



Dave Smith The great valerio

A Study of the Songs of
Richard Thompson

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This book is dedicated to

Liz, Dan, Em, Jane, Geoff, Mutti and Albert

*Pardon old fathers if you still remain
Somewhere in ear-shot for the story's end ...*

Richard Thompson

*And sometimes you never connect with a song
Till its telling the way that you feel
Putting words to your story, all the pain and the glory
How can it be written so real?*

Patrick Humphries, Ethel Stephenson et al

*To steal is to flatter
What a compliment to pay!*

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PREFACE

I grew up near Wolverhampton, a town not renowned for its appreciation of the arts. Famously, it did for a while have a work by Barbara Hepworth in the Mander Centre. The sculptress was interviewed on “Midlands Today” when one of her sculptures was unveiled there sometime in the mid Sixties. She stressed that in donating the work to the town – or city as we should now call it – she intended to enrich the cultural life of the place and to give Wulfunians a rare opportunity to touch, feel and experience a piece of living art. I dimly recall the town council putting railings and barbed wire around it a few days later to prevent late night art lovers from pissing on it and the North Bank intelligentsia from spraying it gold. In Wolverhampton “RSPCA” typically refers to the Prevention of Cruelty to Artworks.

Music, in fairness, did rather better than the visual arts in the halcyon days when Wolves were a football team rather than icons in a Richard Thompson tour guide. In the Sixties, the Gaumont Cinema – now a discount carpet warehouse – and the Civic and Wulfrun Halls attracted great names from the vintage age of rock ‘n’ roll. I saw the likes of Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Gene Vincent, Roy Orbison and the great Ray Charles there. Then there were the British bands: Cliff and the Shads – yes, Hank was really that good back then – blazing the trail for the Beatles, the Stones, Spencer Davis, the late-

lamented Graham Bond, the Faces, the Kinks, even Georgio & Marco’s Men. And then there were the more exotic imports. For the blokes, Tina Turner escorted by the sinister Ike. For the lasses, Scott Walker held back by his nerdy Bros. The zenith was reached in April 1967 when Hendrix played the Gaumont. A few months later I fled the coop for the squalid delights of ‘ull H’ university. Chat up line took on a whole new meaning. Philip Spector was foresworn for a while and Philip Larkin sworn in as Chief Librarian.

Against that backdrop, returning to Wolverhampton, hot off a flight from Hong Kong, for a Richard Thompson concert in January 1998 was something of a Proustian experience. A la recherche du tempos perdue. The Wulfrun Hall isn’t the most salubrious of places at the best of times but on a dank, winter’s evening, it’s pure Bram Stoker. That didn’t deter the crowd who filled the place. A similar warm hearted, beery, knowledgeable mix of folk to that which attends Cropredy every year gave Richard Thompson a huge welcome and he responded in kind. This was one of the middle legs of a solo acoustic tour but the sheer vitality and electricity of the performance was awesome. Nowadays RT is never that unplugged! However, the telling moment came unexpectedly, right towards the end, when, as his is wont, he asked for requests. The barrage of usual female suspects greeted him – Valerie, Jennie, Missie, Red Molly and

the rest. And then, amidst the catcalls, a quiet but penetrating voice from a lady sitting down at the front: “Ditching Boy’, Richard, please!” Thompson switched seamlessly to the alter ego he reserves for such moments of mild embarrassment and instantly became “Richard, The Woodwork Teacher”, hesitant, hamstrung and shuffle-footed. “Em. Oh, gosh. Ah. I’m not sure I even remember the – er - words to that one!” A mild titter wave-lapped around the Wulfrun. Her voice came back, polite, plaintive and sincere: “But we do!” This time, the laugh washed over the hall, supportive and deeply empathetic.

That trivial moment says a great deal about the songs of Richard Thompson. These are not songs to be lightly tossed aside with those of **** ***, or hurled with great force along with those of *****. You can fill in your own blankety blanks – you know what I mean. “I’m a celebrity songsmith. Get me out of here.” Back in the real world Richard Thompson’s songs have insinuated themselves deeply into the lives of those who have loved him and his music over the past thirty years and, yes, we probably do remember the words at least as well as the guy that wrote them. The archetypal tragedies in these songs – remorse, love lost, isolation, the yearning for meaning in life – are our little human tragedies and at moments of great need, we turn to the RT catalogue for reassurance and for comfort. As he has created the life of “Richard Thompson” in his songs, so he has both enriched and helped define our lives. Nowadays, there is a sense of community and communion at the heart of his work and his performances – you, me, us – that is unlike anything else in popular music.

We would all be that great hero. In this, as in so many other respects, his work transcends the genre.

I have had an abiding interest in Richard Thompson’s music for over thirty years. It began courtesy of a lad called Dave Harris, a warm, engaging Somerset undergraduate with an ear for the obscure and the eclectic. At a time when the rest of the fresher year at Hull could see no further than Eric and Jimi, he talked in reverent tones about a bloke called Richard whom he’d seen a couple of times in London, with a band called the Convention. Dave’s opinions were initially trampled by the rock-on, cock-sure arrogance of the acnied air-guitarists. But the Fairport albums duly appeared and the band eventually showed up in the Union Refectory. Dave Harris was, needless to say, fully vindicated and we all became disciples.

Since then, I’ve purchased more or less everything Richard Thompson has recorded, more or less as a matter of course. The “more or lesses” acknowledge that there were interruptions: spells spent living in Korea in the late seventies and again in the mid eighties when the nearest you came to great music was a pirated copy – literally unplayable - of “ELP’s Greatest Hits.” The God of Small Mercies smiled on me and I was duly thankful. Returning to live in Hong Kong in the nineties enabled me to plug the odd gaps in the Thompson collection legitimately and, courtesy of favourable exchange rates, economically.

There came a point, though, when the abiding interest became something more. I can pinpoint the time precisely. I had spent twenty-five varied, largely happy and fulfilling years working for a big British company, when the “opportunity”

arose to join a large American corporation. Prudence and a pension dictate that I should call the latter by the Thompsonian pseudonym of “Pond Drew Incorporated.” The move was not a happy one. In many ways, it was a case of two corporate cultures separated by a common language. When my former employers said, “we value people”, long experience proved that they meant, by and large: “we acknowledge that you have valid opinions and we will listen to them; we respect your diversity and your desire to be yourself and won’t try to change you; we accept that you should have an equal say in matters affecting you and your family and we will not arbitrarily screw up your lives if we can possibly avoid it.” It didn’t take me too long to wake up to the fact that when Pond Drew Inc. said, “we value people”, as they did all too frequently, they added an implied parenthesis: “(and we reckon you come cheap)”. Methinks PDI doth protest too much.

A team [sic] meeting in the USA brought the painful recognition home in circumstances I needn’t go into. It is actually still painful. What’s important is that the aftermath found me sitting in a bar in a large US airport, waiting for the next flight back via/via to Hong Kong. As ever, the last Marlborough and final large Jack Daniels before moving to the departure gate, was accompanied by music on the Walkman. By coincidence, or destiny, the track I was listening to was “Can’t Win” – the live version from *Watching The Dark*, which I’d put on my compo-tape largely for the guitar solo. The words cut deep for the first time – “don’t you dare do this, don’t you dare do that, we shoot down dreams, stiletto in the back.” It was like the [first honest] Pond Drew mission statement! But the climactic

moment in the solo when Thompson’s guitar wails - NONO NONONO NO NONO NOOO and on forever - reduced me to tears. On the flight home, I committed to myself that I would write this book. For me. At no time subsequently has it even occurred to me that I wouldn’t finish it, though I never seriously believed it would be published in any shape or form. I owe Pond Drew in more ways than one. This book represents my attempt to take Manhattan. Maybe Berlin comes later.

Researching this book has greatly enriched my life at a time when it desperately needed enriching. Patrick Humphries’ outstanding authorised biography of Richard Thompson, *Strange Affair*, has greatly enriched my researching and pointed me in many of the right directions. I am so grateful to Patrick for turning over stones that his subject undoubtedly wanted to crawl back under. I have spent the last few years turning stones of my own - mostly on long-haul flights and in lonely hotel rooms - attempting to track down Richard Thompson in areas of music, literature, cinema, social history, religion and anthropology that I thought I’d abandoned forever when I left Hull thirty years ago. I can’t pretend to have covered all the bases. Given the self-evident breadth and depth of Thompson’s own interests, it would be surprising if the detritus in my old kit bag and the fruits of my more recent reading and researches had consistently found the “right connection.” But a combination of Humphries’ steers, common ailments shared with Thompson – Yeats poisoning, for one - educated guesswork and blinding good fortune did take me to a number of crossroads where I [thought I] just knew Richard Thompson had stood before. The best example of that felicitous com-

bination of be-lucky and make-your-own-luck comes in my penultimate chapter on “Richard Thompson and the Great Valerio.” Educated guesswork got me half of the story line; a piece of pure serendipity took me into other, more fertile territory. But the surprises – the epiphanies - in the course of that chapter came to me, unannounced and unexpected, literally as I was sifting through my notes before typing the first draft. It was a magical experience and, in the immortal words of Lone Wadi, it told me that I had been right to “endeavour to persevere”. Whether I was consistently right or not is a different matter, of course, but it’s the nearest I’ve ever come to walking on a wire.

For me, the ultimate reward for all this effort has come in the last few months. Through yet more good luck and the good offices of the inestimable Danny Thompson, I managed to get a copy of my typescript – minus the final, as then unwritten chapter – to Richard Thompson. He responded within days with helpful and candid comments on my key assumptions and conclusions. Since then we have conducted a sporadic “virtual interview” via e-mail before rounding things off with a face-to-face session. The content of this dialogue now forms the key plank in my final chapter. Where my original ideas have proved to be way off-beam, I have acknowledged that in the final chapter. But I’ve left earlier sections of the book unedited. The reason for that is not laziness and certainly not indifference. It’s simply that I believe that my occasional misjudgements and misreadings are a valuable and at times amusing illustration of just how dangerous it can be to second-guess a creative genius. No man is entirely worthless:

he can always serve as a horrible example! But, in any case, I enjoyed the journey sufficiently to want to record it, even if I did sometimes end up red-faced and stranded in someone else’s back yard.

Needless to say, I am enormously grateful to Richard Thompson for his time and support and for the unfailing courtesy and good humour with which he has indulged my whims and tolerated my intrusions. The man didn’t know me from Adam when my typescript was dropped in his lap and his decision to read it and respond, rather than take the easy, understandable option and bin it, speaks volumes for him. Richard described to Patrick Humphries the huge letdown that his meeting with his hero, Bob Dylan, had represented. I can only say that encountering my hero has far exceeded any reasonable expectation I might have had.

The public aim of this book is to do no more than encourage others to do what I have done. Listen to Richard Thompson’s songs. Think about the songs. Talk about the songs. They represent as cohesive, compelling and challenging a body of songs as you will find anywhere. Above all, they matter. They say things about our lives that we need to think about and talk about, now more than ever. George Bush has for sure never heard of the transatlantic troubadour called Richard Thompson. Tony Blair has maybe heard Brite Lites but for sure can’t figure out the chord changes. I start with the unshakeable belief that Richard Thompson is, in Tyger Hutchings’ words, the best songwriter and the best guitarist on the planet. More precisely, in the words of Pete Clark, writing in the *Standard* in October 1993: “Richard Thompson is the best-kept musi-

cal secret there has ever been. To call him low profile is absurd hype. But he is arguably the most accomplished singer/guitarist/songwriter that the UK, and possibly the world, has ever seen." My only argument is with the "arguably."

But the cognoscenti apply those kinds of plaudits to Thompson so frequently that the coinage is becoming devalued. They're Stradhoughton-speak for "Duh..." Somebody needs to do an Ethel Stephenson and start the ball rolling - just to ask the simple question "why?" and re-confer meaning on the superlatives before it's too late. I'm not even an amateur musicologist and my response to what I recognise as Thompson's extraordinary guitar playing is largely visceral. I therefore leave others to validate his global primacy as a musician and increasingly as a performer. No, this book is just my attempt to give a few answers as to why I believe Richard Thompson to be, quite simply, the most accomplished and important English songwriter of the twentieth century.

January 2004

DAVE SMITH



PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

AN APPROACH TO RICHARD THOMPSON

HOBBS: Still making snow art?
CALVIN: Yep!
HOBBS: Yesterday your sculpture melted.
CALVIN: This time I'm taking advantage of my medium's impermanence. This sculpture is about transience. As the figure melts, it invites the viewer to contemplate the evanescence of life. This piece speaks to the horrors of our own mortality.
VOICE OFF: Hey stupid! It's too warm to build a snowman! What a dope! Ha ha ha!
HOBBS: A Philistine on the sidewalk.
CALVIN: Genius is never understood in its own time.

Bill Watterson

I have nothing to declare except my genius.

Oscar Wilde

He's British. He doesn't like talking about himself. He's very reticent and I think, like all really great talents, he's not big headed about it. He's very self-effacing, too self-effacing,

actually. I always remember him saying, to me or somebody – you know, when people said to him, “Oh God, you're just the most fantastic guitarist” - it made him want to take up the trumpet.

Linda Thompson.

Michael Parkinson probably wanted to take up the trumpet after the night in 1972 when genius hi-jacked his BBC TV studio. The apparition was clad in dark glasses, a long, black leather mackintosh and a German military helmet, vintage ca. 1943. In the menacing tones that one associates with the cinematic Gestapo interrogator, the figure spoke:

I am sick of zis business about Churchill – ze young Churchill, ze old Churchill, ze weak Churchill, ze thin Churchill, ze fat Churchill. Why doesn't someone say ze truth about Churchill! [Pause] Not many people know – and listen. A painter? Painter! His rotten paintings! Rotten! [Sotto voce] Hitler - zere was a painter for you. [Pause] He could paint an entire apartment; two coats; one afternoon.

The refugee from the Third Reich was, of course, Peter Sellers, putting his own inimitable spin on a scene from Mel

Brooks' *The Producers*. Over the next thirty minutes or so, Sellers reduced an increasingly helpless Parky and the whole studio audience to hysterics with his vivid recollections of people, the "characters", he had encountered over the years and subsequently transformed into high comic art – Blood-nock, Bluebottle and the rest. Sellers displayed throughout the "interview" what Parkinson described, in the introduction to the laugh-fest, as the comic's "remarkable gift for mimicry." But Sellers also revealed, implicitly, much of the sweat and anguish that lay behind the greasepaint, obscured by the mask of genius. The time spent on the periphery at social gatherings, "listening, listening to people talking"; the loneliness, buried deep behind the mask and voice of Bluebottle – "my mum wants me home"; and something darker and very sad – "of course, we don't drink any more". And Sellers provided further examples of the craft that lies behind the creation of the supreme comic effect. It's there, of course, in the example quoted above – the careful modulation of the voice for maximum dramatic effect; the controlled building and release of dramatic tension; and, above all, the manipulation of the audience reaction – "people know – and listen".

At the heart of Seller's genius lay an element of surprise, a sense you frequently had, as a listener, of having been bushwhacked. Sellers had the rare ability to "set up" both the dramatised persona and the audience, and then to undermine both, in a brilliant moment of mock-heroic letdown. "Hitler zere was a [prat? megalomaniac? vile dictator?] painter ... he could paint an entire [Mona Lisa? suite of 'Sunflower' paintings? Cistine chapel roof?] apartment". Then, a temporary

uplift in the voice – "two coats" – before the final, revealing, deflating phrase – "one afternoon". Mel Brooks' script required real talent: Sellers' interpretation and delivery of the script was a work of genius.

And this, in turn, demonstrates that obsessive attention to significant detail that is another characteristic of artistic genius. We saw the same thing later on in this virtuoso performance by Sellers, when he described his first encounter with an anomalous, "tall and wide", bearded scoutmaster. The latter turned up at Sellers' door unannounced one evening and unwittingly provided the inspiration for the character of Bluebottle. The genius resides, not in Sellers' humorous description of the general trappings of scout-master-dom, not in the distinctive, falsetto voice and not, ultimately, in the fact that the character says, in his Bluebottle voice: "I have just seen Michael Bentine aaaat Chiswick, and heeee says that I'm a genius". It resides, instead, in the microscopic attention to detail that Sellers reveals. He spotted and reported that the bearded apparition had "red knees." In a similarly crucial context, James Adie was led to pronounce, "Red hair and black leather, my favourite colour scheme."

Richard Thompson is a genius, as Peter Sellers was a genius. Not in the popular sense of "he's got a brain like Einstein" or "he makes me laugh and/or cry", but in the literal sense, of a person who, according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, has "instinctive, and extraordinary imaginative, creative or inventive capacity". Thompson has all of that. He also creates moments of high comedy, which rely heavily on the same craft,

the same attention to specificity and the same critical element of “surprise” that Peter Sellers had mastered:

*When the party hit full swing,
I saw you come reeling in.
You had that six-pack in a stranglehold.
Now you swagger, now you sway –
Why don't you look the other way,
'Cos I've got something here worth more than gold?*

So far, so good – anonymous person at party is confronted by a drunk who threatens the safety of said person's clearly valuable “treasure”. The language is precise, the alliteration pleasing, and there's nothing to suggest the surprise which arrives with the first chorus: “Don't sit on my Jimmy Shands ... They don't mend with sticky tape and glue”. The “treasure” is a pile of old 78's, first surprise; but the speaker also implies something fundamental about himself and his own values – “I might mend with sticky tape and glue but they won't, so stay away!” The second verse builds up the kind of specificity – attention to salient detail – that Sellers epitomised:

*Call me precious, I don't mind.
78's are hard to find –
You just can't get the Shellac since the war.
This one's the Beltona brand,
Finest label in the land.
They don't make them like that any more.*

The verse also develops a sense of character with remarkable economy. The self-awareness masked by the self-deprecating “call me precious.” The slight defensiveness and self-justification suggested by “78's are hard to find.” And then the rush of enthusiasm, joy and pride as the speaker unveils his obsession – just look at this one. But after the next chorus, the established character stereotyping – “precious” party wallflower vs. he-man; nerd vs. braggart – is totally subverted:

*Darling, though you're twice my size,
I don't mean to patronise.
Honey, let me lead you by the hand.
Find a lap or find a chair,
You can park it anywhere –
Just don't rest your cheeks against my man.*

Second major “surprise” – drunken braggart is a female gorilla! The speaker's tone and language shift accordingly – “darling”, “honey, let me lead you”, “don't rest your cheeks against my man”. And then, the third “surprise”:

*No shindig is half-complete
Without that famous polka beat
That's why they invite me, I suppose ...*

The letdown, the second sad moment of self-awareness – “that's why they invite me, I suppose” – is coupled with a further revelation, to which the speaker is oblivious. His view of a rollicking good evening is couched in terms of a [then]

thirty-year-old Shadows' record. And so he, and we, spins out to "Marie's Wedding"! That brings the final "structural" surprise. We're hauled back to the second line of the song, as the heavenly hunk comes "reeling" in. The "eight-some reel" of polite social ritual becomes the "two-some reel" of Glasgow on a Saturday night. From the safe distance of northern England ca 2003, there is a further surprise. We might also relate this "Marie's Wedding" to at least two other nuptials – "Nobody's Wedding" and the inexcusable [read unmissable] "Madonna's Wedding." And behind all of this – surprise, surprise – is some extraordinary artistic intelligence, listening, observing and shaping. And what's really so "extraordinary" about all of this, of course, is that it isn't in the least surprising. Thompson does this all the time, in his writing, in his playing and in his performances. Just as Sellers "did the business", whenever turned on by a straight man, a straight bourbon and a receptive audience.

Michael Parkinson's heroic efforts to lift the mask and probe the nature of creative genius came to naught on that memorable evening in 1972. Characteristically, he had the professional good-sense to abandon the effort after a few minutes and to go with the flow. But his discomforting experience is not uncommon, for how do you set about analysing and "characterising" creative genius? Doesn't there come a point when you simply have to let it speak for itself? Answer – yes, of course. But on the basis that, in Thomas Edison's words, genius is ten per cent inspiration and ninety per cent perspiration, there is still much that we can do to understand "how" and "why" genius works, even if we can never comprehend ul-

timately the "whence" of its origins. To coin a tactless phrase, we can study the chemical composition of the perspiration, even if the alchemy behind the inspiration remains obscure.

This book is about the "hows" and the "whys" of Richard Thompson's mastery of the art of song writing. It doesn't seek to psychoanalyse the writer. It doesn't set out to develop some abstruse theory of artistic inspiration. It addresses instead the "simple" issues: this is what he says; this is how he says it; these are the influences that helped shape what he says and how it says it; this is why it works for you and me. But even this circumscribed task is far from straightforward in the case of Richard Thompson. There are problems of what we might term "development" and "accumulation".

Greil Marcus, in his excellent introduction to the 1993 *Watching The Dark* anthology, refers to the apparent lack of development in Thompson as a writer:

... there is a way that with Richard Thompson the show never started, that the music he's made is not a show at all. Nor [has he built] a career, as one is accustomed to understand such a thing. Trace Thompson's songs and performances over time and there is little or no sense of development, maturity, refinement ... a listener can believe it was all there from day one – or at least, for Thompson, from the day in 1968 when as a member of Fairport Convention he wrote the impossibly hard, unforgiving first lines of "Tale In Hard Time": "Take the sun from my heart/ Let me learn to despise."

As a generalisation, Marcus' comments ring true for anyone who has followed Thompson's work over the last thirty years or so. In a thematic sense, the view of society, of the human condition and of human relations in, say *You? Me? Us?* does not appear materially different from that in *Henry The Human Fly*. The language may be less self-conscious and the characterisations more varied, complex and fully realised in the later album, but "the song remains the same" to all intents and purposes. And on a personal level, the archetypal rites of human passage – the death of parents and friends, marriage and parenthood, divorce and remarriage – appear to have coloured Thompson's view of the world at times, but no more than that. His conversion to Islam, for example, gave Thompson the prospect of a personal road to salvation. But over the long haul, it does not appear to have caused him to recast his public view of the point of departure, nor the destination, nor, frankly, the difficulty in getting from "A" to "B". True, the conversion does appear to have motivated him to write twenty or so fairly explicit devotional songs in the seventies. But these were not the first devotional songs he had written – "Now Be Thankful" and "Meet On The Ledge" are both great hymns in their own way. Nor, with a handful of dishonourable exceptions, are the songs that followed his conversion noticeably different in character from those which preceded it. Thompson was a profoundly moral and, in the deepest sense, a religious writer, before he ever became a Muslim. Album titles notwithstanding, the general outlook on life as reflected in Thompson's songs did not appear to be any more cast from a "Sunni" vista in 1980 than it was in 1970, or, for that mat-

ter, than it subsequently was in 1990 or 2000. So, we have a problem with "development", if by that word we imply significant change and refinement in outlook, sequentially, over time. Changes, such as they are, are subtle and require of the listener the same attention to salient detail that went into the composition of the songs in the first place.

We have the same problem with what we might term "accumulation" in Thompson's work. He is, I believe, unique amongst modern songwriters in terms not only of the density of his imagery and motifs, but also their relative narrowness. Images of violence, death, money, isolation and entrapment appear in song after song and "accumulate" in the mind of the active listener. The rat in the maze in "Sights And Sounds Of London Town" recalls not only the "vermin round the burial ground" in the fairly recent "Last Shift", but also the rats who, nearly thirty years earlier, would eat the miller's wheel in "Wheely Down." This, I think, does two things. Firstly, it conditions us to relate to Thompson's songs on an increasingly metaphorical and, at times, mythical level. Simplistically, we become accustomed to the association of the literal death of individuals with the death and decay of societies, with the rise and fall of civilisations and ultimately with the spiritual extinction of you, me and us. Secondly, no song of Thompson's, in a sense, ever stands still. Our interpretation of a given song is likely to change over time. The accumulation of common images and motifs in the growing body of his work both colours our interpretation of the "new songs", and, at the same time, causes us to revisit our previous assumptions concerning the "old songs". In a sense, we become co-creators with

Thompson over time, not only of the individual songs, but increasingly, of the rich, dark, complex tapestry which comprises his total output. Let me say up-front that I do not believe this is accidental: Thompson set out, quite deliberately, to achieve this and his success in so doing over a thirty year career is one aspect of his genius as a song writer. The only two poets of the twentieth century who, from the outset, envisioned a coherent and complete body of work in this way were Yeats and Eliot and it is no coincidence that these two names feature again and again as we evaluate the works of Richard Thompson.

These issues of a relative lack of thematic development and an intense accumulation of image and motifs mean that Thompson's work is not amenable to the approach of the standard, chronological "critical study". No generic Rock Biography is ever going to get close to what makes Richard Thompson a "strange affair." In fairness, Thompson's authorised biographer, Patrick Humphries, did a great job within conventional guidelines. But if we're going to position Thompson as a distant successor to T S Eliot rather than the white collar alternative to Broooce, we need to give ourselves the flexibility to range freely and make connections across his work without losing specific understanding and appreciation of what made this song work, at this time, on this album. This mission statement will help – I hope – to explain the structure of this book.

There is, I think, such a thing as a "typical" Richard Thompson song. The first hallmark of such a non-song is its vivid sense of "character", the "actualisation" of the speaker in terms

of his or her personality and the environment in which (s)he is caught up – and by "environment", I mean not only the physical environment but also the nature of the relationship in which a character is usually caught up in the "typical" song. The "reading of" and emotional response to this character enable us to relate to the song on its most specific, most literal level. Second, there is the poetic "organisation" of the song – its melody, form, rhyme and meter. These elements, too, are specific to the song itself, though Thompson's use of traditional forms and melodies can help to "generalise" the impact of the song to some extent. At the next level, that of recurring image and motif, we are increasingly responding in generalised, metaphorical terms. In the example of "Sights And Sounds Of London Town" cited above, we are relating now, not only to the character of Mickey, trapped in Soho, but also to the placing of his personal situation within a traditional song form. We are relating not simply to the image of Mickey trapped in a maze, but also to all the other images of entrapment in Thompson's work. And we are linking the simile of Mickey, "like a rat", to the other rats we have encountered in the RT songbook. These imagistic linkages then enable us to place the theme of the specific song in the context of Thompson's wider treatment of his five archetypal themes. These we could summarise as "Man and Man"; "Man as Man"; "Man and Woman"; "Man and Muse"; and "Man and God". Finally, we get down to the most fundamental level in Thompson's work, that of myth and allusion. Most of the great songwriters of the twentieth century have name-dropped and alluded to historical precedents. With Thompson, we are looking at

systematic plundering of the dead poets and the songwriters who have preceded and influenced him. Hence, in the case of Mickey, we might relate to images of rats in Eliot's *The Waste Land* or to the depiction of the human condition in Kersh's *Night And The City*. Thompson's treatment of his tortured relationship with his muse, in particular, is characterised by this deep and consistent allusiveness. Here, as in other salient respects, the relevant comparisons are with Yeats and Eliot, not Lennon and McCartney.

Put simply, in our "pretend" Thompson song, we are "dragged out" from a literal, specific depiction of character, through a "window" of Thompson's deliberate creation, into realities and perceptions that are increasingly universalised, increasingly allusive and, in many cases, increasingly mythologised. Thompson himself has used the analogy of the cine camera "zooming in" on a unique situation to describe the effect he is seeking to achieve in his songs. By analogy, what I am describing is the concurrent "zooming out" which takes place in all his greatest songs and which places a single freeze-frame of a character-in-time in the context of mankind as a whole, and places one of Thompson's "snap shots" in the history of [cinematic] art. I know of no other songwriter capable of doing this so consistently. It is here that, ultimately, the genius of Richard Thompson is to be found.

The structure of my book hopefully reflects the "metaphorical" logic I have outlined above. In cinematographic terms, I begin by attempting to present a "wide screen" view of the life and times of Richard Thompson. This is followed by a "zooming in" on the genuinely distinctive aspects of his genius – his

treatment of his relationship with his muse and his tacitly acknowledged debt to T S Eliot. This is followed by an even sharper focus and a further "zooming in" on how all of this works in the context of five specific songs. This will hopefully test the thesis of the "typical song" to destruction.

We then "zoom out" again to look, in the second part of the book, at the body of the work and assess Thompson's mainstream output over the last thirty-five years. It is here that the vexed questions of "development" and "accumulation" are rigorously tested, album by album. Whilst acknowledging above the general validity of Greil Marcus' identification of a lack of "development" in Thompson's work, there are, nonetheless, two important distinctions to be made. There is continuity in Thompson's work that enables us to "sit", say, "Poor Will And The Jolly Hangman" alongside, say, "Drowned Dog, Black Night" or "Hard On Me." They are all demonstrably products of the same artistic consciousness. No one else writes like that. But that does not preclude significant shifts in emphasis and – to extend the cinematic analogy – direction, casting, mise-en-scene, camera angle, focus and "lighting", album by album. Furthermore, whilst it is clearly the case that Thompson has never released a "bad" album, four works stand out as career highpoints – *I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight*, *Shoot Out The Lights*, *Rumor & Sigh* and *Mock Tudor*. Each represents an extraordinary outpouring of creative intensity and each is followed by a discernible shift in artistic direction.

Finally, in Part Three of the book we point the camera at the Director, Richard Thompson himself, and look at the ways in which he has constructed the persona of "Richard Thomp-

son” over the last four decades. Just as Peter Sellers made his virtuoso performance on the Parkinson show clad in, and in a sense protected by, the garb of a totally “alien” and anomalous character, so Richard Thompson has over time constructed his own alter-egos, masks that he wears to confront a largely unappreciative world. In peeling off some of these masks, my devout hope is that, in Dave Sinclair’s words the world will at last “wise-up to this remarkable man”. Somehow, from the vat of thirty years’ perspiration, I hope the sweet, unmistakable scent of inspiration and true genius rises to the surface!



CHAPTER TWO

“R. T.” – THE SCREENPLAY

Patrick Humphries entitled his biography of Richard Thompson *Strange Affair*. In fact, if you take a broad view of Thompson's life and times, the affair has actually been pretty unexceptional. Thompson's upbringing was similar to that enjoyed, or maybe endured, by millions of lower middle class kids in fifties Britain. His adult life, too, has had no more than its fair share of slings and arrows. A handful of serious relationships; only two marriages – one over ten years, the other approaching twenty years; only five children; one religious conversion; and no criminal convictions. It's all pretty tame stuff compared with the life of most sixties rock musicians. Thompson might have claimed in a magazine interview, to be a rock musician, and to “throw TV sets out of hotel windows,” but the reality has been a lot more prosaic. There is little in the outline of Thompson's life to suggest that this generally unremarkable man would become a genuinely remarkable writer, guitarist and performer. That is what is so strange about the Richard Thompson Affair. In coming to terms with the strangeness, we need to focus on the seminal influences on and the distinguishing features of Richard Thompson's work. This chapter provides a broad overview. Subsequent chapters will worry away at the detail.

FORMATIVE INFLUENCES

If we look harder at the evidence of Thompson's early years contained in *Strange Affair* and available elsewhere, there are inevitably some intimations of what was to follow. From Humphries' persistent probing of family and friends, there emerges a picture of a boy who was shy and retiring – not surprisingly, given his strong stutter, traces of which lasted into later life – and whose very English reserve and need for privacy would be reflected in his later work habits and would provide one strand in his career long dissection of the English character. Thompson's elder sister Perri told Humphries that she thought “all of that – the speech impediment and the shyness – came from the home environment, because it was a time when you were not encouraged to express yourself.” [PH 15]. But at the same time, the young Richard emerges as a child who was nonetheless capable of forming friendships and of enjoying the things that boys enjoyed in London in the fifties: football; trains; playing soldiers; climbing trees.

More significant, Thompson's homelife, again not unusual in post war Britain, was dominated by a father, who was remote and uncommunicative, though not lacking in creativity. John Thompson was however unwilling to support Richard's

pursuit of a career in music as an outlet for his own creativity. As Richard's mother Joan puts it, "my husband was very bitter really – he wished Richard was in a bank or anything, he was dead against it." [PH 43]. Consequently, in Thompson's teens and twenties, there was clearly a degree of distance and tension between father and son. Nonetheless, John Thompson did bequeath a rich legacy to his son in a number of salient respects. First and foremost, John was a great reader and, unusually for the times, Richard grew up surrounded by volumes of poetry and history, which he duly devoured. When interviewed by Patrick Humphries, mother Joan, sister Perri and Thompson himself all referred to this:

- JOAN: My husband was always an avid reader and was very interested in history – we had all the historical books – wonderful books we had, and Richard read every single book in the house, he just loved reading. [PH 26]
- PERRI: A lot of the books around the house were poetry and literature – prizes father had won. He was very bright, obviously, and could have been an academic. [PH 17]
- RICHARD: English was always my best subject. I really liked poetry. There were always a lot of books at home; they might have been my granddad's books, the whole of Walter Scott, Burns, Shelley. [PH 26]

Secondly, John Thompson was an amateur guitarist and something of his love for the instrument and for a diversity of musical styles clearly rubbed off on his son. Interviewed for a Radio 2 biography, Thompson told Simon Nicol:

When I was growing up, there was music around, you know, there was music that one heard on the radio, on the home gramophone, popular music of the day, fifties - until rock'n'roll came along and saved us all, then it became exciting. My father was Scottish, so he had a bunch of Scottish records, Jimmy Shands and stuff, so I had an early diet of that. He also had some good jazz guitar records, because he was an amateur guitarist. He had Django Reinhardt records and he had Les Paul records, as well as good Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington and stuff like that. So I grew up listening to a mixture really. There was a guitar lying around the house when I was growing up – an old Spanish guitar that my father had brought home and it had been smashed up and he glued it so it was a barely serviceable sort of thing.

Perri's boyfriend, Richard Roberts-Miller – a.k.a Big Muldoon – emphasises the point: "Richard's taste in music was always eclectic. Going back to his dad, his Scottish background, Jimmy Shand, bagpipe music – plus the jazz, and the really well arranged big band stuff. Richard's father could be fairly intimidating, but musically, he had fairly broad tastes." [PH29]. John's Scottish background also affected his son and imbued in Richard a love of things Scottish. In recent years, Madonna's general behaviour would presumably not have perturbed Thompson greatly, but her appropriation of a Scottish kirk and castle for her nuptials with Guy Ritchie provoked a

vicious public response to her “truly crass” lifestyle and her “tits and ass” morality. In more reflective mood, Thompson acknowledged his roots:

I’ve always enjoyed Scottish music – especially pipe music – because it’s so stirring somehow, it’s very haunting, that drone just does something to you. I’ve always felt that the Scottish culture has been more important to me than the English. If I’d ever had a choice, I would have played football for Scotland rather than for England. It just moves something in me. I love English music as well and Irish music – it’s all part of the melange ... Scottish music had quite a big influence on me, but less of the accordion dance music – I really like the pipe music and the songs – the bal-lads, the whole vocal style. [PH 289]

John Thompson was also blessed with a strong work ethic. Richard resented it as a child: “My dad worked ridiculously long hours – sixteen hours a day – and I never saw him.” [PH 14]. He nevertheless replicated a similar dedication to hard work in his own adulthood. The abiding image of Thompson the performer is of a cascade of sweat running down his sin-ewy arm and staining his acoustic guitar. I will never forget his response to the pleasant woman who once stood in front of me in an autograph line. She thanked him profusely for all the enjoyment that his songs had given her over the decades. His response was an embarrassed smile and a simple but telling statement: “You don’t have to thank me. It’s my job.” John Thompson might have approved. In all three dimensions of

his genius, as writer, musician and performing artist, Richard Thompson has devoted the ninety per cent perspiration required to hone his innate skills and talents and keep himself ahead of the herd.

And finally, Richard’s father, though in Joan’s words “a dour Scot”, was nevertheless possessed of a strong sense of humour, as Perri emphasises:

My father would have loved his own big band – he was a great music fan and occasionally played big band music and Django Reinhardt and he also had a great sense of humour which I think Richard has inherited – there was a lot of humour in our household from Hancock and the Goons – all those early radio things because we always had the radio on at home – and father had a good sense of humour, although he was strict and everything, he had a good sense of humour. [PH 20/1]

Thompson’s sense of humour is an often-overlooked attribute. It has been evident in occasional songs and sleeve notes over the years and has increasingly enlivened his stage performances as he has approached middle age. You sometimes get the impression that he enjoys and exploits the tension between what he wants to say and perform and what parts of his audience expect of him. At a solo concert in Wrex-ham in 2002 he performed the uproarious “My Daddy Is A Mummy”, only to be greeted with a call from a heckler in the audience to “do something serious.” His put-down line was

worthy of Billy Connolly: “I can do serious. I can do stupid. Guess which is more popular.”

The second major aspect of Thompson’s upbringing worthy of note resides, not just in the presence of a caring mother who supported him in the face of paternal opposition, but more particularly in the person of his elder sister Perri. Her rebelliousness helped divert some of the flak during the tense teenage years chez Thompson:

Perri was more outgoing and she had more head-on collisions with my dad who was a Presbyterian Scot, a Scottish policeman, heaven help us all – and there was a kind of moral backdrop to life that you had to kick at and rebel against – so my sister was probably the big rebel. I think by the time my parents got to me they were just after an easier life, so I got a bit more leeway. My sister was definitely a seriously independently minded, headstrong, very good-looking teenaged girl who wanted to do what she wanted to do. [PH 16]

Perri’s boyfriends were also instrumental in providing practical assistance to a budding genius at a critical stage:

I suppose I started playing something - I don’t know, the old Bert Weedon Play In A Day or something; listened to a few Shadows records. I had an older sister - she’s about five years older than me - so she was dating boys when I was starting with the guitar and a couple of her boyfriends played the guitar, which was useful. So when they came

round to pick her up, I’d get a quick half-hour guitar lesson - or, knowing my sister, maybe two hours. So that was great, that was a good piece of hands-on tuition. Especially one of her boyfriends, who I know affectionately as Big Muldoon, he was particularly useful, ‘cos he knew all the Buddy Holly stuff. That was great. So we got that down. And then - I think when I was about 11 or 12 - I took classical guitar lessons for a year or two and that was very useful. I think I got an electric guitar when I was 11. So I was playing both, really, from quite early on, and just playing in little school bands, doing Shadows covers, at William Ellis School in north London. [R2B]

Perri and her friends also broadened young Richard’s musical education with choice pickings from their record collections and from local libraries – rare blues offerings, rock’n’roll classics, the first Dylan album. But Perri also provided the template, in a sense, for succession of strong women who played central roles in Richard’s later life – Jeannie, Sandy, Linda, Nancy – and, in turn, in many of his finest songs. It does seem strange that, occasional accusations of misogyny notwithstanding, Thompson’s songs from “Shaky Nancy” to “Beeswing” are populated with a fair sprinkling of strong, fully rounded and sympathetically presented female characters. Stranger still, that the definitive cover versions of Thompson songs are, virtually without exception, recorded by some of the great female voices of the era – Sandy, Linda, Norma, June, Bonnie, Maddy, Christine, Maura, Emmylou, Kate and the rest.

All of which is to make the point that Thompson was largely fortunate in the manner of his upbringing, even if, as Perri points out, it probably didn't feel like it at the time:

For Richard it must have been all brewing there – it's like any creative person – you've got to get your right structure to express yourself in, I think it's the same for a musician, you've got to get the right structure and the right things fall into place. At home all of that was probably stewing around and it was all completely in there but it had no voice. Because he never really said a word at home. [PH 21]

Thompson was fortunate, too, in terms of where he spent his formative teenage years. As a mature artist, he is characterised by his breadth of interest, his depth of reading and the diversity of his musical tastes. There was clearly some innate predisposition to all of this, but there was no better place in which to gain a catholic education in music and ideas than London in the second half of the sixties. Something of the teeming vitality of London in the Swinging Sixties is captured in the career highpoint, *Mock Tudor*. The album is replete with allusions to and from the required reading of the time – Kerouac's *On The Road*, Eliot's *Wasteland*, Graves' *The White Goddess*, Frazer's *The Golden Bough* – and to the cinema of the fifties and sixties. The album is also rich in pastiches of the music on offer in the clubs that Thompson frequented at the time. Amongst his putative peers, Thompson is I believe uniquely blessed with the gift of creative theft – the ability not

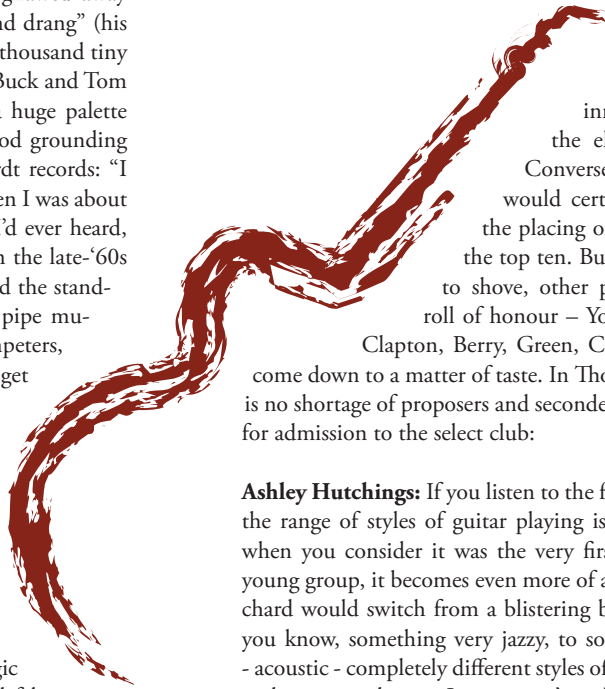
just to pick up and absorb but to thoroughly assimilate and adapt into something new and rich and strange – but an accident of birth put him, quite simply, in the right place at the right time to develop that gift.

He was lucky, too, in terms of his friends and associates, and most particularly in terms of his belonging to the "Witch-season stable" at a time when so many talented musicians were gathered under the erratic but genuinely supportive aegis of Joe Boyd. Thompson's talents were such that he was probably always going to "make it" eventually but Boyd et al provided, in Perri's phrase, "the right structure" and bred self-belief in Richard Thompson. That was always going to be hard to come by. And in terms of support and self-belief Thompson was, above all, lucky in love in later life. Both Linda Peters and Nancy Covey take a lot of the credit for who and what Richard Thompson is today. None of which is to trivialise his accomplishments or achievements but the accident of meeting the right people at the right time in the right place helped put him on the road to distinction. Serendipity played its part. Distinctiveness is what we should now consider.

THE GUITARIST

Mojo's review in June 1996 of "The One Hundred Greatest Guitarists Of All Time" placed Thompson at number ten, tucked neatly in between #11, B. B. King, and #9, Neil Young. **Andy Gill's** citation presents a fair justification for Thompson's inclusion in the pantheon of greats:

Few guitarists of the modern era have been as distinctive or as consistent as Richard Thompson: throughout a three-decade career ... his songwriting has gnawed away at the same dark themes, while his “dirge und drang” (his expression) playing has pierced hearts with a thousand tiny cuts, influencing many figures such as Peter Buck and Tom Verlaine. His unique style is the result of a huge palette of influences, starting with an early childhood grounding in his father’s Les Paul and Django Reinhardt records: “I remember hearing “Caravan” by Les Paul when I was about five,” he recalls, “it was the weirdest music I’d ever heard, from outer space.” Thompson’s immersion in the late-’60s folk-rock scene broadened his playing beyond the standard blues influences. “I started listening to pipe music, or fiddlers, pianists, saxophonists, trumpeters, and pedal steel guitarists – because you can get other ideas, you can expand.” The pipes in particular have brought a singular flavour to Thompson’s playing, a skirling effect incorporating drones and sustained notes which allows fluid elisions of melody and tempo. Unlike many of his peers, Thompson has constantly striven to stretch himself with new challenges, working with such experimentally-inclined artists as Pere Ubu’s David Thomas, former Magic Band drummer John “Drumbo” French and fellow guitar explorers Fred Frith and Henry Kaiser.



No one is going to argue with the position of

Jimi Hendrix as
the undisputed
number one in
the Mojo list.

He was the true
innovative genius of
the electric rock guitar.

Conversely, one might – I
would certainly – argue with
the placing of Keith Richards in
the top ten. But when push comes
to shove, other placings within the
roll of honour – Young, Walker, Page,
Clapton, Berry, Green, Cropper – ultimately
come down to a matter of taste. In Thompson’s case, there
is no shortage of proposers and seconders to nominate him
for admission to the select club:

Ashley Hutchings: If you listen to the first Fairport album, the range of styles of guitar playing is phenomenal. And when you consider it was the very first album by a very young group, it becomes even more of an achievement. Richard would switch from a blistering blues guitar solo to, you know, something very jazzy, to something very folkie - acoustic - completely different styles of guitar playing. But with great authority. I mean, we’re talking about a chap who was still in his teens. So that technique was still there

from very early on and he, like most of the band, must have listened to all kinds of music. [R2B]

Joe Boyd: They did a version of Paul Butterfield's 'East West' and Richard took a solo which went on for about ten minutes. Richard was very shy and silent. I thought, "This guy's seventeen, and he's playing a solo which [is] better than the Bloomfield solo on the record." And on the strength of that - and the whole set was just very impressive - I just found this is something I relate to and then I went into the dressing room and signed them up - or something like that. [R2B]

Dave Pegg: The guitar playing is devastatingly original and there is nobody else in the world who plays like Richard, especially when he plays electric guitar. It's like something that has come completely out of his head, although he has all these influences - he can play country, rock'n'roll, jigs and reels till the cows come home. But when you listen to a Thompson solo, it's not even a mixture of any of the roots, it's something that's completely off the top of his head, and that's what is so great about him. It's not safe, it doesn't have any boundaries, he'll go off and sometimes doesn't come back. [PH 310]

Maartin Allcock: He seems to have assimilated all the things about traditional players that really turn me on - like the ornamentation. He's very bagpipe-oriented and at the same time he's kind-of playing it from his "Buddy Holly

heart". And it's like what it must have been like if Seamus Hennessey had ever played some Bill Haley stuff - which is how it sounded to me, which is like a complete marriage of the two styles, without being detrimental to either and complementing each other. So a lot of the ornamentation stuff, I think, comes from the fact that he's got Scottish blood in him. And he's got a great understanding of what makes traditional music tick in the right hands, I think, which he can maybe turn on when he's doing, like, a slow air or a slow guitar solo. You can almost hear the pipes in there, you know. Sometimes he's doing an instrumental in one of his songs and he'll be reaching out again - but instead of just in one area, he'll be leaping about the fretboard, doing what three guitar players would normally do. And each one of them sounds like they've been practicing very hard and worked out what they're going to play together. And it's all coming out of the one brain. It's quite depressing, really! [R2B]

Clive Gregson: I think he is still the best guitar player I've seen in any context, because he's got astonishing technique, in so many different disciplines. Few people can play rockabilly and make it sound that authentic, few people can play jazz, the folk idiom, the Celtic idiom, out-and-out rock'n'roll, just about the only thing I've never heard him have a go at is heavy metal. He's a brilliant improviser, totally off the top of his head. I've seen him do things where you know that he's flying completely by the seat of his pants. He's also not afraid of making mistakes, which

I really admire, which not a lot of guitarists do – him and Neil Young. [PH 312]

Brian Eno: I've very much enjoyed Richard's work, particularly as a guitar player. I think he's one of the great players of all time. A fantastic guitarist, I think. And really, really underrated. Not by other guitarists, however, who I think generally respect him a lot. But people at large don't seem to know enough about him. [R2B]

David Byrne: Personally, being somewhat envious of Richard's songwriting and guitar-playing, it's somewhat satisfying he's not yet achieved household-name status. It serves him right for being so good. [Mojo]

These edited highlights from the cognoscenti emphasise the things that one should be flagging up in terms of Thompson the guitar player: the mastery of electric and acoustic technique; the huge diversity of stylistic influences which nonetheless add up to something far greater than the sum of the parts; the risk taking. Big Muldoon speaks for me and for the rest of the uninitiated: "He plays the guitar faster than I can listen to it." [PH 318]. Meanwhile, Thompson himself talks in terms of taking the guitar into uncharted territory:

Guitar players, guitar influences, are mostly in the past. I like dead guitar players - there's no competition there! So, Django's dead - he's good. Charlie Christian. George Van

Epps - he's still alive. People like Davey Graham, Bert Jansch. Rock'n'roll guitar players - Cliff Gallup, Scottie Moore and James Burton. That's about it. I don't feel particularly influenced by guitar players now. I'm mostly influenced by other instruments - piano, traditional instruments, fiddle, accordion, pipes - and trying to take ideas from other instruments and put them on a guitar. It seems to make the vocabulary of the guitar richer. It's more of a challenge and it's bringing the guitar into a tradition and also humanizing the guitar somehow. Because fiddle inflection and pipe inflection is really kind of vocal inflection. It helps to vocalise the guitar and it helps to make it closer to a voice. [R2B]

And the overriding characteristic of that voice is its sheer intensity. In Thompson's own words:

You listen to Charlie Parker and think that's amazingly imaginative, but how do you rationalise that, what kind of spirit do you need to play notes like that, how do you get that inspired? Hank Williams always said – how do I aim emotion with that intensity? What kind of megaphone do you have to put your emotions through to get it that hard and concentrated and coming straight at you? He knows where that place is and it's like a laser and he cuts your head off with it. [PH 311]

Richard Thompson described that laser effect and characterised his own unique ability in metaphorical terms in one of his great early songs:

*Dirty people take what's mine.
I can leave them far behind.
They can never cross that line
When I get to the border.*

As a guitarist, he crossed the border a very long time ago and has never looked back.

THE SONGWRITER

Like guitar players, songwriters come in all shapes and sizes. For some, the great songs come easily, as Bob Dylan has claimed: "My best songs are songs which were written very quickly. Yeah, very, very quickly. Just about as much time as it takes to write it down is about as long as it takes to write it." [PZ 80]. Leonard Cohen positions himself at the other extreme: "I am a working stiff. It takes me months and months of full employment to break the code of the song. To find out if there can be a song there." [PZ 334]. Richard Thompson has experienced both extremes, the purely inspirational and the insistently perspirational. He admitted during his radio biography that "Crazy Man Michael" came pretty much unannounced:

That was actually a song that just came very easily. I didn't think about it. You know, sometimes you write a song and it's a real struggle. I've had songs like that that never got finished. And some that I was glad to get finished that

turned out as good songs. But something like "Crazy Man Michael" just wrote itself in about five minutes. That either says it's a really bad song or that it came easily enough that it was a natural kind of song. But I certainly didn't think about it that much.

Equally, he told Paul Zollo that "Beeswing" took about three years to finish. The irony is that, if anything, "Crazy Man Michael" appears to be the more polished and finely crafted whilst part of the appeal of "Beeswing" lies in its natural, conversational feel. The former sounds like a literary ballad and the latter like an ages-old folk song. The three years of effort expended on "Beeswing" represent an extreme example of what the poet W. B. Yeats described as "Adam's Curse":

*... A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.
Better go down upon your marrow-bones
And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;
For to articulate sweet sounds together
Is to work harder than all these ...
... It's certain there is no fine thing
Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring.*

The first thing, then, to be said about Richard Thompson as a songwriter is that in a very fundamental sense the song matters. His commitment, in Yeats' words, is to produce "fine

things.” This implies that the songs themselves are a fairly fragile species, requiring sheltering and protection from outside influences. Wife Nancy makes the point:

I think it’s kind of like, you open the oven door on the soufflé, you don’t want to do that too early, it might fall. It’s kind of a fragile thing. I don’t know exactly what it is, but you kind of need to leave it. That probably comes back to why we get along, because I’m not involved musically. So we don’t talk about it, we don’t have to break that bubble. [PH 302]

The process of producing such fine things is, for Thompson, both profoundly satisfying and ripe with possibility:

Songwriting is too interesting and too much fun to limit yourself to one style. Songwriting is fun and if you’re enjoying yourself when you’re writing it, that’s something that comes across in the quality of the song. Enjoyment is a really big part of the process, even in writing a bleak song – it’s a satisfying process ... I think the song form is really interesting – there’s so much you can do with it – people are willing to listen to [a song] – there’s outlets for it, you can put it on the radio or you can put it in your car. You can listen to it at home or go to a concert. So there’s all kinds of places where people will listen to that particular form. We haven’t really explored the limits of it, and the styles – there’s so much that can be done with it, it’s fascinating what you can do, what you can say, how simple

you can make it and how complex. So I’m glad I’m in this field. [PH 304]

The sense of “exploring the limits” is central to Thompson as a writer. In this sphere, as in his guitar playing, “When I Get To The Border” stands as a powerful metaphor of artistic intent and integrity. The question of integrity, of artistic “truth” is one of Thompson’s major concerns, as reflected in his comments to Patrick Humphries concerning the theological grey are that sits somewhere between the songwriter and the singer:

I’m just not sure where the join is. I think I [know], but it probably gets embellished a little bit. I think stuff gets fictionalised sometimes to make it more interesting. Or sometimes you fall for a rhyme that suddenly makes the song more interesting, but definitely leads you away from the truth – the cold hard truth. Then you get into strange fictional truth, which is often a little bit more exciting and sometimes its more amusing or cutting ... Sometimes a song or a piece of art is larger than life in order to reflect it. In order to tell the truth, sometimes you exaggerate or overdraw, and in a song, you’ve only got three minutes and two verses to put it across, so you do have to paint boldly. I think you can be subtle in the editing, in what you leave out, so you just have the pithy phrases and leave lots out, but it’s still big strokes. [PH 303]

The issue of the “cold hard truth” is of paramount importance to a writer possessed of Thompson’s strong religious beliefs. It is part of his greatness as a writer that, with the exception of a handful of songs written immediately after his conversion to Islam, his own beliefs are not allowed to undermine the balance and the truth of the artistic statements contained in the songs. Indeed, some of his finest songs embody a real tension between the sacred and the secular, between divine aspiration and all too human fallibility. In this he is assisted by the typical Sufi equation of divine and human love. This enables many of his love songs to work consistently on [at least] two levels.

At the same time as celebrating the significance of the song as an art form, Thompson has always accepted that the creation of fine things implies “much labouring” and a determination if necessary to plug away till it comes good:

I find that sometimes I can work away at things for a long time and nothing really very good comes out of it. I find that the more work I do, the more days I string together and then weeks I string together and then months, the better it gets. I get more productive with it. If I’m able to have that kind of time I find that I don’t have any writing blocks or anything. It just steams away. It’s hard to keep up ... I’ll have a minimum amount of time every day I’ll give myself to work and then if it’s going well, I’ll just keep on. [PZ 530]

Thompson is also at pains to emphasise, however, that the creative process is not always mechanistic:

Sometimes it seems to be conscious, and sometimes unconscious. Sometimes it’s intuitive, sometimes it’s intellectual. You go back and forth between the two. Sometimes you definitely just step outside the process and say, “that rhymes with that,” or “that’s three lines in, I need another line to make this verse.” So you’re making conscious decisions about the structure and the theme. [PZ 527]

That said, his reported predilection for certain types of paper and pens does smack of pedantry:

I do like that French paper, cross hatched, with four-hole ring binders ... I like to work on a double-page spread where there’s lots of room, so you can start in one place and you can be writing tangentially up here or down there and you have quite a large visual area, rather than a spiral notebook where there’s no room to go sideways. [PH 301]

While this spiel was undoubtedly an attempt to fend off persistent and relevant questions from Patrick Humphries concerning the nature of creativity, it may be giving away more than Thompson intended. The emphasis on the “large visual area” may well be significant if taken in conjunction with similar comments from Nancy: “I think basically Richard is writing all the time. I think eighty per cent of the time, Richard is writing, singing, thinking. Most of the time his

eyes are moving and he's gone. And I think all the time he's looking ..." [PH 302] Extensive research into "action profiling" has demonstrated the link between body language and a person's underlying mental processes. Eye movement of the kind described by both Richard and Nancy is associated with a generic mental process described by profiling practitioners as "classifying." This is, crudely, the ability to assimilate a mass of disparate data, break it down into compartments and then reassemble it in summary form in order to make it comprehensible. Few people in the West do this instinctively and consistently although it is a common feature of the way that Oriental people think and manage information. This unusual competence may help explain Thompson's distinctive ability as a writer to organise information from a variety of sources – what he has experienced, what he has observed, what he has read, what he has heard – into a cohesive artistic whole. Conversely, it may also help explain why, given the need to focus and communicate intensely in performance, he is given to that distinctive facial expression with eyes tight shut and an appearance that, in Humphries' choice phrase, is "part ecstatic, part constipated."

The purpose here is not so much to psychoanalyse Thompson as to stress the discipline of his work habits. Whilst generalisations are dangerous and there are always exceptions to any rule – vide "Crazy Man Michael" and "Beeswing", both of which are atypical – the general impression that emerges from all that Thompson has said publicly over the years is of a systematic approach to the art of songwriting. He seems to accept that inspiration – whether from the muse, from a

book or from "external" events jotted down in his notebook – comes sporadically and the key is therefore to keep working and revising drafts until the time is right. That process of revision continues right up to the recording of the song. Indeed, "singing in" the song in live performance prior to recording is an important step in confirming "singability", a word that Thompson uses frequently in discussing his own output. Once recorded, however, the song is largely "fixed." Some songs are deliberately changed in subsequent live performance for the benefit of the audience. The change in the final verse of "Cold Kisses" from "a Margaret Millar mystery" to a "Jeffrey Archer mystery" for the benefit of British audiences is a case in point but that is one of a fairly small handful of exceptions that demonstrates the rule. When asked by Paul Zollo if he followed Dylan's practice of rewriting songs after they're recorded, Thompson replied with a terse "not often." Dylan's own stance, again in response to a Zollo question about ongoing revision, was equally blunt: "They're songs. They're not written in stone. They're on plastic." [PZ 85]. Thompson has a radically different attitude. His aesthetic methods and criteria are unusually stringent. It should be emphasised that he is by no means a prolific writer. His published output averages well below one song per month over his professional writing career. Whilst the need to earn a crust on the road and in the studio accounts in part for this, his rejection rate is undoubtedly high and acknowledged by him to be such. In a revealing exchange reported in Hinton and Wall's comprehensive study *The Guvnor*, Thompson talked to Simon Nicol about the need to work exhaustively in order to exorcise obscurity:

- SN: But the ones that didn't fall into that [obscure] category have turned into real keepers. Those are living songs which you got right first time!
- RT: Well I don't know you see. If you write stuff you get duffers. There's probably 200 great Cole Porter songs and about 800 crappy Cole Porter songs. The keepers will survive and that's very nice.
- SN: But it's the thousands you have to tear up first, the ones that you did throw away, which have made you the song writer [you are today]. You've got to get those clichés out of your head. It's an art form which requires a stick-to-itiveness. [**Guv 128**]

To state the obvious, there are very few crappy Richard Thompson songs extant.

The final general point to be made about Thompson as songwriter is that, in terms of his own distinction between the “intuitive” and the “intellectual”, the melody and musical structure of the song tends to fit in the former category and the words in the latter. He confirmed to Paul Zollo that he never composes using an electric guitar: “I write on acoustic or nothing. About 50% of the time I use no instrument. I hear the whole thing in my head and then I can go back and work out the nuts and bolts.” [PZ 528]. From such nuts and bolts, are “fine things” constructed and “sweet sounds” articulated. Adam's curse is, for the rest of us, Adam's blessing.

THE SONGS

On my CV over the years, I've listed amongst my interests “the songs of Richard Thompson” as my own declaration of intent and integrity. Typically – and without exception in the Pond Drew years – this has prompted the questions, “who he?” and “what sort of songs does he write?” The first question is fairly readily answered – although you quickly learn to avoid references to religious conversions – but it is genuinely difficult to respond cogently and coherently to the second question. Stylistically, we can pick out some key strands. Thompson was as bowled over by rock'n'roll as the rest of us and has retained his love of the genre. Much of his music retains the exuberance and vitality of classic rock'n'roll. American country music, too, is a passion. He often aspires in his writing to the elegiac simplicity of Hank Williams and in his vocal delivery to the stoic melancholia of George Jones. His strong attraction to the music of Gram Parsons and that of The Band was an extension to this overarching love of American roots music. On this side of the Atlantic, British folk musics have obviously been a profound influence on the style of Thompson's songs over the years. Less obvious is the influence of British popular song – pre 1950 – on Thompson's work. He acknowledges the influence, *inter alia*, of Gracie Fields, Harry Lauder and George Formby and you can hear echoes of these unlikely role models in a number of his songs. And then, most difficult to quantify, is the Arabic influence. Brian Eno had a stab at articulating this strand with reference to Richard and Linda's output:

I suppose what I like about their music is that it all has this, what I think of as, an Arabic quality to it. Now, I think Arabic is actually what became Celtic music and Celtic music has filtered through to the Thompsons somehow or other. What I mean by Arabic is this combination of complex ornamentation - what are called "arabesques", actually, which he does in his playing a lot but also they do in their singing as well - and coupled with that there's a bitter-sweet emotion, which is very typical of Arabic music, I think. Now, I like Arabic pop music and have listened to it for years and years and they, for me, they are the closest thing to it in terms of mood and actually in terms of style in Western popular music. [R2B]

Beyond the obvious main strands, there are a plethora of sub styles and genres that Thompson has incorporated in his songs. It all adds up to a stylistic "melange", to use his term, which defies generalisation and sound bite summary. The same is true if one considers the words in the songs. Thompson told Patrick Humphries in 1977 that when writing he was simply collating other people's ideas and putting them into a digestible form. One is reminded of Thackeray's comment that Tennyson "reads all sorts of things, swallows and digests them like a great poetical boa-constrictor." This may seem somewhat facetious but Thompson's subsequent comment to Humphries that he was considering the inclusion of a bibliography on the sleeve of the next album didn't sound so daft. Over the years, Thompson has plundered song forms, ideas, concepts and motifs from a huge variety of sources.

Again, we can summarise the main strands. In common with the British crop of singer songwriters of the sixties, Thompson was inevitably influenced at the outset by Bob Dylan. The former claims that his first completed song, written at the age of sixteen, was a Dylan copy. Thompson has also acknowledged other American writers of the period as early influences and motivators: Joni Mitchell, Phil Ochs, Eric Anderson et al. A more durable influence was however the Bible and the British literary tradition. Thompson read the great poets in his youth and has continued to allude to their work throughout his career. Shakespeare, Blake, the Romantics, Tennyson and the honorary Brits, Yeats and Eliot, have exerted a far greater influence on the body of Thompson's work than ever Dylan has. The British folk song tradition, too, has provided theme and motif aplenty over the years. One can in fact pull the literary and traditional influences together and place Thompson legitimately in an important tradition. John Holloway, in his seminal work, *Blake: the Lyric Poetry*, sought to place Blake in the context of a very distinguished lineage:

There is a certain kind of lyric poetry – perhaps the most essentially lyrical in kind – which appears to require some bond with popular poetry and with the traditional literary heritage of the common people, if it is to exist. After the medieval period, there seem to have been only three English poets who have achieved greatness in this way: Shakespeare whose link as a lyric poet is with the folk-song (though here there is much more to say, of course); Wordsworth whose was with the ballad in one of its kinds or an-

other; and Blake who drew upon the wealth of the English Bible and the Protestant hymn ... Blake has only Hardy as something of a successor in English. Perhaps this is because England is now a country virtually without a rich literature of the common people such as it had in the past. Hardy aside, the only great poet of a kind comparable to Blake has been Yeats, whose work belongs to another country where popular culture still held the place it lost in our own.

Holloway's excellent study of Blake was published in 1968. By the end of 1969, "Genesis Hall", "No Man's Land", "Tale In Hard Time", "Meet On The Ledge", "Farewell, Farewell", and "Crazy Man Michael" were all on the turntables of the enlightened. In more recent years, American literature has inevitably featured as an important influence on Thompson's work. And, as in the case of stylistic and musical influences, the Koran and Arabic literature have played a central role in shaping Thompson's songs since the early seventies. This is all reflected in a deep allusiveness in his work. Probably only Dylan rivals Thompson's breadth of allusion but in Thompson's case the allusiveness is systemic. This reflects a love of the poetry of T. S. Eliot and a deep understanding of and respect for his poetic method. Eliot's profound influence on Thompson's work is considered in depth in a later chapter.

Having acknowledged the difficulty in summarising what sort of songs Richard Thompson writes, we thankfully have less difficulty in summarising what he says in those songs. The clarity and consistency of Thompson's world-view is quite remarkable. The basic question to address upfront in reviewing

the key themes is: can we really talk in terms of "Thompson's view of the world"; isn't what we get no more and no less than the sum total of the views of all the characters he creates? We are compelled in fact to grapple with the dreaded "P" word. Thompson has consistently said that his songs are not personal statements - the characters in the songs are not "him" and do not "speak for" him. The management reserves the right to refuse admission! The fact that he creates characters who are wife-beaters, serial killers, voyeurs, transvestites and the rest of his usual list of suspects is clearly no reflection on Thompson's personal predilections and behaviours. But at the same time, the fact that he chooses so consistently to create such characters and to mine the dark underworld of the human psyche must say something about the way he sees life and his own value system. T. S. Eliot famously said of the Jacobean tragedian, John Webster, that he was "much obsessed with death and saw the skull beneath the skin". The same could be said of Richard Thompson. The point at issue is that while the "skins" presented in any one of his songs may not be a true reflection of "him", the career-long preoccupation with the "skull" and the seemingly obsessive need to get inside the skulls of such characters almost certainly are. The Human Fly hummed and picked over Albion's wasteland in Henry. Sam Jones was doing pretty much the same thing in You? Me? Us? Richard Thompson has indeed spent "thirty years [as] a boneman, up and down the nation" and in taking a long-term perspective on his work, it therefore appears valid to me to talk in terms of "Richard Thompson's view of the world". The views of individual personae interviewed during

Richard and Sam's stop-overs during their thirty year Odyssey are discussed in the second half of this book but for now we'll confine ourselves to a flip through the Road Atlas.

In his introduction to *Watching The Dark* referred to above, Greil Marcus remarks that "sometimes Thompson seems to be singing from the plague years, following behind a cart full of corpses". The reference to plague is an appropriate kick-off point for an overview of Richard Thompson's world-view. Unlike Smiffy who "used to dream of Judgement Day/ When the Flood came and carried his school friends away", Thompson uses flood, fire, plague and pestilence as symbols of looming global catastrophe. It's not just the school or the neighbourhood that's on the line; it's the whole world! The language of apocalypse appears in his earliest songs - "When the rivers run thicker than trouble,/ I'll be there at your side in the flood" - and a sense of the instability, impermanence and sheer vulnerability of the current world order pervades many of Thompson's finest songs. In the voice of an Old Testament prophet, he warns in "Can't Win" that "towers will tumble and locusts will visit the land", whilst in "The Sun Never Shines On The Poor", "the world is as black as a dark night in hell." The Devil is leaning on the bell of each and every one of us and if he doesn't get us, the "Sickness And Diseases" probably will! In later songs, the language often shifts from that of the Bible to explicitly Koranic imagery but the message remains the same: "Look down, look down, look down,/ The valley is burning, fire without end." At times, apocalypse takes the specific form of looming ecological catastrophe, as in "Wheely Down", or again from the Henry album:

*They choke the air and bleed us,
These noble men who feed us ...
The fish and fowl are ailing,
The farmer's life is failing.
Where are all the backroom boys?
The backroom boys can't save us now.
We're poisoned by the greedy
Who plunder on the needy ...*

While this early rallying cry still holds out the hope that a new St George will arise and slay the monster we have created, by the mid eighties the beast is out of control and Man is "walking through a wasted land/ Of soft-cell concrete and rust..." The only way forward is again "down... down... down." At other times, and explicitly in the wonderful tirade, "Yankee Go Home", the impending disaster is a function of US economic imperialism:

*Dow Jones going into a stall,
Spray paint saying it on every wall.
The climb was fine, now it's time to decline and fall ...
The Hun's at the gates of Rome ...*

Rising from the ashes is the edifice that we will come to know as "McWorld", an empire whose emblem is the Golden Arches. But much of the time in Thompson's world, the fall of empires has an uncomfortably British connotation to it, as in "House Of Cards" where crumbling masonry stands, amongst other things, for the fall of Britannia: "This very fine house of

great renown,/ It's cracked and shaking and tumbling down." The specific terminal malaise affecting Thompson's homeland is a recurrent theme and preoccupation. In the early songs – "The New St George", "Albion Sunrise", "The Old Changing Way" – decline is couched in almost mythical terms. England was once an Arcadian idyll and may yet be so again: "the faded flower of England may bloom and rise again". But Thompson's youthful idealism was short-lived. By the mid seventies, Shakespeare's "scept'r'd isle" had become "an island made of cocaine on a sea of turpentine". By the nineties, there is the recognition, voiced so effectively in the patchy but laudable Industry album, that the country which had once produced with pride the "1952 Vincent Black Lightning" and the "MGB-GT" is now transformed into "Lotteryland", a "museum of industry." And like Old Grimey, Britain has completed its "Last Shift":

*Now the scapper boys infest
And the wrecking balls caress,
Like vermin round a burial ground
They catch the smell of death.*

The tenor of Industry is more in sorrow than in anger perhaps at the destruction of a national heritage and way of life but elsewhere Thompson is pretty scathing about one particular aspect of what makes Britain British – suburbia. The song "Civilisation" paints an uncompromising and uncharitable picture of what life in suburbia has become – a home for androids, "vegetable[s] with a heartache". And then, of course,

there is "Psycho Street", the friendly suburb to which many of Thompson's roads seem to lead. When the question is posed in "God Loves A Drunk", "does God really care for your life in the suburbs/ A dull little life, full of dull little things", it's hard to escape the suspicion that Thompson on this as on a number of other occasions is at least in part on the side of the inebriated!

But it's what suburbia does to people and to the fabric of social relationships which really gets under Thompson's skin and drills into his skull. In a sense, the overriding message was spelled out early on: "This cruel country has driven me down,/ Teased me and lied, teased me and lied." It is the "teasing" and the "lying", the "rumors" and the "sighs" which breed and multiply on suburban streets that are so destructive and seem to so anger Thompson. His definitive denunciation comes in "Back Street Slide" – "they stab you in the back with a kitchen knife" – but he finds the same destructiveness, vindictiveness and hypocrisy lurking behind the net curtains on a number of lonely streets. It's there from the outset in "the eyes of the boarding-house lady" who stares out in "Sun Shade" but in later songs it's assumed epidemic proportions:

*Small town romance,
Everyone knows you're mine.
They peep from faded curtains,
They read your Valentine....
They'd still break you if they could.
They always say, "I told you so,
She never was no good."*

But it's not just the maliciousness of neighbours that makes suburbia a living hell. The enmity of friends can be even more destructive. In one of his earliest co-written songs, "The Lobster", Thompson used the words of the poet, George Painter, to make the point:

*When you thought me safely drowned,
In the depths I swim around.
Thither, when you too descend,
With my claw I'll tear you - friend!*

The distrust of friendship and what it can often degenerate into in modern society is expressed in Thompson's own words in "Man In Need", a song which is pivotal in his delineation of so many critical relationships - man and woman, man and friend, man and his Muse, man and his God: "All of my friends don't comprehend me./ Their kind of style, it just offends me." And the theme reaches its apotheosis, of course, in the blistering "Put It There Pal": "Some say, you're a rattlesnake in the grass/ But I say, the sun shines out of your arse!" To revert for a moment to the "P" word - to scrutinise the above for signs of personal animosities on Thompson's part as some have done is to miss the important general point. The relevance of these songs is seen in the context of a view of the world in which friendships become poisoned and potentially transformed into razor dances every bit as bloody as the failed love relationships that litter the pages of his lyric book. Simplistically, sick societies breed sick people who develop sick relationships.

All of this represents an unravelling if not a complete disintegration of the social fabric and nowhere is that more apparent than when Thompson directs his scalpel towards the cancers affecting family life and family values. In "The Old Changing Way", the severing of family ties was deeply regretted and the exhortation was to "cling to your dearest". In most Thompson songs however the ruptures are irrevocable. There seems no hope of recovery to any kind of family health in the picture painted with heart-rending vividness in "Speechless Child":

*Can't stand the sound of raging voices,
Can't stand the sound of warring tongues -
Shut in a place where none can reach you,
A better place than this cruel one...
Your mother blames you for her trouble.
Your father needs to pick a fight
And you're the smallest and the nearest.
You close the door and close it tight!
See all the joys of family living...*

The perversion of the relationship that should exist between parent and child is captured in gruesome terms in "Can't Win": "What kind of mother would hamstring her sons/ Put sand in their eyes and put ice on their tongues?" One specific answer was provided in Rumor & Sigh: a mother who "knows best." She's a mother who's "got a zombie army to serve her well" and she "rides the unbelievers down." She is called Margaret Thatcher, a mother who is also Prime Minister of Lot-

teryland. She wants passionately for all her children to buy their own suburban homes in desirable neighbourhoods like Psycho Street. She is the archetypal Twentieth Century Earth Mother who, as the words of the song suggest, embodies for Thompson the apocalypse facing us all.

Thus far, we've confined our overview of Thompson's great themes to the general - the world, civilisation, and society - but it's time to look now at what this implies for the individual. What does Thompson have to say about the human condition? It can be summed up in four words. These words or their synonyms appear throughout his work with amazing frequency: isolation; entrapment; amnesia; death. We will look later at the way in which these motifs appear and intertwine within individual songs and between songs. For now, we'll just pick a handful of the most striking examples to exemplify the key strands.

Isolation in Thompson's work takes many forms. On the most concrete level, there are several striking examples of physical isolation - the "lonely travellers" in "Farewell Farewell", for example; "Crazy Man Michael" who "wanders alone and talks to the night and the day"; the girl who sits alone on a Saturday night asking "Has He Got A Friend"; or, at its most prosaic, the youth on the streets of London in the early hours, "Walking The Long Miles Home." On an emotional and psychological level however, isolation is often seen in terms of a peculiarly British trait, the reserve that so often translates into an inability to communicate, to relate, and to express emotion. The speaker in "How I Wanted To" typifies this:

*When we parted just like friends,
We never tied loose ends -
I could never say the words that would make amends ...
From my blue room you did creep,
A love too rare to keep.
I heard your step and I turned my head to weep.
How I wanted to say I loved you.*

At the most fundamental level, however, the isolation is spiritual. Unlike John Donne for whom "no man is an island intire unto itself", Thompson at times seems to feel that we are all isolated - unknown and in a sense unknowable except by God. But while "God Loves A Drunk", the drunk himself "screams at his demons alone in the darkness". Some of Thompson's most potent images convey this awful sense of alone-ness in songs written throughout his career - "Meet On The Ledge", "Never Again", "The Great Valerio", "Shoot Out The Lights", "Grey Walls", "Burns' Supper." But the terrifying and age-old isolation of the human spirit is perhaps captured most effectively by the image of Poor Will on the gallows tree, poised alone on the brink of eternity with no hope of salvation through human agencies: "no purse for a champion, no true love come over the stile."

Entrapment - the sense of being held captive in a hostile environment, indeed a hostile world - is if anything an even more dominant theme in Thompson's depiction of the human condition. Over fifty songs contain graphic images of being trapped, confined, enclosed, chained, imprisoned, hemmed in. The cumulative sense of claustrophobia - physical, emo-

tional, spiritual - across his work is at times overpowering. Nowhere is this conveyed with such horrific and disturbing impact as in "Killing Jar":

*I once had a songbird with a broken wing.
I cried and I cried but it never would sing.
I once had a songbird, apple of my eye.
I put it in the killing jar, just to watch him die.*

The matter-of-fact awfulness of this image is staggering. The mental picture of the bird's physical suffocation doesn't fade easily and the association of the death of the bird with the protagonist's emotional and spiritual death is one of Thompson's most striking metaphors. One important sub-set of the entrapment theme is the concept of poverty - again on a number of literal and symbolic levels. That poverty is a particularly pernicious and effective form of constraint is emphasised in "Oh I Swear":

*Like jailbirds locked in a cell,
Oh, we go well together.
Like a marriage arranged in hell,
Oh, we go well together.
Cruel poverty is the tie that binds
But we'll get by.
Can't run in a dead end street.
Can't run in a dead end street -
No wings upon your feet and all your dreams are shackled to the
ground.*

The metaphorical association with spiritual and emotional poverty is spelled out in "The Sun Never Shines On The Poor": "most of the people are poor in the heart./ That's the worst kind of poor you can be." One aspect of emotional poverty that appears throughout Thompson's work is the preoccupation that his characters have with the superficial, particularly with the veneer which smart clothes present. Songs such as "A Bone Through Her Nose" and "Little Blue Number" are on one level mild and amusing social comment but on a more fundamental level, the emphasis on the external simply serves to accentuate the emptiness inside. Materialism throughout Thompson's work represents both a symptom of emotional impoverishment and a root cause of deeper social malaise.

The natural and inevitable response to confinement is of course to seek to escape or to forget, the many forms of which Thompson characterises as "amnesia". On a fairly literal level, the urge to escape physically from the constraints of society, the urge to "hit the road", is reflected in songs such as "Shaky Nancy", "When I Get To The Border", "Restless Highway", and the magnificent "Beeswing." The imperative to escape in the latter song is particularly acute: "If you don't take me out of here,/ I'll surely lose my mind". For the heroine of the song, the physical cost of a life on the run - "they say her flower is faded now,/ Hard weather and hard booze" - is perhaps worth paying: "Maybe that's just the price you pay for the chains you refuse". Many of Thompson's most vivid character creations are in desperate search of emotional release. At times, this takes the relatively mild form of simply having a good time and shedding the cares of the world for a while - to

spend “Saturday Rolling Around” and to “dream until Monday comes in sight”. Many hit the bottle to simply shut out the world and play a different role for a while:

*You can be a gambler, never played a hand.
You can be a sailor, never left dry land.
You can be Lord Jesus, all the world will understand,
Down where the drunkards roll.*

The pursuit of “Hokey Pokey” in the form of drink or any of its other manifestations is how many of Thompson’s characters spend their lives. In its most extreme and damaging form, this translates into a yearning for danger and violence, images of which pervade his work. The delinquents who form the appropriately named “Killerman Gold Posse” or who “Crash The Party” epitomise the repressed emotions and violent urges which are unleashed on “Psycho Street.” But the sense of release which comes from acts of violence and the reality of delinquency as both social protest and symptom of social decay are perhaps best expressed in the joyous outpouring of the reprobate who proclaims that “I Feel So Good”: “They put me in jail for my deviant ways,/ Two years seven months and sixteen days./ Now I’m back on the street in a purple haze.” The other main strand of the escape motif in Thompson is the pursuit of false idols who, or which, themselves represent a form of escape from the horrible realities of the day-to-day. At times, this can take the form of a relatively innocuous preoccupation with a racehorse, a deceased Scottish bandleader or a

vintage motorcar. At its most extreme, it becomes a full-blown obsession:

*They came in their thousands from the whole human race
To pay their respects at his last resting place.
But blindly she knelt there and she told him her dreams
And she thought that he answered, or that’s how it seems.
Then they dragged her away; it was handcuffs this time.
She said, “My good man are you out of your mind?
Don’t you know that we’re married? See, I’m wearing his ring.
I’ve come from Galway to Graceland to be with the King.”*

The tragic ironies underlying this song - notably the escape from the confines of a loveless marriage to those of handcuffs and insanity - represent Thompson at his finest.

The ultimate form of escape from a life not worth living is, of course, death. Images of death abound in Thompson’s songs. On one level, these reinforce the universal themes discussed earlier. On another, they provide the backdrop for the personal tragedies that his characters play out. Forty per cent of Thompson’s published songs contain explicit and at times graphic references to death and the afterlife. We see this in “Sam Jones”:

*And I even dream of bones when I’m lying very ill -
Rooms full of skeletons dancing a quadrille,
Rows and rows of skulls singing “Blueberry Hill”.
Sam Jones deliver them bones.*

The reference to the quadrille takes us back to medieval images of the Dance of Death. We are back in the plague years, where we started this odyssey! The motif is however best represented by the Tarot archetypes, which appear in "Poor Will And The Jolly Hangman" - where the latter is judge and executioner at the end of the cosmic farce which is human existence.

For Poor Will, there was no true love about to "come over the stile" and rescue him, but for most of Thompson's characters the possibility of love for another person does exist, at least in theory, as a potential consolation in the wasteland. Some even get quite close to the possibility of fulfilment: "I'm nearly in love./ I'm almost aware of walking on air." However, for those rare happy couples who get beyond that tentative stage and experience real happiness, the final upshot is usually despair:

*When she came to the hospital there wasn't much left.
He was running out of road; he was running out of breath.
But he smiled to see her cry and said, "I'll give you my Vincent
to ride."*

Or again:

*We busked around the market towns. We picked fruit down in
Kent.
And we could tinker lamps and pots and knives wherever we
went.
And I said that we might settle down, get a few acres dug -*

*Fire burning in the hearth and babies on the rug.
She said, "Oh, man, you foolish man! It surely sounds like hell!
You might be Lord of half the world, you'll not own me as well!"*

The only songs in the entire published Thompson canon in which the outcome of a love relationship is unalloyed joy are the inferior "Shine On Love" and the superlative "Cooksferry Queen." In both cases, as we shall see, the protagonist is in love with a very special entity. For the most part, love is an unsatisfactory business for all concerned. The word "business" is used advisedly, for often in Thompson's work the relationship between the sexes is reduced to a form of commerce:

*See that lover standing, staring at the ground,
He's looking for the real thing. Lies are all he found.
You can get the real thing - it will only cost a pound
Down where the drunkards roll.*

Even when money does not change hands, there is little sense of genuine physical and emotional release. Songs such as "She Twists The Knife Again" obscure the underlying distress with a jokey veneer. Others, such as "I Read About Love" or "Hard On Me" make no such pretence. The implicit linkage of sex and violence reaches its climax in the chilling "Love In A Faithless Country" where the image of sexual gratification is captured on the retina of a murder victim. More often than not, the Battle of the Sexes means just that. From the earliest songs - for example, "Sloth" - to the very recent, love is a game played with the gloves off and the knives out:

*After the death of a thousand kisses
Comes the catacombs of tongues.
Who can spit the meanest venom
From the poison of their lungs?
Cruellest dance is the Razor Dance.
Circle in and circle round.
Thrill to put the other one down.
The Razor Dance. The Razor Dance.*

In Thompson's universe, it often feels as if the only thing worse than being part of a relationship is not being part of one or, more particularly, having been part of a relationship that failed. Thompson's songs of lost love are among the most poignant in the language and form a key plank in the platform of his greatness as a writer. Just consider the rare things contained in one version of the Top Ten:

1. Beeswing
2. Devonside
3. Jennie
4. Keep Your Distance
5. Missie How You Let Me Down
6. How I Wanted To
7. The Poor Ditching Boy
8. I Still Dream
9. The Ghost Of You Walks
10. Withered And Died

There are, however, two kinds of relationship depicted in Thompson's work that transcend the generally depressing picture of human love described above. The first is the relationship between the writer and his muse. Thompson's early exposure to the work of Robert Graves is reflected in a series of songs over the years that catalogue the shifting relationship between the writer and the divine Lady from whom he derives his inspiration. This body of songs is unique in popular music. Indeed, few major poets have devoted as many lines to the Goddess as Thompson has. The career long dialogue between Thompson and his muse is again a foundation on which his reputation and significance as a songwriter is based and forms the subject of our next chapter.

The other relationship that transcends the mercenary and the mundane in Thompson's oeuvre is that between Man and God. The songs up to and including the Bright Lights album are imbued with a longing for faith and stability. Following Thompson's adoption of the Sufi faith, the reality of a relationship with God becomes the bedrock of his work. That relationship is never easy, however, and the tenor of the Thompson's greatest devotional songs is of yearning for a union that may never be consummated or that once broken may never be re-established:

*I see you on the street in company.
Why don't you come and ease your mind with me?
I'm living for the night we steal away.
I need you at the dimming of the day.*

Thompson once said that all his songs are love songs, if you know how to listen to them. His songs to his muse and to his God are certainly cast in the language of conventional love songs, which enables them to function on two and at times on three different levels – sacred, secular and mythical. Put bluntly, no one else manages this multi-faceted portrayal of love so comprehensively, so consistently, so effectively.

The consistency and coherence of Thompson's world-view is reinforced by – in a sense, it is a function of – the consistency and coherence and density of his imagery and the main motifs that run through his work. Thompson is a superb imaginal writer – a characteristic that he shares with many of the other great Sufi writers. His use of simile is limited – “like a fox caught in the headlights” is “a rare thing” in both senses – but his use of metaphor is pervasive and helps explain the frequent observation that his songs work on several different levels. Following the launch of the official Thompson website – “richardthompson-music.com” – in mid 2002, we can all now play the image spotting game fairly readily. Type the keyword “rain” into SONG-O-MATIC and 39 songs appear. Type “knife” and “gun” and 30 appear. Type “dead” and 22 appear. The phrase “I love you” appears in just four songs. All you ever needed to know about Richard Thompson at the touch of a mouse. My own analysis of Thompson's imagery was conducted long hand in the bad old days. I grouped related images and motifs in clusters and looked for the number of songs in which a given cluster appeared. The results tell us what we had already sensed as we listen to Thompson's work, album by album. Images of violence appear in nearly

two thirds of the songs. References to love and hate feature in over half the songs, as do images of wealth and poverty. You only get to find a partner at the weekly Razor Dance down on Psycho Street if you've paid the price of admission. If we look at the full list of twenty clusters that are contained in at least a quarter of the songs we get a real sense of Thompson's preoccupations and of the richness of his word pictures:

Violence [plus weapons, war, torture etc]	[plus blood, appears in	64%	of the songs
Love/hate heart etc]	[plus	56%	
Wealth [plus rich, poor, thief etc]		50%	
Names [of people, places, products etc]		49%	
Death [plus grave, ghosts etc]		40%	
Ritual dance, ceremonies etc]	[plus, circles,	39%	
Light/dark sun, moon, night etc]	[plus day,	36%	
Entrapment [confinement, enslavement, magic etc]		36%	
Escape [plus road, travel, borders etc]		33%	

Rain [plus winter, cold, wind etc] us gossip, slander, false friends etc]	29%
Falling [plus sinking, drowning etc]	28%
Old/young [plus parent, child etc]	27%
Birds [plus animals, reptiles etc]	27%
Madness [plus fear etc]	27%
Buildings [plus house, home etc]	26%
Clothing [plus cosmetics etc]	25%
Flood [plus fire, famine, plague, disease etc]	25%
Dreams [plus nightmares, sleep etc]	25%
Truth [plus friends, companions etc]	25%

On average a typical Richard Thompson song contains around eight of these clusters. The density by album ranges from just under six clusters per track on *Hand Of Kindness* to just over nine clusters per track on *Sunnyvista*, *Daring Adventures* and *Rumor & Sigh*. To say the least, it is a remarkably

cohesive body of work and our earlier allusion to a “typical” Thompson song is hopefully justified, at least in part.

A quantitative summary of Thompson’s imagery presents of course only part of the picture. Just as important is the context within which and the effectiveness with which he deploys that imagery. Thompson’s command of what Yeats called the “craft of verse” was summarised by Paul Zollo in the introductory notes to his extended interview with Thompson:

He weaves formal, rich lines of lyrics with elaborate meters and rhyme schemes that challenge and celebrate the conventions of songwriting. Like Dylan, Thompson fuses the energy of poetry with a solid respect for the purity of song craft, employing feminine rhymes and interlocking rhyme patterns few writers ever even attempt. On the page, one of his verses might appear haphazard, with the rhymes falling in funny places. But once you hear it sung you see that it’s structured ingeniously, so that the very play of rhymes and rhythm adds to the emotional momentum of the song. His songs are all structured on an inner skeleton of essential singability, so that the words and music lock together with an undeniable inevitability, giving them the timeless essence of old folk songs. [PZ 524]

We will have many opportunities to test the validity of Zollo’s claims as we trawl back and forth through the Thompson canon in succeeding pages. For now, let us just acknowledge two related examples, one from amongst Thompson’s earliest

and one from his more recent offerings. Both, as it happens, offer more than a passing nod to Dylan:

*In comes Saville,
Had his fill of travel,
Grabbed a bite on the flight just touched down today.
Looking drawn and haggard,
Along he staggered
With a sound that he found over Frisco way.
Please don't get us wrong, man,
This is just a song, man,
No matter what we say.
This is the season,
Stormy weather's on the way.
This is the season,
Stormy weather's on the way.
You better start worrying, witchcraft's here to stay.*

*You had me in a second, you had it all reckoned, you did.
You guessed my game and my name rank and number, you did.
Somehow gave myself away.
Some code, some word I didn't say.
I missed one line in the play
And the trap shut tight
And you did me all right.
I'll crawl back – under my stone.
I'll crawl back – under my stone.
I'll crawl back – under my stone.
And you won't have to stand next to me.*

*You won't have to introduce me.
You won't have to think about, talk about, care about,
You won't have to ask about, fuss about, discuss about,
You won't have to mind about, sweat about, forget about me.
I'll crawl back.*

The final aspect of the songs of Richard Thompson requiring attention at this stage is their strength of characterisation. He acknowledged to Patrick Humphries the difficulty in presenting fully rounded characters within the constraints of a popular song:

You don't have time for the character development of a novel unfortunately – so you get straight in there and deal with broad strokes, so it's a little cruder. You almost have to have the same kind of character development in your head [as in a novel] and then discard ninety-eight per cent of it just to make whatever two lines you write about somebody real. You have to know all the background and then not use it. I had to know as much as possible about Vincent motorcycles and then not use it, leave out all the verses with the technical jargon, because it's too boring for normal people! Whatever you write about, you have to know it very well, as well as you can. Then because it's just a song, you have to ditch it. [PH 305]

Paul Zollo, in his otherwise laudable interview with Thompson spent little time on this aspect of his art. Zollo's

interview with Randy Newman, by contrast, majored on this aspect of the songwriter's work:

Of all the songwriters I've spoken to, there isn't one who is at once as serious and hilarious as Randy Newman. It's the same mix he brings to his songs, fusing humour and darkness to reveal the often harsh realities of human existence. And he does so in the first-person, speaking from the source itself ... And it is this trait, removing all distance from his subject by becoming that subject, that separates his work from that of his peers. There is no other songwriter who has shown us bigotry, ignorance, and human weakness as convincingly as Randy Newman. And he has done so in our own words. [PZ 266]

Newman terms this subversive device the "untrustworthy narrator" by analogy with the "unreliable narrator" employed as a rhetorical device in much modern fiction. Randy Newman is indeed one of the handful of truly great songwriters of the post war era and one of the very few worthy of comparison with Thompson. That said, and with due deference to Paul Zollo, Thompson's deployment of untrustworthy narrators is at least as effective as Newman's and his emotional palette far more extensive. He can articulate bigotry, ignorance and human weakness with the best, but no one conveys heartache, despair, isolation and the yearning for spiritual comfort "in our own words" like Richard Thompson. In Thompson's case, however, the effectiveness of his characterisations and the richness of his songs are intensified by the use of multiple

narrative perspectives and by extensive use of dialogue within songs. We will look in detail at examples of this aspect of Thompson's craft in due course, but for now, consider another possible Top Ten, this time comprising the great Thompson character creations:

1. Hope You Like The New Me
2. I Feel So Good
3. Uninhabited Man
4. Don't Sit On My Jimmy Shands
5. Can't Win
6. Turning Of The Tide
7. The Poor Little Beggar Girl
8. Cold Kisses
9. Killing Jar
10. The Old Changing Way

THE PERFORMING ARTIST

In the revised edition of his mammoth biography of Bob Dylan, *Behind The Shades*, Clinton Heylin highlights the internal conflict that helped shape the career development of two of the authentic geniuses of popular art in the twentieth century:

Like perhaps only Orson Welles this century, [Dylan] was blessed with two forms of genius that, though outwardly compatible were (and are) in fact constantly at war with each other. In both cases, it was often easier, creatively and financially, to play the performer – and as actor and singer, they generally both conveyed (more than) a sliver of genius in their appointed roles – than the auteur.

General comparisons between Thompson and Dylan/Welles are entirely appropriate – they are among the handful of popular artists whose achievements in the long run in any way measure up to his – but in this respect, his dilemma was very different to theirs. By the time Thompson hit twenty-one, his genius as a guitar player was pretty much a given. As a songwriter, there was already sufficient evidence to suggest an extraordinary talent. But as a performer Thompson was disinclined and frankly ill equipped to convey a sliver of real competence, let alone genius. I first saw Thompson on stage during the 1970 Fairport Convention Full House tour. Sandy Denny's departure from the band had necessitated Thompson taking at least a share of the lead vocal duty but he showed

little enthusiasm for the spotlight. Whilst not exactly hiding behind the amp stack, he clearly did not relish being centre stage. The guitar solos were stunning but the vocals were tentative and the general stage presence anonymous at best. One was reminded of Julie Christie's memorable line in the film *Billy Liar*, which coincidentally had been screened at the university film club a few weeks earlier: "You may be a brilliant script-writer, Billy, but you're a rotten actor."

Jump forward to the summer of 2002. Thompson is performing a handful of solo concerts in North Wales and north-west England as a warm-up ahead of his by now biannual appearance at the Cropredy Festival in August. This "Richard Thompson" exudes control, confidence, charm, and, yes, charisma. He excites adulation from a crowd of believers, and from those present because they had finally heard that he was worthy of belief. His regulation, slightly shabby, all-black outfit does nothing to dispel the aura, even if he perhaps still wishes that it might. The twenty-odd song, two-hour set is a carefully constructed and balanced mix of

- **The old:** an extensive trawl through the unparalleled back catalogue from "Genesis Hall" to "Cooksferry Queen";
- **The new:** songs that are being "sung in" ahead of a new album, scheduled to appear in early 2003. "Gethsemane", "She Said It Was Destiny" and a strange song about the Taliban all sound like future classics;
- **The borrowed:** his condensed version of *One Thousand Years Of Popular Song* featuring a 15th century satirical song in medieval Italian, an authentic rendering of the 19th

American century sea shanty, “Shenandoah”, and an outrageous camp version of Britney Spears’ “Oops - I Did It Again”;

- *The blue:* the two stage songs that he has been performing for the past twelve months, the hilarious “My Daddy Was A Mummy” and the scurrilous “Madonna’s Wedding.”

The vocal performances range from the profoundly moving to the unashamedly raucous. The signature guitar playing, as ever, ranges from the searing to the sublime. His stage patter is fluent and funny and comprises a blend of the ad hoc and the carefully rehearsed and precisely repeated ad-lib. The joins don’t show from venue to venue. This “Richard Thompson” is a performing artist of the very highest calibre, at the very height of his powers. The transformation is amazing.

That it didn’t come easy was made clear to Patrick Humphries: “there’s a lot of performers who achieve their adequacy on the stage – that seems to be the way that they fulfil themselves – and off stage they go back to being shuffling wrecks – mere shadows of men. I’ve certainly counted myself among that small legion.” [PH 315]. Serendipity and sheer financial necessity played their part in driving Thompson to achieve and far exceed his adequacy as a performer. Denny’s departure from Fairport Convention dragged him to the front of the stage. Working with Linda enabled him to beat his retreat to the amp stacks. Separation from Linda forced him back centre stage, where he has remained ever since, either leading a succession of superlative stage bands or as a solo artist. But above all, the transformation has come about as a result of Thomp-

son’s sheer bloody-minded determination to make it happen. He was born with no innate gift as a performer. He has made – and in a very real sense remade – himself what he is today. And in that sense his progress as a performer exceeds his accomplishments as either guitar player or songwriter. After a tough thirty-year apprenticeship, he has transformed himself, if you like, into “Billy Lyre” – a brilliant musician, a brilliant scriptwriter and, finally, a brilliant actor. It makes a hell of a screenplay.

CHAPTER THREE

RICHARD THOMPSON AND HIS MUSE

He has remained true to his Muse, despite the demands of the music business.

Simon Nicol

PAUL ZOLLO: Many songwriters, such as John Lennon, have said that writing songs for them is almost a form of channeling, as if they are bringing in the song from another source ...

RICHARD THOMPSON:

I think Lennon was right. [Laughs] Yeah ... there's another side of you, there's the itch, the bit that writes itself, that's somewhat independent. It is hard to analyse. Perhaps it shouldn't be analysed.

I cannot think of any true poet from Homer onwards who has not independently recorded his experience of her. The test of a poet's vision, one might say, is the accuracy of his portrayal of the White Goddess.

Robert Graves

*Oh Shirley, Oh Debbie, Oh Julie, Oh Jane
I wrote so many songs about you
I forget your name (I forget your name)*

Paul Heaton/David Rotheray

When I go out to sing now, I just thank the Triple Goddess that I still have the fire. And for the gift of music and love and communication. And soul.

Laura Nyro.

I think it's the muse. I think that she's totally responsible for anything that I write. So I'm completely indebted to this muse ... Oh, you can try all you want. But if she's not there, there's not much happening.

Robbie Robertson.

The poet Kate Clanchy kicks off a delightfully tongue-in-cheek article in the Guardian concerning the tortured relationships between poets and their muses with a reference to the long-suffering partner of Robert Graves:

On a terrace in Majorca, Beryl Graves, widow of the poet Robert, gives an interview about Graves' mistresses. "Judith, Margot, Julia were nice girls. We liked all the muses – except for Cindy." There were a lot of them to like. Even in his portly 80s, Graves had no difficulty finding young women willing to embody what he called the "White Goddess" and inspire his verse. Graves would never have got away with it without the potent myth of the muse: the idea that poetry is inspired by a lovely female spirit.

Graves, who died in 1985, is perhaps best known for his historical novels, *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God* but he also, in effect, perpetuated the myth of the muse and legitimised his own philandering in a series of studies of the mythical and psychological sources of poetry. Of these, probably the finest and most popular is appropriately titled *The White Goddess*. In the book Graves explores the ancient stories, which lie behind the three-fold deity, who, in one of her later and most widely recognised incarnations, became known as the Ninefold Muse, patroness of the white magic of poetry. Graves' contention is that all true poetry embodies aspects of a single overriding theme:

The Theme, briefly, is the antique story ... of the birth, life, death and resurrection of the God of the Waxing Year; the central chapters concern the God's losing battle with the God of the Waning Year for love of the capricious and all-powerful Threefold Goddess, their mother, bride and layer-out. The poet identifies himself with the God of the

Waxing Year and his Muse with the Goddess; the rival is his blood-brother, his other self, his weird ... [who] often appears in nightmare as the tall, lean, dark-faced bed-side spectre ... but also takes on countless other malevolent or diabolic or serpent-like forms. [WG 24]

Lest this appear to be more than one cool remove from the major themes which run throughout the songs of Richard Thompson, it's worth pausing to reflect on the similarity between Graves' description of the Goddess as "mother, bride and layer-out" and the enigmatic words of the heroine in "Devonside" who volunteers to be "pillow ... lover, mother, whore and wife" to the boy whose health was failing, just as the "health" of the year fails each winter. That may be a coincidence, but Graves' description of the Goddess and her significance to the true poet gets to the heart of one of Thompson's chief preoccupations: "The Goddess is a lovely, slender woman with a hooked nose, deathly pale face, lips red as rowan-berries, startlingly blue eyes and long fair hair ... [A] true poem is necessarily an invocation of the White Goddess, or Muse, the Mother of All Living, the ancient power of fright and lust." [WG 24]. While the majority of Thompson's songs deal with the troubled relationships between all-too-ordinary men and women, a number of his songs, including some of his greatest, treat on one level with the relationship between a particular kind of man – the poet, and by extension the songwriter and performer – and the other woman in his life – his muse. In this important sub-group of songs Thompson, to use another phrase of Graves', is demonstrating the true function of po-

etry, the “religious invocation of the Muse [and of] the mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites”. And, helpfully and unusually, Thompson does on one occasion invite us explicitly to view one of his songs as such an invocation.

In the tour booklet that accompanied the 1992 Rumor & Sigh tour, Thompson gave short comments on each of the songs on the album. The comment on “Backlash Love Affair” runs: “This is a song about Terpsichore – the Greek muse of dancing and singing. She’s represented here by a tattooed heavy metal lady”. Terpsichore was, indeed, a member of the Ninefold Muse referred to by Robert Graves. The nine, in Greek mythology, were the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne and became associated with individual arts and sciences. Over time, Terpsichore became specifically associated with choral song and dance and her portfolio probably comes closest to what Richard Thompson actually does for a living. Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary gives the Greek derivation of the name as “terpsis, delight – terpein, to enjoy – choros, dance”. The consequent adjective, “terpsichorean”, is still in common use – well, fairly! All nine muses are depicted in the famous paintings at Herculaneum. Here, as elsewhere, Terpsichore is shown carrying a lyre and scroll. The curious, or especially sad, can often spot her, so encumbered, gathering dust on the shelves of antique shops around the UK. But the po-faced, austere, sober figure thus encapsulated in Victorian Parian ware bears little obvious relation to the harridan who enslaves the narrator in “Backlash Love Affair”. Like Graves’ Cindy, this Teutonic Terror is not a nice girl!

On a superficial level, Richard has good fun at Terpsichore’s expense, and, to some extent, probably at his own. In an album rich in Thompson’s blackest humour – “Read About Love”, “Don’t Sit On My Jimmy Shands”, “Mother Knows Best”, “Psycho Street” – “Backlash Love Affair” holds its own in great company. The immediate reference to “Iron Maiden” represents Thompson at his most adroit. The archetypal heavy metal band’s name enables him to paint the riotous surface picture – “thrash metal lyrics”; “the stage thundered and the smoke bombs made me blind”; “hair extensions [and] tattoos [and] comic book[s]”. This sets up the non-PC, don’t-mention-the-war type dig at the Germans, whose ruthless efficiency, as we Brits always suspected, clearly extends all the way to the bedroom: “Come on Joe, don’t be slow. In, Out, In, Out”. This in turn provides the context for one of Thompson’s neatest puns – “jig-a-jig” as a bonk amid the head banging, but also as a dreadful cod-folk instrumental by East Of Eden. Fairport meets Black Sabbath – but at least East of Eden made the charts! But the reference to iron maidens also sets up the song’s serious subtext. This isn’t just a description of a masochistic thrash-fest: the song seeks to say a number of fundamental things concerning the relationship between the poet and his muse.

The original iron maidens were the Valkyries who, according to Brewer’s Book Of Myth And Legend, were the “hand-maidens of Odin, who, mounted on swift horses and holding drawn swords, rushed into the melee of battle and selected those destined to death. These heroes they conducted to Valhalla, where they waited upon them and served them with

mead and ale in the skulls of the vanquished". In this context, the thunder and the smoke bombs are transposed from stage to battlefield. The cool marble slab, in the final refrain, similarly, takes on funereal connotations. The true character of these mythical iron maidens is recognised at the end of Thompson's song: "They wrap around you and the cold knives cut and stab". They will always be associated in the popular imagination with "The Ride Of The Valkyries" from Wagner's Ring, and particularly, the use of that piece of music as a chilling backdrop to the aerial invasion of a Viet Cong village by helicopter gun-ships in Francis Ford Coppola's Oscar-winning masterpiece, *Apocalypse Now*. There, the choppers drop from the sky like satanic scarabs descending on a dung heap to Wagner's hellish accompaniment. Coppola's 1979 movie features elsewhere in Thompson's artistic odyssey, but, in any case, he knew the Valkyries of old, from his short time spent as a teenage apprentice to the London glass designer, Hans Unger. Thompson told Patrick Humphries that Unger's practice of playing classical records or BBC Radio Three all day had instilled in his apprentice an appreciation of music in general and an abiding dislike of Wagner.

There are a number of points to register about the depiction of muse-as-Valkyr in "Backlash Love Affair." The poet/writer's relationship with her is unlooked-for – she "stole my heart away". It is predestined and genuinely painful, metaphorically and all too literally. It is, above all, a one-sided affair. "What's my share of this backlash love affair" is a recurring theme in this area of Thompson's work. The song also emphasises the dual nature, the horror and the exaltation, of the muse. In the

privacy of the domestic torture chamber, she's in command and giving commands, fully capable of turning the neophyte into a shish kebab. In public, like a Parian ware statuette, she's demure, "cool as marble". The song says something also about the character of the victim – "why she goes for my type, I'll never understand". She clearly believes him to be a conformist and what, to jump ahead, we might call an "aimless" creature. We will encounter others of his type. Finally, the victim clearly recognises the symbolic significance of their measured coupling – "it's art for art's sake" – but what, in a literal sense, does "Left, Right, Left Right ... In, Out, In, Out" depict? Is she literally drawing a cross in the air on which to nail him? Thompson's summary of what "Backlash Love Affair" is "about" is characteristically precise: "She's represented here by a tattooed heavy metal lady". That seems to invite the question: how is she represented elsewhere in his work? We'll start by looking at representations which bookend Thompson's career as a writer, those contained in *Henry The Human Fly*, and those in *Mock Tudor*. Like Yeats, Thompson has spent his life saying the same thing in many different ways. Let's start at the edges and work in.

Henry The Human Fly is a great album and a courageous album from a young artist who was discarding the secure haven of Fairport for the uncharted waters of a solo career. The statement of artistic intent is right there up-front in "Roll Over Vaughn Williams" and the songs that follow sketch out the themes that Thompson would explore over the following three decades. *The White Goddess* was first published in 1948 and was reissued in the early sixties. It was well known by

Thompson by the time that he came to write the songs on his first album. Graves' cumulative depiction of the goddess/muse as variously beautiful, fickle, wise, implacable and cruel, certainly colours the portrayal of the heroine in "Shaky Nancy", who is shown as a protean, elemental force. Her appearance in the life of the narrator is pre-ordained – "nothing chancy". She has the ineffable mystery of a goddess – "why she comes, nobody knows". And, like a goddess, she inspires a religious response – "say a prayer for Nancy". But it is in "The Poor Ditching Boy" that Thompson foreshadows aspects of the character of the muse and the nature of the artist's relationship with her, in terms that are reflected in his mature work.

Robert Graves reminds us of the innate character of his Triple Goddess, as "a personification of primitive woman – woman the creatress and destructress. As the New Moon or Spring she was girl; as the Full Moon or Summer she was woman; as the Old Moon or Winter she was hag". [WG 386]. This provides the context for "The Poor Ditching Boy." The goddess/muse here is at her most hag-like and destructive and Thompson captures the full horror which her coming excites. The first verse of the song is a great piece of writing, conveying in the first couplet the end-of-world weariness of the environment in which the narrator finds himself, literally and metaphorically, and in which the hag of the Old Moon and of Winter manifests herself. The lethargic river is both a physical representation of the dead of winter and a symbolic reference to the mythical Styx, river of death. The second couplet captures the pain and horror he faces as first his clothing, then his skin, are pared back to the bone to expose his inner core:

*Was there ever a winter so cold and so sad,
A river too weary to flood?
The storming wind cut through to my skin
But she cut through to my blood.*

The ditching boy's fate in being metaphorically flayed alive by the elements and his muse recalls that of the satyr, Marsyas, in Greek mythology. The Goddess Athena invented and learned to play the aulos, a flute-like set of pipes. When she saw an unflattering reflection of her own puffed-out cheeks as she played, she abandoned the instrument, which was retrieved by Marsyas. Against her stern advice, he learned to play, became adept and eventually challenged Apollo to a musical contest. His reward for losing one of the first battles of the bands was to be flayed alive. The narrator in Thompson's song is alert to the danger which the goddess represents – "I was looking for trouble to tangle my lines ... I knew I was standing on treacherous ground". But ultimately, he cannot avoid or escape the clutches of the scheming deity – "trouble came looking for me ... I was sinking too fast to run free". The third verse encapsulates a view of the relationship between poet and muse which recurs in much later Thompson songs:

*I would not be asking, I would not be seen
A-begging on mountain or hill
But I'm ready and blind, with my hands tied behind
And I've neither a mind nor a will.*

The first couplet expresses the narrator's recognition of his fate and his proud, or maybe stubborn refusal, quite simply, to try and talk his way out of it. The "mountain" is Helicon, home to the nine muses of Greek legend. The "hill" is Golgotha, Hill of Skulls, site of Christ's crucifixion and scene of the poet's ritual death in later Thompson works. The second couplet conveys the narrator's powerlessness – he has no ability and no will to oppose his pre-ordained life of service to the muse. This theme, too, we will see in later songs. But it also parallels the fate of another hapless Greek musician, Thamyras. He boasted that he could defeat even the muses in a musical contest. He also lost the contest and his punishment was to be blinded and to lose his musical skills. This is depicted on a wonderfully preserved Attic vase which dates from around 400 BC. A vengeful muse who clutches a lyre is clearly represented. Thamyras' kithara is shown falling to the ground. His mother looks on in horror. The final verse of the song at first hearing appears perversely obscure:

*It's bitter the need of the poor ditching boy,
He'll always believe what they say.
When they tell him it's hard to be honest and true,
Does he mind if he doesn't get paid?*

Explanation, again, comes from Robert Graves, who bemoans the lack of commitment to true poetry "nowadays" and addresses a stern admonition to those who would be poets:

[M]oney will buy anything but truth, and almost anyone but the truth-possessed poet ... Call me, if you like, the fox who has lost his brush; I am nobody's servant and have chosen to live on the outskirts of a Majorcan mountain-village, Catholic but anti-ecclesiastical, where life is still ruled by the old agricultural cycle. Without my brush, namely my contact with urban civilisation, all that I write must read perversely and irrelevantly to such of you as are still geared to the industrial machine, whether directly as workers, managers, traders or advertisers or indirectly as civil servants, publishers, journalists, schoolmasters or employees of a radio corporation. If you are poets, you will realise that acceptance of my historical thesis commits you to a confession of disloyalty which you will be loath to make; you chose your jobs because they promised to provide you with a steady income and leisure to render the Goddess whom you adore valuable part-time service. Who am I, you will ask, to warn you that she demands whole-time service or none at all? **[WG 14/5]**

The narrator in the song may be at the bottom of the oil sump in the "industrial machine", but he is still required to sacrifice what little security his menial job does offer – to "ditch ditching" as the pun in the title implies – in order to devote "honest and true", "whole-time service" to the muse. "The Poor Ditching Boy" remains a popular, if little understood, song in Richard Thompson's canon. Although in some ways its derivative form and structure betray the writer's artistic immaturity, the ideas in the song have stood the test of

time. Nearly thirty years on, songs on *Mock Tudor* are exploring the same theme.

The difference between the invocations of the muse contained in *Henry The Human Fly* and those in *Mock Tudor* is largely one of degree. In *Mock Tudor*, a fifty-year-old Thompson, at the height of his creative powers, has the confidence and the skill and, maybe, the need to devote nearly half the album to a study of the character of the muse and the nature of the creative artist's relationship with her. Moreover, he now has the courage and self-belief, audacity even, to present and perform the songs which comprise his study of the man/muse relationship as an uninterrupted five-song cycle at the start of the album and at each of his public performances over the second half of 1999. Robert Graves would have been proud of his commitment and devotion to the Goddess' service! In an interview in *Uncut* magazine in October 1999, Richard Thompson talked about treasured possessions that accompanied him on his travels. These included the *Moonlight In Vermont* album by Johnny Smith:

I don't know what my favourite album of all time is because it changes every day. But I love jazz and Johnny Smith is a very under-rated Fifties guitarist, quite fastidious but with a poetic dimension. I think this was *Playboy's* album of the year in 1957! I got turned on to him in the Seventies. I felt that after Hendrix there wasn't a lot happening in guitar playing, so I started to listen to a lot of Fifties guitar players. Sometimes you have to go back to move forwards...

Mock Tudor is an album in which Thompson appears to have gone back in order – as subsequent live performances and the 2003 release of *The Old Kit Bag* have shown – to move forwards. Back to his musical roots, back to his literary roots, back to his cultural roots, back home to London in the Sixties and all that implies for him. But he also goes back to address, in a fundamental sense, the question of his own artistic inspiration – where it comes from, what it demands of him, the price he pays for what you and I consume. I would normally refrain from making the simplistic connection between the writer, the performer and the song, but in this case, it seems to me that the sheer intensity with which Thompson attacked the “muse songs” on the *Mock Tudor* album and in concert and the sheer prominence he afforded to them indicates that they hold a profound significance for him. The point wasn't lost on Nigel Williamson who reviewed in *Uncut* Thompson's performance at the 100 Club in London, as Richard warmed up for the *Mock Tudor* tour:

He might be Britain's greatest living singer-songwriter but the other thing Richard Thompson does better than just about anyone else around is to rock ... Perhaps it was the presence on stage of his 24-year-old angel-voiced son, Teddy (recently signed to Virgin), but something had clearly fired up the old man. Backed by a four-piece band which also included long-time collaborator and double bass player Danny Thompson, he tore into the songs with a rare vigour, his voice full of resonance and his guitar playing characterised by stinging, splintering solos that were both tough and

economical, but also rich and expressive. Balancing emotion and intelligence, Thompson's craft and consistency have been a beacon for more than 30 years and the new material ranks with his very best. The first five songs from Mock Tudor were played straight off, in sequence, and even to a crowd hearing them for the first time their quality was self-evident. On one level, they are a song cycle about the shifting emotions caused by a disintegrating relationship. But, like so many great songwriters, Thompson works on many different levels and they also chronicle his growing up in the London suburbs. The joyous rush of the opener, "Cooksferry Queen", gave way to a darker mood, until he reached the cathartic "Hard On Me". As he spat out the words, every syllable of the bitter lyric was followed by spiralling guitar notes which would have left many a guitar-slinging pretender open-mouthed in wonder.

Nor was this simply a case of Richard reaching out on "one of those nights". Each leg of the subsequent tour opened with the same five songs, played in the same sequence, with the same "attack" and deep emotional impact. On a Friday evening at Cropredy, back in August 1999, the intensity and energy focussed on these five songs were, if anything, even more palpable. As torrential rain lashed down on the Oxfordshire hillside, Thompson dismembered these songs and flayed the sodden audience. An awed, breathless moment of silence descended on the crowd as the last stinging notes of "Hard On Me" died away. It really did feel like standing alongside Lear in the eye of the existential hurricane. My sister turned to

me and said, "He's playing as if he's got something to prove!" Indeed – but what, and to whom? Something of the magic of that moment is captured in the version of "Hard On Me" on the live album, Semi-Detached Mock Tudor, recorded during the US leg of the Mock Tudor tour in November 1999 and subsequently released in 2002. If you can only afford to own one live album ...

As Nigel Williamson argues, the first five songs on Mock Tudor can be interpreted, on one level at least, as dissections of a deteriorating relationship. But that is an over-simplification. These songs can be interpreted, fairly literally, as further examples of Thompson's perennial interest in poring over what happens when the "Razor Dance" between a man and a woman gets out of step. But in another enigmatic song on the You? Me? Us? album, Thompson suggests another, even more atavistic dance:

*I'm going to pretend that you like me too.
All of my messages come from you ...
All my life is a ritual dance,
A ritual dance around you,
And the worship hurts to pieces.
Touch me here,
Touch me here on the precious jewel
I wear in my head for you
That only your hand releases.
Let me steal your thunder, won't you?
Let me be your Boy Wonder, won't you?*

*Let me thrill you, will you, won't you?
No's not a word we use around here.*

The language of ritual and worship clearly denotes a relationship between mortal man and a divinity. The Boy Wonder here is, surely, a close relation of “The Poor Ditching Boy” and, lest we miss the point, Thompson even draws us the picture on the album cover. “Richard the Robot’s” head, complete with signature hat and plugged into one of Graves’ “industrial machines”, sits at one corner of the mattress. The pipe in his mouth is not a Greek flute, but the visual pun is obvious. A woman’s head sits atop an art-deco lyre or kithara in the diagonally opposite corner. An industrial rip saw is tearing its way inexorably across the mattress, threatening to separate the two, who, sightless, face in opposite directions. The increasingly part-time poet is threatened with the severing of his umbilical cord to the muse. Who do we really think You? Me? Us? refers to? Mock Tudor gives us some of the answers.

Thompson himself acknowledges that Mock Tudor is a concept album and that one of its concerns is the impact of suburbia on the human spirit. On that level, the title “Metroland” given to the first sub-group of five songs, seems entirely appropriate, predictable even. The word has strong literary credentials. The bard of the ‘burbs, John Betjeman, relished the word and Julian Barnes more recently used it as the title of his debut novel. According to Barnes’s narrator, Christopher:

[Metroland] sounded better than Eastwick, stranger than Middlesex; more like a concept in the mind than a place

where you shopped. And so, of course, it was. As the Metropolitan Railway had pushed westward in the 1880s, a thin corridor of land was opened up with no geographical or ideological unity: you lived there because it was an area easy to get out of. The name Metroland – adopted during the First World War both by estate agents and the railway itself – gave the string of rural suburbs a spurious integrity.

But the term has a deeper, darker meaning. The prefix “metro-“ means, literally, “of the uterus” [Chambers]. The ritual dance in Thompson’s song cycle is played out in a mythic landscape whose ruling deity is the White Goddess of Birth, Love and Death. We are introduced to her, in one of her predominantly benign, creative aspects, in “Cooksferry Queen”. The autobiographical undercurrents in this song are unusually close to the surface. Ashley Hutchings was a teenage patron of an R&B club held at the Cooks Ferry Inn and Thompson acknowledges that the narrator in the song recalls an actual East End wide boy who was converted to the paths of righteousness by the love of a hippie lady. Hinton and Wall report that this was Jack Braceland, owner of Happening 44 in Gerrard Street Soho. The venue has two particular significances for fans of Fairport Convention. It was there that Martin Lamble played his first gig with the band and there also that Joe Boyd was knocked out by a 17-year-old superstar guitarist and decided to hang around for a while. The title “Cooksferry Queen” may even hold a tenuous connection to Thompson’s own real-life muse, lauded in his list of dedications on the sleeve of *Industry*: “To Nancy Covey, the lamb chop who knows

her onions". Mrs T. as "Queensferry Cook", perhaps? And then there is the narrator's surname – Mulvaney. Thompson's friend, Richard Roberts-Miller, throws some light on where this might have come from:

He had this group at school, all of whom called themselves "Muldoon", which wasn't very helpful, because when you called "Muldoon", three people looked round. My name's Richard, his name's Richard, so that wasn't very helpful either. So I became "Big Muldoon", he became "Little Muldoon" and this third chap, Malcolm I think, was just "Muldoon". [PH 27]

At least the protagonist in the song is far from "Mul-vain-he", though, and he accepts his own limited cult status with the kind of disarming, self-deprecating smile that Little Muldoon himself might have appreciated: "I'm known quite famously./ People speak my name in whispers./ What higher praise can there be?" But to return to the Queen Herself. The description of the moment when muse "inspires" poet seems at first hearing to capture the experience of horror that Graves believes the muse's presence can excite:

*She gave me one pill to get bigger,
She gave me one pill to get small.
I saw snakes dancing all around her feet
And dead men coming through the wall....
She blew my mind and she opened my eyes.
She's my Cooksferry Queen.*

There are obvious references here to the drug culture of the Sixties, which some of us can just remember, and an equally obvious allusion to Alice In Wonderland. But the most telling link is back to one of Thompson's own compositions:

*Then the lightning streaks across the room.
You smell like something fresh from the tomb.
You squeeze too hard, you insist on kissing,
When it seems like half your face is missing
And your hair's turned into reptiles hissing.
I can't wake up to save my life ...*

But the final verse of "Cooksferry Queen" is the finest statement anywhere in Thompson's work of the sheer "exaltation" – Graves' word – that the appearance of the muse can excite, an exaltation that the true poet seeks to invoke in religious terms. Again, to run the risk of the "intentional fallacy", Thompson as a teenage scribbler clearly must have felt something of that excitement and, equally clearly, it must have been one of his consistent motivations over the following three decades, for it remains fresh and vibrant for the middle-aged man. This is a joyous piece of writing and Thompson's delivery on the album and in his performances of the song in 1999 fully reflected this:

*Well, she's got every rare perfection,
All her looks beyond compare.
She's got dresses that seem to float in the wind,
Pre-Raphaelite curls in her hair.*

*She could get the lame to walking,
She could get the blind to see,
She could make wine out of Thames river water,
She could make a believer out of me.
Yes, I'd trade it all tomorrow,
All those wicked things I've been.
She's my bright jewel of the alley –
She's my Cooksferry Queen.*

We should pause briefly and allow the phrase “Pre-Raphaelite curls” to take us off down two interesting side-alleys of our own. Raphael Samuel, who died in 1996, was a tutor in history at Ruskin College and a professor at the University of East London, where he established a Centre for London History. *Island Stories - Unravelling Britain*, the second volume of a planned trilogy, was published posthumously in 1998. The cover blurb uses some interesting phrases which certainly have applicability to Mock Tudor: “*Island Stories* is an engrossing journey of discovery into the multiple meanings of national myth, their anchorage in daily life and their common sense of a people’s destiny ... [It] is a luminous study of the way nations use their past to lend meaning to the present and the future.” Great poets, similarly, use their past to create myths and convey meaning, of course, just as Richard Thompson is doing on Mock Tudor. The other Pre-Raphaelite echo is more obvious, though less obviously relevant to the current argument. Thompson co-produced and appeared on a 1986 album, *More Love Songs*, by his good friend, London Wainwright. The cover picture is a reproduction of “The

Awakening Conscience” by the Pre-Raphaelite artist, William Holman Hunt which hangs in the Tate Gallery in London. A number of Hunt’s other famous paintings strike distant chords with Thompson’s work: “The Light Of The World” and “First Light”; “Cornfield At Ewell” and “The Poor Ditching Boy”; “The Lady Of Shalott” and “King Of Bohemia”. Hunt’s painting, “The Shadow Of Death”, does, however, specifically prefigure “The Calvary Cross”, to which we are gradually wending our way. The path is becoming clearer and the miracles performed by the Cooksferry Queen point and light the way. And so, to return to the plot.

“Sibella” takes us into different territory. We are under no illusions that we are dealing here with a relationship between man and a goddess. She is a divinity – “Like a myth, [she] rode in from the West”, like some modern day Valkyr. The reference to “the West” evokes death – the sun sets in the West – but also boundless opportunity and the danger of the unknown and untamed, as in the myth of the American West. When Jack Kerouac set out On The Road, he headed West. Against this backdrop, the relationship between poet and muse is itself becoming strange and confused – “We don’t make sense together/ But my heart’s with you”. The narrator knows exactly where he stands – “From the go, you had my button pressed”. And, in a neat sartorial pun, he’s under no illusions about his own character, because she spells it out for him: “You took chances well within your means,/ Salon hair and creases in your jeans”. In that sense, he knows he’ll have to trade his “fine mohair for tie-dyes and faded jeans” at some stage and forsake his life of dull conformity. But she is a far

more ambiguous figure. Her very name highlights the complexities and confusions and ramifications. She is Cybele as goddess of fertility. Cybele was also a Phrygian Bee Goddess in whose honour young men castrated themselves. Thompson, of course, called his publishing company Beeswing and his website Bees Web – this may be a coincidence. More to the point, Sibella is also Sibyl, as prophetess and fortune-teller, the girl who holds “the ace, the deuce, the trey” and x-rays “the deck to see what’s coming”. She is also Bella Donna as “beautiful lady” but also the Deadly Nightshade, who means inevitable Death. These are all overt and direct allusions and Brewer gives clear definitions of all of them. There are specific modern literary allusions, too, which I discuss elsewhere – Kerouac and Eliot cast long shadows over Thompson’s work. In the cinema, Sibella is the enigmatic and calculating heroine who seals Dennis Price’s fate in the classic Ealing film comedy, Kind Hearts and Coronets. But amidst all the other allusions, the standout phrase in the song – “I find myself strangely true, strangely true” – pulls you up short. Thompson isn’t known for wasting words, so what do these words literally imply? Strangely TRUE – as in UTERus, as in “Metroland”, land of the uterus? Strangely TRUE – as in EUTeRpe, who, according to Brewer, was “One of the nine muses ... inventress of the double flute, muse of Dionysiac music, patroness of joy and pleasure, and of flute-players”? In this area of Thompson’s work, you eventually have to stop believing in coincidences. And so to Bathsheba.

The muse, as depicted in “Bathsheba Smiles”, is even further distanced from her poet-victim and even more indifferent

to his fate than is her co-deity, Sibella. Bathsheba is the Ice Maiden of fairy tale and demands unquestioning worship and obedience. Her questions ring as commands, like Elizabethan imperatives:

*Do you close your eyes to see miracles?
Do you raise your face to kiss angels?
Do you float on air to hear oracles?
Confess upon your knees.*

The final command, in context, is wonderfully apposite – prayer, obeisance, confession, submission and oral sex are all captured in four words. She may spread her joy around, but the recipients of her beneficence are unequivocally there to service her. They are victims and pay her asking price: “Dig in your pockets ...” - the “please” is redundant! The Poor Boy may be ditching “dirt and [a] hair shirt” but the heaven he is being offered is an ambiguous, maturbatory paradise.

The next invocation of the muse makes it clear that what is on offer is a “Two-Faced Love” of the kind embodied by our friend the Iron Maiden. Inevitably, this also links back to Graves, unfortunately in one of his most opaque passages – the gist is, however, pretty clear:

The Latins worshipped the White Goddess as Cardea, and Ovid tells a muddled story about her in his Fasti, connecting her with the word cardo, a hinge. He says that she was the mistress of Janus, the two-headed god of doors and of the first month of the year, and had charge over door-hing-

es...Thus as Janus's mistress, Cardea was given the task of keeping from the door the nursery bogey who in matriarchal times was her own august self and who was propitiated at Roman weddings with torches of hawthorn. Ovid says of Cardea, apparently quoting a religious formula: 'Her power is to open what is shut; to shut what is open.' [WG 68/9]

We should note the relevance of Ovid's formula to a later song on Mock Tudor: "What rock I had you rolled away." But what takes "Two Faced Love" unambiguously into a mythical dimension, however, is the first bridge, which echoes a number of Thompson's other "muse songs":

*Face the music, face the facts,
Different sides of different tracks.
Put my feet on holy ground
Then I helter-skelter down,
Confused of being used.*

The exhortation to "face the music, face the facts [and look for] different sides [interpretations] of different tracks" could, of course, be directed at the listener. The subsequent references to holy ground, to the fairground, to "being used" all recall strongly earlier Thompson songs concerning the muse, as we shall see.

The feeling of exploitation, of "being used" or maybe "bemused", reaches its apotheosis in the chilling "Hard On Me". Here, the narrator confronts the muse at her most destructive and vindictive and challenges her to do her worst, whilst be-

ing under no illusion as to the agony which inevitably awaits him. The anatomical imagery is graphic and chilling and recalls a catalogue of unfortunates in classical mythology whose fate was to be dismembered by the gods. Just as "Cooksferry Queen" represents Thompson's ultimate encapsulation of the exaltation that the muse invokes, so "Hard On Me" reflects the ultimate horror. The song cycle has moved from the zenith to the nadir, from the most miraculous of springs, through the ambiguities of summer, to the blackest winter of despair. "Hard On Me" is one of the Richard Thompson classics. Not everyone thinks so. One reviewer found it to be evidence of Thompson's "laziness" and termed it a "dim clunker". Just to make the point: it's hard to think of any major modern poet, let alone any rock songwriter, who, in one short song, could simultaneously work the themes of adolescent sexual frustration, London in the Sixties, an invocation of the muse and a portrayal of ancient fertility ritual, whilst drawing, inter alia, from his own biography and extensive back-catalogue, from Robert Graves, from the Bible and the Koran, from the anthropologist Sir James Frazer, from T. S. Eliot and from the film director Robin Hardy. And still have breath left to construct a guitar solo most players would die for. With Richard Thompson at his best, you more or less take that kind of imaginative dexterity and breadth of vision – that genius, for God's sake! – for granted. Unless, that is, you've suffered premature brain death from reviewing too many really meaningful albums for Q magazine. 'Nuff said.

Thompson's chief sleight-of-hand in this case, of course, is to use the image of the Wicker Man, which functions both as

powerful fertility symbol in its own right and as a cult horror movie of the early Seventies. The significance of the Wicker Man as fertility symbol is summarised in another of the seminal works of 20th-century scholarship, which have clearly influenced Thompson, Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*:

In the popular customs connected with the fire-festivals of Europe, there are certain features which seem to point to a former practice of human sacrifice. We have seen reasons for believing that in Europe living persons have often acted as representatives of the tree-spirit and corn-spirit and have suffered death as such. There is no reason, therefore, why they should not have been burned, if any special advantages were likely to be attained by putting them to death in that way. The consideration of human suffering is not one which enters into the calculations of primitive man ... [We can with some probability] obtain a picture of the sacrifices offered by the Celts of Gaul at the close of the second century before our era. Condemned criminals were reserved by the Celts in order to be sacrificed to the gods at a great festival which took place once in every five years ... When the time came the victims were sacrificed by the Druids or priests. Some they shot down with arrows, some they impaled, and some they burned alive in the following manner. Colossal images of wicker-work or of wood and grass were constructed; these were filled with live men, cattle, and animals of other kinds; fire was then applied to the images, and they were burned with their living contents.

There is, however, a direct if convoluted link between the Wicker Man and the muse as Robert Graves explains: "the words 'witch' and 'wicked' are derived from the same ancient word for willow, which also yields 'wicker' ... The willow (helice in Greek, salix in Latin) gave its name to Helicon, the abode of the Nine Muses, orgiastic priestesses of the Moon-goddess." [WG 173]. The significance of the film, *The Wicker Man*, as cultural phenomenon, is covered, obligingly and somewhat less confusingly, in *The Virgin Film Guide*:

Sgt. Neil Howie [played by Edward Woodward] is a devoutly Christian policeman and lay minister, still an unmarried virgin though middle-aged. After obtaining an anonymous lead pertaining to the whereabouts of a missing girl, Neil heads out to Summerisle, a Scottish island community within his jurisdiction, in search of clues. What he finds on the island is a pagan cult led by Lord Summerisle [Christopher Lee], which offers a human sacrifice every year. Here we have the unusual case of a film about a pagan cult that has developed a cult of its very own. Drastically cut by its original distributors (from 102 minutes to 87 minutes), poorly marketed and subsequently little seen, *The Wicker Man* developed a reputation as a masterpiece of mystery and the macabre ... While no masterpiece, the film is a fascinating examination of the conflict between fundamental Christianity and paganism. The performances are uniformly excellent, and Hardy's direction is quite evocative, bizarre, witty, erotic, and downright chilling.

What we actually have here, in fact, is the unique case of a cult songwriter writing an increasingly cult song about a cult film which concerns a pagan cult led by a cult actor! After all this time, it's probably not giving too much away to say that the young Britt Ekland does look great with her kit off and that Edward Woodward gives a convincingly brave imitation of Guy Fawkes as he goes up in smoke with the pigs and the goats. But the poet-narrator in "Hard On Me" finds at the eleventh hour that he cannot face the spiritual death, which servitude to the muse implies, with Woodward/Howie's Calvinist fortitude:

*Before I dare
Go on that hill
In dumb despair,
Unfreeze my will.*

On a mundane level, this could be an OTT description of a touch of stage fright or of male virginal dread when the frozen adolescent willy approaches the Mound of Venus for the first time. But the language and context is assuredly that of "The Poor Ditching Boy." On a rather more fundamental level, therefore, we now need to jump back 25 years, to 1974, the year which saw the release of *The Wicker Man* and also Richard and Linda's *I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight*. That probably is a chronological coincidence, but a fitting one. We're finally headed back to the slopes of that hill, that "holy ground". We must now climb Golgotha and stand un-

der "The Calvary Cross". Some friends - some old and some new - are waiting.

Richard Thompson seemed characteristically unforthcoming when asked by John Kirkpatrick what "Calvary Cross" was about. "It's just music, innit?" was the reply. [PH 304]. By Thompson's standards, this was a remarkably candid statement. Fortunately, the title of the song was sufficiently evocative to set most critics off on the right path. Most agreed, more or less, with Leslie Berman's terse summation in the *Watching The Dark* sleeve notes that "Calvary Cross" is "an overtly allegorical number ... an artist's acknowledgement of the contest of wills between himself and his muse." Angus MacKinnon described the structure of the song and captured something of the raw emotion of the live version featured on the guitar, vocal album:

"Calvary Cross" is unrelenting, Thompson's song to his Muse ... A cluster of guitar harmonics before Thompson drains every last reverberation from the song's stately chords. The painful, dignified climb to Golgotha. Two verses with chorus preceding another instrumental stretch. Kirkpatrick trails Thompson's every step as he breaks away from layered rhythms into a frantic coda. More harmonics, silence, applause quickly faded. Catharsis. [PH 180]

These are, however, one-dimensional interpretations of what is actually happening in the song, as Berman's choice of the word "allegory" suggests. According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, an allegory is the "narrative description of a

subject under guise of another [that is] suggestively similar". It is the one-to-one correspondence which misses the point and leads to misinterpretations about where this song starts from – not a “contest of wills” but, literally, no contest; and where it ends up – not purification through “catharsis” but profound, world-weary resignation in the face of the inevitable. What is being overlooked in the typical allegorical readings of the song is that “The Calvary Cross” is an extraordinarily rich and complex piece of song writing, that encompasses not one but four mythical and iconographic frameworks. These reinforce and amplify each other and the central theme. This is, indeed, the relationship between the artist and his muse, but what the song is “about” is stretched in a number of other directions by Thompson’s deep allusiveness. This is reminiscent of the T. S. Eliot of *The Wasteland*, and as we will see in the next chapter, this is no accident.

In fairness, the failure to grasp the underlying dynamics and complexities of the song is hardly surprising. At first hearing or, indeed, first scanning of the song sheet, “The Calvary Cross” almost appears, to use the dreaded “L” word, the product of laziness – disjointed lines thrown on a page and spat out in performance, like some half-cock blues; words on the back of an envelope to fill the time till the guitar solo; Thompson’s impersonation of Clapton crucifying “Crossroads” perhaps. But, of course, it’s not really like that. The first awakening comes on repeated listening as the disjointed blank verse that appears on the page transmutes to a rich tapestry of internal rhymes which binds the song together: the “eye” sound [CAP-ITALS]; the “ay” sound, as in “lady” [italics]; the “a” sound as

in “cat” [bold type]; the “oo” sound, as in “broom” [underlined]; the “ee” sound, as in “me” [bold italics]:

I was under the **cal**vary cross.
 the *pale* faced *lady she* said to *me*:
 I’VE watched you with MY one *green* EYE
 and I’LL hurt you till you *need me*.
you scuff your *heels* and you spit on your shoes.
you do nothing with a *reason*.
 one *day* you **catch** a *train*,
 never *leave* the *station*.
everything you do,
everything you do,
you do for *me*.
 now you can *make believe* on your tin whistle,
you can be MY broom boy,
 scrub *me* till I SHINE in the dark.
 I’LL *be* your LIGHT till doomsday.
black cat cross your **path**,
 WHY don’t you follow.
 MY claw’s in you and MY LIGHT’S in you,
 this is your first *day* of sorrow.
everything you do, *everything* you do,
you do for *me*.

So much attention has clearly gone into the construction of this acoustic fabric – and into concealing what is a supreme artifice under a veneer of artlessness – that there must, surely, be more to the words themselves than a narrow allegorical read-

ing would imply? The leap to Christian allegory is encouraged by the first two lines, the only words in the song which are the singer's own, as opposed to the words of his muse, which he is simply required to transmit verbatim. The iconography seems obvious: "I was under the Calvary Cross./ The pale-faced lady, she said to me..." The traditional Christian interpretation of this couplet would assume that the "pale-faced" – i.e. grief-stricken – lady is one of the three Mary's believed to have been present at Christ's crucifixion. The four Gospels are not fully aligned on this but Christian iconography has opted for a consensus view that the three were Jesus' mother, the Blessed Virgin; Mary Magdalene; and Mary, mother of James, Joses and Salome. A "straight" interpretation of this line would therefore be: "I was in attendance at Christ's crucifixion and was addressed by one of the three Mary's".

The first words spoken by the lady, as reported by the singer, shatter the comfortable illusion: "I've watched you with my one green eye/ And I'll hurt you till you need me." The reference to the "one green eye" takes us into a whole new dimension. Why one eye? The general reference here is to an Islamic symbol denoting the eye as the spiritual gateway that leads to the soul and to ultimate truth and wisdom. Graves hints at another possible, specific association, though, when he quotes from an Elizabethan translation of the Goddess which is contained in Apuleius's *Golden Ass*:

[O]n the crown of her head she bare many garlands interlaced with flowers, and in the middle of her forehead was

a plain circlet in fashion of a mirror, or rather resembling the moon by the light it gave forth; and this was borne up on either side by serpents that seemed to rise from the furrows of the earth, and above it were blades of corn set out.[WG 72]

The colour green, according to Miranda Bruce-Mitford's *Signs & Symbols*, denotes "life, spring and youth." It represents hope and joy. As the traditional colour of the Prophet's cloak, it is the sacred colour of Islam and in Christianity it is the colour of the Trinity. Today, green represents a concern with ecology. However, it can also represent decay and jealousy. That the lady represents more than "hope and joy" is made abundantly clear by the threat contained in the next phrase in the song: "I'll hurt you". And if we now revisit the singer's initial description of the lady, we clearly recognise Graves' White Goddess, his "lovely, slender woman ... with deathly pale face" who is both creatress and destructress. But the resonance between iconographies – that of the Christian religion and that of an older, darker religion – vibrates further. The White Goddess, it will be remembered, was a Triple Goddess, "mother, bride and layer-out" of the poet and his blood brother. Present at the crucifixion are the Virgin Mary, Christ's own mother; Mary Magdalene, a former prostitute; and Mary, mother of James. The latter Mary it was who, in the words of St. Mark, followed Jesus when he was in Galilee "and ministered unto him". She it was who went to the sepulchre with Mary Magdalene with "sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him". She was Christ's layer-out.

When seeking a term to describe the revelation in works of fiction of the transcendent and unexpected in a familiar context, the novelist James Joyce employed the word “epiphany”. Thompson himself describes in graphic terms the effect which epiphany can have in the context of a song: “[you] soften the audience up and once they’re softened up you can just slip the knife in between their ribs. You can hit them harder with the quiet song that hits home, when they’re not expecting it”. [PH 314]. Between the second and third lines of “The Calvary Cross” Thompson ruthlessly drives home the cold steel. But the original Epiphany was, of course, a religious event, “the manifestation of Christ to the Wise Men of the East” and, in a generic sense, any “manifestation of a god[dess]”. [Chambers] The singer here, however, is not only describing his own epiphanic moment – he is also creating such a moment for the listener. It is an astonishing piece of artistry on Thompson’s part.

Once she has revealed her true self, the goddess/muse shifts the singer’s and the listener’s perspective again to unfamiliar and, at first, unrecognisable terrain:

*You scuff your heels and you spit on your shoes.
You do nothing with reason.
One day you catch a train,
Never leaves the station.*

It is the second of these couplets which gives the game away, and creates the epiphany. We have shifted from Jerusalem in the first century AD to twentieth century Yorkshire,

to the town of Stradhoughton, where we need to spend some serious time. Keith Waterhouse’s novel, *Billy Liar*, was published in 1959. John Schlesinger’s film adaptation, starring Tom Courtenay and Julie Christie, was released in 1963. Her portrayal of Liz shot Julie Christie to international stardom. By the mid-sixties, she was an icon whose face famously appeared, smiling enigmatically, on the cover of *The Observer* magazine. In 1967, she starred in another Schlesinger adaptation of a major work of fiction, Thomas Hardy’s *Far From The Madding Crowd*. In discussing Thompson’s depiction of the Ice Maiden on Mock Tudor above, I neglected to mention another coincidence. The character Christie played in the 1967 movie was Hardy’s heroine, Bathsheba Everdene.

The plot of Waterhouse’s novel was derived from James Thurber’s short story, *The Secret Life Of Walter Mitty*. Billy Fisher is a dreamer who works for a funeral director, but whose real aspiration is to become a comedy scriptwriter or songwriter. Billy is stifled by the small town oppressiveness of Stradhoughton: “Dark satanic mills I can put up with. They’re part of the picture. But when it comes to dark satanic power stations, dark satanic housing estates, and dark satanic teashops ...” [BL 24]. His perennial escape is into his private imaginary kingdom of Ambrosia. Billy is also a pathological liar, who uses lies as a buffer against an increasingly claustrophobic and threatening reality. Billy is involved with three young women, two of whom unwittingly share an engagement ring and a silver crucifix. His general aimlessness and indecision are captured in the first two lines of Thompson’s lyric above, which also convey his enslavement in the world of his

own imagination – he does “nothing with reason”. He longs – or thinks he longs – for the bohemian delights of London, an escape route personified by Liz, portrayed in the movie by a stunning Julie Christie. She finally agrees to go with him to London but, at the eleventh hour, he chickens out and, more in sorrow than in anger, she leaves instead for Doncaster. Billy pauses to think again, prevaricates agonisingly, but finally fails to board the overnight London train. He walks out of the station before the train has departed. In Thompson’s metaphor, Billy’s train to the metropolis and the world of real artistic expression “never leaves the station”. Billy chooses instead to escape back into the world of his own imagination, the Kingdom of Ambrosia:

I walked across Bull Ring and up Moorgate. Suddenly I began to feel excited and buoyant, and I was almost running by the time I reached Town Square. I began to whistle “March Of The Movies” and to march in step with it. There was nobody about. When I came to the War Memorial I transferred my suitcase to my right hand and at the correct moment I saluted with the left – up, two, three, down, two, three, head erect, shoulders back. I brought the whistling to a huffing crescendo and wheeled smartly into Infirmary Street. I dropped into a normal step, and then I began the slow walk home. [BL 187]

The accident of Billy’s name – liar/lyre – may have initially captured Thompson’s imagination, and it certainly helps lend sardonic reinforcement to the theme of “The Calvary Cross”,

but his design in incorporating Billy and his girlfriends in the song goes much, much deeper. Michael Bracewell’s book, *England Is Mine*, sub-titled “Pop Life In Albion From Wilde To Goldie”, is a superlative analysis of the English, as opposed to the American, pop psyche. I wouldn’t argue with The Big Issue’s contention that it is “surely the strangest and most beautiful book on pop music ever written”. It is a truly remarkable book. All the more remarkable, then, that Bracewell should make no mention of Richard Thompson in his otherwise all-inclusive tome. Still, at least he left something untouched for the rest of us to feast on! Bracewell is typically incisive in exposing something of the mythic significance of Billy Liar:

Billy’s three North Country muses – Barbara, Liz and Rita – each define a specific embodiment of English pop’s first daughters. Barbara is cloying, practical, sentimental and repressed ... A devout handmaiden of cultural materialism, for whom ‘curtains are my department, pet’, and who dreams of a cottage in Devon, Barbara is the girl-next-door who longs to be married and living next door to her mother ... Barbara is unaware of [Billy’s] simultaneous engagement to the sexually available but equally despotic Rita ... It is only the bohemian Liz (memorably played by the handbag-swinging Julie Christie) whose soft-core beatnik *joie de vivre* offers Billy his third chance of romance and a true empathy with his boredom and misery ... Billy, with an indecision that marks an epoch, is too addicted to his imagination to dare confront the reality of escape with Liz. True to its native culture, but a violent reaction against the traditions of

northern England and the inherent conservatism of youth, Billy Liar provides the three female characters who seem to represent the three faces of early pop's eternal feminine: the nice girl, the tart and the beatnik. [EIM 153-5]

Over twenty years before the first publication of Bracewell's eclectic masterpiece, Richard Thompson had identified and exploited in "The Calvary Cross" the mythic potential of Waterhouse's creations. Thompson spotted what Bracewell failed to identify, however: the clear relationship between the three loves in Billy's life and Graves' Triple Goddess. Liz is Graves' Spring, a.k.a. Girl. Her reappearance in Billy's life is described in terms reminiscent of Thompson's "Sibella" – "Liz was back in town. I liked the phrase 'back in town', as though she had just ridden in on a horse ..." vs. "Like a myth, you rode in from the West". [BL 32]. Her nickname is "Woodbine Lizzie" – the woodbine plant is honeysuckle. She is consistently depicted as fresh, young, full in Bracewell's telling phrase of *joie de vivre*. And critically, in her every incarnation in the book, she wears a totemic green suede jacket – like Shaky Nancy, "She came and went in her green suede coat as though it were a uniform or something". [BL 143]. Billy's lovemaking with Liz, the only real act of love and tenderness in the whole book, takes place in a vernal oasis amongst the satanic mills: "a knoll or hill ... of picnic grass, a kind of lush, tropical green velvet ..." [BL 146]. Rita is Summer or Woman: she is fecund and voluptuous and according to Billy's fair weather friend Arthur her "sexfulness is terrific."

The invocation of Barbara as Winter, the Hag, is comprehensive and unequivocal. Billy's nickname for her is the Witch and she is consistently associated with sexlessness and death. Billy's abortive attempt at coupling with her takes place in appropriate surroundings:

[We] walked up the broken tarmacadam path that was split down the middle like the crust of a cottage loaf, round to the back of the old church. Behind some ancient family vault was a black tree and a clump of burnt-looking, dirty old grass. Sometimes I could persuade the Witch to sit down there, when she was not inspecting the vault. I stared at her gravely. [BL 59]

And then there is Billy, himself, the failed wordsmith. The significance of language in his life has particular specific relevance in the context of Thompson's works, as we shall see later. In Billy's universe, language is debased to the point of meaninglessness. Billy and Liz apart, all characters in Waterhouse's novel are inarticulate to a greater or lesser extent. Billy comments on Rita: "Everybody I knew spoke in clichés, but Rita spoke as though she got her words out of a slot machine, whole sentences ready-packed in a disposable tinfoil wrapper". [BL 47]. Billy's response to the communication void, the absence of meaningful words, around him is to convey, often in sharp, precise and humorous words, ideas which have no meaning – they are all lies, de-coupled from reality. Liz and Billy can, however, communicate: "Liz and I could talk like this for hours, batting the same moonbeams backwards

and forwards across the table, enjoying ourselves enormously". [BL 129]. The word "moonbeams" is, of course, of profound significance; for Liz is Billy's muse, the Moon-goddess, and offers him the chance to escape and to devote his life to meaningful artistic communication in her service. How appropriate, then, that at the crucial juncture when he seeks to persuade her to go to London with him, Billy feigns drunkenness and inarticulacy:

"Drop it," she said, stern behind the smile.
 I said in my normal voice: "Drop what?"
 "That's better. You may be a brilliant scriptwriter, Billy,
 but you're a rotten actor."
 I put on an elaborate mock-sheepish act, standing on one
 foot, pulling out a grin and spreading my arms about.
[BL 183]

At the point of his final denial of the muse, his rejection of her offer of a life in her service, Billy's response, appropriately and tragically, is to parody in a "mock-sheepish act" Christ, the Lamb, on the Calvary Cross!

The mythical flows of "The Calvary Cross" are interrupted at the end of the second verse by a chorus which appears wilfully obscure. Its significance is, however, implied in another passage from Billy Liar, when Liz, for a moment, agrees to go with Billy to London, but only on "one condition". The condition is never stated and never needs to be stated because Billy "did not answer, and she knew there was no answer". [BL 187]. When the chorus is repeated, at the end of the song, it

becomes clear that Liz's condition must have been the basis on which Billy would serve her: "Everything you do ... you do for me". Unlike Richard Thompson, Billy could never accept that discipline.

The first line in the third verse of "The Calvary Cross" links back to the previous section – Billy's "make-believe", and his literal whistling in the dark of "March Of The Movies", in the imaginary, war-torn Kingdom of Ambrosia – but it also serves as the pivotal point in the whole song, as we shall see:

*Now you can make-believe on your tin whistle.
 You can be my broom boy,
 Scrub me till I shine in the dark.
 I'll be your light till Doomsday.
 Black cat cross your path,
 Why don't you follow.*

The meaning of and allusions within this section are, again, obscure initially. What does "broom boy" denote? Servitude? Witchcraft? Marriage, as in "jump the broomstick"? "Scrub me" suggests that servitude is maybe the thread. "Light" and "Doomsday" carry religious overtones on one level and could link back to the song's opening couplet. And the "black cat"? The associations here could be with witchcraft – possibly a link back to the "broom"? And then, the knife hits home for the third time in the song. One possible interpretation, hidden deep, is that this reference is in part directed specifically at the listener and that the "black cat" crossing our paths is actually, in street slang, a coloured musician. Sound far-fetched?

Why don't we "follow" the idea? The link is far from obvious at first hearing and is specifically lupine rather than feline. But the chorus of the blues standard, "I Ain't Superstitious", is too close to Thompson's language for this to be mere coincidence:

*Well I ain't superstitious, black cat just crossed my trail.
Well I ain't superstitious, black cat just crossed my trail.
Don't sweep me with no broom, I might just get put in jail.*

The clincher, however, is the identity of the blues legend most commonly associated with this song, Howling Wolf. Believe it or not, the writer who can nail the point and unravel at least some of the strands in this cat's cradle for us, is none other than Robert Graves:

Why the cat ... and wolf were considered particularly sacred to the Moon-goddess is not hard to discover. Wolves howl to the moon and feed on corpse-flesh, their eyes shine in the dark, and they haunt wooded mountains. Cats' eyes similarly shine in the dark, they feed on mice (symbol of pestilence), mate openly and walk inaudibly, they are prolific but eat their own young, and their colours vary, like the moon, between white, reddish and black. [WG 222]

Thompson must have had second thoughts concerning the impenetrable opacity of this set of allusions, because he saw fit in 1991 to revisit the scene of the crime and, again, compose a picture to help us. This, too, appeared - as centre-fold - in

the Rumor & Sigh tour brochure, which we earlier took as our starting point on our journey to Calvary. In fact, the version in the brochure is just a slightly clearer blow-up of the centre-fold in the CD booklet. The composition – and it is a meticulously planned stage-set – is rich in symbolism. It's worth pausing to take a look. The key components are Thompson himself, sitting cross-legged, staring at a sickle moon. In his hands he holds what from a distance could certainly be mistaken for a kithara. Opposite him sits a wolf-like creature, howling at the same moon. Brewer, incidentally, tells us that wolves were ridden across the sky by the Valkyries. One can imagine our Iron Maiden promenading demurely with a timber wolf on a leash! Obvious phallic imagery is also dotted around the picture – erect cacti thrusting at the moon, a huge snake, and Thompson's beloved Vincent motor bike. But in some ways the most interesting of the secondary images is a big lump of grey rock. On the basis that Thompson rarely seems to do anything by accident, I suspect that this is a specific allusion to the poet W. B. Yeats who, as we will see, has had a profound effect on Thompson's work. In a poem entitled "The Grey Rock", Yeats states in his closing declaration that he has kept his faith to one of his muses, the immortal Aoife, whose home is the grey rock, Craig Liath. The language echoes that of Robert Graves, who we heard earlier declare himself to be "nobody's servant", yet who was still dedicated to "whole-time service" of the goddess/muse. Yeats addresses dead poets with whom he learned his "trade" of writing poetry:

*I have kept my faith, though faith was tried,
To that rock-born, rock-wandering foot,
And the world's altered since you died,
And I am in no good repute
With the loud host before the sea,
That think sword-strokes were better meant
Than lover's music – let that be,
So that the wandering foot's content.*

Richard Thompson, as a songwriter and performer, is similarly in “no good repute with the loud host”. But like Yeats and Graves, he too has kept faith.

The cat/wolf/moon/muse nexus is, however, not the end of the layers of meaning in “The Calvary Cross”. As Brewer points out, mediaeval superstition held that Satan’s favourite earthly incarnation was as a black cat, and for this reason, witches were said to have a cat as their “familiar”. The superstition relates to the classical legend of Galenthias, who was turned into a cat and became a priestess of Hecate. The latter, in turn, is one of the incarnations of Graves’ Triple Goddess. Again from Brewer: “As goddess of the lower world, [Hecate] became the goddess of magic, ghosts and witchcraft. Her offerings consisted of dogs, honey and black lambs, which were sacrificed to her at crossroads”. And where does a reconfigured nexus of Howling Wolf, Satan and a crossroads take us?

Robert Johnson travelled briefly with Howling Wolf and was the Wolf’s occasional jamming partner. In the years since Thompson wrote “The Calvary Cross”, serious scholarship has between devoted to piecing together the reality of Johnson’s

life, but Thompson’s interest was, in any case, in the mythic aura which had come to surround Johnson. The myth of “Robert Johnson” is described succinctly by Charles Shaar Murray in his eminently worthy Blues On CD:

The mythic Johnson was a mysterious travelling bluesman who had never (as far as anyone knew) been photographed, who had somehow (through a deal with the devil, it was said) transformed himself overnight from a mediocre performer to one of the most powerful anybody had ever heard, and who died in strange circumstances, rumoured to be the victim of a voodoo curse. His ectoplasmic presence seemingly left little trace of his passage other than those 29 songs of rage, regret, terror and despair that he recorded in Texan hotels and storerooms in 1936-7. If those songs had been less remarkable, his story would simply have remained an anecdotal blues curio of interest only to blues fanatics, but his subsequent deification among blues-rock aficionados – signposted by two key cover versions, Eric Clapton’s “Crossroads” (with Cream, 1968), and The Rolling Stones’ “Love In Vain” (1969) – transformed Johnson into a 20th-century Faust who stole the fire and paid not only with his life, but his immortal soul.

With Johnson thus identified, the network of inter-twinning mythical frameworks within “The Calvary Cross” is nearly complete, apart from a few loose ends. First, the opening line of Johnson’s classic “Cross Road Blues” is clearly echoed – paraphrased in fact – in the opening words of Thompson’s

song: “I went down to the crossroad, fell down on my knees ...” Second, the crucial significance of the pact with the devil in the Johnson myth puts an alternative spin on Thompson’s “My claws in you and my light in you”. Yes, this can be read in conjunction with the “black cat” whose eyes “shine in the dark”. But it can also be heard as “My clause in you and my light in you” – in other words, “sign on the dotted line and artistic inspiration and immortality of a kind are yours”. The sting in the tail lies in what that contractual provision actually demands – the “one condition” that Liz demanded of Billy Fisher. The second chorus makes it clear: henceforth, “Everything you do,/ Everything you do,/ You do for me”. The true poet is required to give his muse – she demands of him – “whole-time service or none at all”. Finally, we can revisit what I described earlier as the pivotal point in the song: “Now you can make-believe on your tin whistle”. This also can be heard in two ways, depending on perspective – look back to verse two and it means one thing; follow it through in verse three and it means another. The ambiguity is quite deliberate and entirely appropriate. The artist is at a crossroads, the place where decisions have to be taken and choices made. The choice which is being presented to the artist under the cross is: either “you can [continue to] make-believe on your tin whistle [like Billy Liar]”, or “you can [take the opportunity to really] make-believe on your tin whistle [like Robert Johnson]”. Put simply, the choice is “rip up the contract and miss the train” or “sign the contract and get on the train”. Death-in-life vs. life-in-death.



But in reality, the appearance of choice is illusory. The cat's claws are already sunk deep into the artist's hide, deep into his heart. He is already bewitched. And that takes us back, as Thompson's knife pierces us for the last time in this song, to the ambiguity in the first line. This guy isn't observing the cross – he's carrying it. MacKinnon's "painful, dignified climb to Golgotha" actually ends in Thompson's crashing chords, as the artist's feet sink deeper and deeper into the mud, under the weight of the cross he's both chosen and been fated to carry. And by the end of the song, he's nailed to that cross; hung out to dry between an implacable Triple Goddess, whose mouthpiece he will remain, and a listening audience, who are present "under the Calvary Cross" to hang on his every word; there to experience, in Graves' memorable phrase quoted earlier, "the ancient power of fright and lust" which the Goddess' presence excites, as she transmutes from incarnation to incarnation in the course of Thompson's song. Greil Marcus got closest to it when he called "The Calvary Cross" both a "quest and a damnation". A quest for the muse and the certainty of damnation at her hands at journey's end.

The idea of the artist as somehow trapped and exposed, as vulnerable intermediary between his muse on the one hand and his audience on the other, is conveyed by Thompson in his sleeve notes to the *Strict Tempo!* album. Of the track "The Knife-Edge", he says simply, "All music is a knife-edge!" Alongside this instrumental on the *Watching The Dark* compilation sits "Walking On A Wire." Having accompanied Robert Graves and many others on the journey from Helicon to Golgotha, the imagery in "Walking On A Wire" is now

largely self-evident. The specific link back to "The Calvary Cross" resides in the phrase, "Your claws are tearing me" but a number of other phrases clearly relate to songs which we have already considered. The new spin rests in the first couplet – "I hand you my ball and chain./ You just hand me that same old refrain" – which, by way of a telling pun on the word "refrain", neatly expresses the idea that, in entering the service of the muse, the singer has simply exchanged one form of restraint for another. The other phrase that requires explication is: "I wish I could please you tonight/ But my medicine just won't come right". Robert Graves again sheds some light:

The worship of the Muses on Helicon ...was concerned with incantatory cursing and incantatory blessing; Helicon was famous for the medicinal herbs which supplemented the incantations – especially for the nine-leaved black hellebore ... which could either cause or cure insanity and which has a stimulative action on the heart like digitalis. [WG 386]

Whilst not wishing to personalise the argument, I am reminded, on hearing the acute emphasis on the loneliness of the creative process in this song – "Too many nights awake/ And no-one else" – of the comments which Linda Thompson had to make on her first husband's writing habits: "Throughout our married life, he just went off to another room ... He was quite secretive about it, I think sometimes it was tough to even show me the songs". [PH 302]. The other shift, which strikes one as having taken place between "The Calvary Cross" and "Walking On A Wire", is the way in which the presence

of the muse is invoked. In the former song, she is drawn out by way of complex, accretive mythical allusions, which, nonetheless, do add up to a concrete, emotive and, in Graves' term, "thrilling" evocation of the muse in her various guises. In the later song, the calling-up of the muse is oblique, by inference. The prime focus now is on the artist's drudgery, his pain, his vulnerability, and his exposure. "I'm walking on a wire/ And I'm falling" rings like a mantra through the song. She may have inspired him and motivated him to be out there on the wire, but he is now exposed to the vagaries of the wind.

The same sense of vulnerability appears in "How Many Times" - interestingly, performed by Thompson consistently in live appearances before and after the final release of the Shoot Out The Lights album - and, of course, in the anthemic "Wall Of Death." The latter incorporates Thompson's memories of childhood visits to the annual fair on Hampstead Heath in one of his most compelling statements on the human condition and the risks implicit in attempting to escape the clutches of isolation, entrapment, amnesia and death:

*You can go with the crazy people in the Crooked House
 You can fly away on the Rocket or spin in the Mouse
 The Tunnel of Love might amuse you
 And Noah's Ark might confuse you
 But let me take my chances on the Wall of Death.
 On the Wall of Death, all the world is far from me
 On the Wall of Death, it's the nearest to being free.*

The other prime example of what Patrick Humphries calls Thompson's "high-wire balancing material" is of course "The Great Valerio". The narrative perspective in the earlier song is radically different from that in "Walking On A Wire". The latter is written from the perspective of the writer/performer but "Valerio" sets up a counterpoint between the hero balancing on the wire and the crowd who observe him from the "mire" below. This contrast is again derived from Thompson's mentor, Robert Graves. In *The White Goddess*, Graves devotes many pages to a drawing of the distinctions, made historically and still worthy of being made, between the true poet - historically the court bard - and the wandering minstrel or "gleeman". In short:

The ancient Celts carefully distinguished the [true] poet, who was originally a priest and judge as well and whose person was sacrosanct, from the mere gleeman. [The poet] was in Irish called *fili*, a seer; in Welsh *derwydd*, or oak-seer, which is the probable derivation of 'Druid'. Even kings came under his moral tutelage ... The gleeman, on the other hand, was a joculator, or entertainer, not a priest: a mere client of the military oligarchs and without the arduous professional training. He would often make a variety turn of his performance, with mime and tumbling ...
 [WG 21/2]

In "Valerio", Thompson is drawing his own distinction between the true poet and the mere gleeman. The former is Valerio, out there, on the wire, creating true art for you and me, at

risk to his own life. His inspiration, his light, comes from the muse. That is why he is both as “peaceful as a mountain” and has a footing “certain as the mountain slope”. The mountain is, of course, Helicon, home of the muses, and it is from that spiritual home that the artist derives “peace” and “certainty” in his vocation, even if that vocation exposes him to other dangers. His is a lonely trade, and if he fails, no one will be there to assist him. Thompson poses and answers the fundamental question. Question: “who will help the tightrope walker when he tumbles to the net?” Answer: no one - all his fair weather friends will say, “I’m your friend until you use [need] me, and then be sure I won’t be there”. Billy Fisher learned that the hard way. The artist is thus trapped between two certainties as he balances on the wire – that offered by the muse, who will always be there, and that offered by the friends who will never be there when he needs them! And if we’re in any doubt that all of this is what is implied in Thompson’s song, note that Valerio doesn’t just walk the wire, he “dances through the air.” His performance is, yes, terpsichorean, in a literal and a metaphoric sense. The adjective is, again, in common use. In fairness, Patrick Humphries beat me to the punch, in this as in many other respects. His description of Thompson’s live performance of one of his upbeat classics concludes that Richard rounds off his set “with a song about the terpsichorean hardships of being saddled with two left feet.” [PH 284]. Pace Patrick.

And what of the spectators who long to be like Valerio? They are specifically linked to the gleemen, the amateur minstrels, who, as Graves explained, were often variety hacks,

tumblers – “acrobats”. The French term for a wandering minstrel – Grave’s “joculator” – is “jongleur”, a variant of the older word “jougleur”, or English “juggler”. [Chambers]. Thompson is, therefore, using the term “upstart jugglers” very precisely, in order cast Valerio’s spectators as gleemen. They think that they see the “light” of inspiration, which the muse holds out and which Valerio embodies, but in reality, they neither comprehend it, nor are they capable of receiving illumination from it. They’re stumbling in the mire, along with the rest of us. In the words of St. John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... . In Him was life; and the light was the life of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehendeth it not.”

There is clearly a biographical context to this extraordinary song, which I’ll mention but not dwell on. Linda hinted as much, in typically forthright fashion, when interviewed for the Radio 2 biography on Thompson’s life and work. The italics are my attempt to capture the sheer energy reflected in her comments:

I adored Henry The Human Fly and when it came out it got terrible reviews and people didn’t think he was singing in English and thought it was at the wrong speed and everything. I mean, moronic, these people! I thought it was absolutely great. He was slain by those reviews, you know. He was very upset. And so, I think the songs were a little different on Bright Lights ...

'Different' indeed! Thompson's immediate reaction to the crucifixion of his first solo album, was to write "The Calvary Cross", the most chilling invocation of the muse in post war music; and "The Great Valerio", the poet's direct response to the revilers and the wreckers, the reviewers and the gleemen. It is Thompson's equivalent of Yeats' "The Grey Rock" and, like that great poem, is couched in the language of true poetry, a language that the "loud host before the sea" could barely hear above the noise of their own babble. Let Yeats' words to his dead fellow poets be Thompson's consolation:

*You had to face your ends when young –
 'Twas wine or women or some curse –
 But never made a poorer song
 That you might have a heavier purse,
 Nor gave loud service to a cause
 That you might have a troop of friends.
 You kept the Muse's sterner laws,
 And unrepenting faced your ends,
 And therefore earned the right – and yet
 Dowson and Johnson most I praise –
 To troop with those the world's forgot,
 And copy their proud steady gaze.*

The final geographical stop on our journey round Thompson's muse is a London pub in the late Sixties. Members of the legendary beat combo, Fairport Convention, encounter a drunken Irishman who claims to be the tenor, Josef Locke, now fallen on hard times. The event is described in song, thir-

ty years later, by an ex member of said combo. "Josef Locke" is included in our peregrinations partly, I'll admit, because I just love Norma Waterson's interpretation of this and any other of Richard's – no, anybody's – songs that she graces; but also because it helps build on the theme of poet vs. gleeman. On a mythic level Locke is "poet", reduced by penury and bitter circumstance to the role of "gleeman", and publicly bewailing the fact. On a personal level, it's an evocative and affecting depiction of a sad old man, plying for free drinks in a Covent Garden pub:

*My name is Josef Locke.
 God bless all here and state your pleasure.
 If you'll refill my glass, I'll sing "Ave Maria",
 I'll sing "The Old Bog Road" or "A Shawl Of Galway Grey."
 And I've been gone from you for some while.
 Those English tax men, they've cramped my style.*

Thus far, all is pretty literal and there's nothing to suggest a deeper meaning. Locke's fall from grace was, indeed, precipitated by problems with the Inland Revenue. My narrative has been crammed with faux coincidences but here is a real one. When Locke was forced to sell up and flee England to escape the clutches of the tax man, the purchaser of his house, near Blackpool, was George Formby, an acknowledged influence on Thompson's work, as we will see elsewhere. And to complete the circle, Bracewell's long critique on Billy Liar, from which I quoted above, continues: "In the case of George

Formby, the comedy of despair was inherited from his father.”
Hardly X-Files, but interesting!

And then Thompson’s song moves back to ground that is, I hope, becoming familiar:

*And if you think I’m some fraud upstart,
Just let my voice be my calling card.
It melted hearts and royal teardrops fell –
They loved me well, they loved me well.*

On a personal level, Locke is becoming maudlin and Thompson captures perfectly the pathos of the fall from grace. But on a mythic level, that key word “upstart” is another knife in the ribs. We’ve just heard it in “The Great Valerio” and, in the mouth of Josef Locke, it has exactly the same connotation. The reference to “royal teardrops” intensifies the association and puts us squarely back with Graves and Valerio. Locke was once a “court bard”, even if the plebeian, “loud host” in the pub finds that hard to believe. In the next verse, the pub crowd turns cynical and ugly, provoking a defiant, proud response from Locke, which Thompson reflects with great economy: “This is a damn poor show!/ You’ll not call me a drunkard./ I’ve sung for kings and princes!” And, in the face of their disdain for his art, in the final verse, Locke escapes the mob, before they have him thrown out: “And now you dare mock “The Singing Bobby!”/ I’ll find the door, take your bullies off me”. He drags himself out, defeated and deflated, reflecting on his own fall from grace: “A sweeter age it was that loved me well./ They loved me well ...” Thompson’s reflection

of the shifting moods of man and mob throughout this song is remarkably assured, and is reflected in turn by Norma Waterson’s sensitive, affecting vocal interpretation. Equally remarkable, however, is the way in which Robert Graves predicts both the metaphorical fate of the reluctant gleeman, Locke, and also his likely, Bard-like response to it:

If the gleeman’s flattery of his patrons were handsome enough and his song sweetly enough attuned to their mead-sodden minds, they would load him with gold torques and honey cakes; if not, they would pelt him with beef bones. But let a man offer the least indignity to an Irish poet ... and he would compose a satire on his assailant which would bring out black blotches on his face and turn his bowels to water ... [WG 22]

The final Thompson song to draw on, briefly, as we conclude our journey – no, a pilgrimage is what it’s been – takes us back to where we started, to the Terpsichore connection and Rumor & Sigh. Thompson’s 1992 tour guide tells us what “God Loves A Drunk”, from that album, is “about”: “This song is about sobriety rather than drunkenness. Often the most spiritual people are the most outrageous or wild – those who don’t mind losing what they’ve got to get something else. You don’t have to be clean-shaven and dressed in a polyester suit to be right with God”. We should just pause and reflect on that phrase for a moment: “those who don’t mind losing what they’ve got” in order “to get something else”. That, ultimately, is what “connects” all of this. That, ultimately, en-

capsulates the challenge that the Muse has flung out since time immemorial; the challenge which Billy Liar rejected and which Richard Thompson and all the true poets and artists we've met on this trip have taken up: "I will give you this, and in return, you will give up all of that". In the words of "God Loves A Drunk", taken out of sequence to make the point more clearly:

*Will there be any pen-pushers up there in heaven?
Does clerking and wage slaving win you God's love?
I pity you worms with your semis and pensions
If you think that'll get you to the kingdom above.*

*O God loves a drunk, the lowest of men,
With the dogs in the street and the pigs in the pen.
But a drunk's only trying to get free of his body
And soar like an eagle high up there in heaven.
His shouts and his curses are just hymns and praises
To kick-start his mind now and then.
O God loves a drunk – come raise up your glasses. Amen.*

Robert Graves knew that poetic inspiration was a kind of divine intoxication. Apollo rewarded true poets with a garland of laurel, the significance being, "not merely that laurel is an evergreen and thus an emblem of immortality: it is also an intoxicant". [WG 391]. Graves also bemoaned the fact that we live in "a civilisation in which the prime emblems of poetry are dishonoured, in which serpent, lion and eagle belong to the circus tent". [WG 14]. Richard Thompson has toyed with

the circus tent at times in his career and the knowledge that he was so doing has clearly troubled him. But, ultimately, he has been devoted to the liberation and celebration of the "eagle", which, throughout his thirty years of more-or-less committed service to the Muse, has been "high up there in heaven", along with the "bonny birds" which wheel away at day's end and the kestrels which turn "in the empty skies on high over Wheely Down".

CHAPTER FOUR

RICHARD THOMPSON AND THE BETTER CRAFTSMAN

All things can tempt me from this craft of verse:
One time it was a woman's face, or worse –
The seeming needs of my fool-driven land;
Now nothing but comes readier to hand
Than this accustomed toil.

W. B. Yeats.

I think of it as a craft – that's the part you can really work on and hone, by studying and reflecting on what the song form is. You're looking at other songwriters and poets, and looking at melody and seeing what works and what doesn't and how you can fit it all together, and that's definitely a part you can polish ... Just being involved in the craft process can sometimes be the inspiration – it just puts your mind into the right state to be receptive.

Richard Thompson.

For Ezra Pound – *il miglior fabbro*.

T. S. Eliot.

We have seen how, throughout his career, Richard Thompson has adapted myths – many acquired courtesy of Robert Graves, but others culled from a diversity of unlikely sources – and has incorporated them into songs that, on one level at least, deal with the relationship between the poet and the muse, from whom the artist derives his inspiration. This kind of systematic use of mythical allusion is uncommon in popular song. So from whom did Thompson learn this particular aspect of his remarkable craft? Influence spotting is a notoriously risky game, particularly as applied to singer-songwriters. Does Van Morrison's habitual dropping of Yeats' name really imply a deep understanding, earned by intense study of the works of the latter by the former, to the point where Yeats' mastery of the poetic craft really informs, shapes and validates Morrison's songs? I don't think so! Equally, does Thompson's use of a Tennysonian phrase as the title of his album, *Mirror Blue*, imply that the Victorian poet's art has affected Thompson's competence and progress as a songwriter? Clearly not to any great extent. As a specific allusion, the phrase casts light on the album's preoccupations very effectively, but, in and of itself, it says little about Thompson's art on a broader level. In that respect, the key question is: from whom did Thompson

learn the technique of allusion in the first place, and why does he clearly attribute such significance to it?

In his dedication to later editions of *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot referred to Ezra Pound as “il miglior fabbro”, the “better craftsman”.⁷ In so doing, Eliot was acknowledging his personal debt to Pound, his long-time mentor, supporter and collaborator. The original Italian quotation is, in fact, from *The Divine Comedy*, and is Dante’s tribute to the 12th century troubadour poet, Arnaut Daniel, emphasising the latter’s superiority over all his Provençal rivals. Richard Thompson’s *Mock Tudor* album stands firmly in this rich tradition. It is in part Thompson’s personal recognition of his debt to Eliot, Thompson’s own “better craftsman”. But Thompson is doing much more than simply acknowledging a debt to an old teacher. By assimilating into *Mock Tudor* Eliot’s specific poetic theory and technique, much of Eliot’s language and many of his preoccupations, Thompson is demonstrating just how well he has served his apprenticeship and learnt the lessons from the craftsman. If this does not place Thompson ahead of Eliot in the pantheon of literary greats, it surely suggests that he is a better craftsman than most of those who have graced the upper reaches of the album charts for the last thirty years!

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St. Louis on 26th September 1888. His boyhood was divided between Missouri and Massachusetts. He was educated at Harvard and the Sorbonne, before returning to Harvard in 1911, in order to read for a doctorate in Philosophy. In 1914, he was awarded a Harvard travelling fellowship, to study for a year at Oxford University. At that point, England effectively became his per-

manent domicile. He became a naturalised British citizen in 1927 and in the same year was baptised and confirmed into the Anglican Church. His public career as a poet spanned 25 years – from the publication of *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917, to that of “*Little Gidding*”, the last of his *Four Quartets*, in 1942. Thereafter, Eliot devoted himself to drama, criticism and “occasional” verse. He is most widely lauded for *The Waste Land* (published in 1922) and most widely reviled for *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*, a “funny” book of largely un-funny poems which brought the best out in Andrew Lloyd Webber. The *soi-disant* musical, *Cats*, opened in the West End in 1981 and continued to run until May 2002. Eliot used up his own ninth life in 1965. Without wishing to perpetrate unnecessary biographical fallacies, there are some obvious and telling comparisons to be made between the life experiences of T. S. Eliot and Richard Thompson:

- Eliot’s reaction to the enervating atmosphere of pre-World War I, Bostonian tea-party society was to embrace the most stable culture and tradition he could find: he became a royalist, Anglican Englishman. Thompson’s reaction to the stultifying realities of post-World War II London was to become a rock ‘n’ roll singer and eventually move to America.
- Eliot satirised the genteel social milieu of fin de siècle Boston from a home in London, in the ‘twenties and ‘thirties. Thompson affectionately mocked the London of the Swinging Sixties from the safe haven of LA in the 1990s. Conversely, Eliot depicted his adopted city as a cultural and

spiritual wasteland, while Thompson's response to all forms of US cultural imperialism has consistently been, "Yankee Go Home."

- Both artists underwent much-publicised religious conversions that profoundly affected their subsequent work. Eliot, broadly, shifted from an early absorption in the philosophies and cultures of the East to embrace Anglicanism. Thompson was raised in a Christian household and converted to Islam.
- Both men guarded their private lives jealously, whilst at the same time constructing very public personae of themselves as artists. Eliot declared that he wanted no "life" written, and inserted a clause to that effect in his Will. The closest approximation to a standard biography – Peter Ackroyd's *T. S. Eliot: A Life* – did not appear until twenty years after the poet's death. In Thompson's case, even his authorised biographer finally had to admit that Richard is "deft at avoiding those keen to disinter a past he regards as long gone". [PH 345]. Keep your distance, pal!

While the superficial similarities between the lives of Eliot and Thompson do provide useful insight – simplistically, physical distance in each case seems to have provided emotional distance and objectivity – the deeper links between the two only begin to emerge when we consider Eliot's theory of poetry and the effect which this has clearly had on Thompson as a writer and on his approach to the "craft of verse". We need to look in turn at Eliot's concepts of mythic composition, artistic impersonality and the "objective correlative".

In a famous essay, "Ulysses, Order and Myth", published in 1923, Eliot suggested that, underlying the chaos of post-war Europe, there was a deeper reality that ultimately could give shape and coherence to the surface anarchy. Eliot believed that James Joyce had tapped and exploited this reality in *Ulysses*, a novel in which a day in the life of an ordinary Dubliner, Leopold Bloom, is couched in terms of and "authenticated" by the *Odyssey* of Ulysses. Eliot argued that Joyce's exploitation of myth was a means of giving shape and significance to the futility of modern urban existence. We saw earlier how, in order to give shape and significance to the vexed question of the nature of artistic inspiration, Richard Thompson turned to myths as metaphors for his own experiences, perceptions and beliefs. In "Calvary Cross", for example, mythical frameworks were plundered variously from Robert Graves, from the Bible, from Billy Liar, and from the history of the Blues. Nowhere in that song is Thompson picking up specific mythical allusions or frameworks directly from Eliot. But, equally, the technique of and significance attributed to the manipulation of myth is purely Eliotian. Thompson has assimilated the craft of manipulation from a "better craftsman", but has made it his own. He is exploiting myth in order, reversing a famous Eliotian precept, to make art "possible" – i.e. comprehensible – in the modern world. We will see, however, when we come to look at *Mock Tudor* in detail, that in this album, Thompson has moved to the final stage in his apprenticeship. Here, he does, indeed, appropriate Eliot's own "mythic" structures in order to give shape and significance to the futility and anarchy of contemporary London and to authenticate his own life and

significance as an artist. Overlaying the myth of the White Goddess, which we have already identified in the “Metroland” songs, is the myth of The Waste Land, the myth of “Prufrock”, the myth of “The Hollow Men”, and Eliotian myths derived from the Four Quartets.

The second of Eliot’s basic precepts of poetic theory, that of artistic “impersonality”, is outlined in his classic essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Here, Eliot’s desire that poetry should be seen as objective and analytic, rather than emotional and impressionistic, is set in the context of tradition as an “objectifying” force. In a literary context, “tradition” embodies the experience enshrined in the literary works of all ages and not simply that of a specific writer, toiling in the here-and-now. Tradition, therefore, tends towards the universal and the impersonal. “Individual talent”, on the other hand, inevitably tends towards the specific and the personal. The work of the true poet, by implication, is to balance – to walk the tightrope between – the two tendencies. In the essay, Eliot makes a number of important statements that have clear relevance to Thompson’s craft. He argues that a sense of history is vital to anyone who aspires to remain a poet beyond the age of twenty-five. Specifically, no poet can be viewed in isolation: the worth of a poet can be judged only in relation to the “dead poets” who preceded and influenced him.

This calls to mind Greil Marcus’ comment on Thompson’s “strongest moments”, those when “decades or centuries are brought to bear [and] Thompson seems to be singing from the plague years, following behind a cart full of corpses.” That sense of a space-time continuum does exist throughout

Thompson’s work. We – you, me, us, here and now – are still all working for the Pharaoh, still “living in Egypt land”. We are all roaming an “old changing way”. In a specific literary sense, Thompson contrives to set the magnificent apocalyptic language of the King James Bible along side the most trite of 20th century put-downs: “towers will tumble and locusts will visit the land” collides with “you can’t win”. And in a musical setting, Chuck Berry – “Roll Over Beethoven” – rubs shoulders with Hank Williams – “move over cool dog” – while the latter’s namesake, Ralph Vaughn, rolls over and sticks his paws in his ears. Closer to home, the phrase “Mock Tudor” is, at one and the same time, a reference to a depressing, cliché-d style of modern suburban housing and a tacit acknowledgement of the architectural splendour of the Elizabethan age. #1999 Arcadia Avenue does mock Fotheringhay Castle, in much the same way that the language of the suburbs and the pop charts mocks the language of Shakespeare. Historical allusion in Thompson’s work is no matter of mere preciousness. It displays a fundamental sense of the here-and-now in the context of history. It is a statement of belief in tradition, as defined and understood by Eliot. Thompson is what Eliot would have termed a massive “individual talent”, but his worth can only be fully assessed in the context of the traditions – cultural, literary, and musical – of which he is a product. Thompson explicitly appreciates his debt to the “dead poets”. The dedication on the Mock Tudor album sleeve to Sandy Denny and to Nick Drake is not only a personal expression of loss, but also an impersonal statement of faith, kept to them and to Eliot. It is no accident that the acknowledgement to Sandy and Nick

should be on the sleeve of this album rather than the many which preceded it. Thompson feels his history in his bones and says as much: “Me name is Sam Jones and it’s bones me occupation”. But the mythic figure of Sam exists both as a figure from the plague years – “I’ve seen battlefields white with human ivory,/ Noble dukes and princes stripped of all their finery” – and as the self-sacrificing artist, determined to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year, who has therefore spent the last “thirty years a bone man up and down the nation”.

The essence of Eliot’s third cornerstone of modernist poetics, the infamous “objective correlative”, is summed up with uncharacteristic brevity in his essay on Hamlet. Here he argues that emotion in art should be expressed in terms of external events or objects associated – correlated - with that emotion. Reference to the events or objects therefore triggers recollection of – recreates - the emotion. Here, I’m reminded of Linda Thompson’s recollection of her first husband’s difficulty with the “P” word:

Going to record an album, there’d be maybe four or five songs that dropped by the wayside. But then there would be a lot more that he threw away. The bleak ones were very bleak, but he never wrote anything too personal about himself, which I always thought was a great shame. I think he was just scared to do that. To open a can of worms. He would never write a song saying ‘I love you’ or ‘I hate you’ or whatever. He would never make it personal. Or maybe those were the ones he threw away. [PH 302]

Linda’s observation of Thompson’s reluctance to make a song “personal” is obviously validated by the end result – there are few published Thompson songs that express naked emotion, none of the heart-on-sleeve singer-songwriting that we are accustomed to hearing from other artists. As we shall see in later chapters, the “distance” between songwriter and singer, author and persona, is stretched to an unusual degree in Thompson’s work by his construction of complex “characters” and by subtle manipulation of narrative perspective. But even the emotions “felt” by his characters are often “objectified”. Take the example of a dilapidated property, used as a correlative for remorse and related emotions:

- *This old house is falling down around my ears ...*
- *I took my darling down/To that big grey house down the lane.*
- *This very fine house of great renown/It’s cracked and shaking and a-tumbling down.*
- *In a cold, burned-out house, she sat at a table ...*
- *... this old house moves and moans ...*
- *This old house is tumbling down ...*
- *This house is dark and shuttered ...*
- *You left your mark on this old place, that you did.*

The final reference to the “old place” in “Missie How You Let Me Down” is a fine example of how emotion is “objectified” within that song, and within Thompson’s work as a whole. The song catalogues the “marks”, the “traces”, left by the departed lover – footsteps “frozen in the ground”, food

“still sitting there at the table”, her shape “still there in the bed”. These signs are observed from a safe distance, not touched, smelled or felt up close. Far-fetched analogies are constructed to further “distance” emotion: “if you never liked pulling teeth,/ Then why did you tie me in the dentist’s chair”; and again, “I could stew in here like a pressure cooker and screw down the lid”. And all this takes place in an archetypal Thompsonian landscape of the mind: “Hailstones and a sickle moon and the north wind races”. In a telling admission, the protagonist is running his mind “over lost embraces”. The reality of heartbreak comes down to a mind-game: “maybe I should just take a match and burn the whole thing to the ground”. “Missie” is a song of tremendous power, with the ability to stir the listener’s emotions profoundly, but the way that effect is created is clearly Eliotian. Eliot’s reference to his own life as a “decayed house” in “Gerontion” hopefully helps make the point! Thus, to return to Linda’s words, Thompson’s high rejection rate is not a function of emotional hang-ups but instead is based on purely aesthetic criteria. Those criteria, and the craft derived from them, came from Eliot, as we shall now see demonstrated in the context of *Mock Tudor*.

The links between *Mock Tudor* and Eliot’s life and poetry are manifold. Some are strong and significant; others may be tenuous, but are still interesting in the wider context. The sheer weight of evidence should leave us in no doubt, though, as to the extent which Thompson has drawn on Eliot, nor as to his desire to make that dependence, that “debt”, pretty obvious to his listeners. The badge on the *Mock Tudor* tour

sweatshirt is a lovely tongue-in-cheek way of making the point – why else depict “Cats” in a rock milieu?

At my request, Thompson signed my copy of the *Semi-Detached Mock Tudor* CD sleeve, “To T S Eliot - From Richard Thompson”, making the telling observation, “why should I recognise him: I always read his poems but he never buys my albums.” Ironically, my original intention had been to quote extensively from Eliot’s *Collected Poems* in order to demonstrate the close parallels contained in Thompson’s songs and to encourage lovers of Thompson’s songs to buy the book and revisit a major dead poet. This plan was scuppered when, after four months’ of exhaustive deliberation and two polite “chasers”, the Eliot estate graced me with a one-line e-mail refusing permission to publish extracts. High up above the crowd the Great Valerio is walking. The following references to Eliot’s poems are therefore – begrudgingly – taken from *T. S. Eliot Collected Poems* [Faber & Faber, 1963]. All lovers of Richard Thompson’s music should possess and consult a copy. But you’d make me feel good if you didn’t actually buy one. Many allusions identified within Eliot’s work are taken from *A Student’s Guide to the Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot* by B. C. Southam [Faber & Faber, 1994]. The latter is a fascinating read and is highly recommended to those who, like me, had long forgotten what Eliot was really all about. I hereby acknowledge my debt to the dead poets. A number of specialist studies of Eliot that I have consulted and hopefully benefited from are included in the Bibliography.

The album title, *Mock Tudor*, relates to a mock-heroic portrayal in *The Waste Land* of Elizabeth I and her rumoured-

lover, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester [lines 266-289]. Thompson captures this ironic counterpoint between Tudor myth and modern realities in his album title and the contrast is reinforced and given specificity by the ability of the heroine in the opening track, “Cooksferry Queen”, to “make wine out of Thames river water”.

COOKSFERRY QUEEN

- Thompson’s song title links to the section of *The Waste Land* entitled, “A Game of Chess.”
- The title, “Cooksferry Queen”, as enunciated by Thompson, comes out as “cook’s fairy queen”. This recalls Sir Philip Sidney’s epic poem, “The Fairie Queene”, a tribute to Elizabeth I, whom he served as courtier. Thompson is suggesting a Cook’s approved tour around the Virgin Queen, flagging up the contrast between the first and second Elizabethan ages.
- The opening lines of the song, which take us immediately out into the backstreets of the city, recall the sleazy depiction of London in the opening lines of Eliot’s “Prufrock” [lines 1-7].
- The reference to the “town with no future” where the speaker’s “future lies” captures the elegiac tone of the famous passage from Eliot’s last major poem, “Little Gidding” [section II, lines 70-73], where the poet refers to revisiting old words, an old street and an old body. This reference is cen-

tral to an understanding of Mock Tudor and I encourage you all to consult a Reference Library.

- Mulvaney’s self-deprecating introduction – “I’m known quite famously./ People speak my name in whispers-/ What higher praise can there be”. – echoes the snickering footman in “Prufrock” [lines 85-87]. It also suggests “The Hollow Men” [lines 5-7] where meaningless voices whisper together.
- The “whisper” motif has deep resonance in Eliot and across Thompson’s work. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men” uses, as one of its allusive underpinnings, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad’s anti-hero, Kurtz, hears voices from the jungle which surrounds him: “[It] whispered to him things about himself which he did not know [and] echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core”. Thompson’s “Uninhabited Man” is, of course, based overtly on “The Hollow Men.”
- Kurtz was also an ivory trader who ruthlessly plundered the Congolese jungle. His modern counterpart, Mulvaney, is willing to trade his “fine mohair” and he expresses the strength of his affections for his Queen in terms of his willingness to “trade it all tomorrow,/ All the wicked things I’ve been ...”
- Mulvaney’s reference to his “fine mohair” recalls clothing analogies in “Prufrock” [lines 42, 122, 124]. Mulvaney’s comment also prefigures other sartorial images in *Mock Tudor*:
 - ‘Salon hair and creases in your jeans’
 - ‘My suit’s got creases and my shoes have got shine’

- 'It suits me more than it ever suited you'
- 'Dresses expensive, but that's just a crutch.'

There is also a clear biographical link to Eliot himself who continued to display in London the "urbane dandyism" he had acquired at Harvard.

- The Hammer Horror tackiness of "snakes dancing around her feet/ And dead men coming through the wall" suggests the section in *The Waste Land* [lines 379-381] where baby-faced bats crawl down a wall. In the "Elegy" section of Eliot's original manuscript draft of *The Waste Land*, the poet described a haunting Medusa-like figure – a thinly veiled attack on his wife Vivienne – who is adorned with scorpions hissing around her head. Thompson's "I Can't Wake Up" extends the comparisons.
- Eliot's "Game of Chess" section in *The Waste Land* ends with Ophelia's words from *Hamlet* – "Goodnight, ladies" – which are spoken to the court, immediately prior to her death. *Hamlet* has accused her of being a whore, and suggested she take herself off to a "nunnery", Elizabethan slang for brothel. Mulvaney's comment that he is "the prince of this parish" and that he's been "ruthless" and "mean" should clearly be seen in the context of himself as *Hamlet*. Thompson's *Idiot's Guide To Hamlet* has appeared in recent years in performance as "Dog Eats Dog In Denver."
- The Ophelia analogy is continued. In Shakespeare's play, Ophelia flees the court and gathers flowers by a brookside. She falls into the stream and lies, awaiting death, while her

hair and clothes spread out on the water. This graphic image captured the imagination of many painters in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – Millais, Hughes and Waterhouse are just some examples. All were, of course, Pre-Raphaelites. Hence, the lines: "she's got every rare perfection,/ All her looks beyond compare./ She's got dresses that seem to float in the wind,/ Pre-Raphaelite curls in her hair".

SIBELLA

- The thudding drumbeats which lead us into "Sibella" provide the first link in this pivotal song to Eliot, whose "Portrait of a Lady" includes a reference to a "dull tom-tom." Eliot was known as "Tom" by his friends. Eliot and his executors recognised the joke and I'm sure Thompson also enjoyed it!
- The name "Sibella" recalls the character of Grizabella, played by Elaine Paige in the original London production of *Cats*.
- The dramatic structure of "Sibella", which is repeated in "Bathsheba Smiles", is a form of "conversation galante", a one-sided dialogue in which the protagonist speaks directly, whilst the target of his words comments "silently". Thompson lifts the technique from Eliot, who in turn borrowed from Laforgue. Eliot uses the form in his own "Conversation Galante" and in "Portrait of a Lady."
- Thompson's title links to Eliot's epigraph to *The Waste Land*, which refers to the sad fate of the Cumaean Sibyl,

who was condemned to spend eternity trapped in a cage. Eliot's quotation is from the *Satyricon*, of which the title *Mock Tudor* is a neat, but probably unintended echo.

- The title also has a more direct, personal link to Eliot, whose first wife, Vivienne, published autobiographical short stories in *The Criterion* magazine featuring her own alter ego, Sibylla. In recent years, critics have emphasised the fact that *The Waste Land* is no arid, cerebral curiosity and that, at its heart, lies the profound emotional trauma of Eliot's unhappy marriage. The relationship was the subject of Michael Hastings' 1984 play, *Tom and Viv*, which was subsequently filmed, starring Miranda Richardson and Willem Dafoe. Deeper insight into the tortured partnership between Eliot and Vivien can be gained from the excellent 2001 biography of Vivienne by Carole Seymour-Jones. It's appropriate, therefore, that Thompson should refer to a strained relationship in this song: "We don't make sense together."
- Thompson's opening lines link directly to the Sibyl – in classic times, a prophetess, now reduced to telling fortunes. Thompson's girls who "x-ray the deck to see what's coming" recall the prostitutes, Doris and Dusty, in Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes* who cut cards in order to tell each other's fortunes. The same motif is present in *The Waste Land*, in the character of the charlatan Tarot-teller, Madame Sosostris [lines 43-59].
- In the same section of Eliot's poem, there is reference to Belladonna, the "Lady of the Rocks". Thompson's meticulous choice of letters in his song title enables him to capture this. It may be stretching a point to jump forward, to the

female character in "Uninhabited Man", who rolls rocks away. Similarly, it may be a bridge too far to try to link Sibella to Belladonna to Mona Lisa – who was described by Walter Pater, in a passage known to Eliot, as "older than the rocks among which she sits" – and on to Bathsheba, who smiles enigmatically at us in Thompson's next song on *Mock Tudor*.

- The phrase "tea-time of your soul" has central significance in *Mock Tudor*, as it does in Eliot's work. The precise phrase, Thompson had used before, in describing to Patrick Humphries the desolation of the suburban Sundays of his youth: "Sundays used to be torture in our house – from about four o' clock it was the Sunday tea-time of the soul – just incredible depression. It was dark, it was always winter, always raining. Eventually, when we were teenagers, we found ways around it, ways to avoid it". [PH 18]. This may help to explain specifically, why bad weather should feature so prominently throughout Thompson's work as an objective correlative for misery and depression. Thompson echoes the "T phrase" on the last song on the album: "Stop by and see us – for tea". But Eliot – true Bostonian, he! – was obsessed by the arcane, meaningless ritual of taking tea. In "Prufrock" alone, we find several references to the taking of toast and tea, the measuring of life in coffee spoons, and to assorted cups and cakes and ices. Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady" is similarly awash with cups of tea.
- The reference to "wilder days" which follows the taking of tea is particularly interesting. It illustrates the prevalence of varied, deeply hidden allusion in *Mock Tudor*, a tech-

nique learned from the craftsman, Eliot. Here, Thompson is using the phrase not only in its common meaning but also as a reference to the films of director, Billy Wilder. The allusion to film is in itself appropriate, since Eliot was the first major poet to incorporate cinematographic technique in his poems, a practice that Thompson has followed. But the appositeness of the phrase, “wilder days”, goes much deeper. Wilder’s strong satiric comedies, high on energy, high on romance, represented an alluring alternative to the “tea-time of the soul” which was London in the ‘50s and ‘60s. The titles of his films are instructive, too:

- Love in the Afternoon [released in 1957 – when do you take tea?]
- Some Like It Hot [1959 – and how do you prefer your tea?]
- The Apartment [1960 – where shall we take tea?]
- Irma La Douce [1963 – shall we ask the Lady to join us?]
- Fortune Cookie [1966 – and what else shall we put on the tea tray?]

It will come as a surprise to no one that the male lead in all these films was Jack Lemon!

- Thompson’s strange second verse – “Some say you can learn a lot from books,/ Thrill ride to second hand living ...” – is a fairly explicit recall of the passage in *The Waste Land* in which Marie contrasts a particular “thrill ride” of her youth with the bookish existence to which she is now reduced [lines 10-18]. In this context, the enigmatic reference to

Marie Antoinette may make sense: “Easy to smile when luck is running”.

BATHSHEBA SMILES

- “Bathsheba Smiles” is well on the way to becoming a minor RT classic. At both of the concerts that I attended on the 1999 Mock Tudor tour, it received comfortably the loudest pre-applause of all the new material. At the Festival Hall, the mauve-haired lady sitting next to me actually lip-synched the chorus. Which is all very surprising, given that it is such a tough song to “read”. Its significance in the context of the “Metroland” cycle and the myth of the goddess/muse is clear at a high level but the detail is worrying. There is a nagging feeling that Princess Di is in there somewhere: “She smiles and heads bow down ... Air kisses every victim twice ... Dig in your pockets, please ... No pain, no gain’s a strain,/ But she never seems to hurt”. All of this smacks of the Royal charity circuit and early mornings at the gym. Then, there’s the suggestion, maybe, of a premature exit: “Hello heaven, goodbye dirt/ And no hair shirt ...” It suggests leaving the paparazzi behind and skipping the next fifty years of public penance. But it still doesn’t fit “tightly” somehow. The real specificity comes from Eliot and focuses precisely on the phrase “confess upon your knees”.
- Eliot’s poem, “Whispers of Immortality”, centres on the alluring figure of Grishkin. She is “nice” – in the obsolete sense of wanton, or lascivious – “uncorseted”, and has a

friendly bosom. Her feline magnetism is twice compared to that of the Brazilian jaguar. And again, Grishkin in a drawing room has the feline stench of an animal in heat. Eliot's model for this poem, stylistically and thematically, was Gautier's "Emaux et Camees" ["Carmen"]. In Gautier's poem, the Archbishop of Toledo is amongst the men who are captivated by Carmen's charms: he "says a mass on his knees before her" ["chante la messe a ses genoux"]. Thompson, I believe, made the connection via Eliot to Gautier's image.

- The real-life role model for Grishkin was the Russian dancer, Serafima Astafieva. If one accepts that Thompson's literary model for Bathsheba was Grishkin – not proven, I accept, but I still think it highly likely – then, he has, in effect, transported her from the Diaghilev ballet company to the world of haut couture. "Catwalk pilgrims" then become pilgrims to the catwalk, drawn not simply by the show but by the cat's walk, the feline sensuousness of Bathsheba. If this reading is correct, it provides an appropriate context – literally, "Whispers of Immortality" – for the otherwise obscure questions, "Do you close your eyes to see miracles?/ Do you raise your face to kiss angels?/ Do you float on air to hear oracles?" The reference to the cat's walk also recalls Vivienne Eliot's alter ego Sibylla who, in one of Vivienne's Criterion pieces, allows an old lady to stroke her like a cat.
- In "Whispers of Immortality", Eliot also draws a famous comparison between "Abstract Entities" which are drawn to Grishkin's all-too-fleshly charms and "our lot", poets who find comfort elsewhere, in fleshless bones. The prime

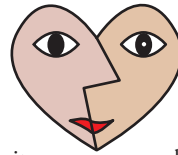
exemplar of such a poet is the Jacobean tragedian, John Webster, who "was much possessed by death/ And saw the skull beneath the skin". This is highly reminiscent of the "Uninhabited Man" who warns that "you'll find no me beneath the skin". Bones were also much in Thompson's mind when *Mock Tudor* was in production. He appeared on Philip Pickett's *Bones Of All Men*, which was released in 1998. Or maybe, it was the other way round ...

- The other clear echoes of Eliot, which do not depend on the Grishkin link, originate from the social milieu depicted in "Bathsheba Smiles." Eliot's poetry – visit the library – is littered with social gatherings, the tea parties and the soirees of the chattering classes. Famously, in the room the women come and go, "talking of Michaelangelo". *Mock Tudor*, too, has its fair share of social get-togethers: Bathsheba working the room; the disrupted middle-class party in "Crawl Back"; the late, late party in "Walking the Long Miles Home"; the theatre visit in "That's All, Amen, Close the Door"; and the parties, the chit-chat, the jollity, and the ritual taking of the tea in "Hope You Like the New Me." What is important, however, is the way in which Eliot uses impropriety, and particularly, improper or inappropriate use of language, as a symptom of social degeneration and spiritual malaise. A fine example is "A Portrait of a Lady", where the hostess' reference to Chopin is couched in totally inappropriate language, redolent of both sex and the sacrilegious. The same fundamental insensitivity lies at the heart of "Bathsheba Smiles". Here, implied prostitution – "sharing love is sharing wealth" – is an act of confession. The indis-

criminate sharing of sexual favours – the spreading of joy around – takes on the significance of religious ecstasy: see miracles, kiss angels and hear oracles while you dig deep in your pockets for relief!

TWO-FACED LOVE

- The theme of this song – the entrapment of a relationship that leads to one of the partners suffering mental instability and emotional paralysis – is very reminiscent of the real life marriage between “Tom and Viv” Eliot. It is no coincidence that Vivienne identified with the Sibyl of Cumae whose eventual fate was to be trapped in a cage, longing for death. There were occasions during her marriage when Vivienne felt similarly trapped and longed for death. The to-be-admired-but-also-not-to-be quoted Carole Seymour-Jones has described in harrowing detail Vivienne’s predisposition to mental illness, complicated by a dependence on prescription drugs and by the bizarre experimental medical treatments imposed on her. Given this medical background and the toxic atmosphere of Vivienne’s marriage to Eliot, it is no surprise that her final days should have been spent in a private mental asylum in Finsbury Park. The two-faced love which “makes me lose my mind”, pacing “the room at night”, is akin to that which Vivienne Eliot endured. Eliot imagined Vivienne’s life in the asylum in his overtly autobiographical play, *The Family Reunion*, with its references



to echoing passageways and breaking chains [Part 2, Scene 2]. Thompson’s own “Grey Walls” and “Oh I Swear” use similar imagery.

- Vivienne Eliot died on 22nd January 1947, aged 58. The cause of her death was given as a heart attack but her biographer suggests that medical negligence might have caused Vivienne’s death. While there is no proven link, the ambiguity surrounding Vivienne’s fate recalls not only the fate of Harry’s wife in Eliot’s *The Family Reunion*, but also that of the heroine in Thompson’s “Did She Jump Or Was She Pushed.” Thompson has repeatedly denied that the latter song is “about” the death of Sandy Denny. I think it is likely to relate also to Vivienne’s death.
- The motif of emotional paralysis in “Two-Faced Love” also brings to mind Eliot’s *The Hollow Men*. In that poem, Eliot perceived his wife as his own shadow side, as a dark anima who lurked behind his urbane exterior. The significance of Eliot’s reference to the shadow that sits between essence and descent, desire and spasm needs no elaboration. Stuffed with straw, the falling shadow annihilates the satisfaction of desire.
- The sexual fumbling in “Two-Faced Love” - “Pardon my naïve caress,/ Tenderfoot tenderness -/ Uncouth, to tell the truth” – harks back to the encounter between the typist and the clerk in *The Waste Land* and to the inexperience of the hero in “Prufrock.”

- “Hard On Me” sits firmly in the thirty-year sequence of Richard Thompson songs which embody his relationship with his muse and his role as an artist. That much becomes apparent in the second line of the song: “Why do you grind me small?” This is an explicit echo back to “Walking On a Wire”: “This grindstone’s wearing me ...”. What makes “Hard On Me” so remarkable, and so “difficult”, as a song is the way in which Thompson succeeds in grafting onto one of his own recurrent themes, a rich overlay of allusion to Eliot’s works, which acts to extend and amplify the starting proposition. The theme, if you like is Thompson’s, and the basic mythical foundation is that which he derived from Graves, but the dramatic context within which the theme is developed and much of the language in which it is articulated are clearly derived from Eliot.
- The long third section of *The Wasteland*, “The Fire Sermon”, is loosely but explicitly based on a sermon preached by the Buddha against the fires that consume men: “With the fire of passion, say I, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of infatuation; with birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair are they on fire”. The sermon was preached by Buddha to monks and expounded the canonical rules which should guide their conduct. By the end of the sermon, the monks “became free from attachment to the world”. At the end of the section, Eliot links this central text of early Buddhism to a similarly pivotal Christian text: “To Carthage then I came/ Burning

burning burning burning/ O Lord Thou pluckest me out”. Eliot’s acknowledged source here is the Confessions of St Augustine: “to Carthage then I came, where a cauldron of unholy loves sang all about my ears”; and again, “I entangle my steps with these outward beauties, but thou pluckest me out, O Lord, Thou pluckest me out!” Thompson’s narrator’s progress, similarly, moves from graphic depiction of the fires that consume him – rage, lust, despair – to the prospect of a Christian resolution “on that hill”, the Hill Of Skulls, where Christ was crucified.

- The belief in salvation through re-birth in Christ is central to Eliot’s “Journey of the Magi”, in which the Kings from the East move from their “old dispensation” through a hard and bitter agony - epiphany - to a new perspective on life. This progress, too, is mirrored in “Hard On Me”, where the protagonist moves from being “trapped inside the Wicker Man”, clearly symbolic of Eliot’s “old dispensation”, facing “hard and bitter agony” before he “dare go on that hill”.
- Thompson’s plea to “unfreeze my will” has a particular personal connection to Eliot who throughout his life complained of aboulie or paralysis of will. Thompson’s specific reference to the “hill” recalls Eliot also. The latter suffered from periodic “writer’s block” which his wife satirised cruelly in the mouth of Sibylla in one of her *Criterion* pieces, suggesting that Eliot had tackled one peak too many and was now stranded up a literary mountain. It would probably be too cynical of me to even imply that his executors want to keep him there.

- The nature of the physical agony faced by the persona in “Hard On Me” recalls another Eliot poem, “Ash Wednesday”, in which three white leopards dismember the speaker [section II – “Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper tree”]. But the unbraiding of veins and loosening of reins in Thompson’s song also links to the much-anthologised concluding passages of “Prufrock”, in which Eliot connects the literal enervation of the body to the achievement of necessary artistic detachment: “as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen”. On this level, “Hard On Me” is a prayer, in which the postulant begs to be allowed to shed the “madnesses”, the “fires” of Buddha’s sermon, and to be liberated - unbraided, unstitched and finally loosened - to be set free to throw “nerves in patterns” on the screen of Mock Tudor. To state the obvious, this is an extraordinary piece of allusive poetry!

CRAWL BACK (UNDER MY STONE)

- When I first heard Thompson perform “Crawl Back” in early 1998, he dedicated it to the model, Jerry Hall. The implicit class conflict between Mick Jagger, East-Enders turned rock god, and Hall, jet-set sophisticate supreme, isn’t a bad lead-in to the song!
- The chastity belt erected by literary executors notwithstanding, *The Waste Land* has attracted more than its fair share of class-based deconstruction in recent years. But Eliot’s preoccupation with class is, nonetheless, real. David Trotter observes that “the clerk [in lines 230 to 250] is a petty-bourgeois, caught between the class from which he is trying to escape and the class he wishes to enter ... What fascinated Eliot about such people was the way that uncertainty about their social status had produced an inner division between speech and identity. They hoped to raise themselves by aping bourgeois dress and speech and manners, and so their behaviour was inevitably at odds with their class origins.” Somehow, the arriviste is bound to give himself away, by a word, a gesture, a betrayed deficiency in the genetic code!
- The ambivalence of Thompson’s protagonist towards the middle classes mirrors that of Eliot himself. The latter spent several years as a bank clerk but could nevertheless rail against the “hopelessly stupid” English middle classes whom he saw as archetypically trapped in snobism and prejudice.
- The general thematic similarity between “Crawl Back” and Eliot’s work is particularly acute in the case of “Prufrock”. Lines 52 to 61 are central to an understanding of “Crawl Back.” Eliot was setting up his anti-heroes for a sound horsewhipping before Richard Thompson was born!
- Thompson’s song title nicely echoes the invitation in *The Waste Land* to come under the shadow of the red rock.
- The repetition of words and phrases in poems, often separated by years, was one of Eliot’s standard techniques and reflected a basic aesthetic principle since, as James Olney explains, “he wished all his poems to be seen as interlocked emotional moments in a consciousness that changed and

developed but that was also continuous from beginning to end". We have already observed Thompson's similar linking of words, images and motifs between songs, over the years. It is, however, worth flagging up the bridge to "Crawl Back", with its socio-babble reference to the glass floor and ceiling. This is a direct link to "Killing Jar", which contains that horrific image: "I put it in the killing jar, just to watch him die." The echo of the earlier song makes it clear that the "freedom" enjoyed by the middle class, to which the narrator of "Crawl Back" aspires, is tantamount to slow suffocation.

UNINHABITED MAN

- This is the song that, even to the casual listener, "connects" Thompson and Eliot on some level. Thompson's title is clearly related to Eliot's "The Hollow Men." The strange chorus, based on "Goldilocks and the Three Bears", also overtly reflects Eliot's use of "Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush" as a motif in "The Hollow Men": "Here we go round the prickly pear ... at five o' clock in the morning".
- The theme of "The Hollow Men" was summarised by Eliot in a 1930 essay on Baudelaire, in which he argued that to be a man entails either doing bad or doing good. The most damning condemnation one can make of the great and the good is that they do not have the capacity for either. The moral anonymity of the "hero" of "Uninhabited Man" should obviously be seen in this context – "if there's no

me, there's no sin". But it also casts light on a succession of Thompsonian anti-heroes over the years. It explains why James Adie, warts and all, is depicted in a way that stirs our sympathies as well as Red Molly's!

- The situation at the centre of Thompson's song – an illicit liaison between an "old dry shell" of a man and a disinterested female – "fresh face to change the mood" – is reminiscent of the loveless encounter between the clerk and the typist in *The Waste Land*. [Lines 236-240]. The June-to-December relationship at the heart of Thompson's song also recalls Eliot's second marriage: he was aged sixty-eight when he married the thirty year-old Valerie Fletcher.
- The comment, "I'll find my feet again, you say ... What rock I had, you rolled away", implies the Resurrection and links to the strong vein of Christian iconography running through *The Wasteland* and *Mock Tudor*. In the former, the Crucifixion and Resurrection form central sections [lines 322-330 and 359-365 respectively]. In *Mock Tudor*, the imagery of Resurrection in "Uninhabited Man" is preceded by that of the Crucifixion ["Hard On Me"] and, in turn, by references to the miracles performed by Christ ["Cooksferry Queen"].
- Thompson's hero's description of himself as a condemned building, a "romantic ruin", recalls the description of the empty chapel in *The Waste Land*, itself based on the Chapel Perilous of medieval legend. The "ruin" motif also suggests Eliot's universal phrase at the end of *The Waste Land*: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins".

— SIGHTS AND SOUNDS OF LONDON TOWN —

- “Sights and Sounds” is a relatively naturalistic song, in a traditional form, and, as such, is a fair distance from the densely textured, modernist poetry of Eliot. It is worth, however, remarking on the local specificity – references to the Euston Road, the Golden Goose, St Anne’s Court et al – which is also a feature of *The Waste Land*. The image of Mickey, running like a rat through a maze, also recalls fellow rodents in the latter: “rat’s alley”, “a rat crept softly”, “the rat’s foot”. The background guitar figure to Thompson’s chorus also, appropriately, repeats Eliot’s use of the song “London Bridge Is Falling Down”. Finally, there is a nice irony in the fact that Eliot’s closing section of *The Waste Land*, “What The Thunder Said”, is recast by Thompson in the London of the 1960s as “Street Cries and Stage Whispers”, or, perhaps more explicitly, “the streets cry and the stage whispers!”

— THAT’S ALL, AMEN, CLOSE THE DOOR —

- Despite Eliot’s highbrow reputation, he retained a keen interest in popular culture. Music hall, in particular, attracted him and in an obituary notice on the death of Marie Lloyd in 1922, he expressed the view that the halls represented a special source of communal feeling and vitality, and that their closure was yet another aspect of the modern waste land. But Lloyd herself held special significance for him,

as James Olney explains: “Trying to understand how it was that she held her audience, and how, from being held, it in turn participated, Eliot uses the terms from the Upanishad as they are rendered in “What the Thunder Said”: give (“no other comedian succeeded so well in giving expression to the life of that audience”); sympathise and control (“Marie Lloyd’s audiences were inevitably sympathetic, and it was through this sympathy that she controlled them”). It is in similar terms that Richard Thompson expresses his own regret at the death of a fellow artist whom he had loved, Sandy Denny: “She gave as much/ As she had to give./ Please don’t ask for more,/ Please don’t ask for more./ That’s all”.

- Sandy Denny died, tragically young, as a result of a fall at home. In “Prufrock”, Eliot captured, in a Shakespearean allusion, the kind of emotion that an event such as this must have provoked in Denny’s friends: “I know the voices dying with a dying fall/ Beneath the music from a farther room”. Thompson objectified his own emotions in similar remorseful terms: “You wish./ Well don’t wish for me./ As if a wish/ Could cheat the fall./ Just believe/ And leave it be”.
- Thompson’s two line in memoriam fittingly echoes Denny’s own immortal lines: “When memories fail,/ Well, who’s to know?” Who does know where the time goes?

The above analysis goes into some of the fine detail in order to make the general point that, in addressing Eliot’s influence on Thompson’s work, we are not referring to some-

thing trivial or merely accidental. Deep study of Eliot was required to enable Thompson to allude to the “better craftsman’s” work so extensively. And deep learning from Eliot’s craft was required to enable Thompson to assimilate Eliot so unobtrusively and yet effectively into the body of *Mock Tudor*. But there’s devil in the detail – in this case the danger of losing perspective on *Mock Tudor* as a cohesive work of great art. A number of points require to be made, again by analogy with Eliot. The popular misconception of *The Waste Land* as an impenetrable, arid artefact is the result of eight decades of critical scrutiny in which the reading of the tealeaves has typically taken precedence over admiration of the sumptuousness of the banquet. To be fair, Eliot’s own breadth and opacity of allusion invited much of this. It is nonetheless refreshing to read modern criticism such as the following from Frank Lentricchia that places appropriate emphasis on *The Waste Land* as theatre:

By ‘theatre’ and ‘theatrical’, Eliot intended several things: first, the literary form he thought best suited down through the eras to meet, engage, and capture the life of the writer’s times (the historicity of theatre); second, a writer’s literary self-consciousness of being in performance while writing, seeing himself in a dramatic light, in the act of creating himself as a character; third, a music-hall show, a series of entertainments, or the music-hall performer himself, represented for Eliot best by herself, Marie Lloyd ... *The Waste Land* as theatre is attested to by Eliot’s own recorded performance, persuasive testimony to the poem’s dramatic

character and possibilities, with its five parts functioning as five separate shows, replete with characters from all classes, language ‘high’ and ‘low’, jokes, dialogue, playlets, gossip, sex, popular and operatic song (something for everyone) ... *The Waste Land* is a titanic variety show (a satura, a mixture) offering the pleasures of the theatre, pleasures independent of deep structure and myth, analytic intellect, or literary knowledge, pleasures one need not be an insider to enjoy and that cannot be excited by attention to ‘plan’ and ‘mythic method.’

The provisional title of *The Waste Land* was “He Do The Police In Different Voices”, a quotation from Dickens’ *Our Mutual Friend*. This reflects Eliot’s intention that his long poem should weave together a varied pattern of voices, both personal and impersonal. This, I believe, captures the essence of what Thompson is attempting in *Mock Tudor* and it may well explain the snoring policeman in “Walking The Long Miles Home.” The album has that variety, that feeling of sheer vitality, which *The Waste Land* can still demonstrate if you put the Concordance to one side, sit back, listen and enjoy. Nora Barnacle, wife of the novelist James Joyce, once described walking past her husband’s study when he was deeply engaged in the writing of *Finnegan’s Wake*. This novel is not one that you would normally associate with good fun, but Nora often heard laughter emanating from the room, reflecting Joyce’s own delight in the complex verbal confections he was composing. *Mock Tudor*, likewise, is very much imbued with this spirit. The perspective on *Mock Tudor* as a “series of

entertainments” is also important. The catchall description, “concept album”, is misleading, since it implies the existence of both a single underlying concept and a degree of linearity in narrative structure. Mock Tudor has neither – it is demonstrably not a three-act rock opera on the joys of growing up in suburban London. This is not “Dicky Meets Tommy”. The album does have conceptual and thematic coherence, but this derives from the dense underpinning of myth and allusion that we have identified, not from a single, underlying set of unified, logical precepts. Similarly, its structure is not, in any conventional sense, “linear”. The breadth of Thompson’s linguistic, vocal and musical repertoire and his conscious linking of phrases and motifs both within the album and from the album out to other Thompson works, and to those of other writers, result in a crystalline spatial structure. This structure is “anchored” and constrained only by the geographical specificity of the opening lines of “Cooksferry Queen” at one end, and the particular “definition” of the narrator, the epiphanic statement of Thompson’s own “literary self-consciousness” at the other.

That artistic sense of selfhood is another important similarity between the ways in which Eliot and Thompson see and “publicise” themselves as writers. In a Yeats memorial lecture in 1940, T. S. Eliot praised the integrity and courage of the Irishman in living out the life of a poet from beginning to end. This prompted Eliot to “read” Yeats’ work “backwards”, from the point of final development to the earliest beginnings. In doing so, Eliot was, in fact, following a principle of poetic structuring which Yeats himself had described as “dreaming

back’. James Olney elaborates on the significance of the principle in terms which imply its applicability to Thompson’s work:

This way of reading a poet backwards is particularly appropriate, I believe, in the case of a public poet like Yeats or Eliot who has from the beginning quite consciously projected his career forward. It is to read a poet not biographically, from the dates and events yielded to us by history, but autobiographically, from the poet’s own imagining of what he will be and do and from his own memory of what he has been and done, all as recorded in the [specific] poems that are summary milestones on the way to being and doing ... each of these poems comes at a crucial, transitional moment in the career, each of them is both summary and projection, is, as Eliot puts it in *Little Gidding*, ‘an end and a beginning./ Every poem an epitaph’, a dreaming back and also an initiation and a commencement ... These transitional moments are always double, and in a double sense: they are poems of setting out but they are also poems of summary of what has gone before, so that later poems regularly take up into themselves earlier poems; and they are also poems of heightened self-consciousness as the poet, observing everything, forever observing, includes himself in the observation. The title of the first volume – *Prufrock and Other Observations* – is altogether significant.

We have already seen how, in the case of Richard Thompson, it is possible, indeed necessary, to “dream back”, from

“Hard On Me”, to “Walking On a Wire” and from thence to both “Calvary Cross” and “The Great Valerio”. But it is also possible to read backwards from Mock Tudor, to his first solo album, Henry the Human Fly. As in Eliot’s case, that sense of the fly on the wall, “observing everything, forever observing” – and, in Thompson’s case, quite literally including “himself in the observation” on the album sleeve – is “altogether significant”. It is probably no coincidence that one of Ezra Pound’s jokey names for his friend Tom was Tsetse (fly). The first song on Henry is quite clearly a “summary poem” à la Yeats and Eliot. “Roll Over Vaughn Williams” is an unambiguous statement of musical intent, in which Thompson both recalls the forms of music which have influenced him and states his future artistic manifesto, in terms of his commitment to unify those influences into something unique and subversive: “live in fear!” The song’s title compresses three main strands of historical influence and future development into one portmanteau phrase that Joyce and Eliot would have relished. The first strand is transparent and is captured in Chuck Berry’s “Roll Over Beethoven”. This implies a continuing commitment to the rock ‘n’ roll music that had rescued Thompson from eternal Sunday tea-times. Ralph Vaughn Williams’ English pastoralism is, similarly, unambiguously invoked. Indeed, the format of the song, as a traditional “calling-on song”, reinforces the commitment to the English folk-tradition. But “squeezed in the middle” is an often overlooked strand, that of American country music. This is personified in Hank Williams, whose simple, direct, yet profoundly moving songs Thompson has covered in live performance for thirty years. Asked which song

he most wished he had written, Thompson cited Hank Williams’ “My Sweet Love Ain’t Around.” Hank squeezes into the title credits on Henry, not only by virtue of his surname, but also courtesy of the title of his first major ‘country hit’, the 1947 recording, “Move It On Over.”

In the third song on Henry, Thompson states his future theme as a writer. “Poor Ditching Boy”, as we have seen, owes a heavy debt to Robert Graves’ *The White Goddess*. It is the first definitive statement in Thompson’s oeuvre of the theme of true poetry and the price that the writing of true poetry exacts. But what are we to make of the second song on Henry, “Nobody’s Wedding?” Thompson has described this as a “nonsense song”, which, at a superficial level, it appears to be. Yet, there is a serious sub-text. The sense of the undermining of ritual and ceremony that sits at the heart of “Nobody’s Wedding” is strongly reminiscent of Yeats: “The ceremony of innocence is drowned”. More particularly, though, the title and theme of Thompson’s song has a specific literary antecedent. Look at the opening passage to the third section of Eliot’s “East Coker”, with its reference to the silent funeral, “nobody’s funeral, for there is no one to bury.” No surprise that in this poem, at the end of his active, meaningful career, Eliot should state:

*In my beginning is my end. In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.*

Thompson's house, at this stage, had yet to be built, let alone fall down around his ears. He was staring at "an open field", a blank page. And so, he simply turned the world on its head: the terms of reference that defined the end of Eliot's poetic career, "flipped", in order to define the start of Thompson's. "Funeral" became "wedding"; the city moguls and the men of letters from "East Coker" became characters from nursery rhyme, the butchers and bakers and candlestick makers. Eliot's "cold sense" and lost "motive of action" were reversed, with the fear-less conviction of youth, into an avowed determination to "make your own amusement", make "a pile of loot". Don't worry, be happy, make money. It all headed south quickly, of course – Henry was panned by the critics and neglected by the buying public. In Linda's words, Thompson was "slain". But he kept the faith, as Yeats and Eliot and all the true poets had done before him. I Want To See the Bright Lights Tonight redefined the terms of reference. Thompson recognised his own fallibility and encapsulated it in the image of Valerio, balancing on the high wire. Thereafter, he charted a somewhat different course. But the manifesto and the commitment remained undiminished. Thompson has stayed that course – the one defined primarily with reference to Eliot and Graves - knowing that, again in Eliot's words, the end of life's explorations is to arrive back at the starting point.

Mock Tudor marks Thompson's return to the place where he started. At the end of the album, he explicitly acknowledges the guide and mentor who has accompanied him on the journey. "Hope You Like the New Me" has been described as the most cynical song Thompson ever wrote. I'm convinced it's

the most honest and reverential thing he's ever put his name to. The song is "about" theft, a theme dear to Eliot's heart. The latter famously distinguished between good and bad poets: "Immature poets imitate, mature poets steal, bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion." Thompson hits the issue head-on:

*To steal is to flatter,
What a compliment to pay!
All those things I stole from you,
Well, I might give them back someday.
Yes, I really might, someday.*

The song is Thompson's tribute to the "dead poets" and performers from whom he stole, in his pursuit of "a whole of feeling" which is uniquely enshrined in the songs of Richard Thompson and which is totally unlike that from which it was ripped. But in this context, what are we to make of the strange sixth verse of "Hope You Like The New Me?" Whose wife did the singer steal? Richard Thompson actually in a sense appropriated both wives of T. S. Eliot. The link between the name of Eliot's first wife, Vivienne, and "Sibella" has been noted already. Eliot's second wife was Valerie. This might help explain why Thompson chose such a *recherché* name for the title of the song on Daring Adventures. It is certainly an appropriate name for the companion of a Valerio. Valerie's maiden name

was Fletcher, which may explain the opening line to “Uninhabited Man” – “Only a misdirected dart ...” But it is with Eliot’s first wife, Sibylla, the Sibyl, that this part of our journey ends.

The mythical Sibyl answered questions put to her, in enigmatic fashion, by flinging from her cave handfuls of leaves bearing letters. The postulant was required to rearrange the leaves, the letters, in a suitable order to unlock the solution to the riddle. Following the lead given by Robert Graves, who devoted much of his life to deciphering word puzzles in ur-texts, Thompson has played the anagram game in a number of his songs over the years. Eliot, too, enjoyed word games and expressed the hope that his essays “might preserve in cryptogram certain notions which, if expressed directly, would be destined to immediate obloquy, followed by perpetual oblivion.” On Mock Tudor, Thompson himself turns Sibyl, throwing the same handful of six letters out at us at the start of every verse of “Hope You Like The New Me”. The letters are repeated for a seventh time, in the fourth verse, in a phrase that we are expected to interpret very precisely: “I [and] also stole – the way that you [Robert Graves] tell them”. But there is another key to unlocking the secret this time around – we need to find a missing letter. “Crawl Back” provides the clue, again very precisely:

*You had me in a second, you had it all reckoned, you did.
You guessed my game and my name, rank and number, you did.
Somehow – gave myself away.
Some code – some word I didn’t say ...*

In an album that deals so profoundly with Thompson and Eliot’s “tea time of the soul”, it is fitting that the word Thompson quite literally “didn’t say” is “tea”. Instead, he said the phonetic “T”. He invites us to take it from him: “Come by and see us – for ‘T’”. Armed with our letters, we can readily solve the sibylline riddle – “ISTOLE” plus the missing “T”... T S ELIOT, *il miglior fabbro*. Again, we shouldn’t have been surprised by this – Richard warned us that there was magic, witchcraft, in the offering:

*I swear by the pricking of my thumbs,
I’ll make your day
And melt away.
I’ll crawl back under my stone.*

At first hearing, the Shakespearean allusion – so very Eliot! – seems anomalous in the mouth of a working class upstart, but in the mouth of Richard “Tom’s Son”, the words from Macbeth take on a whole new significance:

By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes.
Open locks,
Whoever knocks.

[Macbeth, IV.i.44]

Prophesying over for another album, his debt to *il miglior fabbro* duly honoured, the latter-day Sibyl can crawl back into his cave.

CHAPTER FIVE

RICHARD THOMPSON AND THE PILGRIM SOUL

Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Kubla Khan.

And I made a rural pen,
And I stain'd the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs
Every child may joy to hear.

William Blake, Songs of Innocence.

Strange how potent cheap music is.

Noel Coward, Private Lives.

Who would true valour see,
Let him come hither;
One here will constant be,
Come wind, come weather.
There's no discouragement

Shall make him once relent
His first avow'd intent
To be a pilgrim.

John Bunyan, Pilgrim's Progress.

I've both looked forward to and dreaded this chapter. Its purpose is to recombine some of the strands we've spent a long time unravelling and, thereby, to allow five classic Richard Thompson songs to speak more-or-less for themselves, as songs. They are:

- From Galway To Graceland
- Al Bowlly's In Heaven
- 1952 Vincent Black Lightning
- Can't Win
- Beeswing

If they're not the five classics, I think most people would agree that they're not far removed from that distinctive Roll of Honour. Their selection is validated on the basis of common themes and a central preoccupation with "the pilgrim soul". The reason for the choice of this phrase will, I hope,

become apparent. If it doesn't, shoot the piano player, not the songwriter! His competence and significance will hopefully be beyond dispute in thirty or so pages time, if it isn't already.

From Galway To Graceland

"From Galway To Graceland" is one of those deceptively "simple" Richard Thompson songs that gnaw away inexorably at your entrails, the more you listen to them. Thompson has written many songs on the theme of "false idols" but none handles the complexities of the theme with such economy, directness and sheer emotional impact. Much of the power of the song derives from the character of the heroine. This is portrayed by means of a few deft touches:

- She has religious beliefs – "she whispered 'Amen'".
- She is no longer a "young girl", no longer "pretty and pink". Twenty years of marriage have taken their toll.
- In the version of the song that appears on *Watching The Dark*, "she sneaked out the door and walked into the night". This implies that she has reason to fear the relationship she is leaving behind but it also establishes the contrast between a life of lies and evasions within her former home and the liberation that she finds outside her front door. In later recorded versions of the song, Thompson changes the line to "she picked up her bags and walked into the night". This implies far greater confidence and certainty on the part

of the heroine but, for me, the revision loses the sense of danger and vulnerability implicit in the original.

- Her preference for the song "Suspicion" implies something about the life she is leaving behind – the chorus of the Presley song refers to "torment" and "torture" - but it also reveals much about the heroine's own temperament. Not for her the raw power of Elvis in the fifties! "Suspicion" was released in the USA in 1964, by which time Presley was already on the treadmill of third-rate movie production. RCA was consistently scraping the barrel by then to issue singles and albums on schedule – the halcyon days of Top Ten hits and gold records were well in the past. That said, "Suspicion" was one of Elvis' better efforts in the early/mid sixties and the song's upbeat, Italianate melodrama obviously struck a responsive chord with the woman from Galway. "Suspicion" was not released as a single in the UK, so the heroine and the songwriter clearly looked beyond the pop charts for a Presley song that carried real significance.
- The punning reference to "'Elvis I Love You' tattooed on her breast" implies a degree of emotional immaturity that is accentuated neatly in the next line: "her heart beat so fast". It is not clear, however, whether she was tattooed before or after her flight from home.
- Her long, slow decline from daydreaming to delusion and dementia is captured in one simple sentence: "She'd dreamed for so long, now she'd see him at last".

The directness of the heroine's characterisation is underlined by an unambiguous narrative perspective. A "reliable", omniscient narrator tells the tale throughout the song.

A simple melody, a regular rhyme scheme –AABBCCDD – and a consistent meter characterise the organisation of the song. The rhythmic pattern established in the first couplet is maintained throughout, with only occasional irregularities for emphasis, as in the third line:

*Oh, she **dressed** in the **dark** and she **whis-pered** 'A-men'.
She was **pret-ty** and **pink**, like a **young girl a-gain**.
Twen-ty years **mar-ried**, and she **nev-er** thought **twice** ...*

All of this creates a soothing, lilting effect, characteristic of many traditional Irish songs. The point is enforced if we listen to the excellent version of "Galway To Graceland" [sic] contained in Sean Keane's fine album, Turn A Phrase. Here, Thompson's song fits seamlessly alongside four "Trad. Arr." songs and songs in traditional vein by Ewan McColl, Tommy Sands and others. The deliberate evocation of traditional form and "feel" by Thompson helps underline the heroine's Irishness. This is the kind of song she would have listened to as a girl. But it also serves to emphasise what is "different" about her. So many Irish ballads are written from the perspective of the expatriate Irish person who longs to return home from America to Ireland. "I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen" is the best-known example, but a number of the songs on Keane's album fit the same mould. Thompson's heroine, by contrast, is in exactly the reverse position. She has had her fill

of what Galway has to offer and can't wait to fly the friendly skies!

In an interview with Paul Zollo, Richard Thompson stressed the importance that he attaches to song titles: "I love titles. I'm obsessive about titles. I love to find a good title. You know, a title can paint a picture". [PZ 528]. "From Galway To Graceland" is a case in point: so much of the power and resonance of the song derives from the images encapsulated and tensions set up within its title. We first hear the phrase at the end of the first verse. Up to that point, the song has seemed to centre on the mundane story of a disillusioned wife leaving home to be with her lover. The final couplet pulls us up short, in one of those "surprises", those epiphanies, so characteristic of Thompson's songs. The metrical precision serves to emphasise the polarity at the heart of the song:

*Oh, to **be** with her **sweet-heart**, she'd **left** every-**thing**.
From **Gal-way** to **Grace-land**, to **be** with the **King**.*

The dual emphasis on the verb "to be" highlights that the heroine is leaving Galway in order to find life but the life-choice she is making is captured crucially in the contrasting words "gall" [phonetically] and "grace". The word "gall" has manifold meanings. According to Chambers Dictionary, it variously conveys "bile, bitterness, malignity", "a state or cause of irritation", "a flaw", "assurance, presumption". Thus, in one word, Thompson is encompassing the unsatisfactory, "galling" home-life that the heroine is leaving behind, the "flaw" at the

centre of her character and the “assurance [and] presumption” which gives her the courage to leave.

The word “grace”, too, is rich in meaning. The first semantic layer is theological: “the undeserved mercy of God, divine influence, eternal life or salvation”. These connotations imply the heretical conjoining of the King of Heaven and the King of Rock’n’Roll. In the phrase “gracious living”, however, “grace” implies “living in conditions of ease, plenty and good taste”. This suggests the splendour of the literal Graceland, Elvis’ home in Memphis, which, though famed for its “ease and plenty” was ironically notorious for its bad taste. In the phrase “fall from grace”, the suggestion is “to backslide, to lapse from the state of grace”. This extends the religious metaphor. The heroine is turning her back on the Catholic faith of her youth – she whispered “Amen” – in order to pursue a false God. But she is, at the same time, undergoing metaphorically the process which is followed by a novice nun: she has “left everything”, all worldly possessions, behind; she spends her days on her knees, in prayer and contemplation; she sees visions of the King (of Heaven). And finally, she is initiated into the sisterhood as a Bride of Christ: “Don’t you know that we’re married? See, I’m wearing his ring”. The sub-text of religious conversion is underlined, of course, by the angelic “silver wings [that] carried her over the sea”.

The “gall” vs. “grace” polarity at the heart of the song is enforced by a number of other powerful oppositions: “dark” and “night” vs. “day after day”; life and vigour [“pretty and pink”] vs. the “graveside”; “dreamed” and “dreams” vs. the harsh reality of “handcuffs this time”; “silver wings carried” vs. the

guards who “dragged her away”. This dense texture of image and suggestion highlights the tragic irony of the heroine’s story. She has exchanged “death” with a living husband, for “life” with a dead sweetheart. She has abandoned the whispers “in the dark” of a true faith that no longer holds meaning for her, in favour of the bold, daytime assertion of an idolatry which binds her forever: “my dear man are you out of your mind? /Don’t you know that we’re married?” The strength of the assertion is intensified in later recordings of the song when the conciliatory “my dear man” is replaced by the peremptory “my good man”. The latter phrase is deeply ambiguous, as Robert Graves makes clear in his novel *King Jesus*:

Chrestians is the commoner name for Christians, that is to say, “followers of the Anointed King.” Chrestians means “followers of the Chrestos, or Good Man” – good in the sense of wholesome, plain, auspicious ... “Chrestos”, of course, can also be used in the derogatory sense of “simpleton.” “Chrestos ei” – “What a simple-minded fellow you are!” – were the very words which Pontius Pilate addressed in scorn to Jesus on the morning of crucifixion; and since the Christians glory in their simplicity, which the most sincere of them carry to extravagant lengths, and in receiving the same scorn from the world as King Jesus himself, they do not refuse the name of “The Simpletons.” [KJ 3-4]

The use of religious iconography to depict the contradictions and ambiguities implicit in the pursuit of false idols, is a common thread in Thompson’s work. The motifs in “From

Galway To Graceland” link very clearly to those in “Al Bowlly’s In Heaven” and “1952 Vincent Black Lightning”. These three songs, in addition to other Thompson songs on similar themes, “play off” each other and extend the general significance of the specific situations. Within “From Galway To Graceland”, that process of “generalisation” is, in any case, encouraged by the placing of the heroine’s position in the context of the “whole human race”. The yearning for meaning and “connection” in the modern spiritual wasteland is something that we all feel and, in the absence of true belief, surrogate gods will sadly have to be invented. Patrick Humphries makes a telling observation concerning Thompson’s heroine from Galway: “there is a fine line to be drawn between the emptiness of her own barren life and her worship of the dead King of rock’n’roll. Crazy as it is, just how much emptier would her life be without that obsession?” [PH 296]. The strength of his own faith notwithstanding, Thompson is not preaching in this song. He draws that “fine line” for us and ensures that our sympathies are fully engaged with his heroine as she confronts her existential dilemma.

But “From Galway To Graceland” does not deal simply with the life of a fictional heroine: it also reflects, on a deeper level, the well-publicised life of a modern mythic hero, Elvis Presley. In the course of his life, Presley also moved from “gall-way” to a home, Graceland, which epitomised the rags-to-riches journey he had made. In an ironic sense, he was raised in a kind of “grace-in-gall” way – in an impoverished home whose happiness was, nevertheless, assured for him by the loving presence of his mother, Gladys. From there he worked his way up to

an increasingly surreal “gall-in-grace” land – that of a palatial home, bereft of Gladys, to which Presley increasingly retreated in order to escape the pressures of his own myth. “Grace” for Presley was in one sense personified by his dead mother. Like Thompson’s heroine, he was “down by [her] graveside day after day”. He was reunited with her on 27th October 1977, when his body and hers were re-buried in the Meditation Garden at Graceland. Thompson’s reference to and stress placed on “his last resting place” are very precise.

There is another sense, however, in which the pursuit of “grace” for Elvis Presley represented the attempt to recover the artistic potency that was lost in the maundering sixties, to ditch the anodyne “Suspicion” and its like and to rediscover, in the ordeal of performance, the visceral intensity of his earliest recordings. Peter Guralnick, author of a towering two-volume biography of Presley, describes one of the last concerts: “Hunched over the piano, his face framed in a helmet of blue-black hair from which sweat sheets down over pale, swollen cheeks, Elvis looks like nothing so much as a creature out of a Hollywood monster movie – and yet we are with him all the way as he struggles to [finish the song and] achieve grace”. [PG 638].

At times in his adult life, Presley did seek to recapture the innocent, trusting faith in God of his childhood. For one brief moment, he actually believed that he had succeeded. His long-time hairdresser and spiritual advisor, Larry Geller, tells the story of how, in April 1964, Elvis saw the face of Christ depicted in a cloud formation over the New Mexico desert: “Elvis’ expression was the one that you read of in the Bible or

other religious works: the look of the newly baptised or the converted. He appeared so peaceful, so accepting, so open, so happy. It was something I had never seen before and I would never see again". [PG 194]. Like a deluded Galway housewife, kneeling at the grave of her dead sweetheart! Increasingly, however, Presley cast himself in an overtly messianic role: "I want to feel God's love. I want to give it back. I want to awaken in all these young people a closer relationship with God". [PG 363]. By the end of his life, the fine line between would-be disciple and would-be Messiah had been crossed and Presley said that he felt "like Jesus betrayed by his disciples". [PG 636].

The heartbreak implicit in the fate of Thompson's heroine is only accentuated by the recognition that the false idol, for whom she yearns, did himself harbour delusions of divinity. There is a sad story told by the sculptor, John McIntire, who was commissioned by Elvis' bodyguards to produce a statue of Jesus for the Meditation Garden at Graceland, as their Christmas present to the King: "They wanted marble. I had four weeks, it was December 6, 1965, when they came. I carved it in the front living room; it's the world's largest plastic Jesus (they still think it's marble). On the plaque on the bottom of the sculpture the bodyguards made this little poem up; the wording on it put Elvis on the same level as God". [PG 216].

And yet the human truth at the heart of "From Galway To Graceland" lies not in any mistaken belief that Presley was a charlatan or a psychotic but in the reality that, despite his manifold flaws, he was still able to inspire the devotion of millions. The closing words of Guralnick's *Careless Love* capture

the tragedy at the centre of Presley's life and of those who, like Thompson's heroine, are drawn to false idols like moths to a flame:

Elvis Presley may have lost his way, but even in his darkest moments, he still retained some of the same innocent transparency that first defined the difference in the music and the man. More than most, he had an awareness of his own limitations; his very faith was tested by his recognition of how far he had fallen from what he set out to achieve – but for all his doubt ... he continued to believe in a democratic ideal of redemptive transformation, he continued to seek out a connection with a public that embraced him not for what he was but for what he sought to be. [PG 661]

And that, ultimately is why "From Galway To Graceland" is one of the great Richard Thompson songs. The "innocent transparency" of the heroine reflects that of the flawed mortal whom she would set up as her God. Her "redemptive transformation" may in the end be as fundamentally meaningless as his. But the recognition of what he sought to be and she sought to be tells us much about what we should seek to be. In the words of the title of another great Richard Thompson song, "a heart needs a home". And so we, too, spend our lives seeking refuge on the long painful road – the "gall" way – that leads for so many to Graceland and for far fewer to a state of Grace.

On Middle Road in Tsimshatsui, Hong Kong, there used to be a children's playground. I skirted it every morning at around 07:15 on my way to the office. An old Chinese man used to position himself just inside the main gate, every day, rain or shine. He was short and weather-beaten and stood with one foot – always his right – on a low retaining wall and made repetitive, intricate movements with his hands. Each cycle took about thirty seconds and was then repeated, deftly, precisely. He never spoke but instead made harsh, guttural sounds, like a machine gun or a printing press or a heavy injection-moulding machine. Any attempt by a passer-by to engage with him was greeted with a change in the tone and volume of the noises he emitted. He could sometimes sound quite bright and metallic but usually his responses were harsher, duller, louder, as if he resented the intrusion on his private space. He was wizened beyond age, bent beyond years, locked-up in some time capsule. He was defined by his moods and his memories, trapped on a battlefield or a factory floor of his own imagining. He never failed to remind me of the hero of "Al Bowlly's In Heaven", the "sound of some battle raging in [his] head". When I visited Hong Kong recently, the playground had been levelled to accommodate a subway station and there was no sign of the old man.

Thompson's song is a drama in two Acts. The first is a memory of the past, the second a graphic description of the present. The action in Act I takes place in an unspecified dance hall, presumably in London, at a fairly specific point in time. The

time frame is defined by the start of World War II in 1939 – after which, the hero of the song presumably enlisted to serve King and Country – and the death of Al Bowlly, killed by a land mine on 16th April 1941. The second Act takes place in a highly specific location – the area of "town" around St Mungo's mission and Scarborough Street. There is a street of the same name in Whitechapel in the East End of London. The town in question might also be Glasgow, whose Patron Saint is Mungo. The timing of the second Act is not made clear, but the impression is created that considerable time has elapsed between the two Acts:

- I gave my youth to King and Country ...
- Hard times, hard, hard times ...
- Old friends, you lose so many ...
- Once in a blue moon, you might find a job ...

The scenes of the "present" could be taking place at any time between the fifties and the early eighties. By the time "Al Bowlly's In Heaven" appeared on *Daring Adventures* in 1986, its hero would have been in his sixties, assuming he enlisted, as did so many, in his late teens. The two Acts define the states of "heaven" – recalled from memory, time-specific and location undefined – and "limbo" – current reality, location-specific, time unspecified. The dictionary definition of "limbo" is "any unsatisfactory place of consignment or oblivion". [Chambers].

In terms of another Thompson classic, the physical, emotional and spiritual landscapes between which the character in

“Al Bowlly ...” moves are “Graceland” and “gall-way”, an illusory “heaven” and an all-too-real state of limbo, the Garden of Eden and Welwyn Garden City! The character of Thompson’s hero is defined by the way that his mood shifts between these two symbolic states. The mood in the first verse is one of fond reminiscence, epitomised in the sentimentality of “The Very Thought Of You” – or, in Thompson’s later performances of his song, “Love Is The Sweetest Thing.” The tone of the second verse is one of bitterness at the way in which heroism is really treated in a land allegedly “fit for heroes”. Thompson himself articulated the mood in an interview with Patrick Humphries:

It’s a classic example I suppose of what happens in many countries, that once you cease to be of use to your country, wilfully or otherwise, you get forgotten. Another government comes, or three governments later they’re looking for ways to save money, and they don’t remember you being a hero or being of any particular use. So you’re just a statistic. [PH 249]

In the language of the song, the uniform, the “lucky charm”, is swapped for the demob suit; dancing gives way to crutches; heaven to limbo. The bridge-verse-bridge section at the heart of the song conveys a sense of increasing resignation in the face of the inevitable – ultimately, there is “nowhere to go”. Except, to retreat into memories, back to that dance floor. The final verse captures a mood of real exultation at the recollection of what it was like back then:

*And there’s Al Bowlly, up on the stand.
That was a voice, and that was a band ...*

And overriding all of this is an awful sense of loss – a sense of movement from heaven to limbo that is conveyed with a dreadful matter-of-factness. Youth, health, wealth, status, friendships, security, sanity – all gone ...

The poetic organisation of “Al Bowlly’s In Heaven”, as one should by now expect in any Richard Thompson song, underpins the dramatic context and the characterisation. In Thompson’s own words: “It’s bad jazz, though it’s supposed to be bad jazz. It’s more Sid Phillips than Benny Goodman – it’s more British dance hall swing than anything serious”. [PH 249]. And the live performances of the song in the nineties captured that “bad jazz” feel to perfection. Great musicians – Dave, Pete, Danny, Richard – playing bad jazz in the way that only great musicians can. The inconsistent rhyme scheme and rhythm of the song accentuate that “bad jazz” feel and help create a staccato, conversational tone that is entirely consistent with an old man’s mental meanderings. It’s interesting to compare the effectiveness of Thompson’s deliberately “choppy” delivery with the innocuous, Sid Phillips swing that Norma Waterson injects into the song. For once, the great lady could have opted for a more effective treatment. Similarly, it’s instructive to compare the romantic “lilt” generated in “From Galway To Galway” with the irregular rhythms of speech reflected in “Al Bowlly’s In Heaven.” Both effects are quite deliberate and entirely appropriate in context and

character but both depend totally on the “manipulation” of rhythm and meter that only a master craftsman can effect.

In “Al Bowlly’s In Heaven”, Thompson eschews most of the common images and motifs that characterise his work. The song is deliberately prosaic, the commonplace language helping to authenticate the character of the “old soldier”. The “demo-b suit”, foot slogging, spit-and-shine, the “key to the city” as a euphemism for getting your end away, the use of “me” instead of “my”, all help to flesh-out the protagonist’s character. There are however four particularly evocative phrases. The phrase, “Hostels and missions and dossers’ soup-lines”, has no specific association with anything else in Thompson’s songs, as far as I am aware, but it is representative of his consummate power as a writer. Clive James once used the description, “tacky and inexorable like cow gum”, to characterise a particularly memorable turn of phrase and Thompson’s reference to the “soup-lines” has the same “adhesive” quality. It’s hard to shake the image loose. The sibilants stick in the mind, as do all great moments of poetic craft. The use of the phrase “once in a blue moon” is entirely appropriate on a superficial level: this is the kind of cliché that an old soldier might well use. But the implicit allusion to the song “Blue Moon” is particularly apposite, since it underlines the hero’s sentimentality, as well as his sense of isolation and pointlessness. The reference to sleeping in the rain and snow recalls all the other Thompson images of bad weather and also Shakespeare’s song, “Blow Blow Thou Winter Wind”, from Act II of *As You Like It*. Al Bowlly recorded the latter with the Ken Johnson Orchestra in 1940. But the tone of Thompson’s phrase also relates to

the mood evoked in “Begging Bowl”: “London stone’s hard and cold/ When you’re up in the morning early”. Finally, the reference to “spit on my shoes”, whilst entirely appropriate in the context of an old soldier recalling his days of square-bashing, recalls a similar phrase in a much earlier song: “You scuff your heels and you spit on your shoes”. The distant allusion to “Calvary Cross”, Thompson’s definitive statement on the price one has to pay in order to be a poet, may be coincidental, but there may equally be a connection via Horace’s Odes [IV. iv.62] which acknowledges of a dead hero that “Even in his dismembered state, [he retained] the limbs of a poet”.

Thematically, “Al Bowlly’s In Heaven” links to a number of other Thompson songs. Patrick Humphries points out the thematic and instrumental similarity to “How Will I Ever Be Simple Again.” [PH 249]. The Blakean theme of Innocence vs. Experience is obviously common to both songs. In its delineation of the awful waste that war represents, “Al Bowlly’s In Heaven” clearly prefigures “Woods Of Darney”. And as a metaphor for the devastation wrought by successive Thatcher governments on Great Britain Ltd., it links to songs such as “Begging Bowl”, “Can’t Win”, “Mother Knows Best” and, particularly, “Drifting Through The Days”:

*Sitting in the evening,
Dreaming of the old times
When a job was there for the steady and strong.
I see old faces flickering in the firelight,
Faces of condemned men who did no wrong.*

*Drifting through the days,
Drifting through the days.*

One specific meaning of “limbo” [Chambers] is “prison”. This ties the “condemned” men in the song from Industry unequivocally to the narrator in “Al Bowlly’s In Heaven”, who is “sentenced” to misery.

It is however at the level of broader allusion and myth that the real power of “Al Bowlly’s In Heaven” emerges. The song has a specific literary antecedent. Wilfred Owen’s poem, “Disabled”, deals with the plight of a World War I veteran who sits “in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark”. The third person narrator contrasts the protagonist’s current impotence with the good times, before he decided to “please the giddy jilts” and enlisted to fight for the then King and Country. Thompson’s song reverses the narrative flow of Owen’s poem, which starts with the current reality of disablement, “his ghastly suit of grey,/ Legless, sewn short at elbow”. From here, the poem shifts to memories of the halcyon days, “his youth, last year”, before a final return to the here-and-now: “Why don’t they come/ And put him into bed?” Owen’s evocation of the amputee’s past clearly provides the basis for Thompson’s song:

*About this time Town used to swing so gay
When glow-lamps budded in the light blue trees,
And girls glanced lovelier as the air grew dim, -
In the old times, before he threw away his knees.
Now he will never feel again how slim*

*Girls’ waists are, or how warm their subtle hands;
All of them touch him like some queer disease.*

Owen also prefigures the bitterness of Thompson’s narrator, at the lack of recognition for what he has sacrificed:

*Some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer Goal.
Only a solemn man who brought him fruits
Thanked him; and then inquired about his soul.*

Thompson’s deliberate lack of specificity in terms of the “now” enables his song to function as an anti-war protest in 1918, 1948, 1998 or whenever. The allusion to Wilfred Owen’s poem broadens the historical perspective and enables Thompson’s song to range back from Bowlly’s death in 1941, as well as forward to the end of the term of one post-war government, two, three ... In Eliotian terms, Thompson’s borrowing from a “dead poet” gives universality and “life” to his own song. In Thompson’s own words, “it’s the past impinging on the present – which is basically what fiction is”. [PH 249].

The “mythic” perspective underpinning this great song comes from the life of Albert Alick Bowlly himself. Richard Thompson characterised Bowlly as a “convenient symbol”, as, perhaps, “the 40s’ Nick Drake”. A better allusion might have been “the Elvis Presley of pre-war Britain”. Bowlly was notoriously depressive and short-tempered, a heavy gambler and a womaniser. Conversely, he was noted for his compassion towards fellow-sufferers. When singing a particularly moving passage, he would turn from the microphone with tears in

his eyes. His unpredictable temperament and predilection for violence, resulted in his fall from grace, from the zenith of performances at the Savoy in the twenties, to the ignominy of busking in cinema queues. Other Thompson characters, as we shall see, “busked” around the English market towns. From the nadir, Bowlly clawed his way back to the Rainbow Room, the Savoy and, presumably, to the unspecified dance hall where Thompson’s narrator encountered him around 1940. As a personification of the Godhead, Bowlly was as unlikely a figure as Presley was. Al Bowlly “in heaven” has the same ambiguous resonance as Elvis in Graceland. And that, ultimately, provides the bedrock for the song, “Al Bowlly’s In Heaven.”

The derivation of the word “limbo” is from the Latin “limbus”, or “border”. “When I Get To The Border” utilises the same iconography:

*Dirty people take what’s mine,
I can leave them far behind –
They can never cross that line
When I get to the border.*

The religious connotation of the word is “the borderland of Hell, assigned to the unbaptized”. [Chambers] Thompson’s hero ultimately is Everyman, trapped in the hinterland of Hell-on-earth, seeking refuge in a false idol. But, as in “Galway to Graceland”, there is no sermonising in this song. All our human emotions are engaged in support of Thompson’s wounded hero as he wanders around the back streets of the modern wasteland. Like the brain-damaged Chinese man in

a Kowloon park, he is a pilgrim, seeking a home, just as we need a home.

1952 Vincent Black Lightning

In Richard Thompson’s own words in his 1992 tour guide, “the Vincent Black Lightning is a rare and beautiful machine. Only 27 were ever made”. In the pantheon of “rare and beautiful” Richard Thompson songs, “1952 Vincent Black Lightning” belongs well up in the top 27 – in my view, somewhere between #2 and #7! The Vincent motorcycle sits at the structural, emotional and mythical heart of the song and the characters of the chief human protagonists are defined with reference to it. Again in Thompson’s own words, the Vincent is “the lodestone around which the characters in the song revolve”. A couple of years after Thompson’s *Rumor & Sigh* appeared, Channel Four TV broadcast a series on Classic Motorcycles. Gary Johnstone’s fascinating, well-written book of the series explains the context and significance of the Vincent motorbikes:

Phil Vincent, the company’s owner and a keen racer, had a powerful vision. In his eyes, quality of design and engineering came before quantity. His Australian designer, Phil Irving, conceived a machine which reached new limits of performance excellence ... Made until 1955, the Series B, C, and D Rapide tourers, the Black Shadow sports bikes and the Black Lightning racers were glorious beasts. They

combined a raw, almost evil, power with a smooth sophistication that made them seem sinister, yet beguiling. The curious firing pattern, both cylinders firing close together followed by a gap like the galloping horse's gait, added to their animal persona. Top speeds of over 200 km/h (125 mph) underlined their aggressiveness. In 1955, in line with his purist ideals, when the market could not bear the high cost of the machines, Vincent simply stopped making them.

The other heroine, Red Molly, does only four things in the song. She allows herself to be pulled onto James' Vincent bike. She responds to Sergeant McRae's exhortation to "come down ... come down ... come down" to James' "dying bedside". She cries when she sees James "running out of breath". And she speaks, once. In a song crammed full of dialogue, she delivers only two short sentences: "That's a fine motor bike./ A girl could feel special on any such like". Her confidence, flirtatiousness and independence are captured in these lines. Her jaunty swagger hooks the listener from the outset. But what really characterises her introduction in the song is her reaction to the machine, not her reaction to James Adie. What makes her feel "special" is the thought of riding the machine she is looking at, not the man she is addressing. And what makes her "special" for James, is the fact that she recognises the intrinsic significance of the motorbike, which prompts his response, "my hat's off to you./ It's a Vincent Black Lightning 1952".

James' character is, similarly, articulated in terms of the machine that he possesses, rather than by any extended delineation of his personality. His past is defined by the robbery

of "many a man" to get his Vincent machine. His present is a thrill-ride with Molly, "red hair and black leather", on the pillion: "nothing in this world/ Beats a '52 Vincent and a red-headed girl". His future is a matter of no consequence, once future custodianship of the Vincent is agreed: "if fate should break my stride,/ I'll give you my Vincent to ride". This is a matter of fundamental importance for James. The phrase "in earnest" is used very precisely. It implies not only that he is speaking "in all seriousness", but also that he is making a formal pledge. Red Molly is the target for James' engaging, amusing patter, but the Vincent unlocks the poetry in his soul:

*Now Nortons and Indians and Greeves won't do –
They don't have a soul like a Vincent '52 ...
I see angels on Ariels in leather and chrome
Swooping down from heaven to carry me home.*

As Thompson has pointed out on a number of occasions, the structure and "poetics" of "1952 Vincent Black Lightning" are closely based on traditional English ballad. The rhyming couplets; the ballad metre; the use of extensive dialogue as a vehicle for development of character and narrative; the symbolic linking of love and death; the "ring" motif - all clearly derive from the English folk tradition. In fact, the story line of Thompson's song is, in some ways, a dark inversion of one of the most popular ballads, "Lovely Joan." This has been widely covered by folk revivalists, most notably by Martin Carthy on his debut album:

*A fine young man it was indeed.
He was mounted on his milk-white steed.
He rode, he rode, himself all alone,
Until he came to lovely Joan.*

*'Good morning to you, pretty maid.'
And 'Twice good morning, sir,' she said.
He gave her a wink, she rolled her eye.
Says he to himself: 'I'll be there by and by.'*

*'Oh, don't you think these pooks of hay
A pretty place for us to play?
So come with me like a sweet young thing,
And I'll give you my golden ring ...*

In this ballad, virtue prevails. Joan pretends to fall for the chat-up line but finally escapes, maidenhead intact, milk-white steed and literal golden ring to the good: she “robbed him of his horse and ring,/ And left him to rage in the meadows green”.

A more modern precursor to Thompson's bloke-bird-bike menage-a-trois is, however, to be found in the melodramatic tale of a latter-day, American Molly and James. Patrick Humphries suggests that the transatlantic cousins in question are Bonnie and Clyde, but Thompson's own version of that myth is the inferior “Shane And Dixie.” On this occasion, I believe that Thompson had in mind the star-crossed lovers who featured, unforgettably and notoriously, in a 60s hit by The Shangri Las. Betty met her Jimmy, not at the corner café, but

at the analogous candy store. She “fell” immediately when he turned around and smiled at her. Jimmy gave her his ring. But he was a hard case and her folks were always “putting him down – down – down”. She broke off the relationship and now explains to her school friends how he rode off on “that rainy night” with predictable consequences. The song, which is punctuated throughout by the sound of a powerful motor bike revving, reaches its climax with the noise of the bike skidding and crashing. Jimmy hurtles on to immortality as the “Leader Of The Pack.” The colour of Betty's hair is not mentioned, and the bike was, presumably, a Harley.

Although the melody, form and structure of Thompson's song are very “traditional English”, his guitar playing, as Marc Ellington has pointed out, is very “twenties America”, very “Appalachian”, “almost Carter family style”. [PH 274]. The transatlantic mixing of styles and iconographies is not accidental, as Thompson himself implied in conversation with Patrick Humphries:

A lot of the mythology of popular music is American – “The Midnight Special”, “Going Down To New Orleans.” And all those cars – “buy you a Chevrolet.” So romantic myth in song definitely crossed the Atlantic at some point. I think it had already done so by the 1920s, although you still had “A Nightingale Sang In Berkeley Square” or “Waterloo Sunset”, but generally speaking the mythology of popular song has been in America, especially in the South. So being British, I've always tried to look for objects that have some kind of mythological appeal, that you can write about as a

British songwriter. The Vincent is a fabulous beast, it really is a thing of fable and beauty and it's mythological ... [PH 274]

Thompson's use of British icons is paralleled in "MGB-GT", his song on the Mirror Blue album, "about" an archetypal British sports car. With typical geographic specificity, the latter is "placed" on the Old Hog's Back near Guilford, just as the Vincent is linked precisely with Boxhill in Surrey. The top of Boxhill, in the Mole valley, is a favourite haunt of bikers and it is no surprise that James and Molly should gravitate there. However, nearby stands a small country house called Polesden Lacey, described by Michael Bracewell in *England Is Mine* in the following terms:

The house, finished in 1827, is one of the smaller jewels in the National Trust's crown ... and commands a spectacular view, to the south, of landscaped meadows and gentle escarpments. In late summer, the perspective of this view is marked by the pale proportions of scattered oaks and chestnut trees, their full silhouettes cross-hatched by shadows and heat haze. The place has a wide and varied selection of the standard Arcadian reference points: there are the statue plinths along the long garden walk which are inscribed with Augustan translations of the *Aeneid*; there is the small, open-air theatre; and, above all, bang on cue, there is the inscription which runs around the statue of a smirking god: 'Traveller, make haste. The sun is sinking low, he shall return, but not thou.' The Queen Mother spent part of her

honeymoon here. And here, on a hot gravel path between trimmed and pungent box hedges, we are reminded of mortality: 'Et in Arcadia Ego' – Death's catch-phrase, the Either to Arcady's Or.

For Bracewell, at the heart of English Arcady lies the paradoxical sense of "death in the midst of beauty" which also sits at the centre of Thompson's song. Arcady functions, moreover, not only as "our monument to lost innocence" but also as "the setting in which we lost our innocence". The Vincent bike as icon and Boxhill as location both encapsulate this ambiguity within "1952 Vincent Black Lightning." Riding the bike to Boxhill represents the high point of the relationship between James and Molly – emphasised by the joyous extended guitar break which follows the "Boxhill verse" – and also the point from which James and Molly must "come down" to death and despair. Both characters undergo their own personal flights from Arcady. With an ironic asymmetry, James travels from a state of "experience", leaving behind a life of crime to pursue his own naïve vision of immortality, while Molly moves from her initial disingenuous admiration of the Vincent to the bitter experience of taking the keys to the bike from her dying lover.

The Vincent motorcycle itself clearly functions as a symbol of one specific aspect of the flight from Arcady: the decline of British manufacturing industry and the devaluing of individual craftsmanship in the face of mass production. In this sense, the song links thematically to "Mother Knows Best" on

Rumor & Sigh, but also prefigures the later Industry album. Gary Johnstone again provides the context:

The great British motorcycle industry existed from around 1920 to 1970, but was essentially Victorian in character. In an earlier generation, Britain had been the unchallenged world centre of steam technology. In the climate of a *laissez-faire* political ethos, private, entrepreneurial engineering flourished. Individuals and small firms often grew out of the daring inventions of one man ... It is almost as if the British fought the [second World] war to preserve their Victorian engineering heritage and methodologies. Great ideas in the UK have often been hamstrung by the past; a crippling nostalgia haunts manufacturing thinking ... Japan, free from old ideologies and supported by a growing internal market, did not bother to look back. They looked forward and asked: 'How can we create a new world motorcycle market?'

One of the most telling imagistic connections is, however, between the "angels on Ariels", envisioned by James on his death-bed, and the "little angels" who beat their wings in the earlier "Jerusalem On The Jukebox." The latter song functions, on one level at least, as a Thompsonian rant at the undermining of "Britishness" in the face of US cultural and economic imperialism. However, the specific historical threat to the Vincent came first, as Johnstone notes above, not from the USA but from Japan, the Land of the Rising Sun. James' handing of the machine's keys to Red Molly is, thus, no more acciden-

tal than it is factually correct. (The Black Lightning had to be kick-started.) In live performances of the song, Thompson amusingly but deliberately highlights the point: "Now Nortons and Indians and Harleys, and Suzukis and Greeves won't do -/ They don't have a soul like the Vincent '52".

And the bestowing on the machine of a soul relates this song to those other songs, which deal with pilgrimage, with the pursuit of grace, in similarly heretical terms, "From Galway To Graceland" and "Al Bowlly's In Heaven." The nature of James' quest is implied in his surname, "Adie(u)" – "to God" – that ties him to the woman from Galway and the hero of "Al Bowlly ..." Their false idols were dead singers: his is a cult motorbike. This broader thematic resonance of Thompson's song is further extended in the phrase:

*I see angels on Ariels in leather and chrome
Swooping down from heaven to carry me home.*

Patrick Humphries elaborates on this universal dimension to the song:

The yearning to return home is probably universal and definitely something of a cliché, but the vividness of Thompson's particular vision sharpens the familiar emotional tug into a pang ... The home to which James Adie goes is that mythic place whose pull we never escape, but to which we never return, the whole of humanity in exile from Eden. But in Thompson's words, even the stalest sentiments are made fresh ... [PH 344]

In the context of the myth of an English Arcady, James is displaying a typical “infantilist” preoccupation with the search for lost innocence and a lost childhood. But in the context of Thompson’s work as a whole, James, in common with the woman from Galway and the wounded old soldier who dreams of Al Bowlly, is simply a pilgrim on the road, seeking a “home”. And as in their case, his final resting-place is an illusion, Graceland rather than a state of grace. Poor Red Molly is left in limbo.

Can’t Win

A couple of years ago, in an antique shop in Bridgnorth, I found a battered 1950s hardback buried among the encyclopaedias of home medicine, the moth-eaten Mrs. Beeton’s and the Morris Minor maintenance manuals. The book’s title – The Manor School – and the picture of two be-capped schoolboys on its torn and begrimed cover reminded me of the “Billy Bunter” stories about life in Greyfriar’s School, written by Frank Richards. I used to haul them home by the armful from the Coseley public library when I was in infants’ school. That was probably what prompted me to dust off the artefact and open it. I was immediately hooked by the dedication from the author, H.Eltrington:

*But when the one great scorer
Comes to write against your name,*

*He writes not that you lost or won,
But that you played the game.*

I duly paid my four pounds – five shillings plus inflation and a premium for rarity value – and rediscovered my childhood for the few hours it took me to digest Eltrington’s magnum opus. The hero of Eltrington’s book is Miles Dacre, a stolid fourth form boarder at Manor School. As the book opens, Miles’ father is threatening to withdraw him from the school if his performance in academic work and sports does not improve. Suffice it to say that, in the long run, Miles wins through by doggedness, determination and an in-built propensity for “playing the game”. The theme and literary merit of the book are encapsulated in one telling episode in which three fellow pupils gatecrash Miles’ study. Head of house has outlawed the teatime partaking of sticky buns and other tasty comestibles in the run-up to the annual inter-house sports. The three crusaders are, therefore, seeking a safe haven in which to duck the draconian training regime and indulge in an illicit éclair-fest. Miles does the manly thing, and tries to encourage them to leave:

‘You’re welcome to get as much good out of my study as you can, but I can’t have you come here just to break the rules. It’s – it’s not playing the game to go against Keith in this matter. He is captain, and whether we like it or not we’ve got to stick to him and Five-Oaks with regard to the sports. Of course I know that some fellows want training more than others, but one can’t – well, one can’t just fix up

the rules for the benefit of one or two.' Miles's natural lack of fluency was not helped by hearing Bullen murmur, 'Saul amongst the prophets.' [TMS 147]

I often wonder what became of Bullen! His nice blend of cynicism and great timing would have made him a great role model for Jeremy Paxman! At the end of The Manor School, conformity is triumphant and Miles is offered the chance to stay on at the school for an extra year and to become himself captain of Five-Oaks house. The ending is meant to be inspirational, if your upper lip is stiff enough: "But Miles never became captain of Five-Oaks, for it was the year 1939, and when the Manor-men assembled for the winter term Miles was one of the first to volunteer". [TMS 283].

And lest we suffer an attack of cultural "amnesia" and mistakenly believe that the symbolic significance of "playing the game" that is enshrined in H. Elrington's post-war book is a mere anachronism, another near-contemporary writer, this time much closer to Richard Thompson, makes the point:

In 1949, when T. S. Eliot (another person who became English by choice) was grappling with the question of what defined a national culture, he drew up a list of the characteristic interests of the English. It included 'Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar.' Fifty years on we should have to change the list a

little, reflecting convenience foods, the mass media and the decline of the pin table. But it would still have its most startling characteristic: out of the thirteen characteristics Eliot identifies as distinctly English, no less than eight are connected with sport. [JP 196]

The Eliot quote comes from *The English*, by the sainted, sanctimonious and often very funny Jeremy Paxman, who tracks his underlying point, as does Richard Thompson, back to Sir Henry John Newbolt (1862-1938). The latter's "Vitai Lampada" stands as the definitive statement of the civilising value and moral significance of the Victorian ethic of "playing the game". It is worth quoting in full, if only for its combination, in Paxman's words, of "breathless rhythm and breathtaking stupidity" [JP 197]:

*There's a breathless hush in the Close to-night –
Ten to make and the match to win –
A bumping pitch and a blinding light,
An hour to play and the last man in.
And it's not for the sake of a ribboned coat,
Or the selfish hope of a season's fame,
But his captain's hand on his shoulder smote –
'Play up! Play up! And play the game!'*

*The sand of the desert is sodden red, -
Red with the wreck of a square that broke; -
The Gatling's jammed and the Colonel dead,
And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.*

*The river of death has brimmed his banks,
And England's far, and Honour a name,
The voice of the schoolboy rallies the ranks:
'Play up! Play up! And play the game!'*

*This is the word that year by year,
While in her place the School is set,
Every one of her sons must hear,
And none that hears it dare forget.
This they all with a joyful mind
Bear through life like a torch in flame,
And falling fling the host behind -
'Play up! Play up! And play the game!'*

Before joining up to rally the ranks, our friend, Miles Dacre, had found himself facing just such a sporting crisis:

There were four balls of the over left; the first two, which were hard and fast, he did not attempt to hit, simply contenting himself with defending his wicket. The third, which pitched short, he sprang out to meet as he had done at the first practice, but never since, and drove for all he was worth. He knew as he started to run that every ounce of his weight and strength had been behind that drive, but he did not know that it was a hit for six, until he heard a roar from the part of the field where Five-Oaks had congregated, and from another point the shrill squeal of the cubbies, who, in spite of their insignificance, represented an independent opinion, 'Five-Oaks for ever!' [TMS 217]

Of course, many over the years have wised-up to the important distinctions to be made between "knocking sixes", "knocking the Hun for six" and being yourself "knocked for six". Wilfred Owen, in a poem already quoted, identifies that warfare implies swapping one set of rules for another very different code:

*One time he liked a blood-smear down his leg,
After the matches, carried shoulder-high.
It was after football, when he'd drunk a peg,
He thought he'd better join ...
Now, he will spend a few sick years in Institutes,
And do what things the rules consider wise ...*

And Jeremy Paxman himself quotes an extract from a 1964 Beyond The Fringe sketch, which ought to have nailed the myth forever. Peter Cook and Jonathan Miller played the parts of the wartime protagonists [JP 183]:

- PETER: Perkins! Sorry to drag you away from the fun, old boy. War's not going very well, you know.
JON: Oh my God!
PETER: We are two down, and the ball's in the enemy court. War is a psychological thing, Perkins, rather like a game of football. You know how in a game of football ten men often play better than eleven?
JON: Yes, sir.

PETER: Perkins, we are asking you to be that one man. I want you to lay down your life, Perkins. We need a futile gesture at this stage. It will raise the whole tone of the war. Get up in a crate, Perkins, pop over to Bremen, take a shufti, don't come back. Goodbye Perkins. God I wish I was going too.

JON: Goodbye sir – or is it au revoir?

PETER: No, Perkins.

But the creed of the futile gesture persists, of course. Its most celebrated apologist in recent years has been a former Prime Minister of Great Britain. In an oft-quoted speech in 1982, and throughout her eleven years in office, she took a dim view of the perceived national failure to play the game, the ripping up of Newbolt's rulebook: "We are reaping what was sown in the sixties ... fashionable theories and permissive claptrap set the scene for a society in which the old virtues of discipline and restraint were denigrated". With maternal solicitude, she bewailed the relaxing of the social controls imposed in the Victorian era by evangelicalism, non-conformity and hypocrisy, and sought to re-impose the "old virtues". There is only one possible response to the question that sits at the heart of "Can't Win":

*Oh, what kind of mother would hamstring her sons,
Throw sand in their eyes and put ice on their tongues?*

Answer - Margaret Hilda Thatcher. Like Newbolt, Elrington and her own successor as PM, Dame Hilda obviously be-

lieved that all of life's minor and Major problems could best be solved with a straight face, a straight bat and a big step down the wicket. But Thompson's view of the value that she really placed on infant initiative is spelled out very clearly in "Mother Knows Best":

*So you think you know how to wipe your own nose?
So you think you know how to button your clothes?
You don't know shit, if you hadn't already guessed!
You're just a bump on the log of life,
'Cos mother knows best.*

And, brother, "if you have a dream" in Thatcher's Britain, "hush, not a sound":

*Bring me your visionaries, I can put out their eyes.
Bring me your scholars, I'll have them all lobotomised.*

It is therefore no surprise that she casts a long shadow over the restrained, constrained existence of the hero of "Can't Win", who, at every turn, has been drugged, browbeaten and coerced into falling in line. Conformity is all. What is surprising about Thompson's song is the mixture of narrative perspectives and verbal registers, which make this, unlike "Mother Knows Best", so much more than a straightforward political rant.

In true Eliotian style, there are arguably four different "Voices" to be heard in "Can't Win". The first Voice is heard in the first two verses of the song: "I started to cry ..." and

“They told me to think ...” This is the Voice of the chief protagonist who is looking back over his childhood and recalling the extent to which he was quite literally inhibited. The forms of the constraints placed on him are strangely old-fashioned. “Swaddled” is Biblical in its connotation while the reference to “gin in my cup” is certainly Victorian in derivation. “Mother’s ruin” was the popular term for gin in Victorian England and the pacifying of unruly infants with alcohol and narcotics was common practice. Kellow Chesney in his seminal work, *The Victorian Underworld*, refers to the use of “Godfrey’s Cordial”, a compound of opium and molasses, by Victorian child minders to keep their charges quiet. The refrain “Play up, play the game” is also, as we have seen, Victorian in origin. Thompson is deliberately “generalising” the message by the use of archaic language and allusion.

The third and fourth verses of the song – “Oh, what kind of mother ...” and “Don’t waken the dead ...” – adopt a different Voice, a more “poetic” register. The reference to not waking the dead is probably an allusion to Dante’s *Inferno*, via Eliot’s *Wasteland*:

*Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.*

But the third and fourth verses also have a personal tone – “If you have a dream, brother, hush, not a sound” – which

suggests that an omniscient narrator is speaking these words to the protagonist whom we heard in the first and second verses. This is the Voice of “friendly advice”, which again serves to shift the focus from the specific to the general.

The third Voice to be heard is the “they” who exhort and cajole the protagonist: “You can’t win, you can’t win ...” The use of this Voice is akin to the role of the Chorus in a Greek drama but the clichéd language is that of the backstreets, not that of the classical stage. The empty protests – “Don’t you dare do this ... The nerve of some people ...” – might have originated from the “gate-mouth woman, leaning on a fence” who appears in “Back Street Slide.” One is, however, reminded of Newbolt’s line quoted above: “none that hears [the phrase ‘play the game’] dare forget”.

The fourth Voice delivers the pair of couplets that fit between verses and choruses:

*Oh, towers will tumble and locusts will visit the land.
Oh, a curse on your house and your children and the fruit of
your hand.*

*Oh, if we can’t have it, why should a wretch like you?
Oh, it was drilled in our heads, now we drill it into your head
too.*

This is a distinctly different tone from anything else in the song – the language of the King James Bible, rather than that of the inner city. The Book of Jeremiah, in particular, is full of similar predictions of doom:

... the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken my covenant which I made with their fathers. Therefore thus saith the LORD, Behold, I will bring evil upon them, which they shall not be able to escape; and though they shall cry unto me, I will not hearken unto them. [Jeremiah xi.10-11]

Other phrases in the song extend the Biblical allusions – “swaddled me up”; “turn the [other] cheek”; “stand there and rust” (from Matthew vi.19-21). This articulate, educated Voice is reminiscent of Miles Dacre as “Saul amongst the prophets”. In this sense, the first of these couplets could be directed as easily at the staff of Manor School as at the Children of Israel. If they fail to enforce the holy covenant that has been entrusted to them – the playing of the game – divine retribution will surely follow.

The staff of a public school did get their come-uppance in Lindsay Anderson’s ground breaking 1968 film *If ...* Robert Murphy sums up the plot in his excellent study of Sixties British Cinema:

Whatever virtue the public school ethos once embodied, here it is in a state of advanced decay. The housemaster (Arthur Lowe) is bumblingly ineffectual, the headmaster (Peter Jeffrey) more interested in business management than Greek grammar, and real power is in the hands of a triumvirate of prefects, forerunners of the ‘young fogies’ of Thatcherism. They are opposed by proto-revolutionary Mick Travers (Malcolm McDowell), but the violence he is

provoked into using by their mindless authoritarianism is indiscriminate and seemingly futile.

By the time Richard Thompson released “Can’t Win” on *Amnesia* in 1988, Thatcherism was a grim reality. The “young fogies” had taken over and all opposition was definitely futile. For the dreamers and non-conformists of the eighties, the alternative to armed insurgency was to “stand there and rust”, along with the factories and the pitheads. You couldn’t win – Thatcher just “(rode) the unbelievers down”. But “Can’t Win” is not just another anti-Thatcher tirade, any more than *If* was a simple moral fable about a St. Trinian’s for bad boys. Lindsay Anderson made the point: “(it’s) a metaphor, if you like, of life in Britain today – the image of the school as a reflection of a certain British tradition”. So, too, “Can’t Win.” Thompson’s masterful use of varied narrative perspective, diction and allusion ensures that his song can be interpreted as a metaphor for any corrosive, bureaucratic system that belittles people and stifles initiative and creativity – for Thatcher’s Britain, for the Manor School, for the Back Street Slide into anonymity, for the polar-bear-poachers at Pond Drew Inc. In the words of the final song on *Amnesia*:

*Call it England, call it Spain,
Egypt rules with the whip and chain.
Moses free my people again! We’re all working for the Pharaoh.*

The personal significance Thompson attributed to “Can’t Win” can be gauged by the intensity of the nine-minute-plus

live version on *Watching The Dark*. The vocal is angry and embittered but the venom of the extended guitar solo that ends the performance overwhelms even that. Hendrix joins forces with Coltrane on a very good night to overthrow the Pharaoh and liberate the children of Israel. Unconstrained, they may resume their pilgrimage to the Promised Land.

Beeswing

“Beeswing” sits logically alongside “Can’t Win” and “1952 Vincent Black Lightning” in the Richard Thompson Hall Of Fame. The themes of repression and the flight from Arcady are common to all three. But “Beeswing” goes much further in terms of its exploration of the ambiguities inherent in these themes, the breadth of its allusive framework and the vitality and lyricism of its poetic expression. Paul Zollo provided a fruitful lead-in when he observed that, in terms of form and structure, Thompson’s song is reminiscent of Bob Dylan’s “Tangled Up In Blue.” Thompson responded: “Yeah. A heck of a song. [Laughs] You’ve just named one of the top-ten songs of the twentieth century right there”. [PZ 527]. I love that laugh! In context, it implies “yeah, you’ve caught me out”. Well, maybe we will. I laugh when I read the quote because I’m not totally convinced that “Tangled Up In Blue” is also one of the Top Ten. I’m in no doubt where “Beeswing” stands in the rankings. Thompson’s early debt to Dylan has been acknowledged but the comparison between these two songs in many ways just serves to highlight the differences between

some of the artistic methods of the two finest songwriters of the rock era, when they are both writing at the peak of their inspiration, craft and capability.

The thematic similarity between “Tangled Up In Blue” and “Beeswing” is intimated - in the original version of Dylan’s song contained in the *Blood On The Tracks* album - by the narrator’s reference to “an Italian poet from the thirteenth century”, a copy of whose poems was once given to him by his long-departed lover. The version of “Tangled Up In Blue” that appeared on the 1984, *Real Live*, album had been extensively revised and Dylan chose to replace this reference to Dante Alighieri [1265-1321]. Instead of handing the narrator a copy of Dante’s poems, the lover instead quotes to him from the Bible. This reflected Dylan’s own conversion to Christianity in the intervening years, but robbed the song of a much more potent allusion. Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, at its most literal level, is the account of a man in love who journeys beyond the grave to be reunited with his lady, his muse, who died ten years earlier. On an allegorical level, it describes Dante’s conversion from sin – “gall” - to grace. On a mythic level, it suggests the progress of the soul of Everyman towards salvation and also the search of the poet for his muse. The journey begins in the hinterland of Hell – “limbo” - and ends in Paradise. Dante’s avowed aim in writing the work was “to lead men from a state of wretchedness to happiness”. In an emotional and a spiritual sense, the protagonists of both “Tangled Up In Blue” and “Beeswing” move between states of “wretchedness” and “happiness” in the course of their journeys.

Dylan's reference to Dante and, by extension, to The Divine Comedy, illustrates the way in which he, in common with Thompson, utilises poetic allusion and myth in many of his finest songs. Before commencing his own pilgrimage, Dylan's narrator was living "in a basement" – neat pun! – on Montague Street. The location ties his quest unequivocally to Dante's. At one stage in The Divine Comedy, Dante challenges the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Albert of Austria, to visit Italy and examine for himself the ruinous state of the country, which is riven by party faction, civil war and family vendetta:

*Come and see, you who are negligent,
Montagues and Capulets, Monaldi and Filippeschi:
One lot already grieving, the other in fear.
Come, you who are cruel, come and see the distress
Of your noble families, and cleanse their rottenness,
And you will see how dark Santafior is.
Come and see your Rome, which is in tears,
Widowed and alone, and calls day and night:
'My Caesar, why do you not bear me company?'
Come and see how the people love one another!*

No surprise, then, that on Dylan's Montague Street there is "revolution in the air". But the street name also conjures up, of course, the "star cross'd lovers", Romeo and Juliet, whose feuding families, Montagues and Capulets, were "already grieving" the loss of their children when Dante wrote The Di-

vine Comedy. The theme of familial opposition to young love is reflected in the first verse of Dylan's song:

*Her folks said our lives together
Sure was gonna be rough
They never did like Mama's homemade dress
Papa's bankbook wasn't big enough.*

In terms of broad themes and general allusive method, there are therefore close similarities between the Dylan and Thompson songs. But from that point on, the differences begin to emerge.

It is instructive, firstly, to compare the method of and attitude towards poetic composition of the two writers. In the sleeve notes to Biograph, Dylan talked about the way in which he had continued to work on "Tangled Up In Blue" long after its initial release:

On Real Live it's more like it should have been. I was never really happy with it. I guess I was just trying to make it like a painting where you can see the different parts but then you also see the whole of it. With that particular song, that's what I was trying to do ... with the concept of time, and the way the characters change from the first person to the third person, and you're never quite sure if the third person is talking or the first person is talking. But as you look at the whole thing it really doesn't matter. On Real Live, the imagery is better and more the way I would have liked it than on the original recording.

It's very characteristic of Dylan that he should put out a song that he was "never really happy with" but then work, pretty much in public, to polish and refine it. It says a lot about his supreme confidence, arrogance even, as a writer and performer. But it also reflects a degree of indifference to the "song" as a finished artefact. Dylan always feels free to take liberties with his work. In this case, in **Neil Corcoran's** words:

"Tangled Up In Blue" encodes an account of itself in its own variations; it becomes an allegory of its own procedures. Keeping on keeping on, getting on the train and riding, staying on the road and heading towards the sun become not only the activities recommended by the song, but what the song does; it changes, it adapts, it refuses the consolations of the finished in favour of a poetics of process, of constant renewal, of performance rather than publication. Recommending the provisional as an ethic, it also embodies it as an ethic.

Thompson's approach to composition, by comparison, seems to be a protracted, painful, private process, but one that results, nonetheless, in a definitive, "fixed" output. Performances of "Beeswing" that have followed its appearance on the *Mirror Blue* album have not changed the song materially. The live performances of the hugely talented Pete Zorn on "whistle" have added bite and poignancy to the feel of the song and Thompson's own vocals have become increasingly emotive. But the text and the structure have remained as per the origi-

nal recording. **Thompson** summarised the song's evolution in conversation with Patrick Humphries:

I wrote another song called "Beeswing" that was never published. Actually because it wasn't that good of a song. I always liked the name. It's the name of a little town near where I grew up. I just liked the sound of the name ... I wrote a lot of versions of it. That song is a good example of something that took about three years to finish ... To work that long (is unusual but) I do tend to put things away and then come back to them. You keep getting frustrated!

For Dylan, it's a case of try it out, "it doesn't really matter". He has an innate belief that it will all come right eventually, in the course of the "poetics of process". For Thompson, as we have seen, the "consolations of the finished" are what justifies the bearing of what Yeats called "Adam's Curse." And if "Tangled Up In Blue" can justifiably be viewed as "an allegory of its own procedures", so too, in a sense, can "Beeswing." Although Thompson's poet-narrator can claim at the end of the song to miss his lost love "more than ever words can say", the sad irony is that he has succeeded triumphantly in articulating and capturing both the (honeyed) taste of her wildness and his own sense of desolation. He ends up, again in Yeats' words, "as weary-hearted as that hollow moon". He is facing the pyrrhic consolation of "holding" his love, not in his arms, but in a poetic encapsulation of what her loss means to him. He has held a *Mirror Blue* up to her physical reality – in Yeats' terms, "He [has] shadowed in a glass/ What thing her body was"

- but he can no longer enfold that body in his arms. In physical terms, he had threatened from the outset to “crush” her and he could not prevent the deleterious effect of time on the youthful bloom of her “flower”. But, in metaphoric terms, he has nonetheless enshrined her frailty and vitality for all time in song. “You wouldn’t want me any other way” translates as “you couldn’t have me any other way”.

In more specific terms, and to contradict Zollo’s earlier observation, it is the formal and structural dis-similarities between “Tangled Up In Blue” and “Beeswing” that are most striking. Dylan’s song is characterised by a high degree of narrative disjunction. Dylan’s narrative commences imprecisely, near the end of his song, sometime in the late sixties. There is “revolution in the air”. But if we ignore the deliberate ambiguities surrounding who precisely is speaking, when, about whom, and try to piece together the “logic” of the song, we see how Dylan’s surface narrative undergoes continual locational and temporal shifts:

- Verse 1 – heading East, “after we’d split up”.
- Verse 2 – heading West, “after we’d first met”.
- Verse 3 – up North, down South, on other occasions “after we’d split up”.
- Verse 4 – unspecified, “when we first met”.
- Verse 5 – unspecified, “after we’d first met”.
- Verse 6 – presumably, up North, “before we met”.
- Verse 7 – heading “back” to somewhere, in the here and now.

Thompson’s narrative, by comparison, is strictly linear and, unlike Dylan’s narrative, also follows a fairly well defined geographical pattern. Thompson’s narrator and his lost love first meet in a “steamie” on Cauldron Street. Although the town is not specified, the use of the regional, archaic noun “steamie” pins the meeting somewhere north of Hadrian’s Wall and, most probably, in the Glasgow area. From there, the pair moves south, presumably stopping off at the “market towns” that line the main A1 trunk road, until they reach Kent. From there, they move to the Gower Coast in Wales, where “tempers reach a pitch”, the heroine’s “rambling itch” prevails and the pair separates. Thereafter, there is a hiatus in terms of time and location. The heroine is last heard of, “back on the Derby beat”, her “flower” faded. Significant time and distance have elapsed. The “Derby” in question may be the town in the north Midlands or, alternatively, the phrase may refer to Epsom, the town in the North Downs that is home to the classic horse race. The immediate reference in the song to the “White Horse in her back pocket” ironically suggests the latter. Either way, she has effectively covered most of the length and breadth of mainland Britain and ended up somewhere back in the middle – in “limbo”.

“Beeswing” is also anchored at a specific point in time – the “Summer of Love”, a period which carries particular resonance for Thompson personally. The highlight for many of the summer of ’67 was the Monterey International Pop Festival, the event that effectively launched Jimi Hendrix as a major force on the American rock scene. In Britain, of course, we’d already seen the light. In his performance at Monterey on

Sunday June 18th, Hendrix performed Dylan's "Like A Rolling Stone", prefiguring the theme of the later "Tangled Up In Blue." He also featured "Foxy Lady" – maybe stimulating the immortal line, "Like a fox caught in the headlights, there was animal in her eyes". On August 27th, Hendrix jammed for the first time with an up-and-coming, British band, Fairport Convention, at The Speakeasy in London. He repeated the experience thereafter on a number of occasions. This had a profound effect on Fairport's eighteen-year-old lead guitarist. Thompson spoke at length to Patrick Humphries about the experience of jamming with the "extremely urbane and very bizarre looking, very handsome black man" who invited himself to join in Fairport's performances of Dylan's "Absolutely Sweet Marie" or Paul Butterfield's "East-West." The impact Hendrix had on Thompson was by no means unusual. Terry Reid recalled the effect Jimi could have on a convention of the rock glitterati in 1967:

We were all hanging out in Carnaby Street, at the Bag O' Nails – Keith, Mick Jagger, Brian Jones comes skipping through, like, all happy about something. Paul McCartney walks in. Jeff Beck walks in. Jimmy Page. I thought, What's this? A bloody convention or something? Here comes Jim, one of his military jackets, hair all over the place, pulls out this left-handed Stratocaster, beat to hell, looks like he's been chopping wood with it. And all of a sudden WHOOORRRRAAWWRRR! and he breaks into Wild Thing, and it was all over. There were guitar players weeping. They had to mop the floor up. [Mojo]

Having stressed the narrative 'linearity' and temporal specificity deployed by Thompson in "Beeswing", as opposed to Dylan's deliberate discontinuity and ambiguity in "Tangled Up In Blue", we need to go one level deeper – to ignore the surface flames for a moment and get into the symbolic tunnels. The "starting point" of Thompson's song comes in his second line, very specifically, in 1967, with the systematic burning of babies in Vietnam by the United States of America. Thompson's heroine is "not the factory kind". And the factories she is specifically rejecting, in this context, are those of the Dow Chemical Company. Between 1962 and 1971, the United States dumped over nineteen million gallons of chemical defoliant on an area of four-and-a-half million acres in Vietnam. The US war objective was to eliminate ground cover, which might provide protection for Viet Cong guerillas. Since the latter were by then predominantly dug-in many feet underground, this was one of the sickest cases in history of slamming the stable door months after the horse had bolted. The US is still a little edgy about this minor miscalculation. "Spell-checker" doesn't recognise "Viet Cong" – "Vet Conga" doesn't have nearly the same resonance, although it does imply some sinister dance of death! In 1969, a couple of years after the "Summer of Love", scientists discovered – or finally acknowledged that they had discovered – that a primary chemical in Agent Orange could cause birth defects in laboratory animals. A number of chemical companies had produced and supplied the precursor in question and, in 1984, the group as a whole paid \$180 million, to settle a class action suit. This had been brought by US veterans who charged that their health had

been irreparably damaged by exposure to the defoliants. Although a number of companies were implicated in the episode, in the minds and words of the sixties protesters, “Dow Burns Babies Best.”

As an aside, Dow Chemical has proved remarkably resilient. It had weathered a take-over bid by DuPont in the 1920s – the latter stranded mid-course, between its original role of selling gunpowder to incendiary points all around the world and its later incarnation as who-are-we-kidding champion of polar bears and Aids victims – and had gone on to bigger and better things. For Dow, the Agent Orange experience was good training for the \$3.2 billion subsequently paid out in settlement of “unsubstantiated” claims lodged by the 176,000 women who claimed that Dow-Corning breast implants caused health problems. This in turn provided a solid ground-
ing for the 1999 take-over of Union Carbide. The latter, in 1984, “might” have killed 6,500 people and injured another 20,000 in Bhopal in India. We might all feel, in sympathy with Thompson’s heroine, that “if you don’t take me out of here, I’ll surely lose my mind”. Picking fruit down in Kent seems a far safer pastime – until, that is, one of the factory kind gets hold of the Granny Smith gene! The above facts, incidentally, are courtesy of Reuters’ Business Alert, 8th April 1999.

The ironic counterpoint between the “burning babies, burning flags(tones)” and “fire burning on the hearth and babies on the rug” in the first and third verses of “Beeswing” establishes the polarities that lie at the heart of the song – war and peace, experience and innocence, exile and home. The

same tension in “Tangled Up In Blue” is captured wonderfully in the position of the narrator at the end of the song: “still on the road/ Headin’ for another joint”. The reference to the “joint” as both safe domestic haven and source of chemically induced escape is representative of Dylan at his best.

Thompson, of course, was writing with the benefit of considerable “distance”, temporal and emotional, from the historical context in which the opening events in his song occurred. Dylan did not enjoy this advantage, which accounts for another significant difference in the way in which the mythic quest in his song differs from that in Thompson’s. Tim Riley makes the point in *Hard Rain* that the odyssey described in Dylan’s narrative is not tied to a specific social context:

What the sixties hadn’t come to terms with yet was the relative privilege its youth culture enjoyed compared with the nomadic poverty of singers like (Robert) Johnson and (Woody) Guthrie. The continental sweep of “Tangled Up In Blue” takes this for granted as well: Dylan isn’t singing about homeless people who drift because they have to; he’s singing about people on the run from situations – and themselves – by choice. This makes the situations they encounter all the more self-destructive, and more tragic.

The protagonists of Thompson’s song, by contrast, are themselves “nomadic singers”, who “busked around the market towns”. He also places his narrative in the specific societal context of the “travelling people”. Marc Ellington, interviewed by Patrick Humphries, emphasised Thompson’s empathy with

the travellers and deep understanding of the sense of alienation that they inevitably feel in the face of society's disinterest or downright hostility. In "Beeswing", Thompson is in a sense exemplifying Rousseau's adage that "Man is born free but is everywhere in chains". In other songs, such as the bleak "Oh I Swear", he makes the point explicitly:

*Can't run in a dead-end street!
Can't run in a dead-end street!
No wings upon your feet
And all your dreams are shackled to the ground.*

His heroine in "Beeswing" rejects the "chains" represented by the gypsy caravan along with those epitomised by the babies on the rug and by the factory. She retains her sanity and dignity, even if she must withstand the ravages of "hard weather and hard booze". The proud statement of her integrity – "Maybe that's just the price you pay for the chains you refuse" – transcends the "drop-out for a while" expedience of the sixties which permeates the Dylan song.

Another striking difference between "Beeswing" and "Tangled Up In Blue" lies in the approach the two writers adopt to maintaining variety and holding the listener's interest through two long narratives. Thompson highlighted the difficulty in achieving this: "[It's] too long for rock and roll. It's a song that some people feel is two verses too long. But if you can hook people with a story, then it can work. In performance there are ways you can get people's attention". [PZ 526]. The way that Dylan captures and retains interest is through the shifts

in narrative perspective, time and location referred to above. Although the rhyme scheme and rhythmic structure are maintained consistently through all seven verses, the listener is kept on the alert throughout – who, where, when, why? The song is anchored only by the tag line in the title which, as Tim Riley observes, "pulls the meaning back in" at the end of every verse. Thompson's strategy is very different. In his song there are no apparent shifts in narrative perspective and no deviations from the linearity of character and narrative development. He generates variety and retains his hold on the listener through structural shifts:

- Verse 1 – four lines, comprising two rhymed couplets.
- Chorus – "basic" chorus.
- Verse 2 – four lines, comprising two rhymed couplets.
- Chorus – variation on "basic" chorus: "I might crush her where she lay".
- Extended instrumental break: this sunny interlude actually moves the narrative along, conveying both movement and happiness. Things begin to darken hereafter.
- Verse 3 – six lines, comprising three rhymed couplets.
- Chorus – "basic" chorus.
- Verse 4 – four lines, comprising two rhymed couplets.
- Verse 5 – six lines, comprising three rhymed couplets.
- Chorus – begins with the "basic" opening line, but thereafter is totally different.

There is a nice, maybe deliberate irony, underlying this comparison between the "poetics" of "Tangled Up In Blue"

and “Beeswing.” We earlier heard Neil Corcoran making the valid observation that Dylan’s song “encodes an account of itself in its own variations”. It does this, however, within a rigid formal framework. In contrast, Thompson’s song ends up as the definitive statement of its heroine’s wildness and beauty, but does so in the context of a very flexible framework.

The final telling difference between Dylan and Thompson’s poetic methods in these two great songs lies in the writers’ respective uses of imagery and allusion. Dylan’s song is deliberately prosaic, at times even clichéd. The one telling simile in “Tangled Up In Blue” relates to the words of the “Italian poet”, Dante, every one of whose “words rang true/ And glowed like burning coal”. Dylan, at this one point in the song, flags up, very deliberately, the allusive context in which we should “read” his song. Having made the connection, we can then relate to the historical and mythic significance of The Divine Comedy, to Montague Street, to Romeo and Juliet, to the poet-muse relationship and so on. Dylan in a sense leaves nothing to chance. If we miss the obvious flag, we don’t deserve to start the race towards comprehension! Thompson, by comparison, leaves everything to chance. He scatters images and allusions throughout “Beeswing” and challenges the listener to make the connection. I don’t know if I’ve done so. In “Man In Need”, Thompson said that “you’ve got to ride in one direction/ Till you find the right connection”. In terms of finding meaning in life, that’s probably correct. In terms of finding “meaning” in his songs, it carries a big downside! As Yeats once said, “(This) poem has always meant a great deal

to me, though, as is the way with symbolic poems, it has not always meant quite the same thing”. Let’s give it a go.

The surface “meaning” of “Beeswing” – the characterisation, dynamics and storyline – appear pretty straightforward. The character of Thompson’s heroine is developed logically and sequentially. When the narrator and we first encounter her, she is a “girl”, a “lost child”, doubting her own ability to retain control over her own destiny and sanity: “If you don’t take me out of here, I’ll surely lose my mind” By the time the couple reaches Kent, she has gained control and is capable of rejecting the conventional domestic idyll, “fire burning in the hearth and babies on the rug”. By the time they reach the Gower, she’s made her own mind up about where the relationship is headed – “She thought we shouldn’t wait for the frost ...” – and she votes with her feet. Thereafter, although she flirts with the “settling down” offered by a gypsy caravan, she has the strength of will and maturity to throw off her chains and pay the price accordingly.

If the heroine of “Beeswing” moves progressively from a state of dependence to one of independence, the song’s narrator moves in the reverse direction. His progress is from control – physical and emotional – of the relationship, through an increasing yearning to put on the chains of domesticity, to ultimate dependence on a dream: “if I could only... if I could ...” The asymmetrical progress of hero and heroine mirrors that in “1952 Vincent Black Lightning” and, again, in “Devonside.” In the latter song, the heroine moves from independence and control – “she held him with the shiver in her eyes” – to submission – “I’ll be your pillow, your mother,

lover, whore and wife". The hero, conversely, moves from an immature physical and emotional dependency to the stark recognition that maturity brings: "he knew that he had loved and never seen her ..."

But "Beeswing" is an iceberg of a song, where what's interesting is the 90% of the action that takes place below the surface. The very title of Thompson's song invites the hunt for layered meaning. The heroine may have the frailty and delicacy of a bee's wing, but as the narrator discovers to his cost, bees can sting and the yearning for the lost taste of honey can cut long and deep. The bee also invites the hunt for mythic allusion. I have earlier noted the significance of Cybele – "Sibella" – as Bee Goddess. She is often depicted as a Queen Bee, around whom male drones swarm in midsummer. According to Robert Graves, "the ecstatic self-castration of her priests was a type of the emasculation of the drone by the queen bee in the nuptial act". [WG 192]. Thompson's reference to the "tinkering" of "knives wherever we went" takes on uncomfortable connotations. The bee also features prominently, as Brewer records, in the mythologies of Egypt, India, Greece, Australasia and Africa, as well as in Christian iconography. It also features in Celtic mythology – bees were believed to possess a secret wisdom derived from the "otherworld". This begins to get closer to home.

At one level, the imagery in "Beeswing" is very reminiscent of Yeats' obsession with Irish myth and legend. The bee features prominently in what is probably his best known poem, "The Lake Isle Of Innisfree":

*I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.*

But the similarities go beyond that. Even "Spellchecker" picks up the fact that the nearest analogue to "cauldron" is "cauldron". In Irish myth, the cauldron of Daghdha is a source of plenty. Yeats' "Prayer For My Daughter" entreats that she might enjoy the Horn of Plenty and yet still be "rooted in one dear perpetual place". Thompson's heroine enjoys neither the plenitude nor the stability. The linking of Thompson's heroine to a white horse – she has it "in her back pocket" – recalls the myth of Niamh, who came across the waves on a white horse, from the land of eternal youth, Tir na n-Og, to take the great warrior, Oisín, as her mate. The saga is the subject of Yeats' long lyrical narrative, *The Wanderings Of Oisín*. The reference to the wolfhound at the heroine's feet, on a metaphoric level, emphasises the degree to which she has thrown off her shackles. At the start of her journey, she was as "a fox caught in the headlights". But on a mythic level, the allusion recalls Queen Maeve, who appears in many of Yeats' early lyrics. As her alter ego, Medb or Mab, Queen of Faery, she features in Dylan's "Just Like A Woman." As Maeve, mythical Queen of Connacht, she was the enemy of Cúchulainn, and brought about his downfall. The latter's name translates as Hound of Culann. Maeve, plus hound, featured as a symbol of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, which Yeats helped establish. The image of the hound also features prominently in one of Yeats'

last poems, “Hound Voices.” Here, Yeats singles out for praise his long-time friend Dorothy Wellesley, a woman who had for years been “companioned by a hound”. She had loved “bare hills”, and was “the last to choose the settled ground”. Wellesley, in common with the other heroic women who occupied a central place in Yeats’ life and affections – Maud Gonne, Lady Gregory, his wife George – experienced “those images that waken in the blood”: “Young man, oh can’t you see, I’m not the factory kind”.

But having highlighted the echoes of Yeats and Irish myth in “Beeswing”, I would have to say that another allusion appears to me to have stronger resonance. Blake’s poem, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, is a long and complex exploration of the typical Blakean theme, covered in less complex terms in *Songs of Innocence* and of *Experience*. There is a general case to be made that “Beeswing” is a metaphor for the decline, the move from “innocence” to “experience”, of “Albion”, seen from the perspective of one of its “Daughters”. Red Molly’s journey can be viewed from this perspective and we should be reminded of Gary Johnstone’s description above of Victorian England as the “unchallenged world centre of steam technology”. The heroine of “Beeswing” is first described as a “laundry girl” in a “steamie”. She rejects the “factory” of the modern industrial world for a gypsy caravan, the headlights for a white horse. Her flower – the red rose – ends up faded. England Inc, RIP. But the Blakean analogy is far more specific and personal.

Visions of the Daughters of Albion was probably written around 1792, when slavery and the rights of women were ma-

jor political issues in Britain. Blake’s passion for liberty, and particularly the rights of oppressed women, was heightened at this time by his acquaintance with Mary Wollstonecraft, whose *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* was published in 1792. Wollstonecraft emphasised that a woman’s first duty is to develop her mind. She sought to affirm equality of women based on reason and she rejected outright the subjugation of women implied in their traditional role as gratifiers of male desires. The central declarations made by Thompson’s heroine are clearly in this spirit:

- As long as there’s no price on love I’ll stay.
- I’m not the factory kind. If you don’t take me out of here, I’ll surely lose my mind.
- It surely sounds like hell! You might be lord of half the world, you’ll not own me as well.

The heroine of Blake’s poem, Oothoon, is an “innocent” who plucks the flower of sexual experience. She is raped by the violent Bromion and then rejected by her true love, Theotormon. Bromion is a slave owner and Oothoon denounces slavery, and all forms of oppression, while “The Daughters of Albion hear her woes, and echo back her sighs”. For Blake, English women are enslaved by the same attitudes as are embodied in Theotormon and Bromion. Although the “Daughters” are mentioned only briefly in the poem, it is their experience of oppression, which colours the work. The poem has been variously interpreted as a dark, Oedipal drama and as a feminist diatribe, but on a less cerebral level, its themes of

innocence and experience, entrapment and freedom, dependence and independence are obvious, universal, and highly relevant to this analysis.

The language of Blake's Visions, too, is heavily reminiscent of the imagery in "Beeswing", as the following random selection suggests. Speakers' names are bracketed:

*[Oothoon] I pluck thee from thy bed
Sweet flower, and put thee here between my breasts,
And thus I turn my face to where my whole soul seeks.*

*[Narrator] Over the waves she went in wing'd exulting
swift delight,
And over Theotormon's reign took her impetuous course.*

*[Oothoon] With what sense is it that the chicken shuns
the ravenous hawk?
With what sense does the tame pigeon measure out the
expanse?
With what sense does the bee form cells?*

*[Theotormon] Tell me where dwell the joys of old? &
whence the ancient loves?
And when will they renew again & the night of oblivion
past?
That I might traverse times and spaces far remote and
bring
Comforts into a present sorrow and a night of pain.
Where goest thou, O thought? To what remote land is*

*thy flight?
If thou returnest to the present moment of affliction
Wilt thou bring comforts on thy wings, and dews and
honey ...*

*[Bromion] And is there not eternal fire, and eternal
chains
To bind the phantoms of existence from eternal life?*

*[Oothoon] ... beauty fades from off my shoulders,
darken'd and cast out,*

A solitary shadow wailing on the margin of non-entity.

I cry, Love! Love! Love! Happy, happy Love! free as the mountain wind!

Oothoon, like Thompson's heroine, was a "rare thing", allowed to run wild, till her beauty fades. Bromion is the owner of factories, the driver of the car whose headlights entrap the fox. Theotormon, like Thompson's narrator, can only seek comfort in the recollection of the lost taste of honey.

But it's not quite as simple as that, is it? Although there is, I believe, sufficient "correspondence" between Blake's Visions of the Daughters of Albion and "Beeswing" for us to make connections and draw comparisons between the two, there is at least one more context in which we have to view Thompson's song, that of the album on which it appears, *Mirror Blue*. Blake, in a sense, points us in that direction in his one line dedication to Visions: "The Eye sees more than the Heart knows". The mirror is an archetypal symbol that vari-

ously denotes truth, particularly divine truth, and wisdom, particularly self-knowledge. But Thompson's album title is an acknowledged, specific allusion to Tennyson's *The Lady Of Shalott*: "sometimes through the mirror blue/ The Knights came riding two and two". Thompson summarised for Paul Zollo what is for him the core theme of the poem: "The lady is someone who is cursed. She can only see reality in reflection. If she looks directly at the world, she dies". Tennyson's Lady must, however, ultimately turn from the mirror that holds "shadows of the world" and confront reality and the "curse" that is her destiny:

*And down the river's dim expanse
Like some bold seer in a trance,
Seeing all his own mischance –
With a glassy countenance
Did she look to Camelot.
And at the closing of the day
She loosed the chain and down she lay;
The broad stream bore her far away,
THE LADY OF SHALOTT.*

Thompson's heroine also "loosed the chain" and turned her back on the shadows of imagined idylls, all that "steam": fruit picking in Kent, the Garden of England and the Garden of Eden; the Christmas carol domesticity of hearth and home; the gypsy caravan and the romantic myth of the travelling people. For her, the final reality is human and spiritual isolation and, ultimately, death: a "flower" faded by "hard weather". At

one stage, she had fled the onset of the frost, but, inevitably, winter comes to claim its own. She learned the bitter lesson that remained unlearned by the protagonists in "From Galway To Graceland", "Al Bowlly's In Heaven", "1952 Vincent Black Lightning" and "Can't Win."

But even that doesn't capture it all. "Beeswing" is not a simple transposition of a Victorian epic. And "Beeswing", like *The Lady Of Shalott*, is no one-dimensional allegory. The richness and the resonance of this wonderful song is suggested in three stunning lines, arguably the richest that Thompson has ever written:

*Brown hair zig-zag round her face, a look of half surprise -
Like a fox caught in the headlights, there was animal in her eyes.
She said, "Young man, oh can't you see, I'm not the factory kind
..."*

At first hearing, this verse is built around a conventional simile, the likening of the heroine to "a fox caught in the headlights". This recalls a similar image from "Tangled Up In Blue": "I just kept lookin' at the side of her face/ In the spotlight so clear". The simile of the fox implies the heroine's wildness, an idea that is reinforced by the reference to her "zig-zag" hair. For years, I equated this narrowly with the geometric "Mary Quant Look" and with images of the Swinging Sixties. But I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something more. I finally remembered where I'd seen the distinctive phrase "zig-zag" before:

*Though logic-choppers rule the town,
And every man and maid and boy
Has marked a distant object down,
An aimless joy is a pure joy ...
And wisdom is a butterfly
And not a gloomy bird of prey ...
How but in zig-zag wantonness
Could trumpeter Michael be so brave?*

This celebration of the “butterfly” comes from Yeats – who else – here speaking in the voice of “Tom O’Roughley.”

It is worth remarking at this point that the simile of the fox is a strikingly pictorial image. There may in fact well be a specific pictorial influence at play here. The Pre-Raphaelite artist, John William Waterhouse, painted two striking visions of The Lady of Shalott. In the first she is depicted lying in a barge, having “loosed the chain”, before making her final journey down river to death. In the other painting, she is still confined in her tower. She stands, slightly crouched, with her back to the large window which opens up on the landscape around Camelot. There is a suggestion of apprehension in her posture, of wildness in her tousled hair and of fear in her dark, staring eyes. It is a stunning portrayal of a vixen at bay.

If Thompson had left it there, if he had simply said, “she was like a fox caught in the headlights”, we could pass on, having logged a somewhat trite and unmemorable analogy, and allusions to a couple of Eliot’s “dead poets” and perhaps to a dead painter. But the second half of the simile blows the whole thing wide open. The two halves of the second line are

really not “connected” in a conventional sense. “A fox caught in the headlights” does not have “animal” in its eyes. It may have emotions – fear, surprise, loathing – reflected in its eyes, but not “animal”. In a sense, the phrase repeats the first simile: “there was [an] animal in [the headlights]”. But the person drawing the second analogy is, in a sense, the heroine herself: it is her eyes that are looking at the animal. In other words, she sees herself as an animal, as a fox.

The fox is, thus, being “illuminated” from three perspectives. In a literal sense, it stands there, entrapped in the headlights of the car. Figuratively, the narrator “throws light” on the heroine as an elemental force, trapped by the forces of materialism and convention. He will, nonetheless, seek to impose the stereotype of motherhood and domesticity, babies and hearthrugs, on her. But she, too, sees herself as an “animal”. She states that she is “not the factory kind”, implying that she is a natural force, not capable of being manufactured in a factory. She sees herself as Yeats’ “wanton” St. Michael, hell-bent on blowing down the Walls of Jericho. Like Dylan’s protagonists, Thompson’s lovers “always did feel the same ... just saw [the fox] from a different point of view”. And like Dylan’s protagonists, they are both “tangled up in [the mirror] blue”.

And, then, there’s the fourth perspective – the eyes behind the knowing laugh that Paul Zorro heard when he prodded the sly old fox with a reference to “Tangled Up In Blue.” The only other connection we’ve made between Richard Thompson and foxes is in the context of Robert Graves, the self-confessed fox who’d sacrificed his “brush”, his “contact with urban

civilisation”, in order to render life-long service to the Muse. And lest references to a brushless fox seem a long way removed from the concerns of “Beeswing”, Chambers stands ready to remind us that an alternative meaning of “flag” is “a bushy tail”, one burned off, no doubt, by Dow Chemical. However, as one might expect by now, the connection with Robert Graves is far from accidental and goes far beyond a questionable pun on the word “flag”. The myth of the muse permeates “Beeswing” and helps explain a number of seemingly abstruse references. Why do the narrator and his love meet in a laundry? Why does Thompson use the word “steamie”? Why is it located on “Cauldrum Street”? Why does the song’s central relationship break up in Wales? The answers lie in Graves’ *The White Goddess*. In short, in Welsh legend, the Triple Muse was born from and is custodian of the Cauldron of Cerridwen, from whence true poets derive their inspiration. Graves summarises the origins of the Welsh romance as follows:

A nobleman of Penllyn named Tegid Voel had a wife named Caridwen, or Cerridwen, and two children, Creirwy, the most beautiful girl in the world, and Afagddhu, the ugliest boy. They lived on an island in the middle of Lake Tegid. To compensate for Afagddhu’s ugliness, Cerridwen decided to make him highly intelligent. So, according to a recipe contained in the books of Vergil of Toledo the magician (hero of a twelfth-century romance), she boiled up a cauldron of inspiration and knowledge, which had to be kept on the simmer for a year and a day. Season by season, she added to

the brew magical herbs gathered in their correct planetary hours. [WG 27/8]

By extension, and by analogy with related ancient myths, poetic “inspiration” came to be associated with the breathing in by the poet of the intoxicating fumes – the steam – from the cauldron. The muse came to be associated with custodianship of the cauldron – she became, if you like, a “laundry girl”. The linking of muse and cauldron was made explicit in the reference in the *Kadeir Taliesin* to the “sweet cauldron of the Five Trees”. This alludes to the five sacred trees typically associated with the goddess. It also refers to the five elements – Earth, Air, Fire, Water and the “quintessence”, or soul – and to the “quintessence” plus the four winds or the four seasons. The elements, the compass points, and the seasons are all alluded to, explicitly or implicitly, in “Beeswing.” And finally, the Triple Goddess is herself clearly evoked in her incarnations as girl, woman and hag as the heroine progresses through the song.

Graves, the “brushless fox”, admonished part-time poets, as we heard earlier. He told them clearly that the Muse “demands whole-time service or none at all”. His peroration echoes the mythic theme underlying “Beeswing”:

And do I suggest that you should resign your jobs and for want of sufficient capital to set-up as small-holders, turn nomadic shepherds – as Don Quixote did after his failure to come to terms with the modern world – in remote unmechanized farms. No, my brushlessness debars me from

offering any practical suggestion. I dare attempt only a historical statement of the problem; how you come to terms with the Goddess is no concern of mine. [WG 15]

In these terms, the song's narrator is, simplistically, someone who failed to "come to terms" with the Goddess. She spells out that, in the words of "Calvary Cross", "everything you do, you do for me". Read: "as long as there's no price (put on my) love, I'll stay". Read: "if you want me to stay, you must pay my price". And from that perspective, we can hear the alternative meaning implicit in the final verse: they say that her inspiration, "her flower" is faded from me now. That's the price that the part-time poet pays for refusing the chains, the obligations, which the muse places on him. He might now be "Lord of half the world" but he can consequently never own Her as well, no longer function as a true poet. It's bitter the need of the poor ditching boy!

Ultimately, none of the above decon-, recon-, miscon-structing actually matters very much, does it? Yeats constructed myths around his frustrated love for Maud Gonne, but we hear his authentic voice in his lyrical evocations of her, as a person, as a woman. This is what captures our hearts and souls. The myths merely engage our minds. This is what matters:

*When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;*

*How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you
And loved the sorrows of your changing face ...*

Yeats' "When You Are Old" is a "rare thing". So, too, is Dylan's "Tangled Up In Blue." So, too, are Richard Thompson's songs of the "pilgrim soul" that we have looked at in this chapter. In John Holloway's terms, Thompson's songs are "lyric poems – perhaps the most essentially lyrical in kind". All of them, "fine as a bee's wing" ...

PART TWO

CHAPTER SIX

I WANT TO SEE THE BRIGHT LIGHTS TONIGHT

From uninspiring, derivative songs written with fellow band members to works of authentic genius in two years. Dylan is probably the only modern writer who has experienced this kind of learning curve and lived to tell the tale. His story made headlines. The remarkable tale in hard time of Richard Thompson is still on the back pages. Post Fairport, Thompson's debut solo album combined compelling songs with crass production and the consequent critical lambasting and public indifference could have proved terminal. Linda Peters rode in from the West to save the day. The subsequent Bright Lights album is the nearest a British band has come to replicating the purity and elegiac simplicity of The Band at their best. It represents the first creative peak of Thompson's career.

“WHO KNOWS WHERE THE TIME GOES?”

The early history of Fairport Convention has received its fair share of quality analysis over the years. It is a compelling story and anyone with half an interest in the life and works of

Richard Thompson should certainly own and be familiar with the following:

- Meet On The Ledge – Patrick Humphries
- Fairportfolio - Kingsley Abbott
- No More Sad Refrains - Clinton Heylin
- Nick Drake – Patrick Humphries
- Strange Affair – Patrick Humphries
- The Guv'nor & The Rise Of Folk Rock – Hinton and Wall
- Fairport unConventional – Brian Schofield

There is a m[or]ass of fascinating detail contained in these books but the outline chronology of the band's evolution can be summarised as follows. In April 1968, the first “settled” Fairport line-up – Messrs Hutchings, Nicol, Lamble, Thompson, Matthews and Judy Dyble - had their debut album in the can:

	Band Personnel	Album Sessions	Album Releases
1968			
April	< Judy Dyble		
May	> Sandy Denny		
June			
July			Fairport Convention
August		What We Did ...	
September		What We Did ...	
October		What We Did ...	
November			
December			
1969			
January			
February		Unhalfbricking	
March	< Ian Matthews	Unhalfbricking	
April		Unhalfbricking	
May	Death of Martin Lamble		
June			
July	> Dave Swarbrick [*]		Unhalfbricking
August	> Dave Mattacks	Liege & Lief	
September		Liege & Lief	
October		Liege & Lief	
November	< Sandy Denny		
December	< Ashley Hutchings		Liege & Lief
1970			
January	> Dave Pegg		
February			
March		Full House	
April		Full House	

Band Personnel	Album Sessions	Album Releases
May	Full House	
June		
July		Full House

[*] Dave Swarbrick guested on “A Sailor’s Life” on Unhalfbricking.

From the wealth of source material, two pieces of conventional wisdom emerge. The first is that the band’s recording career was kick started by an encounter between a whiz-kid guitarist and a hip American entrepreneur, Joe Boyd: “It was Richard that interested me from the very beginning – to see this 17-year-old kid playing incredibly mature guitar solos ... Essentially, my primary interest in Fairport Convention was in Richard, because he was obviously the most talented.” [MOTL 10]. The second sound bite is that the conception and birth of British folk-rock, in simplistic terms, resulted from the intense creative friction between an Ashley-Hutchings-impelled dynamic that was driving “his” band from “rock to folk” and a countervailing momentum that was propelling newcomer Sandy Denny from “folk to rock.” Within the band, so the story goes, Sandy provided the charisma and the inspiration; Ashley gave generously in terms of the perspiration and the legwork. According to Hinton and Wall, “For a year and a half the conjunction would prove musically explosive. It would then be Sandy writing new songs, and Hutchings pursuing his experiments in traditional folk music with single-minded determination, and a brave recklessness.” [Guv 71]. In contrast to his biographers’ consistent and often churlish undervaluing of Thompson – e.g. “the young Thompson plays with a sense

of determination which has flickered only intermittently since he lacked Ashley’s stern gaze on him, urging him upward” [Guv 64] - Hutchings himself had the grace to admit that Thompson was more than a disinterested bystander:

Although Liege & Lief incorporates a lot of traditional material – songs and tunes – there is song writing on it, of course, and Richard contributes a few [sic] songs. And don’t they fit well into the album! I mean, seamlessly, with the traditional material. It’s hard to kind of separate it. He has such a great understanding of the language of the tradition that he could write those songs, contemporary songs, but draw on the style [of the tradition] and write material, which has become timeless. [R2B]

The half pause on that word “contemporary” always reminds me of “The Way That It Shows”: it’s the little things betray. However, the conventional wisdom and the “surface chronology” reflected in the above summary does little to explain the amazing transformation in the song writing capability of Richard Thompson in the two years spanning the recording of, say, “If (Stomp)” and that of, say, “Poor Will And The Jolly Hangman.” We can chart the band’s progress with

reference to the external mileposts represented by changes in personnel, album releases and tour dates. We can ascribe the band's development to the Svengali, Hutchings – according to Simon Nicol, “someone with whom the buck stops”; according to Richard Thompson, someone with whom “the list starts.” But there were deeper factors at play throughout this crucial period, shaping the mind and the art of Britain's finest songwriter. His development was running to a different clock. It might have all begun with a group of young friends writing songs together and looking to find “better words.” Most of the group eventually scrabbled unhalfbricking to literacy. But before he left his teens, one of the group would have found superlative words of his own and would have written his first definitive statement of intent, “Meet On The Ledge.”

“FEEL FREE TO LEAN ON ME “

Fairport's initial reputation as a talented covers band was a source of increasing frustration to its teenage lead guitarist:

I remember saying to Ashley after a gig, that I was kind of embarrassed about doing the material we were doing, because it seemed that we should have outgrown doing covers – even though it was only 1967 – it somehow wasn't good enough and other bands were writing their own stuff and we should too. I remember being angry and saying to Ashley this isn't good enough, we've got to get some original material ... and stuff started to trickle through. [PH 50]

When Fairport started writing, they had the advantage of a comprehensive range of potential sources of inspiration. Joe Boyd has commented frequently on the breadth of musical background and taste he encountered in the fledgling Fairport:

They had a kind of train spotter's view of American pop music, or new songwriter music, rock 'n' roll, country music. I mean they were very, very encyclopaedic in their knowledge. A lot of them had different areas of expertise, but as a group they had quite an amazing collective memory of a lot of songs, which Richard still demonstrates to this day. [R2B]

The well was deep but help was needed to lift the buckets. Thompson makes it clear that the band was on a steep learning curve and extensive collaboration between band members was an artistic necessity, if not a survival imperative, as Fairport's budding Dylans, Mitchells and Ochs put together the band's eponymous debut album:

Because we were feeling our way as writers, we really needed other people to bounce ideas off. I think if we'd written songs on our own, they'd have been worse than they already are. There's a few duffers on there anyway. Serious duffers. Well, you expect that on the first record. We were finding our way in a recording studio. By our second album we were getting the noises down in the studio, the guitar sounds, the drum sounds, whatever they were, a lot

better. It's been commented that Fairport were more of an American band at this stage, but I felt we were unformed. There was a real Britishness to it as well, a kind of Kinksian Britishness. [Guv 55]

"If (Stomp)" – Matthews/Thompson – ex Fairport
Convention.

Ian Matthews claims that his contribution was limited to two extra "verses" – presumably he meant couplets - to pad out a song that Thompson already had. "If" is an enjoyable country pastiche that even at this stage demonstrates Thompson's unusual felicity with words, rhymes and rhythm:

*If I were rich enough
To see you pretty, looking like a scene I dreamed
If you were bitch enough
You'd leave me here a king without a queen
Well, if you do,
If you leave your little boy blue
If you do
I'll shut you out, you'll shout and you'll know it, too ...*

The song links love and money in a way that would characterize many of the great Thompson songs but there is little in this fairy-tale picture of the love-lorn king to prepare us

for the grim kingdom of "Sloth" that would be explored in a matter of months.

"Decameron" – Ghosh/Horvitch/Thompson – ex Fairport Convention.

Written with two school friends, "Decameron" is typical of the bed sitter images beloved of sixties trippy troubadours:

*They listened to his voice grow pale.
No stamps were on the morning mail.
They all listened to the white truck ring.
Words just didn't mean a thing.
See me fly, see me cry, see me walk away.
Every time the sun shines, to me it's a rainy day.*

Nigel Schofield suggests listening to "Decameron" alongside "The End Of The Rainbow" or "God Loves A Drunk" as "a fascinating foretaste of the tone of much of Richard's later work." I confess to failing to see the connection between the drippy adolescent tone of "Decameron" and the rich complexities of "God Loves A Drunk."

“Sun Shade” - Ghosh/Horvitch/Thompson – ex Fairport
Convention.

More adolescent angst but with the interesting appearance of other motifs that would run through the whole Thompson canon:

*Wind grows cold in the trees.
She cries, so hard to please.
My restless feet; the rain in the street and her vanity fair
Sighs in the eyes of the boarding-house lady who stares,
Thinking I care.
So it's a long dusty road
Feelings I shouldn't have showed
Follow me ...*

“The Lobster” – Painter/Hutchings/Thompson – ex
Fairport Convention.

The words are from a poem by George Painter. The extended guitar noodling is self-indulgent. The whole effect is melodramatic and, frankly, slightly embarrassing.

“It's Alright Ma, It's Only Witchcraft” – Hutchings/
Thompson – ex Fairport Convention.

This parody of Dylan's “It's Alright Ma, I'm Only Bleeding” is the standout band composition on the first album. Lyrically and musically it is great fun. The irreverent send-up of Boyd and Witchseason – the company name itself derived from a dark Donovan song, “Season Of The Witch” – was to prove prophetic. Boyd and positive cash flow were often not on speaking terms:

*In blows Snow White
The dwarves are kind of off-white
The vision's his decision so they're out of luck
Associates are reeling
The wallpaper is peeling
He doesn't see the paperwork that's come unstuck.
Please don't get us wrong, man,
This is just a song, man ...*

“Throwaway Street Puzzle” – Hutchings/Thompson
– unreleased at the time.

Another rollicking Hutchings/Thompson composition that was unreleased at the time but thankfully appeared on Thompson's guitar, vocal compilation. The song comes close

to the kind of “Kinksian Britishness” that Thompson detected in the early Fairport:

*Alright now mister
Come in and join the other guys
Just one thing mister
Don't try to touch the merchandise
Or get too friendly
You know that wouldn't be too wise.*

Shades of, “You can get the real thing, it'll only cost a pound.”

“If It Feels Good, You Know It Can't Be Wrong”
—— – Hutchings/Thompson – unreleased at the time. ——

The song was featured on Top Gear in September 1968 and subsequently appeared on the Heyday album. Hutchings claims credit for the smutty words and credits the tune to Thompson:

In the early days of Fairport, musically we used every possible colour on the palette. That's how my song writing came about. Anything I did in the early days was really just to help things along. For example, I would say, “Why don't we do a ragtime number,” because Richard plays this great ragtime guitar, “it would make a nice contrast.” I would write a lyric – “If it feels good, you know it can't be wrong” – and

Richard would put music to it. Very often it was my way of encouraging a certain type of song into the set.

It is actually quite a funny song – worthy of Bernard Cribbins in his heyday:

*O your fingers may be aching
My bones feel that way too
Control yourself a little
And slow down you wild one, you.
My father wouldn't like me to
So I'm showing you the door.
I'll see you, George, tomorrow
And we'll limbo dance some more ...*

“Book Song” – Matthews/Thompson – ex What We Did
————— On Our Holidays. —————

Matthews and Thompson both make it clear that the latter contributed little to this song beyond the addition of chords. It is very much a child of its time but its air of wistful introspection retains a certain period charm, like an old Habitat catalogue.

Thompson describes the track as a successful experiment:

I think Fairport were an intellectual band. We weren't a sort of gut-feeling dance band or anything. We were a bunch of suburban London intellectuals - most of us went to grammar schools - and so we used to think about music. And so there's always conceptual ideas in what we were doing. “The Lord Is In This Place” started out as an idea. You know, “why don't we, dot, dot, dot. Why don't we do something that sounds like it's somebody busking? Let's get a great echo - well, let's do it in a church - we'll have somebody throw money down at the end so it sounds like that - wouldn't that be great on the stereo” and that sort of thing. And on that record as well, we were still experimenting, but I think we were being more successful. I think our pass rate went up. [R2B]

If Thompson's characterisation of his first recorded songs as “duffers” is somewhat uncharitable, there is certainly nothing in the collaborations contained on the first and second Fairport albums to suggest what was to come. But the change reflected in Thompson's own solo compositions on *What We Did On Our Holidays* was striking.

“ALL THOSE THINGS I STOLE FROM YOU ”

It is hard to overestimate the importance on Richard Thompson's development as a writer, and maybe as a person, of the arrival in Fairport Convention of Sandy Denny in May 1968. Joe Boyd has spoken frequently on this theme and it is worth recording some of his views on Sandy's impact on the dynamics of the band and on Thompson himself:

I was worried about the group when Sandy came in because I felt that she was too strong a personality for them. She was too boisterous. She was completely unafraid of speaking her mind and making fun of people and putting them down. And I thought she'd run roughshod over these timid little grammar school boys from Muswell Hill. But she recognised very quickly in Richard someone of immense musicality who she could absolutely trust with her songs. And so, instead of pushing everybody around, she became very deferential – musically, anyway – to Richard. And I think it excited him, the idea of writing songs for her to sing. It also challenged him. I think he maybe sensed that she would dominate the group – unless someone stood up within the group to match her contribution. [R2B]

I definitely felt a tremendous release of energy in both Sandy and Richard. It was musical love at first sight. I think that they had an incredibly stimulating effect on each other,

and the group was all involved and caught up in that process. She said to me at one point, very early on, something to the effect of, “Jesus Christ, what a fucking genius!” But she would have grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and shaken him and said, C’mon, I want more, more, more ... She was like a bomb. She wouldn’t have been prepared to settle for anything less than his best. Richard and Sandy were completely opposite personalities, and yet I think they both had huge respect, one for the other. Sandy was finally a real foil for him. [CH 73/4]

Thompson’s own personal testament to Sandy would finally appear on Mock Tudor in “That’s All, Amen” and again in “Hope You Like The New Me”:

*I stole your laugh - so bright and breezy -
That stops parties in mid air.
It makes me feel more devil-may-care.
Hope you like the new me.*

As he told Clinton Heylin, “I tend to forget the traumas and tragedies, and I just hear her laughing the most infeciously funny, unique Sandy laugh.” His later comments on her artistic integrity and on the obscurity of some of her writing also imply professional lessons learned the hard way:

She never showed off for the sake of it, it was all in the service of the song. I’ve not heard a singer since with that much of a gift. She could incline to the obscure in her writ-

ing – personal or literary references which are not easy to decipher, and are hard to pin down emotionally, and for that reason is sometimes not engaging for the listener. But some of my all time faves are Sandy songs – some of the best songs written since the war. [CH 252]

But the biggest impact Sandy had on Thompson and the rest of the band was in exposing them to and sharing with them her deep knowledge of the English folk tradition. As Thompson told Beat Instrumental in August 1968, “We think of ourselves as a folk-based band. This is even more pronounced now that Sandy Denny is with us. [She] really knows what the folk tradition is all about, and the group as a whole are drawing from English roots. The fact that we’re electric doesn’t make any difference.” Thompson’s comments were made at the time that Fairport were in the studio recording their second album, *What We Did On Our Holid-ays*. Although Denny had been with the band less than four months, her impact was already substantial, as evinced by the inclusion on the album not only of her own haunting elegy “Fotheringay”, but also of two songs from her previous folk club repertoire, the traditional “Nottamun Town” and the [excuse the Ashleian pedantry] “Trad. Arr. Colum/Hughes” song, “She Moves Through The Fair.” The enigmatic murk, myth and magic of “Nottamun Town” seem to have had a particularly profound effect on Thompson. We hear echoes of the following in many of his early solo compositions and in the songs co-written with Dave Swarbrick:

*Sat down on a hard, cold, frozen stone.
Ten thousand stood round me, yet I was alone.
Took my hat in my hands for to keep my head warm.
Ten thousand got drowned that never was born.*

However, Thompson's observation that Fairport's move towards folk-based music is "even more pronounced" following Denny's arrival suggests that there were already other forces at play, working on the hearts and minds of the band as a whole and on its most distinguished and talented alumnus. Shortly before Denny's debut with Fairport at the Middle Earth on May 20th 1968, the band played an international pop festival in Rome. There they caught a set at the Piper Club by The Byrds, whose current line-up included the charismatic and mercurial Gram Parsons. Hutchings picks up the story:

I spoke to Gram Parsons after the gig. We flowed out into the street after the gig and Parsons being fresh-faced and very enthusiastic, came out into the street as well ... I talked to Gram along with a couple of other people [sic] and was struck by his enthusiasm, his humbleness, and his excitement at being part of it all. It's sad to think how it ended so soon. [Guv 65]

It's maybe churlish to wish that some of Parsons' "humbleness" had rubbed off on Ashley. But this meeting and a subsequent encounter at the Middle Earth later in May had a profound effect on Thompson. Again, "Hope You Like The New Me" provides the testament:

*I stole your soul - when you weren't looking.
I reached inside and cut it free.
It suits me more than it ever suited you.
Hope you like the new me.*

Beneath the Nudie suit and the country-rock veneer, Parsons' music tapped a rich vein for Thompson. In Gram's terms: "We are playing roots music ... It's a form of love music, a binding type of music between people ... We're playing with white soul, and soul is universal. And the universality of roots music has stood the test of time." Thompson saw Parsons' significance in similar terms:

[Y]ou do sing about hard times and you do sing about sad experiences – not necessarily when you're sad, but sometimes you just reflect on the sad times. It's something that moves people, like when you hear a heartfelt piece of soul music like "Dark End Of The Street" or "When A Man Loves A Woman" and you think "Yeah, I know what you mean."

One of Richard and Linda's live versions of Parsons' "Dark End Of The Street" appears on the guitar, vocal album. Much later, Thompson made the link unequivocally in the opening verse of "Cooksferry Queen":

*It's a secret but no secret,
It's a rule but no rule –
Where you find the darkest avenue,
There you'll find the brightest jewel.*

And I also think there's a simple explanation of the name selected for Thompson and pals' 1982, one-off band, the GP's. "GP" has little to do with grazed pontiffs and high noon in the Vatican and much to do with the title of Gram Parson's first solo album!

Another bright jewel in the crown that was Boyd's Witch-season roster was Nick Drake. Thompson played lead guitar on "Time Has Told Me", the first track on Drake's first album, *Five Leaves Left*. In the long run, Thompson's dense, allusive, impersonal style of writing has diverged wildly from the simple, adolescent, confessional intensity of Drake's work. A dominant tone of melancholy, at times bordering on desolation, is however common to both writers. And both men typically avoid the self-indulgence of many of the American songwriters of the sixties - what Patrick Humphries memorably termed "the heroin hypersensitivity of James Taylor and the emotional spring cleaning of Joni Mitchell." [MOTL 84]. From Nick Drake, Thompson borrowed - his, and Eliot's word is "stole" - a style. Not the sartorial style, the black coat and cords - though, maybe that too - but the authenticity, the ability, most of the time, to articulate grief and despair without self-indulgence:

I stole your style - hope you don't mind.

I must try to be all I can be.

It suits me more than it ever suited you.

Hope you like the new me.

It is this kind of authenticity, of artistic integrity, that Joe Boyd was alluding to when he looked back at Thompson's development over the last thirty odd years:

His playing back then demonstrated a rare matching of impeccable taste with a wild sense of adventure, and a deeply rooted sense of harmony with absolute melodic originality - plus, of course, blinding technique. What no one could have predicted from that vantage point was his developing genius as a composer and his evolution as a virtuoso of the acoustic guitar and a moving singer of real depth. He has mastered many forms and many styles, yet remains completely himself: a crusader for Britishness and for history in a time of fashionable transience and mid-Atlanticity and a shamelessly emotional and danger-seeking musician in a time of safety and blandness.

It's hard to believe that in a matter of a few months following the release of Fairport Convention, the serendipitous encounters with Parsons, the arrival in Fairport Convention of Sandy Denny, and the exposure to the man-child Drake could have had such a material impact on Thompson's output as a writer. But, quite simply, how else do we account for the difference in mood, quality and ambition between, say, "Decameron" and "If (Stomp)" on the one hand and "Tale In Hard Time", "No Man's Land" and "Meet On The Ledge" on the other?

“No Man’s Land” – Thompson – ex What We Did On
Our Holidays

According to Humphries, this is an accordion-led “swinging nightmare” of a song. Pete Frame called it “an exuberant accordion dominated romp which, despite the despondent lyrics, conjures up visions of leather-trousered Germans spilling beer.” Crying in their beer, more like. The dense, opaque lyric is reminiscent of many of Denny’s early songs but the emphasis of the vindictiveness of them, out there on the suburban streets is characteristic of many vintage Thompson songs:

*Hey, come and make it easy
Hey, come and make it back
It’s no use to be free
If lies are all the truth they see
They’ll screw up what you do
When you’re through.*

“No Man’s Land” also represents the first of those Thompson titles. If freedom is a walk across the Flanders mud towards the German guns, far better to stay huddled in your trench. Or, as Thompson put it much later, when he had found even better words, far better to “keep the blind down on the window, keep the pain on the inside.”

“Tale In Hard Time” – Thompson – ex What We did On
Our Holidays.

Greil Markus highlighted the first couplet and suggested that, with Thompson, it was maybe “all there from day one.” There is, of course, a world of difference between this and the fey “Decameron” – “Every time the sun shines, to me it’s a rainy day” is Donovan at his drippiest; this is Dylan at his darkest:

*Take the sun from my heart
Let me learn to despise
I’ll show you another who cannot tell lies.*

*The blind man can see
Put a match to his eyes
I’ll show you another who sings as he cries.*

*I cannot be whole
As the beggar who sighs
But I’ll show you another who knows as he dies.*

Before long, Thompson would learn to create “characters”, mature embodiments of the stagy adolescent sentiments stated naively in “Tale In Hard Time.” In “Crazy Man Michael”, for example, he does indeed show us “another who sings as he cries.” Much later, in “Burns Supper”, we see the Northern Lights through the eyes of “another who knows as he dies.”

“Meet On The Ledge” – Thompson – ex What We Did
On Our Holidays.

According to Humphries, the song is rooted in Thompson’s childhood:

Brian Wyvill is almost certain it was written for Thompson’s school friends at William Ellis school. Wyvill feels the song is connected with the Pothole tree on Hampstead Heath, which the young Thompson, with Wyvill and Mick Quartermain, would climb after school. Wyvill later became an accomplished mountaineer. During those schoolboy tree-climbing episodes, he and Quartermain would usually get right to the top, but the trepidatious Thompson would only get to a branch halfway up – The Ledge. [MOTL 23/4]

Patrick has also described the song’s “air of weary acceptance and resigned fatalism, buoyed by a chorus of something nestling next to optimism.” [PH 57]. Elsewhere, his comments imply the difficulty one has in separating the Crompton myth that is “Meet On The Ledge” from the song that Thompson actually wrote. It does seem to foreshadow the death of Martin Lamble, of Sandy Denny and of the hopes and aspirations of a generation. Thompson is, perhaps unsurprisingly, ambivalent about the song: “I suppose if it is a good song then it will say different things to different people and it’ll say different things at different times. I’m still not convinced it’s a good song. But if it means things to people then I’m glad. I feel some sense of achievement.” [PH 57]. “Meet On The

Ledge” is in fact the first of Thompson’s “summary milestones on the way to being and doing” that we earlier heard James Olney describe in the context of the artistic development of Yeats and Eliot. It is “both summary and projection”; a précis of what has happened thus far and a prediction of what is to come, not in the context of the lives of the band members but in terms of the artistic biography of its most talented member. The opening verse makes it clear that, at it most literal, this is a song about writing songs:

*We use to say “There’d come the day, we’d all be making songs
Or finding better words.” These ideas never lasted long.*

One is reminded of Thompson’s comment, quoted above, that Fairport were an “intellectual band.” “Meet On The Ledge” represents Thompson’s first definitive statement of intent, a determination to stop playing with ideas with others and to set out alone up the rocky slopes of Helicon: “Yet now I see, I’m all alone, but that’s the only way to be ...” There are no illusions as to what that implies:

*The way is up along the road; the air is growing thin
Too many friends who tried, blown off this mountain in the
wind.*

But the song has an even darker sub-text. The young writer knows that he may fail in his ascent – “When my time is up, I’m going to see all of my friends.” And for those “friends”, those early collaborators, it will be payback time: “You’ll have

your chance again, then you can do the work for me.” On his first solo album, Thompson would explore the same theme in even more explicit, even more cynical and disillusioned terms:

*It's bitter the need of the poor ditching boy,
He'll always believe what they say.
When they tell him it's hard to be honest and true,
Does he mind if he doesn't get paid?*

In terms of Thompson's evolution as a songwriter, “Meet On The Ledge” marked the first step onto the steeper part of the learning curve. His songs that appeared six months later on “Unhalfbricking” marked another giant leap upwards.

—— “Genesis Hall” – Thompson – ex Unhalfbricking. ——

Brian Schofield summarises the song's specific background in Fairport unConventional:

Genesis Hall was a squat off London's Drury lane. As part of the general police clampdown in the late sixties, it was raided. At the time of Richard's writing of the song, squatters were still being evicted from the building. “Genesis” represented a new beginning. The irony was that the building had been derelict but the squatters had gone through the process of making it safe, making it liveable, and finally renovating the property. On seeing news of the event, Rich-

ard Thompson, whose father was still a serving policeman, felt the confusion of divided loyalties that poured out in this song.

Thompson himself seemed to view the song as a pretty unequivocal political statement: “A function of the song is to speak politically or socially and to talk about the things that don't get said, and to redress the balance of propaganda, almost. To speak for people who don't have a voice.” [R2B]. In terms of that “voice”, according to Humphries, “It is Thompson's chilling ability to ally the style of a seventeenth-century Scottish Border ballad with a rock 'n' roll sensibility which still astounds. Solemn and stately, the song proceeds with tragic inevitability.” [PH 68]. That certainly highlights one of the striking characteristics of “Genesis Hall.” It is the first Thompson song in which the impact of the Denny-initiated exposure to the folk tradition is obvious. The language of Thompson's refrain is particularly effective. The long open vowel sounds strike a plangent note and have the same impact as, say, an Anglo-Saxon monologue – “geond lagulade longe sceolde” – or a Shakespearean soliloquy – “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow.” From the outset, Thompson's empathy for the English folk tradition goes right down to its linguistic roots.

Equally striking, however, is the deliberate exploitation of myth and allusion to add depth and resonance to the song. The Biblical references to Genesis and the Flood are explicit and obvious but the allusion to Enoch Powell's infamous “rivers of blood” speech, in which the latter predicted the cataclysm that would result from allowing “those of a different kind” into our

midst, is easily overlooked. Similarly, the specific reference to “the gypsy who begs for your presents, [who] will laugh in your face when you’re old” and much of the general tenor and tempo of Thompson’s song surely comes from Dylan’s “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue” with its reference to “the vagabond who’s rapping at your door.”

Most striking, however, is the complexity of characterisation and narrative perspective embodied in the song. The reference to the “sheriffs” and the fact that Thompson’s father, John, was literally a Scottish policeman has inevitably prompted commentators to equate the speaker in the song to “Richard Thompson.” But the ambiguities implicit in the language preclude any simple equation of writer and character:

*My father he rides with your sheriffs;
And I know he would never mean harm,
But to see both sides of a quarrel
Is to judge without hate or alarm.*

The overt “message” is that sitting on the fence is in itself a value judgement, but who is seeing both sides of the quarrel, “Me” or “My father”? The final verse contains an even deeper ambiguity:

*When the rivers run thicker than trouble,
I’ll be there at your side in the flood
But it was all I could do to keep myself
From taking revenge on your blood.*

Who is the “you” whom the speaker is addressing here – the oppressor, the oppressed or the sheriff who is literally a blood relative? We are listening here to a narrator every bit as unreliable as those who would appear on You? Me? Us? or Mock Tudor. “Genesis Hall” is a song about beginnings in more ways than one.

— “Cajun Woman” – Thompson – ex Unhalfbricking. —

Thompson talked to Patrick Humphries about his abiding interest in Cajun music and suggested that the storyline came from “the Greek story of Electra translated to the swamps of Louisiana.” [PH 68]. The mechanics of the “translation” – whether from Sophocles or Euripides is unclear – are not germane but the fact that Thompson was drawing on classical myth prefigures the altogether significant appearance of the Muse and of deep classical allusion on Henry. “Cajun Woman” is also the first in a long series of pastiches in which Thompson explores his musical roots. The long upward path leads eventually and circuitously to Mock Tudor. By the time the song was released in July 1969, Thompson was clearly demonstrating a distinctive voice and a high degree of technical competence but events had already conspired to take his writing into a new, darker dimension.

“I MIGHT GIVE THEM BACK ONE DAY”

In the early hours of the morning of 12th May 1969 the van carrying members of Fairport Convention back to London from a gig in Birmingham crashed on the M1 motorway. The band's drummer, Martin Lamble, and Richard Thompson's girlfriend, Jeannie Franklin, were killed. Hutchings and Thompson were seriously injured. Only Simon Nicol remained relatively unscathed, physically at least. For Thompson, just turned twenty, it was his first brush with death. The immediate impact on his song writing was profound. The distinctive voice he had begun to develop in the songs that appeared on *What We Did On Our Holidays* and *Unhalfbricking* became deeply coloured by guilt and remorse.

—— “Farewell, Farewell” – Thompson – ex Liege & Lief. ——

References to the cutting of cloth – Jeannie Franklin was a tailor – and to “bruised and beaten sons” leave no room for doubt as to the specific context for this song. Humphries' summary nearly says it all:

A flawless example of what Fairport were capable of at their peak: Sandy's haunting handling of a Richard Thompson ballad, steeped in tragedy and parting, as Swarbrick's fiddle weaves its distant adieu. The lyrics are a taste of what was going through Thompson's mind. Typical that even in that

era of peace and love, Thompson's concern is with parting and loathing. [PH 89]

But there is a flaw, as Thompson himself acknowledged: “It's too personal, the lyrics are too convoluted to understand.” In an unusually revealing moment in Hinton and Wall's overly reverential book, the Guvnor asked Thompson if he had found it difficult to write songs post the traumatic events in May '69:

I think right up to the mid seventies. I found it very hard to be an honest songwriter to tell you the truth. To put your heart on your sleeve. To say, “I love you” or something. To actually bare your personal life in song I found very hard, so I would definitely draw veils over songs. To just keep it one step from decipherment if you like. I don't want people to know this is really about me. It's in code. [Guv 248]

In a technical sense, the veil is drawn not so much by the obscurity of the language as by the archetypal setting of the song. The narrator seems to be about to embark on some pilgrimage, following the same allegorical winding path trodden by Bunyan's Pilgrim or Spenser's Red Crosse Knight. The casting of the song as a dialogue between the speaker and a group of fellow pilgrims also echoes Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

“Crazy Man Michael” – Swarbrick/Thompson – ex Liege
& Lief.

The M1 crash was caused when driver Harvey Bramham fell asleep at the wheel. According to Humphries: “Richard, who was in the front seat next to Bramham, grabbed the wheel, but over-corrected, and the van cart-wheeled.” [MOTL 30]. The raven’s prediction that “your true love will die by your own right hand” perhaps carries very literal personal associations. In any case, Thompson has acknowledged that the song at one level is about the death of Jeannie: “because in some way I felt responsible for her dying. There wasn’t any way I was, but I just felt that at the time.” [PH 91]. The song lyric may also have had a specific traditional precursor. Clinton Heylin quotes Judith Pieppe’s recollection of her first sighting of a young Sandy Denny at the Barge Folk Club: “The only song I remember her singing was about a bloke who accidentally shot a girl, it went something like ‘she’d her apron all about her/ And I took her for a swan’.” [CH 30]. As Heylin points out, the song in question was probably “Polly Vaughan”, one of a small number of ballads that treat with metempsychosis. The extended and expert use of dialogue in “Crazy Man Michael” also derives from traditional folk song. This would become the hallmark of some of Thompson’s finest creations: think of the backchat between Red Molly and James Adie.

In “Crazy Man Michael”, the song lyric encapsulates the art of the writer: speech that is plain expertly fitted to “the simplest of tunes.” Thompson initially grafted his lyric onto the traditional tune, “The Bonnie Hoose Of Airlie” but Dave

Swarbrick came up with the haunting air that we now associate with this masterpiece.

Nigel Schofield refers to excellent interpretations of the song by Dave Burland and Vicki Clayton – does anyone else get really irritated by all her extraneous “well’s”, “and’s”, and “so’s” – but the version on Liege & Lief captures one of Sandy Denny’s finest recorded moments. The point when her voice soars on the word “crazy” at the start of the final verse is magical.

“Bad News Is All The Wind Can Carry” – Thompson
– unreleased at the time.

The song was written in the wake of the M1 crash but feels like a mature Thompson offering. The desolate house and the back street slide feature throughout Thompson’s later work:

*This house is dark and shuttered,
Luck has run out the door.
No day time will shine
In this empty room no more.
Bad news is all the wind can carry.*

*Some people say she wandered,
And that she’d a price likewise.
I’ll cut their tongues and hang ‘em high.
They’ll rot away with all their lies!
Bad news is all the wind can carry.*

Martin Carthy's rendition of the song with Brass Monkey is absolutely riveting.

The equally bleak "Never Again" was also written at this time and subsequently appeared in expanded form on Hokey Pokey.

Following the crash, the members of the reconstituted Fairport spent three months together in a Queen Anne mansion in Farley Chamberlayne in Hampshire, working on material for what would become *Liege & Lief*. During this period, a major influence on all members of the group was the music of The Band. Joe Boyd observes, in his sleeve notes to the 2002 CD reissue of the definitive Fairport album, that The Band's *Music From Big Pink* was a decisive factor in the gestation of *Liege & Lief*:

[Fairport] had always been enamoured of American roots music and singer-songwriters. The Band hit them hard. They couldn't stop playing the LP. They loved it, but they were shocked. It was so deeply American, so fully immersed in the roots of that culture, that Fairport felt that the goal posts may have been moved too far away. They could never occupy the space occupied by The Band. But perhaps they could accomplish something parallel to *Big Pink* if they set their minds to it. Maybe they could create a repertoire as English as The Band was American.

Kingsley Abbott ascribes Fairport's deep interest in The Band to Thompson:

Richard was the one who really led Fairport's appreciation of The Band. They were going back to roots in some ways, but within a rock context, whilst The Byrds were going in a more country direction. It took a little bit of time for *Music From Big Pink* to really dig into people's consciousness. I've still got Richard's copy of [The Band's] second album. It had just come out over there, then Richard went off and got an import copy, only to have somebody drop the needle on to the first track. [Guv 72]

This trivial example of the needle and the damage done must have been painful for Thompson who admired The Band's integrity, musicality and unconventionality: "We admired The Band for their rootsiness, at a time of heavy drug-induced noodling. They had short haircuts, knew how to swing, blended styles from various traditions, and generally flew in the face of marketing common sense." [CH 102]. He spoke at length and with uncharacteristic candour and enthusiasm to Patrick Humphries concerning the impact of *Big Pink*:

It was the record for us – because it was so rootsy and unpretentious – the drums were just drums, there was no echo on it, they did it at home, it all sounded great, the songs were fantastic, the musicianship was unbelievable. There were a lot of subtle things about The Band that we didn't really grasp – their sense of time and swing was kind of elusive to us, we didn't really have those reference points. Levon [Helm] probably sat and watched loads of old black

jazz drummers forever, it had touches straight out of the 1940s. There was that kind of elusiveness to the rhythmic stuff that we didn't grasp. Rhythmically Fairport and indeed British Rock generally was pretty foursquare to the beat – maybe that's the way it has to be. There was a lot we admired about The Band – great song writing, which had a nice historical perspective to it, good guitar playing, wonderful singers, good everything. They were completely out of time, and they made no concessions to having long hair. When we saw them at the Albert Hall, they had drainpipe jeans on, turned up at the bottoms, and really short hair – we hadn't seen anybody for years with short hair – even Jason King had long hair then. [PH 78]

It took Thompson a while to arrive at the short haircut by a process of natural attrition, but the rest of this summary could have been a description of his own first master work, *I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight*. What is striking, however, is the way in which Thompson and Ashley Hutchings responded so very differently at the time to the gauntlet thrown down by The Band. *The Holy Grail* for Hutchings was the transposition of traditional songs to a rock idiom. In a sense the archive photographs and artefacts adorning the original sleeve of *Liege & Lief* symbolise his quest. Never slow in coming forward, he claims full credit for the concept:

I always felt that the sleeve echoed the traditional folkyness [sic] of the music. It goes without saying that this is not pure chance. I organised the middle spread. I got every-

thing. Each one of those, either from Cecil Sharp house, I found them, or Bob Pegg drew them specially for me ... So I kind of got all this together and wrote captions and so on. [Guv 123]

Thompson was unimpressed. His own sleeve notes to *Full House* parody Hutchings' scholarly descriptions of arcane rites and there is a nice irony in the Bob Pegg drawing, exhibited by Hinton and Wall, that shows Hutchings and Denny attempting to revive a prostrate Thompson. While Hutchings boasted to his biographers that "when I do my research, I do it more thoroughly than anyone I know" he was conveniently overlooking his erstwhile lead guitarist. Thompson's researches during this critical period in his artistic development took him in very different directions but were no less thorough and impactful. The evidence of his songs suggests that at this time he immersed himself deeply, not only in the volumes of traditional songs that lay around Farley Chamberlayne but also, courtesy of Graves, Frazer, and the ancient poets, in the myths and archetypes underpinning those songs.

In a provocative and consistently challenging study, *Albion – The Origins Of The English Imagination*, Peter Ackroyd advances the thesis, *inter alia*, that "there is no progress in English writing but, rather, a perpetual return to the original [Anglo-Saxon] sources of inspiration." He observes that in Anglo-Saxon poetry there are effectively no boundaries between various genres:

Little distinction is made between the poetry of natural observation and of religious narrative which suggests that there is very little perceived difference between religious and secular poetry. In a society once thoroughly paganised, where ravens spoke and stones moved, how can there be such a difference? And in a society where the values of early Christianity came to prevail over heathen reverence, the whole world remains a spiritual force replete with miracles and changed by prayer. It was, and is, an island of visions ... We read continually of exile and transience, of kinship feuds and the necessity of loyalty, of the isolated wanderer; we witness the giving of gifts in the mead hall, the blizzards of winter, the effigy of the boar; we are reminded of fate and destiny, of the wilderness world, of the strongholds of city dwellers, of the surging salt sea, of the raven, of the eagle and the wolf. It has been suggested that we still dream of dark woods in memory of the Druids; in turn the fascination with old ruined dwellings in writers as disparate as Wordsworth and Dickens with deserted or empty buildings, all their warmth displaced by wintres woma, or the awful sound of winter. [PA 21/2]

This surely is the physical and psychic landscape in which Thompson's characters move and fulfil their appointed destinies at this stage in his career. We see it first in the "cold north wind" and the winding road of "Farewell. Farewell." We see it in the person of Michael, communing with the raven and the wolves. We see it in the "dark and shuttered" house in "Bad

News" and in the metaphor of the ship contained in the final verse of that bleak song:

*I'll steal a ship and rig her
On course I'll lash the wheel
I'll lay me down beneath the stars
Until the bottom meets the keel.*

In Anglo-Saxon poetry, the metaphor of the ship was used to signify the act of composition, the poetic narrative being likened to a vessel that had to be driven across the face of the deep. But the ship also stood as a symbol of the frail human being, tossed on the stormy ocean of life. Anglo-Saxon fragments such as "The Wanderer" or "The Seafarer" are filled with the sorrows of decay and desolation, exile and isolation. The singers in these songs have left the warmth and security of the mead hall and contemplate the *hrimcealde sae*, the rime-cold sea. We see this above all in the setting of "Crazy Man Michael", "within the fire and out upon the sea." That polarity lies at the heart of much Anglo-Saxon poetry and is captured most famously in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, in the extended simile of the sparrow. Bede reports discussions between King Edwin of Northumbria and his councillors in AD 627 on the wisdom of accepting the Christian faith:

Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of man on earth with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a single sparrow through

the banqueting hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter's day ... In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside, the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came. [PA 72/3]

This deep sense of melancholy and fatalism, the Anglo-Saxons called *dustsceawung* - contemplation of dust - and it is the prevalent tone of the songs that Thompson composed jointly with Dave Swarbrick. Nor is it coincidental that Michael's destiny is to be "keeper of the garden." Ackroyd points to the significance of the garden in the English imagination:

Most houses in England possess a small garden; it is part of their natural state or, even, part of their natural inheritance from the prehistoric inhabitants of England whose small plots of cultivated land may be considered the first gardens of Britain, where henbane and opium poppy flourished. The walled garden became the model of secrecy and enchantment; the English imagination can grow only in a confined space. [PA 411]

The words to the songs he co-authored with Swarbrick came to Thompson the hard way, as a result of intensive research, bitter experience and extended self-communing – "the way is up and long the road." The airs however breezed in with

the Fiddle Bill. Martin Carthy told Hinton and Wall of David Swarbrick's reaction on the latter's return from the recording session where he had guested on "A Sailor's Life." There he had played for the first time with "that man", Richard Thompson: "No reflection on you [Martin], but I finished that session and felt that I wanted to play with that man for the rest of my life ... I can't tell you how good it was! It was fantastic!" [Guv 107]. One is reminded of Boyd's comment on the immediate impact upon Sandy Denny of Thompson's "immense musicality." As with Denny, the respect between ur-folk fiddler and rock god was, it should be said, mutual. Swarbrick brought to the partnership his own innate musicianship and an extensive catalogue of folk tunes, but more importantly an ability to compose melodies in the traditional style which accorded perfectly with Thompson's increasingly dark broodings on the human condition and the English psyche. Martin Carthy has commented on Swarbrick's rare ability to compose distinctive tunes in the traditional idiom:

Swarb writes great tunes. The tunes he wrote for Richard's songs "Now Be Thankful" and "Crazy Man Michael" are fabulous. All his best tunes are slow tunes – without exception ... The extra-ordinary thing about Swarb is he's been involved in folk music ever since he was that big. He's played the fiddle and learnt all those tunes since he was about fifteen, sixteen maybe. Not one of his tunes sounds like any other tune that you've heard. Everybody else writes a tune and you can pick up a little bit of that one there and a little bit of that other one – in the general feel of it. His

tunes sound like nobody else. It's extraordinary, absolutely extraordinary. [**Guv 111**]

As Simon Nicol suggests, in part the collaboration was based on a strange musical alchemy in the studio:

Swarb and Richard's writing was a side effect of the band living together [in Little Hadham]. There was a certain kind of unlikely magic. They could produce spontaneous music in the studio, which is jolly difficult ... To be able to do the sort of thing they refined on "Sloth" is not something you can work at. Ninety percent has to be there, even before you meet. [**MOTL 71**]

But Thompson's comments on the partnership suggest it was more a case of ships touching in the night:

Swarb and I'd sit at the Angel, in front of the fire late at night and get the guitar out and he'd say "I've got this tune I've had for a long time, see if you can do anything with this" and so he'd play "Sloth" or something and I'd say leave it to me. So we'd figure out melody first and then I'd go away and try and do the lyrics. It's hard to do lyrics to order while you're sitting there – I find it's usually deserving of some reflection. I think we wrote some really good songs like that. [**PH 106**]

And Swarbrick's typically forthright comments also dispel any notion of two fellow composers chummily roasting their chestnuts by an open fire:

Richard and I never got on in the early days of Fairport Convention ... we thought we did, but we never did. We composed some bloody good songs together, but it was purely on the basis of "you write that and I'll write this, and we'll put it together." But we never sat down and had real good chats. [**MOTL 71**]

Joe Boyd, too, was not entirely comfortable with the relationship, fearing that the withdrawing Thompson would not "hold his own" in the face of Swarbrick's natural aggressiveness. At times subsequently, Thompson himself has been seemingly dismissive of the partnership with Swarb: "Really, I think, we were driven by boredom and a need for material for the [Full House] album." [**MOTL 74**]. But while there undoubtedly was a practical need to generate material for the next album, this flip casting aside really is disingenuous, even by Thompson's standards. The alternative was pretty obvious and less risky - they could easily have done an Ashley and pinched eight matty@groveses from trad.anon.com. No, in context, to write these eight songs with Swarbrick was the tough option for Thompson. This is a cohesive, compelling and challenging collection and it sets the tone and in many ways establishes the standard of consistent excellence that we have come to expect as of right from much of Richard Thompson's later work.

— “Walk Awhile” – Swarbrick/Thompson – ex Full House.

According to Schofield, the song “combines archetypal Thompson lyrics, sounding like something from the dark ages, with a variation on the traditional tune, ‘Bonaparte’s Retreat’, which Swarb used to play with Martin Carthy.” To be precise, Thompson’s lyrics combine archetypes from the dark ages in a pretty light-hearted way, references to undertakers notwithstanding. Schofield also points to structural and lyrical similarities between “Walk Awhile” and “When I Get To The Border.” It should be said that the similarities, if any, are fairly distant – good fun shouldn’t be confused with great art. There is however an early, acerbic reference to the impact of Sunday tea times on the soul of the budding writer:

*Here comes another Sunday, ringing on the bell.
And here comes your own dear child with another tale to tell.*

“Doctor of Physick” – Swarbrick/Thompson – ex Full
House.

There is a nice irony here. Hutchings’ stepmother, Kay, recalled an aspiring young thespian and impresario:

Ashley loved the theatre. He had a toy theatre and he’d love you to be ill, so that he could set up his theatre and do a show. He does super voices ... The first thing he did was

The Mummer’s Play. He must have been nine or ten. I can remember him practising his lines all day – “Is there a Doctor in the house? Yes, there is a Doctor!” He played the Doctor of Physick. [Guv 21]

We might want to connect this to Hutchings’ ungallant description of his relationship with Sandy Denny, given to Hinton and Wall:

When Sandy joined the band, I suppose it was because I was the oldest of the boys in the band, she looked to me, and I looked out for her. When we would get in the van to travel anywhere, she always sat next to me, and there was always my shoulder to lean on when she was feeling tired, or indeed, slept as we often did on the way back from a gig late at night. That was a ritual we went through in the early days. She would always sit next to me and always lean on me if she needed to. Physically as well as psychologically. Which was a nice thought. I slept with her once, but that was for comfort. That wasn’t for sexual reasons. That was for bodily comfort one time at her place. [Guv 71]

Thompson may well have put one and one together: “Take care, daughter dear ... The Doctor comes to steal your goods in the dead of night.”

On a somewhat more elevated plane, we might wish to ponder on some of the specific vocabulary used by Thompson in the song. Why Doctor Monk? Why is he unpacking a trunk? Why the reference to a relic? It’s all in a name. Thomas

Chatterton was born in 1752. He seems to have inherited a passion for antiquity from an antiquarian father who died before Thomas was born. Chatterton attended a charity school in Bristol but learnt to read from old folios collected by his father and scattered around the tiny family house, opposite St Mary Redcliffe church on Pyle Street. A lot of young boys in more recent times have been similarly inspired by a father's library of old texts. Before Thomas Chatterton left school, he had begun to forge "medieval" poems of rare distinction and to devise false genealogies and create mock heraldic emblems. The specific inspiration for the forgeries was believed to have come from Thomas Percy's largely authentic *Reliques Of Ancient English Poetry*, published in 1758. Chatterton invented a 15th century Franciscan monk, Thomas Rowley, whom he claimed had resided in St Mary Redcliffe and written volumes of poetry. These Chatterton claimed to have transcribed. On being challenged as to the provenance of "Rowley's" poems, Chatterton claimed to have found them in an old trunk within the muniment room of the church. He even managed to produce some stained "antique" documents to validate his assertions. The poems were of such sustained high quality and the supporting evidence was so compelling, that well into the nineteenth century there were many who believed that no mere boy could have forged such masterpieces. At the age of seventeen, Thomas Chatterton travelled to London to find his fortune. He died shortly thereafter of arsenic poisoning. At the time, his death was regarded as a suicide but recent commentators have attributed it to a botched cure for syphilis. He stands accused as forger and plagiarist on a lavish scale but as

Peter Ackroyd points out he nonetheless "composed as many fine lines of medieval poetry as came out of the medieval period itself":

He evinces all the antiquarianism of the English imagination but out of it he fashioned works of genius; he wanted to recreate, rather than rescue, past time. Like Edmund Spenser, he invented a language with which to restore the proximity as well as the mystery of the past. [PA 429]

One is reminded of Eliot's description of the poet, quoted earlier, as someone who "lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past." Thomas Chatterton was an appropriate alter ego for Richard Thompson at this stage in his artistic development, as he, too, sought to restore the proximity and mystery of the past in songs of real genius. These songs have the same sense of timelessness that Ackroyd identifies in Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia On A Theme By Thomas Tallis*:

[I]t seems to lift one into some unknown region where one is never quite sure whether one is listening to something very old or very new; the embrace of present and past time, in which English antiquarianism becomes a form of alchemy, engenders a strange timelessness. It is a quality which Eliot sensed in the landscape of England itself and to which he gave memorable expression in *Four Quartets*. [PA 440]

—— “Sloth” – Swarbrick/Thompson – ex Full House. ——

According to Schofield, the song “fits perfectly into a strand of twentieth-century art wherein significance is obvious but meaning is non-immediate. It demands that the audience become involved (and in the case of “Sloth” this applies as much to the music as the lyrics, of course). Great works which have been thus characterised include Eliot’s *The Waste Land*.” Quite. The title of Thompson’s song is, inevitably, significant. Langland’s *Piers the Plowman* saw the figure of Sloth in a London tavern. Amid the noise and mire of medieval London it was still possible for “Poor Will” Langland to glimpse the spiritual destinies of humankind. Thompson applies the archetype to his perennial theme of the war of the sexes. “Sloth” in a sense is a Thompsonian spin on “Matty Groves” but what is remarkable is the way in which this ages-old song of human-love gone wrong fits seamlessly alongside the later hymn to the Beloved, “Beat The Retreat.”

“Poor Will And The Jolly Hangman” – Swarbrick/
—— Thompson – unreleased at the time. ——

Another early echo of *The Waste Land*. Like *The Waste Land*, Thompson’s song is rich in allusions to the Tarot – Hangman, Jester, Gallows Tree, Champion’s Purse. The Full House sleeve also shows band members as “Royal Minor Arcana Cards.” Patrick Humphries attempts to “position” “Poor Will” in the eighteenth century by quoting from E. P. Thompson’s *Making*

Of The English Working Classes and linking the hanging of Will to public executions at Tyburn. Nigel Schofield picked up some of the song’s specific allusions and placed it back where it belongs, in the medieval period:

Although on the surface this appears to be more accessible than most of Richard’s lyrics from the period, it is a very packed and cryptic song. We “rise for the Hangman; his pleasure is that you should rise”; a mark of respect, of course, except usually the Hangman wishes you to drop! Is the Jester’s Assize a punning reference to Jeffries’s Assize, the famously Draconian court of the Hanging Judge? Are the poor ladies and gentlemen waiting to laugh as they pay the Hangman his fee, also awaiting their own execution? – and the true love coming over the stile brings to mind the final salvation of the abandoned victim in “The Prickle Holly Bush.” In an era when rock music was embracing the Dungeons and Dragons mythology of some half-baked Middle Earth, Richard Thompson forced us clear-eyed into the Medieval world of *Piers Plowman* and *The Seventh Seal* and the diseased court of Hamlet’s Elsinore.

The reference to “The Prickle Holly Bush” [Child 95] is particularly important. The traditional song provides not only a specific verbal tag – “no true love come over the stile” – but also the *mise-en-scene* for Thompson’s divine comedy:

*Oh, hangman, stand there for a while,
For I seems to see my dear old father,*

*He's a-coming over yonder stile.
Oh, father, have you got any gold
Or silver to set me free,
For to keep my body from the cold clay ground,
And my neck from the high gallows tree?*

“The Prickle Holly Bush” is a pretty interminable song – father, mother, brother and sister all show up with nary a penny to save the condemned singer. His salvation is finally secured by a gold-laden true love who finally comes over the stile. Thompson’s song, by comparison, is rich, resonant and timeless. Its literary progenitor is surely Thomas Hardy:

*All rise for the hangman, his pleasure is that you should rise.
He's the judge and the jury at the jester's assize.
Poor Will on the gallows tree, never a cruel word did say.
Oh, that a young man should be treated this way!
Run to me mother of anyone's child and tell me the revelry
planned;
Judges and barristers, clerks at the law, his show is the best in
the land.
Here's a health to the jolly hangman;
He'll hang you the best that he can;
Here's a health to the jolly hangman.*

Thompson has kept faith with “Poor Will” and his performances have graced many a Cropredy in the last twenty years. Ironically, the song was dropped from the Full House album at the last minute: “I really didn’t like the vocals – I

thought that was the real problem, none of us could really sing it and it sounded like it. I think that was the reason [it was dropped], but it probably should have been on the record.” [PH 107]. Quite.

— “Now Be Thankful” – Swarbrick/Thompson – single. –

This is a rarity – a Thompson song that the author actually likes:

It’s a very hymnbook kind of song and I suppose that I like songs of praise – not the television programme, but the idea of it. I like the fact that living in a creation and being a creature that you can actually say “thank you”. And I personally believe that one of the reasons that people are around, being creatures in a creation, is so that they can say “thank you”. And it’s for their own benefit. But I like to do that. It’s a naive song. It’s a little immature. But I can still sing it. [R2B]

If there was only one Thompson song I could have played at my funeral ...

“The Journeyman’s Grace” – Swarbrick/Thompson – ex
Angel Delight.

At one level, the song is an early example of Thompson kicking against the pricks – particularly those who run record companies. A journeyman was, of course, a qualified artisan but the term nowadays carries the pejorative overtones of “mere hireling.” But we’re also back in the land of Beowulf, searching for meaning in a malevolent landscape of myth and magic:

*Lead my weary flesh and bone to a circle made of stone.
Take me to the mountains for my leisure.
And if the dead man won’t depart, drive a stake into his heart
And let the air deliver him his pleasure.
Oh, please, journeyman, help me on my way.
Oh, please, help me, please, and I won’t be afraid.*

Before too long, Thompson would discover the significance of the straight path, would meet a group of people on the Euston Road who convinced him that “there’s a grace that leads you straight from place to place.” At that point archetype finally became actuality.

“Sickness And Diseases” – Swarbrick/Thompson – ex
Angel Delight.

The drover riddled with the “stones” is in many ways an even more potent metaphor of the human condition than Poor Will. Pre-anaesthesia and pre-antibiotics, the only cure for gallstones was a surgical procedure with a dirty instrument from Dr Monk’s trunk that was pretty much guaranteed to kill you. Friend Billy survived it long enough to reappear as a young-old man on Hokey Pokey, for whom the only kiss was the kiss of the knife.

The fourth CD in the 2002 retrospective collection Fairport unConventional contained the fifteen most popular Fairport tracks from a poll of the band’s fans. Five of the fifteen were Swarbrick-Thompson compositions – “Walk Awhile”, “Poor Will”, “Crazy Man Michael”, “Now Be Thankful”, and “Sloth.” Two of the fifteen were Thompson songs – “Farewell, Farewell” and, inevitably, “Meet On The Ledge.” The only surprise, perhaps, is that “Doctor Of Physick” missed the cut. Thomas Chatterton would have relished the anonymity. Job well done.

HENRY THE HUMAN FLY

1. Roll Over Vaughn Williams
2. Nobody's Wedding
3. The Poor Ditching Boy
4. Shaky Nancy
5. The Angels Took My Racehorse Away
6. Wheely Down
7. The New St. George
8. Painted Ladies
9. Cold Feet
10. Mary and Joseph
11. The Old Changing Way
12. Twisted

All songs written by Richard Thompson. Produced by Richard Thompson and John Wood.

Players – Richard Thompson with Timmy Donald (percussion, vocals), Pat Donaldson (bass, vocals), David Snell (harp), Jeff Cole (trombone), John Defereri (tenor sax), Clay Toyani (trumpet), Sue Draheim (fiddle), Barry Dransfield (fiddle), John Kirkpatrick (accordion), Andy Roberts (dulcimer), Sandy Denny (piano, vocals), Linda Peters (vocals), Ashley Hutchings (vocals).

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On Sunday 24th January 1971, Richard Thompson announced that he was leaving Fairport Convention. His sub-

sequent comments have generally suggested that, at the time, the decision was instinctual, rather than a considered reaction to fundamental dissatisfactions or a conscious career choice. He told Patrick Humphries that he was just writing “stuff” that seemed interesting and “thought it would be fun to make a record” on his own. [PH 123].

But in a long exchange between Thompson and Ashley Hutchings in 2001 - recorded by Hinton and Wall for their Guvnor study - Thompson suggested that the underlying cause of his departure was his inability to create, in the context of Fairport Convention, the kind of mutually-supportive working environment that had characterised The Band as a band:

RT: I think that when you write for a band, the band has to comprehend it, and empathise with whatever you're writing. It's very difficult. I could really write some obscure lyrics.

AH: Although we empathised, we often didn't comprehend, but we were quite happy to go along ... With a lot of the songs we were doing in the early days, it was [a question of] trusting you, trusting your good taste. But it's also something like a great poem, an obscure poem maybe, or a great work of art - you give yourself to it, even though you don't fully understand it. As time goes by, you might understand it a bit more. But you know quite early on if a poem is for you, or if a painting is for you, even though you don't fully comprehend it.

RT: With [song] writing it's the same thing. I think you develop an instinct for what's a good song and you test it with an audience. If you're a band member, you test songs amongst the band. Then you know if something is communicated. Either something concrete or abstract. I think that at the point that I left the band, I did feel frustrated. Somehow I wasn't writing stuff that could be shared amongst the band. It wasn't bad writing, it was quite personal. And I thought that I just had to get away and get through that wee bit there. The songs that The Band wrote – I think actually the other members contributed more than their names on the credits – I think they are terrific ensemble songs in that there is a real shared feeling about them. That they are comprehensible to everybody in the band. There's a real spirit when they're played, I always thought, that's indescribable. And I certainly fell short of that [with Fairport] a lot of the time. **[Guv 128-9]**

Thompson's session work with the other luminaries such as Sandy Denny, Nick Drake, John Martyn, Ian Matthews and Al Stewart kept the wolf from the door and beefed up his CV without helping to crystallise in his own mind what manner of beast his "fun record" should be or in what sort of environment it should be played. Three consecutive collaborations in which Thompson played a more active role in 1971/2 did however help shape his ideas, if only in a negative sense. The *No Roses* album, recorded by Shirley Collins and the newly

formed Albion Country Band, retains an austere beauty to this day but for Thompson, then, it was a case of more of the same, another articulation of Ashley Hutchings's constrained vision of an indigenous English music played on electric instruments. The same was equally true of the Albion's *Morris On*, recorded in late 1971 – musicians of real flair straightjacketed in a thesis. Thompson said that he'd found it enjoyable to do but that if he had to do it all the time he'd go "bananas." The third collaboration, the Bunch's *Rock On*, recorded in January 1972, simply reversed the concept – British folkies playing old rock 'n' roll songs, albeit songs by many of Thompson's favourite artists such as Jerry Lee Lewis, Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly and Hank Williams. Today, *Morris On* sounds twee while the Bunch album teeters somewhere between cautious reverence and a real vitality. Neither represented the hybrid form of "English rock 'n' roll" that, instinctively, Thompson was seeking to create. As Patrick Humphries explains, this "didn't mean simply electrifying Morris tunes, rather he saw himself as an alchemist carefully blending the English traditional with the vigour of American rock. Thompson envisaged brass more redolent of Methodist hymns than R&B; he was looking as much toward East Grinstead as Memphis for inspiration. He heard rhythms sounding more like 'the old Sally Army' than the Bar-Kays." [PH 127]. The first fruit of that alchemy was Henry The Human Fly.

The alter ego of The Human Fly was an appropriate guise for Richard Thompson to adopt at this pivotal stage in his young career. The sleeve quotation from Ambrose Bierce's *The*

Enlarged Devil's Dictionary gives some ironic suggestion of the fly's relevance to the ambitious scope of the album:

The earth, grown wan with age, renews her youth. Seas usurp the continents and polar ice invades the tropics, extinguishing empires, civilisations and races ... but always the house-fly is to hand like a run of salmon. By his illustrious line we are connected with the past and future: he wantoned in the eyebrows of our fathers; he will skate upon the shining pates of our sons.

Thompson chose an interesting source from whom to borrow the "scene setter" for his debut album. Bierce was a celebrated American writer, journalist and adventurer who disappeared mysteriously in revolution-torn Mexico in 1913 at the age of seventy. His Devil's Dictionary, comprising oddball definitions of over two thousand words, originally appeared in US newspapers and journals over three decades. The definitions are characterised by a consistent misanthropy. Women, politicians, organised religion and the Arts were particular butts for his vicious, Swiftian satire. Take as a typical example his terse definition of the noun "Presidency": "The greased pig's bladder in the field game of American politics." Ironically, his definitions of assorted musical instruments suggest that he, like most critics, might have struggled to admire Henry:

Accordion, n. An instrument in harmony with the sentiments of an assassin.

Clarionet, n. An instrument of torture operated by a person with cotton in his ears. There are two instruments that are worse than a clarionet – two clarionets.

Fiddle, n. An instrument to tickle human ears by friction of a horse's tail on the entrails of a cat.

Piano, n. A parlour utensil for subduing the impertinent visitor. It is operated by depressing the keys of the machine and the spirits of the audience.

Fittingly, one of Bierce's early noms de plume, Dod Grile, is an anagram of "God Riled." Thompson's take on this might have been a divine outburst of exasperation: "Bugger, raining again!"

Closer to home, The Fly recalls the nickname given to Thompson by the air guitarists of the late sixties and also summons the familiar compound ghost of Eliot, awarded the sobriquet "Tse Tse" by Ezra Pound. The appellation also echoes Blake, whose poem "The Fly" appears in Songs of Experience. A more contemporary resonance is to be found in the classic 1958 horror film The Fly. Given the album's preoccupation with the threat to the world posed by the nameless "backroom boys", the cover image of a mutant creature resulting from some bizarre experiment is entirely appropriate. Most appropriate, though, is the sense of a fly on the wall conveyed in the title, denoting the kind of voyeuristic detachment Thompson would seek to establish in the songs on this album and for most of his subsequent career.

The album is a young man's view of a world gone wrong and the prescriptions, such as they are, are similarly those of a young man. What is uncharacteristic in one so young, however, is the strength of the writing, the clarity – at least at a conceptual level – of the artistic mission, which underpins the writing, and the confidence required to articulate that mission to an audience, or audiences, who were clearly expecting something completely different. They must have been disconcerted from the off by the Dylanesque sleeve-notes which record a conversation between God and the Archangel Gabriel. The pair engage in a Dud-and-Pete-style dialogue about the weather, the common cold and the contents of the fruit bowl before agreeing to get the boys over to “play a little something” or, more precisely, the twelve special something's that follow.

Roll Over Vaughn Williams

The first song on the first solo album is, as Thompson himself acknowledged, a clear statement of artistic intent. Cast in traditional form – a “calling on song” – “Roll Over” proceeds to throw down the gauntlet to the folk establishment. He hinted at the nature of the challenge in an interview with UK Rolling Stone in October 1969:

Traditional music was doing all right in England until the coming of [mass] communications, then it disappeared entirely, as American music flooded over on radio and record.

So now there's electric music coming over from America, there's traditional music here, and there's no link at all ... In America, their folk music is a straight line – white music went over and became bluegrass, then it got electrified and it's Nashville now. Over here, it's nothing. Folk music is still a guy standing with a finger in his ear and a pint in his hand at a folk club.

The challenge is of course there in the title. Thompson's attempt to create an “English Rock 'n' Roll” will entail the rolling over of the English pastoral tradition and the incorporation of a more vibrant musical strand à la Chuck Berry and a more direct and honest form of writing à la Hank Williams. There is a clear rejection of the cerebral approach to the study of folk music – “Pencils ready, paper dry” – and an implicit admission of Thompson's discontent with the scholastic path pursued by Ashley Hutchings – “If you break it on your knee, better men might disagree./ Do you laugh or do you stick your finger in your ear?” At this stage in his career, Thompson believed he could go-it-alone, break the mould over his knee and laugh in the face of opposition. The critical response both to the Henry album and to the artistic agenda would prove his confidence misplaced.

Nobody's Wedding

A nonsense song that is anything but! As discussed earlier, the allusion to Eliot establishes the point that for Thompson

this is a new beginning but the song also reinforces the sense of subversion of the old order contained in “Roll Over”. Jimmy Shand’s “Highland Wedding” and “Mairi’s Wedding” are sardonically employed as musical backdrop to a bacchanalian orgy. The song intensifies the feeling of spiritual malaise that permeates the album – “Didn’t hear the words of the Bible being read” – but also echoes Yeats’ “A Prayer For My Daughter”:

*And may her bridegroom bring her to a house
Where all’s accustomed, ceremonious;
For arrogance and hatred are the wares
Peddled in the thoroughfares.
How but in custom and in ceremony
Are innocence and beauty born?*

What better encapsulation of the death of innocence and beauty than a satanic inversion of a wedding ceremony whose presiding deity is a “wild boy chopping up the floor”?

The Poor Ditching Boy

The ditching boy is one of the great Richard Thompson characters whose popularity has stood the test of time. At one level, the song is the first definitive depiction of the twisted relationship between the writer and his muse. At another level, it is a metaphoric portrayal of the human condition couched in typical Thompsonian terms – isolation, entrapment and

pain. At yet another level, it is symptomatic of the breakdown in relationships, which characterises Thompson’s spiritual wasteland:

*Was there ever a winter so cold and so sad,
The river too weary to flood?
The storming wind cut through to my skin
But she cut through to my blood.*

“Bugger” said God, “raining again!”

Shaky Nancy

The song is dedicated to Big Muldoon. As we have seen, the opening track on Mock Tudor would also incorporate a tacit nod to Thompson’s first guitar tutor. We are presented with another frozen Anglo-Saxon landscape of the mind; another failed relationship; another lovelorn protagonist yearning for amnesia – another day at the office for Henry! Nancy herself is Thompson’s first fully drawn heroine and, in her elusiveness and quasi-divinity, she prefigures Sibella who, nearly thirty years later, would ride in “like a myth” from the west. One wonders to what extent the picture of Nancy – and for that matter Sibella – was influenced by Linda Peters. She drifted into Thompson’s life in 1969 and drifted off to the USA with Joe Boyd for much of 1971. The relationship between Richard and Linda only began to develop seriously after they had worked together on the Bunch sessions in January 1972.

The Angels Took My Racehorse Away

According to Linda, she loved this song, while James Burton hated it. That's what you get from playing second fiddle to Ricky Nelson! "Angels" is a good-time song and a reworking of an old formula. Thought the setting is very "Scottish Borders" and the Lanark Silver Bell is a real horse race, the song's bloodline probably goes back to the USA and to the race winning grey mare, Skewball, who "never drank water, she always drank wine." Humphries' comment that the song conveys "sentiments worthy of the most maudlin country and western song" is more apposite than he probably suspected. However, "Angels" has a serious if ironic sub-text. In Henry's universe, an angelic visitation does not herald the birth of the King awaited by Mary and Joseph in their demented border watch. Instead, it signals the death of a horse that once won a race in the Borders.

Wheely Down

According to Thompson, Wheely Down is an actual place near Shepton Mallet. Simon Nicol, displaying his typical laconic wit and deadpan delivery, suggested it is "like 'Solisbury Hill', but without the royalties." [Guv 129]. But Thompson's song is a somewhat darker beast than the Peter Gabriel anthem. From an idyllic description of the town nestling, literally, in the bosom of the Earth Mother and of Man existing in fruitful partnership with nature, the song, as its title suggests,

spirals down to a vision, couched in Biblical terms, of disease, disintegration and despair. The presiding spirits here are the malevolent presence, which stares out of Wheely Down, and the kestrel, which turns in the empty skies overhead. Both are derived from the greatest poem of apocalypse written in the twentieth century, Yeats' "The Second Coming":

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned ...
... somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of indignant desert birds ...*

For Yeats, human history evolved in two-thousand-year cycles, which he envisioned as interlocking cones or gyres. The year 2000 marked the end of one such cycle – the benign Christian epoch – and heralded the start of a cycle of bestiality and violence. For him, as for Thompson, the "armies of deliverance [were] run into the ground." Wheely Down is therefore a mythic topographical feature with a very specific literary antecedent. The song, it should be said, reads like a poem and works best as a poem. For me, Ivor Cutler's lugubrious recitation on the World Is A Wonderful Place tribute

album is a lot more effective than Thompson's dirge-like incantation of the song.

The New St. George

A very traditional form and feel for a late twentieth century call to arms. This song is companion to "Albion Sunrise". Both are strongly imbued with the spirit and iconography of Blake. Both appear on the Albion Country Band's album, *The Battle of the Field*, recorded in 1973 but not released until 1976. The specific vision of Albion in "The New St. George", approaching the millennium and potential apocalypse, is perhaps inspired by Rachel Carson's seminal *The Silent Spring*, which was required campus reading in the sixties. Sadly, the symptoms remain as true now as then. The song is dated only by its spirit of youthful idealism, which is even more forcefully conveyed in "Albion Sunrise", with its confident prediction that "the faded flower of England will rise and bloom again".

Painted Ladies

The Book Of Rock Lists doesn't include "Painted Ladies" in its "Onan's Greatest Hits" list of the twenty-five greatest songs about masturbation. This is a criminal oversight – it belongs right up there with the Everly's "All I Have To Do Is Dream", The Who's "Pictures of Lily" and Springsteen's "Blinded By the Light". On such seminal foundations are great reputations

built. More rain, more despondency and one more barren, loveless life. The innuendoes contained in the description of the film stars who "can't hold a candle to something that trembles" fit perfectly the squalid, sleazy feel of the song. I'm reminded of Yeats' "Wild Old Wicked Man" who fantasises about

*Girls down on the seashore
Who understand the dark;
Bawdy talk for the fishermen;
A dance for the fisher-lads;
When dark hangs upon the water
They turn down their beds.
Daybreak and a candle-end.*

Cold Feet

The song that gets closest, in musical terms, to the transatlantic hybrid that Thompson was seeking to concoct. Many's the finger that must have entered the ear at this point! Thematically, the song joins the catalogue of spoiled and frustrated relationships but in the kind of jokey way that foreshadows much later, much greater offerings, such as "Nearly In Love" or "Two Left Feet".

Brass “redolent of Methodist hymns” underscores this lament for an overdue Messiah, whose arrival awaits the reconciliation of His parents who are trapped in a surreal, perverted relationship. Three strong literary allusions give this song resonance and validity and enable it to transcend the trite and tested. The context in which Mary and Joseph are placed, and the specific description of Mary herself, recall Eliot’s “Sweeney Erect”, a piece of low-life comedy in which Eliot depicts the bestial relationship of the ape-like Sweeney and the leonine Doris. Ronald Schuchard paints the picture in his revelatory study, Eliot’s Dark Angel:

For his piece de resistance, Sweeney begins toying with his razor, testing its sharpness on the hairs of his leg, an acrobatic gyration that elicits a shriek of animal laughter; indeed, Sweeney’s Chaplinesque, music-hall pantomime throws Doris into a paroxysm of uncontrollable laughter, making her clutch breathlessly at her aching, bursting sides.

Doris, “The epileptic on the bed/ [Who] Curves backward, clutching at her sides”, clearly prefigures Thompson’s Mary. She is “in stitches . . . tied down on the bed”. Sweeney’s antics, similarly, foreshadow Joseph’s playing of the ukulele, “standing on his head.”

The worm which loves – and by implication destroys – the sacred rose is borrowed from Blake’s “The Sick Rose”, one of his Songs of Experience:

*O Rose, thou art sick,
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm,
Has found thy bed of crimson joy;
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.*

And finally, the picture of Mary and Joseph, “watching the border” and awaiting a momentous birth again recalls Yeats’ nightmare prophecy of the Second Coming:

*The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born.*

The Old Changing Way

Secular elucidations of the later proposition that “A Heart Needs A Home”. Although “The Old Changing Way” shares something of the naivety and idealism of “The New St. George”, it is redeemed by the strength of the story line and the specificity in Thompson’s description of a dying way of life. The archetypal tale of Darby and his brother Tam prefigures that of a much later couple who would “tinker lamps and

pots and knives wherever [they] went” and pick “fruit down in Kent” but who would still stumble apart “in the Gower one time” on the old changing way. The conversational phrasing of “The Old Changing Way” is characteristic of Thompson at his most powerful as a songwriter. The song has the feel of a very old song from the oral tradition, references to spikes and brothels notwithstanding, and as an elegy for a dying way of life ranks alongside Jez Lowe’s laments for the death of communities in the North East. One is also reminded specifically of the great Mick FitzGerald song, “All Our Trades Are Gone”. June Tabor’s introduction to her stately recording of the latter song captures perfectly the tone and message of Thompson’s earlier masterpiece:

There was a time in the not so distant past when gypsy peoples had a place in rural society, travelling from farm to farm and from village to the edge of small towns, mending the pots and pans and kettles that poor people couldn’t afford to replace. Travelling tinsmiths, that’s what “tinker” means. And in between times, they did the seasonal work in the fields, picking potatoes, peas, hops down in Kent, berries up in the North East of Scotland. And if people were suspicious of them, and if they weren’t exactly well liked, they were tolerated. I can remember as a child the gypsy women coming to the door selling pegs and baskets. I remember the horse trains. But times have changed and now we live in an age of plastic and Euro-agriculture. And this proud and ancient nomadic people are trapped in a society that increasingly refuses to understand them or their needs.

And intolerance and persecution [are] on the increase from the highest to the low. And the basic human rights, so hard won, are about to be denied to them. . . Just think what it’s like to be a gypsy. Just put yourself in their place the next time you pass their vans on the road. And you’ll know which are theirs – the polished chrome and the proud displays of china and glass. And a look of desperation in the eyes of the people who live under constant harassment when all our trades are gone.

Twisted

More rain, another lovelorn Lothario and the first of Thompson’s great songs about the demon drink – “Down Where The Drunkards Roll” would follow shortly and the pinnacle represented by “God Loves A Drunk” would be tackled in due course. As Linda makes clear, Thompson was writing with the benefit of no little experience of imbibing: “He was a big drinker, but he was never really drunk much, he had a fantastic capacity for booze. I don’t remember him drinking beer, but I think spirits and wine. He used to do horoscopes and he would do people’s birth chart and charge a bottle of wine.” [PH112]. The song title is an appropriate summation of the themes of the album – mankind individually and collectively “twisted” with no redemption in sight beyond that offered by a second-hand patron saint and no consolation outside booze, a brothel or a dirty book. The chorus of the

opening track rings like a mantra through the whole album – “live in fear, live in fear”.

Henry The Human Fly is Thompson’s “nearly” album. The review by Andrew Means in *Melody Maker*, which so wounded Thompson, is not that wide of the mark:

Some of Richard Thompson’s ideas sound great – which is really the saving grace of this album, because most of the music doesn’t. The tragedy is that Thompson’s “British Rock Music” is such an unconvincing concoction ... Even the songs that do integrate rock and traditional styles of electric guitar rhythms and accordion and fiddle decoration – and also include explicit, meaningful lyrics – are marred by bottle-up vocals, uninspiring guitar phrases and a general lack of conviction in performance.

If one puts to one side the fatuous implication that “explicit” and “meaningful” are somehow synonymous, Means’ comments are largely valid. Thompson himself has subsequently acknowledged the poor quality of the vocals and has admitted his failure to do himself justice as a guitar player. What really hits home however is Means’ assertion that the music simply doesn’t sound that great. There is a fine dividing line between the emotive, rootsy purity of The Band to which Thompson so clearly aspired, and the murky mix and tentative performances that we hear on Henry. And Thompson must shoulder the blame, as writer, performer and co-producer, for a failure to think through what an album of “British Rock Music” was actually going to sound like. At this stage in his career, there

was a clear disconnect between the manifesto, as enshrined in the album’s opening track, and the finished product. To be fair, he has subsequently ‘fessed up to Patrick Humphries that he didn’t really think too much at the time about the challenge of fusing traditional British and contemporary American musical cultures. That sounds less like the careful blending of the alchemist and more like an apprentice chef tossing a few available ingredients in the wok and giving them a quick stir. Henry has its moments of haute cuisine but perhaps its over-riding value is as a learning experience for Thompson himself and as a yardstick by which to judge the dish of full-blown genius that directly followed it.

I WANT TO SEE THE BRIGHT LIGHTS TONIGHT

1. When I Get To The Border
2. The Calvary Cross
3. Withered and Died
4. I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight
5. Down Where The Drunkards Roll
6. We Sing Hallelujah
7. Has He Got A Friend For Me
8. The Little Beggar Girl
9. The End Of The Rainbow
10. The Great Valerio

All songs written by Richard Thompson. Produced by Richard Thompson and John Wood.

Players – Richard and Linda Thompson with Timi Donald (drums), Pat Donaldson (bass), Simon Nicol (dulcimer), John Kirkpatrick (anglo concertina and accordion), Brian Gulland (krummhorn), Richard Harvey (krummhorn), Royston Wood (backing vocal), Trevor Lucas (backing vocal), CWS (Manchester) Silver Band.

UK Release April 1974. Island ILPS 9266.

The impact on the 23-year-old Richard Thompson of critical hostility and public indifference to the release of Henry The Human Fly in April 1972 was summed up by Linda with typical forthrightness:

He was very young, and it was his first solo album, and it got slated. I remember we went for a walk on Hampstead Heath one Thursday morning, and he got Melody Maker, and he sat down and read it, and couldn't believe it. Because, you know, he thought it was good ... It's a wonderful record. Okay, the vocals could have been mixed further forward, but it's terrific. Anyway, when you're that age, and it's your first record, and everybody says it's absolute garbage ... He went into a severe decline ... I don't think he was ever going to make another record. [PH 135].

One consequence of the trauma was that Linda, quite literally, moved from backstage to a position of prominence that she would occupy professionally for much of the next ten years. In the wake of Henry the pair, who were married on 30th October 1972, eked out a living in the folk clubs where, in Humphries' words, Richard played "the serious folkie musician, doodling with his range of foot-operated bass-pedals, while Linda connected with the crowd." In Linda's words, "We went back to doing all these really crummy, smoky clubs. But he quite liked it. He was into American music well before he was into English music, so for him it was much more of a novelty." But according to Humphries, Thompson found the competitiveness and narrow-mindedness of the folk world stultifying. Thompson's own comments suggest that he found the folk scene "incredibly bitchy and everybody hated everybody else, and was really jealous of success – real backbiting place." [PH 42]. Either way, the public partnership with Linda in the clubs at least enabled Richard to undergo the kind

of public recuperation and rehabilitation that he would probably have found impossible in her absence. The inner healing would however be a more protracted and complex process, as reflected in the songs, which comprised *I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight*. The album was recorded in May 1973, although its release was delayed by Island until April 1974. Thompson has made it clear that the songs on the album were all fairly recent: "It was just whatever songs had been written in the last year or so – I don't think there was a particular philosophy." [PH 144]. As one might expect, therefore, the album is rich in songs that reflect a barely concealed bitterness and hurt at the treatment afforded Henry, and an overt questioning by Thompson of his role as a writer and performer and of his relationship with his muse and his audience.

Less predictable, however, is the sense of spiritual longing that permeates the album. While the motif of the Redeemer, the new St. George, required to save an endangered planet had run strongly through Henry, the emphasis in *Bright Lights* falls firmly on the quest for personal redemption and the difficulty of attaining salvation in a world of broken relationships and shattered dreams. And the language shifts also from the measured and distanced to the intensely personal and urgent, from "Mary and Joseph were watching the border" to "when I get to the border". This inevitably raises the question, which he would no doubt dismiss, of the significance of *Bright Lights* in the context of Thompson's own conversion to Islam. In interview, Thompson describes a search for truth stretching over a number of years, leading to a chance encounter which crystallised all that he had been seeking:

When I was about sixteen I started to get interested in life, you know, in Zen – I think that was the first thing, finding a book on Zen in a bookshop and thinking 'wow, this is just great'. So I was a sort of weekend spiritual person for some considerable time – I suppose I read my way through the Stuart Watkins philosophy bookshop. A for Anthroposophist to Z for Zen and I thought gosh, these Sufi's sound really cool, this is really where it's at, this is just great. That was about 1973, and it was like whatever you were thinking inside suddenly appears on the outside. That strange thing that happens in life where even if you don't know it, you're being a magnet for something. Suddenly while I'm thinking all this sort of pseudo-spiritual stuff about how great the Sufi's are, suddenly the real ones turn up and I thought 'wow, what's going on here?' [PH 150].

There seems little doubt that the chance encounter with the Sufi group on the Euston Road which Thompson describes above took place after the songs for *Bright Lights* were written, if not recorded. Equally, it is hard to escape the suspicion that in those songs Thompson was betraying, whether consciously or unconsciously, an urgent inner compulsion to find peace and to believe. The sense of some kind of spiritual quest is generated systematically by means of clusters of interlocking primary images that permeate the album. The strongest cluster relates to a journey which either must be taken or which the protagonist is prevented from taking:

- *I'm packing up and running away ...*
- *A one-way ticket's in my hand ...*
- *One day you catch a train/ Never leave the station.*
- *Meet me at the station, don't be late ...*
- *I've been down to London, I've been up to Crewe ...*
- *If you've got the cab fare, mister, you'll do alright ...*
- *She lives out on the highway ...*
- *Silver moon sail up ... On the waters so wide ...*
- *You can be a sailor who never left dry land.*
- *He's got the haunt of the sea in his eyes.*

Imagery of light appears throughout the album, implying not simply the lights of the big city but, metaphorically, spiritual illumination and, as we have seen elsewhere, artistic inspiration:

- *Scrub me till I shine in the dark.*
- *I'll be your light till Doomsday.*
- *My claw's in you and my light in you.*
- *... silver moon shine ...*
- *I want to see the bright lights tonight.*
- *Till the shining star appears.*
- *Fools who think they see the light ...*

Images of money and theft – and by analogy the theme of emotional and spiritual impoverishment which would feature so strongly in Hokey Pokey – are prevalent:

- *Dirty people take what's mine ...*

- *I need to spend some money and it just won't wait.*
- *You can get the real thing, it'll only cost a pound ...*
- *... She keeps her money clean.*
- *I love taking money off a snob like you.*
- *If you give me your money, it'll do you no harm.*
- *Tycoons and barrow boys will rob you ...*

And any doubt concerning the religious connotations of these clusters is surely removed by a thread of Christian iconography and Biblical allusion which runs throughout the album:

- *Heading for the chosen land ...*
- *I was under the Calvary Cross ...*
- *He covers himself with thorns ...*
- *I could be in the gutter, or dangling down from a tree.*
- *I'll be your light till Doomsday.*
- *You can be Lord Jesus, all the world will understand.*
- *We sing Hallelujah.*
- *Till the shining star appears.*
- *He looks like God made him with something to spare.*
- *That's according to Saul when he laid down the Law.*
- *I'd much rather be rich after than before.*
- *There's nothing at the end of the rainbow.*
- *We stumble in the mire.*
- *Fools who think they see the light.*

Accompanying the shift in language and step-change in imagistic density and coherence on Bright Lights is a much

greater emphasis on the creation of character. The focus shifts, if you like, from “the future of the world” to “the future of these particular people”. *Bright Lights* is populated with strong, complex characters “speaking” in their own voices with an immediacy and authenticity to which, from Henry, only the creations of the poor ditching boy and Darby the tinker come close. Brian Eno, interviewed by BBC Radio Two, spoke at length, with characteristic enthusiasm and fluency, about the richness and complexity of characterisation on *Bright Lights*:

On this particular record, the songs I like best are the darker songs - I think they're great at dark songs. Even the ones which are supposed to be quite 'up' actually have a sinister undertone to them. You know, they seem like desperately happy - like in 'I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight'. Probably, if anybody else were singing, it would be a straightforward, happy song. But when they do it, there's a kind of overtone of desperation - like, 'I've just got to try and be happy tonight'. You know what I mean? It's not a simple form of happiness somehow. And, of course, the very dark songs - like 'Withered and Died', for instance, and 'Down Where The Drunkards Roll' - I love those. Those are really my favourites, I think. Talking about his lyrics is interesting, 'cos I very rarely bother with anyone's lyrics. I don't listen to lyrics that much, and generally I think that they don't make a huge contribution in most music. But in this music, they're very, very important. And he does manage to draw these characters who you feel tremendous pity

for somehow. They're people who seem to be stuck, to be in difficult situations. People who are capable of very complicated and mixed-up emotions, of being idiotically gleeful, at the same time as being terminally miserable, you know. I mean, a lot of these people are clearly at the bottom of the pile socially, and yet there's a real braveness about the way they jump up and dance, whatever the circumstances.

Noticeable, too, is the emergence of strong female “speakers” for the first time in Thompson’s writing. The great Thompson songs performed by Sandy Denny were either written in the third person – “Crazy Man Michael” – or featured a non-gender-specific persona – “Genesis Hall”. In the songs on *Bright Lights*, Thompson is at times writing specifically for a female voice and testing the effects that can be achieved by using that voice in specific contexts. But the first voice on *Bright Lights* is Thompson’s and the effect is electrifying.

When I Get To The Border

No “gentle ladies, gentle men” this time - the opening bars to this song convey a real sense of yearning. The Fly’s ironic detachment is put aside, to be replaced with a deep sense of hurt: “Dirty people take what’s mine ...” Objective correlatives be damned! Think instead of Yeats’ bitter postscript to *Responsibilities*: “all my priceless things/ Are but a post the passing dogs defile.” But, affronted dignity aside, what is this song really all about and where and what is the border?

On a fairly literal level, “When I get To The Border” is a simple escapist song. The protagonist expresses dissatisfaction with the workaday world – “Monday morning, closing in on me” – and determines to escape to the “chosen land” beyond the border, where all troubles will evaporate in the company of the “girl with the yellow hair.” The protagonist is in good company. American literature, in particular, is rich in quests for a new life, new experience and a new identity beyond the frontier. One thinks of Huck Finn, lighting out for the Territory; of Melville, spurning the security of the shore in order to confront the nature of creation on the high seas; or of Jack Kerouac, out there on the road:

I woke up as the sun was reddening; and that was the one distinct time in my life, the strangest moment of all, when I didn't know who I was ... I wasn't scared; I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost. I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future, and maybe that's why it happened right there and then, that strange red afternoon.

And the motif of lighting out for the border is particularly strong in American popular culture, as evinced by the number of “road songs” in country music. Hank Williams’ “Ramblin’ Man” is a prime example:

*Some folks might say that I'm no good;
That I wouldn't settle down if I could*

*But when that open road starts to callin' me
There's something o'er the hill that I gotta see.
Sometimes it's hard, but you gotta understand,
When the Lord made me, He made a Ramblin' Man.*

That kind of spirit imbues “When I Get To The Border” and Williams’ reference to the Lord is particularly apposite. This is another of Thompson’s songs of the “pilgrim soul”, written by Thompson at a time of particularly acute personal need. The specific influences, as so often, come from Eliot. The latter’s much publicised and dissected conversion to Christianity was not a single event but a tortuous and, at times, tortured process stretching over many years. His spiritual odyssey was reflected in major works throughout his poetic and dramatic career. Thus, in one of the earliest poems, St. Narcissus is motivated to leave the common press of humanity in the city and seek rebirth through martyrdom in the desert: “He could not live men’s ways, but became a dancer before God.” And it is only in *The Four Quartets*, over twenty years later, that some kind of resolution and spiritual fulfilment is finally achieved, in the form of “a white light still and moving.”

But the poem which most nearly reflects the theme and the mood of “When I Get To The Border” is Eliot’s “Ash-Wednesday”, published in its final form in 1930. In the Christian calendar, Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, the period of forty days of fasting that precedes Easter. This is the time when the Christian repents for his past sins and turns away from the world towards God. Eliot’s poem represents the beginning of an exile’s arduous journey from a life of

tormented human love in the prayerful hope of finding, like Dante, a *vita nuova* in divine love. In the pivotal second part of “Ash-Wednesday”, the exile describes to the “Lady” how he has become dead to his former life. His bones are now scattered in the desert, singing whilst happily awaiting spiritual rebirth. Thompson’s theme in “When I Get To The Border” could be simply paraphrased in other words spoken by Eliot’s exile: “I who am here dissembled/ Proffer my deeds to oblivion, and my love/ To the posterity of the desert.” The narrative thread of the song clearly reflects the progress of Eliot’s narrator – the rejection of the time-bound world of work and worry in search of spiritual rebirth in the sand and dust of the desert. Eliot’s bones chirp happily; Thompson’s protagonist dances down the dusty street.

Certain words and phrases used by Thompson have particular relevance and resonance when seen in the context of “Ash-Wednesday”. The use of the archaic word “sawbones”, for example, recalls Eliot’s bones in the desert. The reference to the “one-way ticket” also relates to Eliot’s poem. The latter’s original title for the opening section of “Ash-Wednesday” was “All aboard for Nachez, Cairo and St. Louis”. This, the rail conductor’s final boarding call for the rail journey to St. Louis, was a distant echo from Eliot’s childhood but also a direct “lift” from the 1927 phonograph record, “The Two Black Crows”, recorded by the American vaudeville team, Moran and Mack. Thompson’s reference to the “dusty road” is also quite deliberate and specific. In the church ceremony on Ash Wednesday, the priest marks the foreheads of the laity with

ashes in the form of a cross, saying, “Remember, O man, that thou art as dust and unto dust thou shalt return.”

The only seemingly obscure reference in Thompson’s song is to the “salty girl with yellow hair”, who does not seem to relate comfortably to the manifold Lady of “Ash-Wednesday.” When taken in conjunction with the immediately preceding reference to “sand”, Thompson’s girl may recall the final section of “Ash-Wednesday” in which the exile dreams of the granite rocks on New England’s shores and “the salt savour of the sandy earth.” Equally, the salty girl may refer to Eliot’s Marina – literally “of the sea” – the subject of an eponymous poem, which also centres on renunciation, rebirth and restoration. I would also add that the proximity of references to “sand”, “salty girl” and “yellow hair” might also imply a particularly personal allusion to Sandy Denny.

Although “Ash-Wednesday” is the Eliot poem which seems to prefigure “When I Get To The Border” most closely, it should also be noted that Eliot’s play, *The Family Reunion*, deals with similar themes, in language which closely recalls that used by Thompson. The play centres on a man, Harry, who believes that he has destroyed his wife and must pay a life-long penance if his soul is to be saved. The form and location of this penance is not clear but Harry is aware that it entails “worship in the desert” that lies on the other side of despair. Henry’s aunt Agatha is even more pointed, referring to Harry’s crossing of a frontier, a border that the unprivileged cannot cross [Part II, Scene III].

The Calvary Cross

I've spoken at length earlier about this remarkable song and its crucial position in Thompson's career-long assessment of his relationship with his muse and his audience. From our analysis of the underlying religious theme of "When I Get To The Border", it should now become apparent that "The Calvary Cross" also plays a crucial role in terms of the architecture of the Bright Lights album. From the Lenten pilgrimage to the desert beyond the border, we now move to Calvary and the crucifixion. And lest we think that the juxtaposition of the two songs is accidental, we should for a moment look forward to the end of the album and the image of what now appears as the ascension of the risen Lord:

*High up above the crowd,
The Great Valerio is walking.
The rope seems hung from cloud to cloud
And time stands still while he is walking ...
Fools who think they see the Light ...
[We] feed on what we see above ...
How we wonder, how we wonder ...*

"The Calvary Cross" also sits firmly in the network of imagery on the album. I referred to primary images above but we should also consider secondary images of death:

- *If you see a box of pine/ With a name that looks like mine*
...

- *I'll be your light till Doomsday.*
- *... withered and died ...*
- *... live for a day ...*
- *... he's dead for evermore ...*
- *... dangling down from a tree ...*
- *... I'd much rather be rich after than before.*
- *... the man who holds a bread knife up to your throat*
...
- *There is also a cluster of images of dreams:*
- *Now you can make-believe on your tin whistle.*
- *My dreams have withered and died.*
- *I'm gonna dream till Monday comes in sight.*
- *There goes a troubled woman,/ She dreams a troubled dream.*
- *All running in their sleep, all in a dream.*

Linda, fittingly, related Thompson's private dream of popular success to the image of the cross: "I think [peer recognition has] always been his reward and his cross in a way. 'Esteemed by your peers' is a euphemism for sales figures through a magnifying glass. He always did have that, and critical acclaim." [PH 140].

Withered and Died

This is the first recorded example of Richard Thompson writing with his wife Linda very specifically in mind. The text

of this song says a great deal that Richard Thompson must himself have been feeling in the wake of Henry:

*This cruel country has driven me down,
Teased me and lied, teased me and lied.
I've only sad stories to tell to this town.
My dreams have withered and died.
Once I was bending the tops of the trees,
Kind words in my ear, kind faces to see.*

Thoughts that perhaps lie too deep for human tears. Words, certainly, that Richard Thompson could not put in his own mouth. Linda is therefore used as a mouthpiece, ostensibly performing a song of love lost, but a song that nevertheless treats with Richard Thompson's own deepest fears. "Silver moon sail up and silver moon shine" is as much a prayer for inspiration from the muse as a trite protestation by one forsaken in love. Elvis Costello's cracked and embittered version of the song on *Out Of Our Idiot* gives some idea of what this might have sounded like if Richard Thompson had ever sung it.

I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight

Richard Thompson's first great country and western song. The theme of escaping to the honky-tonk on Saturday night is ages-old. If Thompson had a specific example in mind, it was probably the Ted Daffan song, "I've Got Five Dollars And It's

Saturday Night". This was a 1956 American country hit for Faron Young but Thompson more likely heard the definitive 1965 duet by the great George Jones and the underrated Gene Pitney:

*I've been working hard the whole week long.
Tonight I'm gonna have some wine, women and song.
Gotta work next week but that's alright –
I've got five dollars and it's Saturday night ...*

*There's music and dancin' and flirtin' and fun.
It's gonna go on till way past one.
I'm gonna go where the lights shine bright.
I've got five dollars and it's Saturday night.*

In Thompson's hands, the archetype undergoes a daring transposition – from small town America to inner city Britain; from fiddle solos to a silver band; and, most audacious, from macho Marlborough Man to street-wise Glasgow chick in search of "a couple of drunken nights rolling on the floor". Breathtaking!

"Bright Lights" however is not a one-off. It fits beautifully and pivotally in the structures of the album. "I'm gonna dream till Monday comes in sight" links directly to the album's opening track – "Monday morning, Monday morning closing in on me." The character in "Bright Lights" is a personification of all the fools stumbling "in the mire" in the album's final track. Consider the position of "Bright Lights" within the album's cluster of secondary images of dance and drink:

- *Take me to the dance and hold me tight ...*
- *I'll be dancing down the street ...*
- *I'll dance with my peg-leg a-wiggling at the knee.*
- *As he dances through the air.*
- *A couple of drunken nights rolling on the floor ...*
- *Just say I drowned in a barrel of wine ...*
- *Soon they'll be bleary eyed under a keg of wine/ Down where the drunkards roll.*

Consider also the title of the song and the album – both are “about” spiritual illumination and enlightenment, the “white light” of “Burnt Norton”, at one level.

Down Where The Drunkards Roll

A very dark song. It's interesting to note the significance of alcohol in both of the mainstream popular cultures that have influenced Thompson over the years. The drinking song is a staple of both American country music and British folk music. As we shall see, intoxication is also an important concept underpinning Thompson's Sufi beliefs. One possible template for this gallery of people on the fringe is Hank William's “A Picture From Life's Other Side”:

*In the world's mighty gallery of pictures
Hang the scenes that are painted from life.
There's pictures of love and of passion.
There's pictures of peace and of strife.*

*There hang pictures of youth and of beauty,
Of old age and the blushing young bride.
They just hang on the wall but the maddest of all
Are the pictures of life's other side.*

The two specific pen portraits Hank paints are of a gambler who stakes his dead mother's ring on his last, inevitably losing hand and of a young mother – “an outcast whom no-one will save” – as she takes her last step into the river.

We Sing Hallelujah

An apparently one-dimensional song, though one which clearly reinforces one of the album's dominant themes. The whole album, in a sense, centres on the “shining star” of the chorus.

Has He Got A Friend For Me

So much more than a redraft of Janis Ian's “At Seventeen”. Clearly written as a “Linda vocal” and, unlike Humphries, I find the hard edge to her voice is entirely appropriate. In the context of the album, this lonely lady is the antithesis of her sister in “Bright Lights.”

The Little Beggar Girl

A relatively light-hearted treatment of ideas that would be given fuller consideration in “The Sun Never Shines On The Poor” on Thompson’s next album – “some of the people are crippled and lame” inside as well as outside.

The End Of The Rainbow

Patrick Humphries’ comments on this song are particularly insightful. You do wonder about the timing of this song, appearing so soon after the birth of the Thompsons’ daughter, Muna. It should however be noted that the upbeat and optimistic companion piece, “Rainbow Over The Hill”, had already been demo’d by Thompson in 1972. There is however another perspective worthy of consideration. Eliot’s “Animula” – one of the Ariel collection of poems which also includes “Marina” and “Journey Of The Magi” – traces the corruption of the “little soul” of a child as a result of physical, moral and mental conditioning. Eliot’s child is from the pampered middle classes, “Content with playing-cards and kings and queens,/ What the fairies do and what the servants say”. The spiritual end result is however the same as that likely to be experienced by Thompson’s “little horror.” Eliot’s child ends up “irresolute and selfish, misshapen, lame,/ Unable to fare forward or retreat.” Given Thompson’s familiarity with Eliot’s work, there is a strong argument to be made that “The End Of The Rainbow” is a deliberate parody of “Animula”, but with

the same underlying theme. If this is indeed the case, then the juxtaposition to “The Little Beggar Girl”, who is quite literally “selfish, misshapen, lame”, cannot be accidental.

The Great Valerio

I’ve discussed this wonderful song at great length elsewhere. Patrick Humphries unwittingly places it in the context of the times: “Bowie was teasing the media with the death of Ziggy and the birth of Aladdin Sane.” Richard Thompson was – still is – teasing the media and the world at large with the death of Henry and the birth of Valerio. In the welter of image and allusion in both this song and the album, it is worth noting and admiring the way in which the closing couplet – “I’m your friend until you use me/ And then be sure I won’t be there.” – pulls together all the references to damaged friendships and breaches of trust in the album:

- *Dirty people take what’s mine ...*
- *... I’ll hurt you till you need me.*
- *Teased me and lied, teased me and lied.*
- *Count one to ten and he’s gone with the rest.*
- *Steal from the bed of some good friend of mine.*
- *If you’ve got the cab fare, mister, you’ll do alright ...*
- *He’s looking for the real thing. Lies are all he found.*
- *He plays when somebody scrapes on the bow ...*
- *And nobody wants to know anyone lonely like me... etc*
- *... I love taking money off a snob like you ...*

- *Ev'ry loving handshake/ Is just another man to beat ...*
- *... I'll be a friend, I'll tell you what's in store.*

And in the welter of image and allusion in both this song and the album, I hesitate to toss in another suggestion as to the overall “message”. I have however been intrigued for years by the maybe serendipitous echoes in the album, back to a 1939 cinematic fantasy about a young girl who crosses a border to a chosen land:

Someplace where there isn't any trouble. Do you suppose there is such a place Toto? There must be. It's not a place you can get to by a boat or a train. It's far, far, far away, behind the moon, beyond the rain. [Sings] Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high ...

Fanciful? Maybe, but the pictorial images and the dark verbal ironies stick. The “dirty people” – literally Black & White – taking Toto. Dorothy escaping down that long “dusty road” towards the Kansas horizon and, later in Munchkinland, “dancing down the street ... paved with gold”. The Scarecrow nailed to a post. The Cowardly Lion “spoiling for a fight.” The four friends, woozy and stumbling in the Wicked Witch's poppy field, like drunkards. “We Sing Hallelujah”, in the context of the album, paralleling the film's “The Merry Old Land Of Oz.” Dorothy, locked in a turret room in the Wicked Witch's castle as the sands of time run out, facing the reality of the end of the rainbow: “I'm trying to get home to you, Auntie Em. Oh, Auntie Em, don't go away. I'm frightened. Come back!

Come back!” The final encounter with The Great (and Powerful) Valerio/Oz – “Oh no, my dear. I'm a very good man. I'm just a very bad wizard.” And the Wizard himself, floating off in his balloon, leaving Dorothy seemingly stranded: “I'm your friend until you use me/ And then be sure I won't be there.”

Fanciful? Maybe, but the standout track on Thompson's next album reached a conclusion very like Dorothy's: “Anyway, Toto, we're home. And this is my room. And you're all here. And I'm not going to leave here ever, ever again, because I love you all. Oh, Auntie Em. There's no place like home.” In 1999, Richard Thompson featured on the Norma Waterson album, *The Very Thought Of You*, which included stunning versions of “Over The Rainbow” and “Bluebird”, John B. Spencer's tribute to Judy Garland.

I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight has achieved cult status, not least for the speed and economy with which it was recorded. Thompson was typically off-hand in describing the sessions:

I think we got lucky on that record in that everything worked first time. And the sort of budgets that we used to be on on records, sometimes if you didn't get something right, if you didn't conceive of something in the right way, it was too bad. There wasn't time to rewrite anything or go back over something. Our budgets were minuscule. In fact, I think we did ‘Bright Lights’ for £2,500. That's cheap! That's fast! That's doing all the tracks in three days. Overdubs, another day. Mix! Bump! Finished! But as I say, we were lucky, you know - the rhythm section was very steady,

we sang it reasonably well for the time, all the ideas worked, and it's a fairly good collection of songs. So I'm not too unhappy with that record. It's hard to like your own records, but I don't actually dislike that one. [R2B]

Linda paid tribute to the calibre of the musicians:

I adored Henry The Human Fly and when that came out it got terrible reviews and people didn't think he was singing in English and thought it was at the wrong speed and everything. I mean, moronic, these people! I thought it was absolutely great. He was slain by those reviews, you know. He was very upset. So I think the songs were a little different on Bright Lights. We did it in three days....if ever there were any hold-ups on the record, it was me saying, 'Can I please do the vocal again?' 'Cos everyone else did everything first time, with a fag in one hand and a pint in the other - you know, 'standing-on-your-head time'. You know, it was those far-off days where everyone was brilliant. Everyone could play their instruments. [R2B]

Brian Eno waxed lyrical on the quality of the Thompsons' vocals:

I loved their voices and I think they really worked very, very well together. And it was a kind of dark and light quality that the two of them had. She's got such a silvery tone and he has such a muddy, deep wood tone to his voice somehow. So they're a very good combination, because they also,

in a way, represent the two facets of the music, the two things in the music that always set up this tension - which is the basic sombreness of a lot of their music and the aspiration to get out of it, to rise, you know, which I hear in her voice a lot. So I think as a duo, they were one of the great duos. [R2B]

Bright Lights was the album in which Richard Thompson came of age. In the face of career uncertainty and spiritual doubt, he passed over one of the most difficult borders of all - the one that separates mere precocious talent from genius.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SHOOT OUT THE LIGHTS

The period between the recording of *I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight* in May 1973 and the final release of *Shoot Out The Lights* in 1982 was in many ways the most interesting for anyone keen to understand the life of Richard Thompson or the development of his art. The first definitive expression of Thompson's conversion to Islam appeared in the majestic "A Heart Needs A Home" on the *Hokey Pokey* album in 1975. Later the same year *Pour Down Like Silver* was released. This album represents one of the highpoints of Thompson's recording career and stands as one of the few truly great religious albums of the rock era. There followed a three-year sabbatical during which Thompson did not record under his own name, appeared in concert infrequently and, indeed, spent an extended period in a religious retreat. The return to the studio in 1978 was a less than satisfactory experience. *First Light* is probably the weakest album to carry the Richard Thompson moniker. The follow-up, *Sunnyvista*, was also a curate's egg of an album and by the end of the decade Thompson appeared to have a stellar future behind him. From the ensuing personal, professional and spiritual crisis, the second masterpiece of his career was forged.

HOKEY POKEY

1. Hokey Pokey (The Ice Cream Song)
2. I'll Regret It All In The Morning
3. Smiffy's Glass Eye
4. The Egypt Room
5. Never Again
6. Georgie On A Spree
7. Old Man Inside A Young Man
8. The Sun Never Shines On The Poor
9. A Heart Needs A Home
10. Mole In A Hole [*]

All songs written by Richard Thompson, except [*], written by Mike Waterson. Produced by John Wood and Simon Nicol.

Players – Richard and Linda Thompson with Timi Donald (drums, percussion), Pat Donaldson (bass), John Kirkpatrick (accordion), Ian Whiteman (piano, flute, organ), Aly Bain (fiddle), Sidonie Goossens (harp), Simon Nicol (guitar, piano, organ, electric 12 string guitar, vocals), "A Select Few" from CWS (Manchester) Silver Band.

We need to take a biographical time-out. The delays between the recordings and subsequent releases of Bright Lights and Hokey Pokey mean that it is easy to confuse the chronology of the private history of Richard and Linda with the “public record” reflected in album release dates. Given the importance of Hokey Pokey as a “transitional” album in Thompson’s artistic biography, it is worth pausing to summarise and reflect on what happened in real time rather than Island time. Quotations from friends and colleagues are taken from *Strange Affair*:

- October 1972 – Richard and Linda were married.
- Winter 1972/3 – Muna was born.
- May 1973 – Bright Lights album was recorded.
- Autumn 1973 – Richard and Linda toured briefly as a trio, Hokey Pokey, with Simon Nicol: “Before there was an effort to make it into an electric band, we did the folk clubs as a trio ... It was just after they got married, and it was lovely. I look back on that period with great affection ... It was really powerful. You could hear a pin drop at most of those gigs. Rapt attention. Two acoustic guitars, and the bass pedals went through a little backline combo amp, we’d use house microphones ... It was stuff from Bright Lights ... and Hokey Pokey, in the process of creation, Hank Williams’ songs ...”

Note that Hokey Pokey material was being performed and developed at this stage – before the couple’s formal conversion to Islam and some twelve months before the album was eventually recorded. The chronology here is crucial in explaining the predominant “pre-conversion” style and content of the album, its overall upbeat feel and the caesura that exists between the first eight tracks and the first great “post conversion” song, “A Heart Needs A Home.” The final track, “Mole In A Hole”, was an expedient addition which smoothed over the cracks and homogenised the album as a whole. As noted below, if Mike Waterson hadn’t already written that particular song, Thompson would have probably felt compelled to come up with something similar.

- Winter 1973/4 – Linda: “When Muna was a few months old, Richard and I converted to Islam and left the flat in [Thurston Road] Hampstead for the commune [in Bristol Gardens, Maida Vale] soon after.”
- April 1974 – Bright Lights album was released.
- Spring 1974 – Richard, Linda and Simon, plus others toured as Sour Grapes, supporting Traffic. The effect of the conversion was by then very apparent to Simon: “When we did that tour with Traffic, it was obvious that they were making compromises, that they were beginning to draw away ... from infidel society, and my feelings of being a trio with a rhythm section started to move towards a rhythm section accompanying a couple ... I think they were spending more time with people who read the Koran than with

those that didn't. And there were more musicians who didn't read the Koran than those who did."

- Autumn 1974 – Hokey Pokey was recorded over a twelve-week period. The effect of the conversion on Simon himself was by now even more apparent, according to John Kirkpatrick: "I remember at a break in one session ... Simon was literally crying into his beer. He couldn't believe the change that had come over Richard. He'd known him all his life and now it was like somebody else you had to start getting to know all over again. The most spectacular thing was that every couple of hours, he'd get out his prayer mat and dive down. After a take, he'd be on his knees and you didn't quite know what to do! You know, we'd look at each other and say, 'Are we supposed to join in?' ... They would both do it. It was very public to begin with ... Linda was certainly into it as well. But gradually that aspect of it became much more discreet. He would just disappear, then reappear ... He was still just as funny and witty and playing just as well, so I don't think it affected his work."

I bought Hokey Pokey on its release in spring 1975 largely on the strength of its predecessor. Even Steeleye fans loved Bright Lights. After the mandatory first half-dozen airings, I rarely played it, let alone listened to it. I must have reacted to it as Patrick Humphries did: mild amusement at the "fnar fnar humour" of the title track; distant admiration of the guitar twiddly bits in the middle; puzzlement at the borrowed finale of Mike Waterson's "Mole In A Hole", in which "the novelty soon palls." I probably stopped short of Steve Lake's view that,

in Hokey Pokey, Thompson had "hit rock bottom with this hopelessly twee and banal bunch of tunes." But it still took me another twenty years, having finally understood the time-line and got my mind around at least some of the manifold allusions buried within the album, to reach the conclusion that Hokey Pokey is a minor Thompson masterpiece, which makes it a hell of an album by mortal standards.

What now strikes one forcibly now is the remarkable cohesiveness of the album. The extensive use of very English popular musical styles – folk, music hall, lullabies, brass bands, playground songs and pub sing-alongs – is the closest Thompson came in the context of a single album to replicating The Band's achievement in deploying a wide variety of indigenous American musical styles. The Englishness of the musical settings is reinforced by the dominant allusions in many of the songs – Shakespeare, William Blake and George Formby loom large. The honorary English lyric poet, Yeats, turns up in his established role as compound ghost. Eliot takes a sabbatical after his extended workout on Bright Lights. And the thematic coherence of the album is all the more remarkable given that Thompson was integrating earlier preoccupations with a newfound faith in Islam. Structurally, too, the album hangs together beautifully. The pivotal song is "The Sun Never Shines On The Poor" and its proposition that "most of the people are poor in the heart." Everything that precedes "The Sun Never Shines ..." amplifies this basic thesis, the rejoinder to which is provided by the album's two concluding songs.

Hokey Pokey (The Ice Cream Song)

The title track establishes a basic premise: in a world of emotional and spiritual impoverishment, people will find release and relief through all the perverted, distracted and distracting channels that twentieth century, post industrial society makes available. The escape routes may be characterised generically as “Hokey Pokey”, but they are exemplified specifically, verse by verse: money, drugs, food, sex, dreams, violence and sexual perversion. The tone may well be, in Humphries’ phrase, “Carry On Pokeying”, but the underlying message could not be more serious. The pun in the alternative title – “The I Scream Song” – is not accidental. What is there to do but to let rip with an existential holler at the futility of it all?

The song’s specific inspiration comes not from the “Carry On” films, so popular in the sixties, but from George Formby. In the thirties and forties, Formby was a massive presence in British popular entertainment. According to his biographer, David Bret: “On stage and screen, [he] rapidly established himself as the seemingly inarticulate little man who nevertheless triumphs over adversity to ultimately prove that he is by no means as gormless as one has assumed – armed with the weapons of his particular trade: a ukulele, a clutch of catchy songs, a huge toothy grin, and a charisma which unequivocally placed him above all his contemporaries.” The “clutch of catchy songs” was by no means universally accepted. Formby attracted widespread media condemnation for the alleged prurience of the lyrics in many of his songs, culminating in the banning by the BBC of “When I’m Cleaning Windows.”

The head of the Beeb, the puritanical John Reith, took great exception to these innocuous lines:

*Pyjamas lying side by side,
Ladies’ nighties I have spied,
I’ve often seen what goes inside,
When I’m cleaning windows.*

The broadcaster Peter Clayton, reviewing a newly published collection of Formby songs in the Sunday Telegraph in 1974, emphasised the similarity of the songs to the saucy postcards of Donald McGill, celebrated for their malapropisms and double-entendres:

Possession of a book of George Formby songs is roughly the equivalent of having your own rotating wire stand full of seaside comic postcards. “When I’m Cleaning Windows” is pure Donald McGill set to music, an aria about honeymoon couples, bathrooms, underwear and old maids. Verses about Blackpool rock, flannelette nightshirts, violin bows and the prowess of the handyman constitute a crescendo of innuendo in song after song. As you read through them you see why adults would exchange significant glances over your then innocent head when George Formby records were plonked on the wind-up gramophones of your childhood.

Bret reports that George’s favourite postcard was the one that features the incandescent casualty patient, the incompetent nurse and the indomitable Hattie Jacques-style Matron:

"No, nurse, I said prick his boil!" Richard Thompson's favourite smutty post card has not been identified, but his initial painful immersion in Formby's oeuvre came, most likely, from the seemingly endless re-runs of the latter's films on black and white TV which alleviated – or exacerbated – the Sunday tea times of the soul in fifties Britain. We were all scarred by the experience, but with the benefit of forty years hindsight, we probably all look back with a modicum of nostalgic affection. Thompson certainly paid his own tribute to Formby during his set at Folk City, New York, in September 1982:

I'm going to do something really pathetic now – as if the rest of the set wasn't. This is a George Formby song. This is really lowering the tone of the evening considerably. George Formby's a joke in England, you know. [Laughs] He always was. He's the one with the teeth and the ukulele. I don't think he exported very well. His humour was strictly North English. He didn't even export to the South of England. He was extremely gormless. He was a sort of American Ukulele Ike, you know, except Ukulele Ike was probably more talented. But I don't know ... Anyway, our George did do some interesting numbers and this is one of them.

Dismissive introduction completed, Thompson launches into what can only be described as a loving rendition of "Why Don't Women Like Me," a Cottrell, Bennett and Formby composition that appeared in the 1934 film, *Boots, Boots*:

*Take Lord Nelson, with one limb,
Lady Hamilton she fell for him.
With one arm and one eye gone west,
She ran like the devil and she grabbed the rest.
Now if women like them like men like those, why don't women
like me?*

I quote this song for three reasons. First, there are specific verbal echoes here, which we can pick up at our leisure in *Hokey Pokey*. Think of Smiffy with "one eye gone west". Compare the sexual ambiguity implicit in Formby's hook line with the androgynous characters in the final verse of "Hokey Pokey." Secondly, this is actually highly literate song writing and one can see this kind of verbal dexterity and adroitness throughout *Hokey Pokey*. Thompson actually learned something from Formby's nudge, nudge, wink, wink populist offerings. Thirdly, Formby's song is actually very funny and it's well worth hunting out a copy. Thompson has been understandably critical of bootleg copies of his performances but, in this case, I wouldn't trade my illegal copy of "Why Don't Women ..." for anything but a legal "RT Plays GF" tribute album. The specific template for "Hokey Pokey" was provided by the Gifford, Cliffe and Formby composition, "With My Little Stick Of Blackpool Rock": "It may be sticky but I never complain,/ It's nice to have a nibble at it now and again."

In structural terms, there are two particular references in "Hokey Pokey", which link this song unequivocally to "The Sun Never Shines On The Poor" which, as noted, is the pivotal song on the album. First, the sun-warmed (i.e. "in need of

cooling right down”) children in the former, money in hand, relate to the sun-deprived, impoverished urchins in the latter. Second, the ringing of the ice cream bell echoes the ringing of the devil’s bell in “Sun Never Shines.”

I’ll Regret It All In The Morning

This is one of Thompson’s great “sucker punches.” The opening bars of a gentle lullaby – does it remind you of Dana’s “All Kinds Of Everything”? – are followed by some of the most downbeat and downright nasty lyrics that Thompson has ever written:

*Whisky helps to clear my head.
Bring it with you into bed.
If I beat you nearly dead,
I’ll regret it all in the morning.*

The mouthpiece in the song is one of Thompson’s most depraved creations and, in an album chock-full of those who are “poor in the heart”, this character stands out as probably the furthest from possible redemption. The trite title and hook rings as a hollow mantra throughout the song, and typifies Thompson’s ability to take a hackneyed phrase and give it weight and significance in an unusual context. Whenever Thompson resorts to the “twee and banal”, it is for a purpose. Compare the use of the trite phrase in this song with similar conscious exploitations of devalued phrases in “Put It There

Pal”, “I Feel So Good” or “Taking My Business Elsewhere”, then retake your GCSE English exam! In this case, the impoverished, debased language accords perfectly with the hollow sentiments that Thompson’s character expresses and with the moral and spiritual vacuum at the centre of his being.

“I’ll Regret It All ...” picks up a recurrent theme of William Blake – the relationship between “commerce” and sexual brutality. We saw it earlier in *Daughters of Albion*. The phrasing – “Here’s my ticket take me there” – also recalls “Bright Lights” – “If you’ve got the cab fare, mister, you’ll do alright” – and prefigures both Billy and Georgie’s transactions with the opposite sex. The basis of the human relationship at the heart of “I’ll Regret It All ...” is summed up in the simple phrase “we shiver in the dark.” The sexual connotations in this phrase maybe come from Yeats: “all creation shivers with that sweet cry” and again, from “Crazy Jane and Jack The Journeyman”:

*I know, although when looks meet
I tremble to the bone,
The more I leave the door unlatched
The sooner love is gone,
For love is but a skein unwound
Between the dark and dawn.*

And the nocturnal trembling and shivering, of course, takes us back to the title track – “the stuff that’ll cool you right down, / It’s the best thing they ever did sell” – and back beyond that to Henry and the glossy pin-ups who “can’t hold a candle to something that trembles.” Most telling, though,

is the way in which Thompson's shiver in the dark captures not only the ambiguities of isolation and proximity, frigidity and passion and emptiness and yearning which permeate the Hokey Pokey album, but also the existential chill felt by those for whom the sun never shines and those who never achieve spiritual illumination.

Smiffy's Glass Eye

The gloom is alleviated temporarily by the opening bars which again "lure" the listener with their stagy, Pugwashian jauntiness. Metaphorically, Smiffy is one of the "crippled and lame [who] can never stand up true and steady" and his disability exposes him to the callousness of a heartless and superficial society. Again, it is the poverty of the language – particularly in the cheap spoken aside, "it just came out in conversation", and in the closing line – which exposes the spiritual vacuum in which poor Smiffy is forced to exist. Society does indeed turn a blind eye to that sort of thing. Unlike prisoner #999 in "Hokey Pokey", Smiffy has no dreams of sensual gratification to keep him alive. Smiffy dreams instead of Judgement Day and of the flood that will wash away his tormentors while he is borne up to heaven on an angel's wing. It is interesting to note that the vision of the Last Day is framed in explicitly Biblical terms. Only in "A Heart Needs A Home" does the language shift unequivocally to that of the Koran. In isolation, "Smiffy's Glass Eye" is a sad, slight song with a cheap shot at the end. But in the context of the album it reinforces, and in

turn is reinforced by, the theme of "The Sun Never Shines On The Poor." Someone is leaning on Smiffy's bell from the very start.

The Egypt Room

The inhabitants of "The Egypt Room" exist in a nocturnal universe of sleaze and decadence, which is illuminated only by the sparkling jewellery of the Princess as she "does her original motion." The Princess "moves like a snake" while the man with the cane "creeps like a lion." Both exemplify those who feel so low that their "chin scrapes along on the ground." Hokey Pokey for them comes in the form of repressed sexuality and violence, overlaid by the glitz of late twentieth century materialism – diamond bracelets, ruby rings and Italian shoes. It's maybe coincidental, but the alliance of an Egyptian Princess and a man with Italian shoes – a Roman? – possibly suggests Cleopatra and Mark Anthony, another pair of doomed lovers. A more pertinent echo comes from the man with open bloodshot eyes who "creeps like a lion." We are again with Yeats in the "sands of the desert" where "a shape with lion body and the head of a man [and] a gaze blank and pitiless as the sun" is moving its slow thighs and heralding the arrival of the Anti-Christ, the "rough beast" of the millennium. Yet even this song has a strong undercurrent of the music hall courtesy, again, of George Formby. The model for the Princess is Fanlight Fanny "the frowsy night-club Queen", one of Formby's best-known creations. Formby was also no stranger to Egypt.

In another classic, “The Left Hand Side Of Egypt”, George has an encounter with one of the fellas from “Hokey Pokey” who “look like girls” but was really “a kiltie from the old Black Watch.” All good clean fun.

Never Again

The song was written in the immediate aftermath of the Fairport crash in May 1969 in which Thompson’s then girlfriend Jeannie Franklyn was killed. Pat Donaldson, in conversation with Patrick Humphries, linked the Fairport crash and Jeannie’s death to Thompson’s eventual conversion to Islam. Unusually, Thompson talked about the song in an interview with Geoff Brown: “Used to frighten me a bit this song. It’s very weird. Eventually I convinced myself that I ought to write a third verse, and I did and now I like it ... It’s strange, I don’t really think I wrote it. It just came from somewhere.” The addition of the third verse transformed the mood, emphasis and meaning of the song and “objectified” what would otherwise have stood as an intensely personal statement. Putting the song in Linda’s mouth was another way of distancing Thompson himself from the lyric.

The first two verses originally stood alone as a bleak memorial to a loved one. The tone and the hook line echo Lear’s despair at the loss of his Fool:

*And my poor fool is hang’d! No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,*

*And thou no breath at all? Thou’lt come no more.
Never, never, never, never, never!*

But the third verse shifts the perspective. We are now looking at an old man, weeping at the emptiness and emotional poverty of his own wasted life: “the trinkets you carry, the garlands you keep ... the salt tears of lovers, the whispers of friends.” The image again recalls Lear, in his madness, fantastically adorned with wild flowers. The language is also from King Lear, but this time in a different context:

*Come, let’s away to prison;
We two alone will sing like birds i’ the cage ...
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news ...*

The addition of the third verse also firmly plants “Never Again” in the thematic structure of the album. The extended version becomes a lament for wasted youth and lost innocence, an anguished cry for a departed young man who is now buried deep inside the husk of an old man, tarrying before death. As such, “Never Again” provides a mirror image of the unregenerate Billy in “Old Man Inside A Young Man.”

Georgie On A Spree

Superficially, Isabel and Georgie seem to be on a different planet from that occupied by many of the characters on Hoke-y Pokey – innocents abroad, rather than exiles from the land of sewn-up faces. But the shallowness and emptiness of their lives and their relationship are punched home in a succession of sharp, chiming rhymes. Isabel is a silly, shallow creature, defined and validated by the money Georgie spends on her and by the jealousy this inspires in the other girls. Georgie, of course, is one of the “rich men”, dreaming of “his house and his car and his women.” We know he’ll never call her and that, someday soon, she’ll probably end up singing “Has He Got A Friend For Me” or “Withered And Died.”

Old Man Inside A Young Man

The anti-hero, Billy, emerges as another in the catalogue of characters who are “poor in the heart.” His young life has been dominated by sex, violence and the trappings of material success – the whores, the knife and the fancy clothes. He now faces the empty years ahead and the void beyond: “There’s no one thing on earth that I’m not through with./ What can I do with the rest of my life?” The sinister “they” who follow him around hark back to Hobnail Kelly and the Beefcake Kid and perhaps beyond that to the “two big louts [who] came and tripped up Smiffy and his eye fell out.” Billy’s macho assertion that he wants to die with his boots on – “I’d rather be dead on

my feet” – also prefigures the character in “Mole In A Hole” who “may look great” but who, in a telling pun, “feel(s) like death.”

“Old Man” also looks forward to some great later songs. “Take a heart and break it while you can” presages “I Feel So Good.” “The kiss of the knife” foreshadows “Razor Dance” and “Love In A Faithless Country.” “Old Man” also has a strong thematic link to one of the all-time greats, “King Of Bohemia”, with its haunting refrain: “Did your dreams die young, were they too hard won?” There is also a specific literary antecedent we should note. Yeats’ “Girl’s Song”, one of a sequence ironically entitled Words For Music Perhaps, covers the same ground as “Old Man” and “Never Again” with remarkable economy and impact:

*I went out alone
To sing a song or two,
My fancy on a man,
And you know who.
Another came in sight
That on a stick relied
To hold himself upright;
I sat and cried.
And that was all my song –
When everything is told,
Saw I an old man young
Or young man old?*

As so often in Thompson's work, the pairing of songs on a similar theme, in this case on the same album, adds richness and resonance to both.

The Sun Never Shines On The Poor

As noted, this quirky song provides the keynote for everything that precedes it on Hokey Pokey. Recent conversion to the Sufi faith notwithstanding, the inspiration for the song lies not in the Koran, but in the work of that most English of visionaries, William Blake. Blake's Songs Of Innocence contains the poem "Holy Thursday" which describes an annual service held in St. Paul's Cathedral on the first Thursday in May for the children of London's charity schools: "multitudes of lambs: Thousands of little boys and girls raising their innocent hands." Thompson's inspiration comes, typically, not from this fairly innocuous song of innocence but from the similarly titled song of experience:

*Is this a holy thing to see,
In a rich and fruitful land:
Babes reduced to misery,
Fed with cold and usurous hand?*

*Is that trembling cry a song?
Can it be a song of joy?
And so many children poor?
It is a land of poverty!*

*And their sun does never shine,
And their fields are bleak and bare,
And their ways are filled with thorns;
It is eternal winter there.*

*For where'er the sun does shine,
And where'er the rain does fall –
Babes can never hunger there,
Nor poverty the mind appal.*

The poverty – material and spiritual – which had so appalled Blake nearly two hundred years before appears to have had an equally profound impact on his twentieth century successor and to have found expression in strikingly similar terms:

*The world is as black as a dark night in hell.
What kind of a world can this be ...
The future looks black as before
And the sun never shines,
The sun never shines on the poor.*

The words of Blake and Thompson echo back to those of the Old Testament prophet, Zechariah, describing the restoration of Jerusalem: "There shall yet old men and old women dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand for very age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof." But for Thompson, Jerusalem un-restored is a city where children are

not innocents at play, but urchins “writhing around in the mud.” Thompson’s image of old people “like hermit crabs” again harks back to Blake. The illustration to the latter’s “London” shows an old man, bowed with age, being led by a child past a shadowed doorway. Note also the ironic link between Blake’s children, being “fed with cold and usurous hand”, and Thompson’s, handing their money over to an ice cream man!

Whatever its literary antecedents, “The Sun Never Shines On The Poor” ultimately stands as one of the great and distinctive statements by Richard Thompson concerning the human condition. The vividness of image – particularly the rare use of simile in the description of the urchins – the skilfully manufactured, Dickensian feel to the language, the control of structure, rhyme and metre, the ironic jauntiness of the chorus, the polarities which run through the song – light/dark, young/old, rich/poor – all are hallmarks. No one else could have written this song. The echoes of other Thompson songs are also striking. The urchins writhing in the mud recall the spectators in “The Great Valerio”, stumbling “in the mire.” The analogy of the vicious circle of existence – “Just walking in circles the rest of your life” – foreshadows great things to come: “You’re going nowhere when you ride on the carousel ... Let me take my chances on the wall of death.” The latter words also stand in stark contrast to the direct path to salvation offered to the true believers of Islam: “He that holds fast to God shall be guided to a straight path.” That path is taken up in the next song on the album.

A Heart Needs A Home

The few seconds’ silence that separates “The Sun Never Shines On The Poor” from “A Heart Needs A Home” symbolises the Border for which Richard Thompson had been searching since he was sixteen. After the silence, the human condition is expressed in familiar terms that recall “The Sun Never Shines”: “Empty streets and hungry faces, the world’s no place when you’re on your own.” The falsity and emotional poverty of the material world and the implacable insensitivity of other people, the “poor in the heart”, are still there, captured beautifully in the concluding lines:

*Tongues talk fire and
Eyes cry rivers,
Indian givers,
Hearts of stone.
Paper ships and
Painted faces,
The world’s no place when
You’re on your own.
A heart needs a home.*

But for Thompson, nothing would ever be the same again. Whenever I hear this song, I am reminded of Yeats’ words: “All changed, changed utterly. A terrible beauty is born.” The path to emotional fulfilment and spiritual salvation is now clear. “Never knew the way” before but now “I know the way.” Superficially, the language may be that of a conventional love

song, but it is also a direct transposition of the language of the Koran:

*You alone we worship, and to You alone we turn for help.
Guide us to the straight path, the path of those whom you have
favoured,
Not of those who have incurred Your wrath,
Nor of those who have gone astray.*

And again:

God invites you to the Home of Peace. He guides whom He will to a straight path. Those that do good works shall have a good reward and more besides. Neither blackness nor misery shall overcast their faces. They are the heirs of Paradise: in it they shall abide for ever. **[PK 149]**

And again:

Know that the life of this world is but a sport and a pastime, a show and an empty vaunt among you, a quest for greater riches and more children ... The life of this world is but a vain provision. **[PK 382]**

The conviction and belief of the new convert are unequivocally affirmed. There will be no backsliding: "I'm never going to run away." This carries specific Koranic overtones: "But those that recant after accepting the true faith and grow in unbelief, their repentance shall not be accepted. They are the

truly erring ones." [PK 50]. The opposition of family and friends to the conversion is acknowledged:

*Some people say
That I should forget you ...
A better life, they say,
If I'd never met you.*

But there will be no relapse into the folly of unbelief. "I'm never going to be a fool" again refers specifically to the Koran:

And when [the unbelievers] are told: 'Believe as others believe,' they reply: 'Are we to believe as fools believe?' It is they who are the fools, if they but knew it ... Such are those that barter guidance for error: they profit nothing, nor are they on the right path. They are like one who kindled a fire, but as soon as it lit up all around him God put it out and he was left in darkness: they do not see. Deaf, dumb, and blind, they will never return to the right path. **[PK 11]**

"A Heart Needs A Home" is the first of the great Thompson hymns/love songs inspired by his conversion to Islam. It is also one of the most unambiguous and affirmative of the Islamic songs, possessing none of the hints of ambivalence that characterise a number of the later devotional songs. The writer's mask is very transparent here and the song is probably as near as Thompson has come to a simple lyrical expression of love, uncomplicated by caveat and irony and unfiltered

through one of his usual ambiguous mouthpieces. Even here, however, the recorded, public words were again put in Linda's mouth. K. T. Oslin's earthy torch rendition notwithstanding, Linda's remained the definitive version of this amazing song until Richard and son Teddy performed it regularly during Thompson's 1998 UK tour.

Mole In A Hole

The clarity of "A Heart Needs A Home" is obfuscated, initially at least, by the album's strange closing song. After the spiritual intensity of the former, "Mole In A Hole" feels like a comedown. Moreover, it appears superficially to be a knock at organised religion: "My friend he was so wise he got religion./ That's why I'm alive today and he is dead." But the thought then occurs that this is the only "borrowed" song on any of Thompson's major album releases. Surely, he didn't borrow this particular Mike Waterson song in the knowledge that it could undermine the thematic integrity of the whole album and the specific, intensely personal message of "A Heart Needs A Home"? A closer interpretation reveals that, far from undermining the rest of the album, "Mole In A Hole" is a powerful, if ironic, reinforcement of the key themes. If Waterson hadn't already written this song, Thompson might have felt compelled to do so.

The key to an understanding of "Mole In A Hole" lies in the word "refugee." In a world where most of the people are poor in the heart and where the heart desperately needs a

home, the character in the song is spiritually homeless. He is as fundamentally impoverished as any of the characters in the album's preceding songs, the poverty being reflected in the shallowness of emotion – "I like the flowers, I like the bees" – and aspiration. Is wanting to be a mole or a fly really a meaningful life goal? There is of course a nice irony here – not so long ago, at least one of the performers on this track had viewed himself as a fly and had also liked "the Byrds on their LP's." The grim reality underlying the character's superficial jollity is reflected in the ambiguous "I feel like death" and by the manifestations of decay and mortality: "My feet are smelly and my hair's a mess." The simple message of the song – conveyed in a complex irony worthy of Chaucer – is "better off dead with religion than to be a walking corpse without it." We are again confronted with the "death in life" vs. "life in death" paradox that features in many of Thompson's finest songs – "Calvary Cross" and "Galway To Graceland" spring immediately to mind. My initial reaction to "Mole In A Hole" many years ago was indeed similar to Patrick Humphries' – "the novelty soon palls." I now love it. It's good enough to be a Richard Thompson song and deserves its unique place on a RT album on merit.

Patrick Humphries' summation of Hokey Pokey is also uncharacteristically superficial: "[it] remains a joyous album, which is perhaps why it features so low down the list of Richard and Linda 'faves.' Fans like their Richard straight from a hard day's gloom-digging, not chirpy and cheerful." I am a great admirer of Humphries and, as an overview of a long, complex and distinguished career, *Strange Affair* does

Thompson full justice. However, on this particular count he does Thompson and Hokey Pokey a disservice. The themes of the album could not be more serious – quite literally, first things and last things, Alpha and Omega – and if the tone of a number of the songs is indeed chirpy and cheerful, that simply reflects a common Thompsonian stylistic device – ironic counterpoint. Superficiality and impoverishment are exposed via language that is at times, quite deliberately, superficial and impoverished. And the deployment of the tunes, the tone and the language of the playground and the music hall is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Indeed, it is the very “Englishness” of so many of the songs on this album that throws the Islamic mysticism of “A Heart Needs A Home” into such high relief, a visibility that Thompson probably felt compelled to mask at that stage by closing the album with the upbeat and comedic “A Mole In A Hole”.

Hokey Pokey is indeed a “joyous” album, but in the same cathartic way that Shakespearean tragedy or the mature poetry of Yeats or Blake are joyous. In fact, a better way to describe Hokey Pokey is “gay”, in the sense that Yeats used the word to describe a lapis lazuli carving of three “Chinamen”, climbing towards a halfway house on a mountainside:

*There, on the mountain and the sky,
On all the tragic scene they stare.
One asks for mournful melodies;
Accomplished fingers begin to play.
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.*

In Hokey Pokey, the “glittering eyes” of artistic perception and the “accomplished fingers” of Richard Thompson are brought to bear on the tragic scene that is the contemporary wasteland. From his newly established safe refuge on the steep climb to salvation, Thompson now views dispassionately that which lies below and that which lies ahead – the summit of ultimate faith, comfort and consolation. This newfound sense of solace would become only too apparent to the listening public on Richard and Linda’s next album.

POUR DOWN LIKE SILVER

1. Streets Of Paradise
2. For Shame Of Doing Wrong
3. The Poor Boy Is Taken Away
4. Night Comes In
5. Jet Plane In A Rocking Chair
6. Beat The Retreat
7. Hard Luck Stories
8. Dimming Of The Day/Dargai

All songs written by Richard Thompson. Produced by John Wood and Richard Thompson.

Players – Richard and Linda Thompson with Timi Donald (drums), Pat Donaldson (bass), Dave Mattacks (drums), Dave Pegg (bass), Henry Lowther (trumpet), Ian Whiteman (concert flute, shakuhachi), Aly Bain (fiddle), Nic Jones (fiddle), John Kirkpatrick (button accordion, anglo concertina).

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We now need to take a serious time-out. Richard Thompson's search for truth and meaning had been apparent throughout his song-writing career up to this point and his conversion to Islam represented the end of that quest, or at least the start of a second, very specific journey. In the late sixties and early seventies Thompson was not alone in searching for answers. His mother Joan expressed a life-long interest

in religions, which enabled her to be fairly relaxed about her son's life choice:

Well, I was quite interested in it – I'm always interested in different religions – and I like to try and understand them and I see the good in some of them – in fact most of them. And I thought well he doesn't smoke and he doesn't drink and he looked absolutely wonderful – normal with the beard and everything, so I wasn't all that distressed. [PH 167]

As his sister Perri observed Islam gave Thompson “a structure in a time when everyone was looking for some kind of answer and some sort of structure.” [PH 167]. But why the structure of Islam and why the kind of answers provided by the Koran? The general perception of Islam, even in the seventies, was of a fairly severe and authoritarian religion. This seems very much at odds with the easy-going, if somewhat reclusive, Richard Thompson known to his friends. It certainly appears inconsistent with the strong compassionate vein that had run through songs such as “Genesis Hall” and “The Sun Never Shines On The Poor.” At this point, important distinctions need to be made between the “Islam” of popular (mis)conception and the specific strand of Sufism to which Thompson was attracted and to which he remains devoted. Stuart Litvak makes the general point that Sufism is a seed “that has been cross-pollinating religions and cultures into modern times.” Islam was however the first great flower of the “Sufic germ” and it was to the Islamic branch that Thompson

committed himself. The comments that follow therefore refer specifically to Sufi belief in an Islamic context.

For those wishing to develop a deeper understanding of the impact of the Sufi faith on Thompson's work, I thoroughly recommend *Sufism: A Short Introduction* by the leading Western authority on Sufism, William C. Chittick. He distinguishes between three major dimensions in Islamic thought and practice. On its most external level, Islam is indeed a somewhat dictatorial religion: it does tell people "what to do." Practices, which all Muslims must observe, are specified in the Sharia, a codified set of laws that were based on the Koran and prophetic practice and have been refined by generations of scholars. Submitting to God's will, by obeying the commands set down in the Sharia, is a cornerstone of Islam (which literally means "submission"). This dimension of "right activity" has traditionally been the domain of the Islamic jurists (*fuqha'*). On a deeper level, Islam is a religion that, in common with all major religions, sets out to teach people how to understand the creation, the world and their place in the world. Traditionally, this has been called "faith" (*iman*) because its focus is on the objects which are associated with faith – God, the angels, the scriptures, the prophets and so on. This dimension of "right thinking" is the province of the Islamic theologians (*mutakallimun*) who are the experts in the science of Kalam, or dogmatic theology, and whose prime concern is to explain and defend creedal teachings. On the deepest level, Islam is a religion that teaches people how to set about transforming themselves so that they may achieve nearness to God. The key to this transformation, according to a famous saying of the

Prophet Muhammad known as the "Hadith of Gabriel", is "to worship God as if you see Him, for even if you do not see Him, He sees you." This envisioning is not done with the eyes or the mind, but with the core of the human heart for "Faith is a light that God casts into the heart of whomsoever He will." While Sufis respect both the Sharia and Kalam, this third dimension of "right seeing" is their special domain.

Having characterised the three dimensions of Islamic doctrine and ideology, Chittick goes on to make two further high level distinctions between the strands of "right activity" and "right thinking" on the one hand and "right seeing" on the other. As a general rule, rational thinking about God of the kind undertaken by the *fuqha'* and the *mutakallimun* tends to focus on His "otherness" and His separation from the world. Their emphasis is therefore on distance and diversity. By contrast, the "imaginal" thinking of the Sufis tends to emphasise the nearness of God and the unity that derives from God's presence in all things. This in turn translates into very different emphases on the attributes of God. The rationalists will tend to stress God's majesty, severity and wrath. The imaginal Sufi thinkers, whilst not ignoring the harsher aspects of God, will tend to lay great store by God's beauty, gentleness and mercy. For them, things pertaining to the external and material realms will tend to manifest God's wrath, whereas the closer we move to the spiritual world and to God Himself, the closer we will approach pure mercy. As Chittick notes, at the extremes, this divergence has translated in modern times into certain forms of "fundamentalism" on the one hand and deracinated Sufism on the other. In less polarised terms, there

is a clear association between the Sharia and divine majesty and wrath. There is equally a close parallel between the kind of spiritual perfection sought by the Sufis and divine beauty, gentleness and mercy. Chittick summarises the position in graphic terms:

The differing theoretical and practical emphases of Islam's three dimensions help explain why Westerners can be simultaneously attracted by Sufism and repelled by "Islam." Such people typically have no knowledge of Islam except the stereotypes that have been passed down from the Middle Ages, or they identify Islam with the Sharia, or with various political and social movements among contemporary Muslims. To the extent that they are aware of the Sharia and the more external aspects of Islamic life and civilisation, they are repelled by the sternness and severity of the divine wrath. In contrast, Sufism – whose characteristic expressions are found in beauty, love, poetry, and music – illustrates the dimension of divine beauty and mercy ... When Westerners take their first look at Islam, they often feel as if they have been taken into a desert and set down outside the austere walls of a city that smells of death. In contrast, when they are drawn to Sufism, they enter the delightful gardens that are hidden by the walls surrounding traditional Muslim houses. In a living Islamic community, the walls protect the gardens from the desert winds and the eyes of strangers, but the garden and the human warmth are the reason for the walls' existence. [WCC 11/12]

Without wishing to labour or to trivialise the point, this helps give us some insight into why, within the secure, benign and welcoming walls of Sufism, the heart of Richard Thompson finally found a home.

As noted, Hokey Pokey was released in the spring of 1975. In April, the Thompsons appeared at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London. Their outstanding version of "The Dark End Of The Street" subsequently appeared on the guitar, vocal compilation. Their third album, *Pour Down Like Silver*, was released in November and the Thompsons undertook a fourteen-date UK tour to promote the album. Three tracks from their Oxford Polytechnic gig were also featured on guitar, vocal. In between the QEH and Oxford, the couple remained fairly visible, with festival appearances and the inevitable awards for Richard's guitar playing. However, the evidence dispersed in the Humphries' biography makes it clear that there were deep and difficult undercurrents in 1975. The conversion put pressure on relationships with family and friends alike. In later years, Thompson had the grace to acknowledge his own shortcomings:

For a few years I just found it difficult frankly, to deal with my family – you just do – if you're going to embrace something radical like that and you take the whole philosophy on board, you really ask yourself a lot of questions and it's confusing. I was basically confused and I also probably believed that the good guys were the good guys and the bad guys were the bad guys, which I certainly don't any more. Sometimes the good guys are the bad guys and sometimes

the bad guys are the good guys – so I try to judge people how I meet them these days, rather than saying: “well if you don’t belong to my club, you can’t be any good.” I did a lot of that in the 70s, which is a very bad thing. [PH 167/8]

Some of the inflexibility of the recent convert is reflected in both Pour Down Like Silver and the subsequent First Light, whilst Thompson’s tendency at this stage in his life to polarise the good guys and the bad guys explains the uncharitable tone of Sunnyvista. Even closer to home, the conversion put severe strain on Richard and Linda’s marriage. Linda subsequently made it clear how unhappy she was, even when the couple was still living in London in the Maida Vale commune. With characteristic forthrightness and cutting humour she recalled to Patrick Humphries the time when she left Richard and refused to return, despite his having been awarded a green turban: “I don’t care if he’s got a green willy, I’m not going back.” [PH 169].

None of these disturbing undercurrents is apparent in the implacable faces of Richard and Linda, which stare out at the infidels from the cover of Pour Down Like Silver.

Streets Of Paradise

After the predominant Englishness of much of Hokey Pokey, this is a difficult song to come to terms with. At first hearing, the description of the island “made of cocaine in a sea of turpentine” seems to take us back to familiar territory.

This appears to be a typically sardonic Thompsonian inversion of the encomium to England delivered by John O’ Gaunt in Shakespeare’s Richard II:

*This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands,
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.*

However, there are confusing and disturbing autobiographical echoes. The avowed willingness expressed by the character in the third verse to trade wealth and family in order to be walking in Paradise recalls both Thompson’s abandonment of a Hampstead flat for a Maida Vale squat and his comments above on his own relationship with his family at this time. But on this album, the allusions, the influences and the philosophy are unequivocally and consistently Islamic. “Streets Of Paradise” is essentially a parable, albeit a somewhat opaque one. Two passages from the Koran provide the template – the italics are mine:

Let man reflect on the food he eats: how We pour down the rain in torrents and cleave the earth asunder; how We bring forth the corn, the grapes and the fresh vegetation; the olive and the palm, the thickets, the fruit-trees and the green pasture, for you and your cattle to delight in. But when the dread blast is sounded, on that day each man will forsake his brother, his mother and his father, his wife

and his children: for each one of them will on that day have enough sorrow of his own. On that day there shall be beaming faces, smiling and joyful. On that day there shall be faces veiled with darkness, covered with dust. These shall be the faces of the unbelievers. [PK 80:20-42]

[The unbelievers] think the Day of Judgement is far off: but We see it near at hand. On that day the sky shall become like molten brass, and the mountains like tufts of wool scattered in the wind. Friends will meet, but shall not speak to each other. To redeem himself from the torment of that day the sinner will gladly sacrifice his children, his wife, his brother, the kinsfolk who gave him shelter, and all the people of the earth, if then this might deliver him. But no! The fire of hell shall drag him down by the scalp, shall claim him who had turned his back and amassed riches and covetously hoarded them. Indeed, man was created impatient. When evil befalls him he is despondent; but, blessed with good fortune, he grows niggardly. [PK 70:5-21]

In these extracts, I think we see the prototypes both for the unregenerate “tar brush” – a face “veiled with darkness” – and for the chief protagonist. He turns his back on the misery around him – “we all need some assistance” so let them find their own. He amasses wealth in his guarded silver mansion and impatiently demands his racehorse and his fast car. He believes that, in the last analysis, he can buy his way into paradise. Salvation doesn’t come that easily.

One common Sufi definition of the path to God is tazkiyat an-nafs, which equates to purification of the soul or the self. People have enormously different levels of “self awareness” but, whatever their level of apprehension and comprehension, everyone requires tazkiyat. The Sufis identify three basic stages that must be overcome if people are to achieve perfection and approach God. The first of these is termed nafs ammara, literally “the self that commands (to evil).” This state is characterised by heedlessness – the key Koranic term, ghafla – and ignorance of self. The protagonist of “Streets Of Paradise” is one of those who bury their selves in ignorance and forgetfulness. A later Thompson album would be devoted to this form of “amnesia.”

For Shame Of Doing Wrong

This simple love song is taken into another dimension by four profound statements:

- *Lover, lover I've been away too long.*
- *Take me back to old remembered days, remind me of the times we spent together ...*
- *I'm sorry for the things I've said, the things I've done.*
- *Just turn up your lamp and let me in.*

These statements are central to Thompson’s newfound beliefs as a Sufi and the underlying concepts resonate throughout the songs that follow his conversion. Since this is the first

occasion on which we have encountered them, I will dwell on each phrase in turn.

For Sufis, all love is ultimately love for God. God created the world through love and all things are infused with love, because His love brings them into existence and motivates all of their activities. Our love for any creature can therefore only be love for God, although ignorance veils most people from perceiving what or Whom they actually love. The Koran is quite unambiguous on the point: “He loves them, and they love Him.” [PK 5:54]. Numerous Sufi philosophers and poets have written on the indivisibility of human and divine love. The most celebrated poet is undoubtedly Jalal ad-Din Rumi. The latter was born in Balkh in present day Afghanistan. He moved in his youth to Anatolia and eventually settled in Konya, in present day Turkey, where he died in 1273. In some 65000 verses, Rumi wrote constantly of the trials of separation from God – the Beloved – and the joys of loving union with Him:

*The joy and heartache of lovers is He,
The wages and salary for service is He.
If they were to gaze on other than the Beloved,
How could that be love? That would be idle fancy.
Love is that flame which, when it blazes up,
Burns all away except the everlasting Beloved.*

The point to emphasise is that Thompson’s songs to God are not, as some have claimed, “hymns dressed up as love songs.” For a Sufi, there is no distinction to be made between

the two. Love for God grows up from the basic declaration of Islamic faith, the assertion of God’s unique reality that is enshrined in the first Shahadah – “[There is] no god but God.” And since love is a divine attribute, it follows that, in Chittick’s words, “There is no true lover and no true beloved but God.” Thompson is now writing in a tradition that stretches back several hundred years and a number of the songs to the Beloved that appear on what I term his “Islamic Trilogy” of albums, up to and including Sunnyvista, fully deserve to be placed alongside those of Rumi.

The second major concept to appear in this song is that of remembrance. The importance attached to remembrance of God – dhikr, which also carries the specific connotation of “mentioning” – is a distinguishing characteristic of the Sufi tradition within Islam. A précis from Chittick conveys the importance attached by Sufis to dhikr:

The Sufis are distinguished from other Muslims partly because they consider the remembrance of God, in the form of mentioning His names as instructed by their [sheikhs], as incumbent, not merely recommended. It is they who constantly remind us that the essence of all the ritual activities, after all, is remembering God. Why should people pray and fast? To remember God, to keep Him constantly in mind ... Turning to God – remembrance – awakens awareness of God in the heart and actualises the divine image latent in the soul. Ultimate felicity is nothing but the remembrance of the wellspring of our own true nature, and that is God Himself ... [WCC 57]

It is interesting to note that only three Thompson songs contain explicit references to Allah: “Sweet Surrender”, “You’re Going To Need Somebody” and “Justice In The Streets”.

The third profound concept that appears in this song is that of repentance for “doing wrong” and the implicit assumption of divine mercy and forgiveness. One of the paradoxes of Sufi belief is that awareness of imperfection is a necessary, indeed inevitable, step on the road to perfection and potential union with God. Such awareness is an antidote to the kind of self-satisfaction displayed by the protagonist in “Streets Of Paradise.” It keeps people from turning in on themselves and enables them to turn their aspiration toward the Beloved. The 12th century scholar Ahmad Sam’ani articulated God’s perception of the position of His sinless angels compared with that of fallible mankind:

O angels of the celestial dominion! Although you are obedient, you have no appetite in your selves, nor do you have any darkness in your makeup. If human beings disobey, they have appetite in their selves and darkness in their makeup. Your obedience along with all your force is not worth a dustmote before My majesty and tremendousness. And their disobedience along with their brokenness and dejection does not diminish the perfection of My realm. You hold fast to your own sinlessness, but they hold fast to My mercy. Through your obedience, you make evident your own sinlessness and greatness, but through their disobedience, they make apparent My bounty and mercy.

For Sam’ani, as for Thompson post his conversion, the whole drama of human existence is played out in the context of God’s kindness and mercy. God desires to make human beings aware of their own fallibility, so that they will open themselves to His gentleness, love and forgiveness. As we will see, it was for this reason that He orchestrated the fall of Adam. The point to make here is that Thompson’s frequent expressions of regret, and his apparent preoccupation with his own backsliding and deficiencies, do not denote a diminishing of faith. For a Sufi, they are in a paradoxical sense an intrinsic affirmation of faith.

The fourth profound request in “For Shame Of Doing Wrong” – the plea for God to turn up His “lamp” - brings us to the heart of the matter. The allusion is to one of the most famous and moving passages in the Koran:

God is the light of the heavens and the earth. His light may be compared to a niche that enshrines a lamp, the lamp within a crystal of star-like brilliance. It is lit from a blessed olive tree neither eastern nor western. Its very oil would almost shine forth, though no fire touched it. Light upon light; God guides His light to whom He will. [PK 24:35]

Lest we regard this allusion as accidental, shortly after this passage verse 24:31 of the Koran captures the reference to “song birds singing” that break the character’s heart:

Do you not see how God is praised by those in the heavens and those on earth? The very birds praise him as they wing

their flight. He notes the prayers and praises of all His creatures; God has knowledge of all their actions.

As I said at the outset, “For Shame Of Doing Wrong” is a simple love song. As such, it should be allowed to speak for itself. Before doing so, however, I would just make the point that, within the common Sufi triad, the second stage that must be traversed if the soul is to reach perfection, is termed *nafs lawwama* – “the self that blames itself (for its own shortcomings).” What more effective way of encapsulating that than to write a song entitled “For Shame Of Doing Wrong”?

The Poor Boy Is Taken Away

Inevitably, the third stage in the Sufi triad of self-development is “the self at peace with God” – *nafs mutma’inna* – and that, in a sense, is what this song is all about. As so often in Thompson’s work, a lot hangs on a single word – in this case, the word “poor”. Poverty is of crucial significance in Sufi thinking. The knowledge of human inadequacy, which is a prerequisite for spiritual progress, is knowledge of our own essential nothingness. The Koran calls this nothingness “poverty” (*faqr*). The latter is a common term for Sufism in Islamic languages – the Arabic *faqir* (“*fakir*”) means “poor man”. The word “dervish” also derives from the Persian *dar*, which means “door” and, by extension, one who goes from door to door begging for food or lodging, i.e. a poor man or traveller on the Sufi path to God. It also applies to one who is at the “thresh-

old”, between awareness of this world and awareness of the divine. The concept of poverty towards God is described explicitly in the Koran: “O people, you are poor towards God; and God – He is the Wealthy, the Praiseworthy.” [PK 35:15]. To be poor towards God is to acknowledge one’s need for Him, as articulated explicitly in the final song on the album. This translates into an overwhelming drive to reach the Beloved, to arrive at a state of *nafs mutma’inna*.

Against this background, we can view “The Poor Boy Is Taken Away” as advice given to a lover whose own beloved, the Poor Boy, has forsaken her in order to embark on the path to God. On *Shoot Out The Lights*, “A Man In Need” covers the same territory from the perspective of one such poor boy. This may seem fanciful but the interpretation is validated by the forsaken lover’s “waving adieu” – the Poor Boy has literally been taken “to God”. The same emphasis on the word “adieu” is, of course, of prime importance in “1952 Vincent Black Lightning” where James Adie’s surname is no coincidence. The lover’s dilemma is encapsulated in the ambiguous line “The penny won’t drop in your mind.” This conveys the nature of the problem – the lover’s lack of awareness or ignorance. But it also implies the solution – the penny won’t drop in her mind but in her heart, if she can but awake from her dream and turn to God.

There is one other perspective we should bear in mind in approaching “The Poor Boy Is Taken Away.” Thompson had released another song about a poor boy on the *Henry* album. That song had centred on the fraught relationship between the writer and his muse. Should we therefore interpret the

later song as an implied rejection by Thompson of his muse and/or his audience in favour of his new faith? The fact that he effectively took a three-year sabbatical after the release of *Pour Down Like Silver* at least suggests this possibility.

Night Comes In

Another simple love song that carries profound personal meaning for Thompson and is of crucial importance in understanding all his later work. The live version of the song on guitar, vocal underlines the stark simplicity of Thompson's language with an extended guitar solo of lyrical intensity.

The key phrase in the song is the exhortation to "Take my hand / O real companion" and the subsequent reference to the "friends [who] will never leave me." As in other branches of Islam, Sufi lore is passed on to disciples by a sheikh – literally an "old man" or elder – whose oral teachings give life to the articles of faith. The shaping of character in order to actualise the divine traits that are latent in the human soul is central to the Sufi path. This actualisation can only be accomplished with the help of a teacher who knows exactly what these traits are and can educate the disciple in how best to bring them into the open. The practical guidance of a sheikh is of particular importance in terms of the practice of *dhikr*, which can be invalidated if conducted improperly. Critically, the typical rite of initiation into a Sufi order takes the form of a handclasp between the sheikh and the initiate. This is modelled on the oath – *bay'at ar-ridwan* – taken by the Prophet from his com-

panions at Hudaibiyya and referred to in God's words to Muhammad: "Those that swear fealty to you, swear fealty to God Himself. The Hand of God is above their hands." [PK 48:10]. The handclasp is understood to transmit an invisible spiritual force or blessing [*baraka*] that opens up the disciple's soul to transformation. "Night Comes In" is therefore Thompson's account of the significance and impact of his own initiation into Sufism. The song is addressed to his teacher, Sheikh Abdul Q'adir, and not as Humphries claims to the Prophet.

A number of other phrases in "Night Comes In" have specific relevance to the Sufis. The references to dancing and to the songs that "pour down like silver" are particularly important. The popular connection between the Sufis and dancing dates back to the tales of early travellers to the Middle East who described the dances of the "whirling dervishes". In reality, dancing has played a relatively minor role in the practice of Sufism but it nonetheless represents a significant strand of Sufi thinking. The Koran makes it clear that every thing that comes into existence does so as a result of God's spoken instruction: "Our only speech to a thing, when We desire, is to say to it 'Be!', so it comes to be." [PK 16:40]. In order to come into existence, things therefore need to hear God's instruction. The word for "to hear" – *sama* – is also taken to mean, "listening to music" and, by extension, "music". By the end of the 9th century listening to music, or "audition", was a practice performed by many Sufis and was sometimes accompanied by dancing. The practitioners considered this to be a way of stirring up God's remembrance in the heart and of transporting people to that invisible world where God is still speaking His word – "Be!"

– to them. Certain Sufi orders are called the “Folk of Sama” since they employ music to transport themselves into ecstatic spiritual states. Sufis often identify the primordial music heard by the soul with God’s words to the children of Adam at the Covenant of Alast: “Am I not your Lord?” [PK 7:172]. For the Folk of Sama, music is the secret language of God’s luminous, audible signs. Hearing it, the soul recalls its original abode in the days of Alast, when nearness to God was its natural home. According to Rumi:

*We were all parts of Adam,
We heard those melodies in paradise.
Water and clay have covered us with doubt,
But we still remember something of those tunes ...
So Audition is the food of lovers –
Within it they find the image of their union.*

Dancing, on the other hand, expresses the traveller’s joy at liberation from the stranglehold of individual selfhood that prevents it from approaching God. Rumi explains that the dance takes place in the dancer’s own heart:

*People dance and frolic in the square –
Men dance in their own blood.
Freed from their own hands, they clap their hands,
Having leapt from their own imperfections, they dance.*

Iraqi meanwhile links both dance and song and makes clear that both are universal and eternal:

The song will never cease, nor the dance come to an end,
for all eternity, because the Beloved is infinite. Here the
lover hums,

*The moment I open my eyes,
I see Your face,
The instant I lend an ear,
I hear Your voice.*

So, the lover continues to dance and to move, even though he may appear to be still. You will see the mountains that you suppose fixed passing by like clouds. [27:88]. How could he remain still? Each atom of the universe prods him to move – each atom is a word, each word speaks a name, each name has a different tongue, and each tongue has a song. For each song the lover has an ear. Pay attention – the singer and the listener are one. “Sama” is a bird that flies from God to God.

Thompson would have been familiar with the symbolic significance of the dance, if not with its specific connotations, from his early study of Yeats, who was in turn familiar with and to some extent influenced by Sufi philosophy. Rumi’s description of the dancers clapping their hands quoted above, was picked up by Yeats in “Sailing to Byzantium”:

*An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless*

*Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress.*

For the Irish poet, “all men are dancers” and their release from the complexities and constraints of selfhood is described in one of his most famous poems, “Byzantium”:

*At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit
Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,
Where blood-begotten spirits come
And all complexities of fury leave,
Dying into a dance,
An agony of trance,
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.*

Related to the images of ecstatic dancing in “Night Comes In” is the reference to drinking “the wine of lovers”. Drink and drunkenness had been prominent motifs in Thompson's songs from the early days but after his conversion the state of intoxication takes on specific connotations. I referred earlier to the twin strands within Islam of rational and imaginal thinking about God. Both strands are present within Sufism and, in order to describe the psychological characteristics of these two standpoints, Sufis have spoken of various pairs of “states” (ahwal) experienced by travellers on the path to God. One of the most prevalent pairings is intoxication (sukr) and sobriety (sahw). Chittick summarises the distinction and significance:

Intoxication follows upon being overcome by the presence of God. It designates the joy of seekers in finding the eternal source of all beauty and love within themselves. The travellers see God in all things and lose the ability to discriminate between Him and creation or to differentiate between correct and incorrect. Intoxication is associated with expansion, hope, and intimacy with God. It is the human response to the divine names that declare God's compassion, love, kindness, beauty, gentleness, and concern.

In contrast, sobriety allows for a clear differentiation between God and the world and a calm and careful discernment between right and wrong, beautiful and ugly. It correlates with the absolute distinction between Creator and creatures and is associated with wonderment, awe, contraction, and fear. It is the human response to divine names that designate God's majesty, glory, splendour, magnificence, might, wrath, and vengeance. [WCC 26]

The intoxicating power of God's love and His divine music appear frequently in the poetry of Rumi, who is for Chittick “the leader of Sufism's drunken rowdies”:

*You're still caught up with arranging your shoes and turban –
How can you lift the cup of the heavy drinker?
By my soul, come for a moment to the tavern!
You too are Adam's child, you're human, you have a soul.
Come, pawn your cloak with the wine-merchant of Alast,*

*For he's been selling wine from Alast, before water and clay.
You call yourself a fakir, a gnostic, a dervish – then stay sober?
These names are metaphors, you're imagining things.
Are not Audition and He gives to drink [76:21] the dervish's
work?*

Sufi teachers make further distinctions in terms of intoxication and often refer to three stages on the path to God. These stages have direct relevance to descriptions of the human condition by Thompson following his conversion. Before entering the path to God, most people appear sober but are actually drunk. This form of “blameworthy sobriety” results from their being intoxicated with the illusory standards of social reality and the trappings of ordinary life. Such sobriety is built on forgetfulness of God. It is only when people enter the path to God that they achieve true sobriety by turning their backs on false idols and the follies of the world. Thompson's assertion that he will “turn [his] world around” should be seen in this context. It is only after striving on the path to self-discipline and self-purification that Sufis reach the second stage, that of “true intoxication.” Here, powers of rational discernment can be overwhelmed and lost in the face of divine love and mercy. This stage equates to the Sufi concept of “annihilation” (fana'), the “agony of flame” to which Yeats refers above. The third stage is represented by the return to the world after the journey to God. This stage of “sobriety after drunkenness” equates to the concept of “subsistence” (baqa'). Here, the seeker perceives what subsists after the annihilation of idols and false selfhood. The Koran summarises the second and third stages:

“Everything upon the earth is undergoing annihilation, but there subsists the face of your Lord, Possessor of Majesty and Generous Giving”. [PK 55:26-27]. This in turn harks back to the first Shahadah – “[There is] no god but God” – where “no god” negates all false realities and “but God” affirms the subsistence of the Real.

“Night Comes In” is in a sense the pivotal song on the album. We have progressed from the tears that “pour down like whisky” to the songs that “pour down like silver”. We are at the stage of aspiration:

*I may find
That street tomorrow
Leave the shadow
Of my lonely room
See my one
My one and only
Heart and soul ...*

By the end of the album, we will have seen the Beloved “on [that] street in company.”

Jet Plane In A Rocking Chair

Another song of aspiration and yearning and the need to “turn my world around”. The aspiration is for transcendence – to escape the rocking chair and take off for the other world in a jet plane. The yearning is for “the real thing” – a longing,

not for “no god but [for] God.” The character starts from the position of “blameworthy sobriety” – “act cool when you’re stony dead”. He fittingly describes himself as a “deaf and dumb old dancing bear”. Patrick Humphries rightly flags this up as an allusion to the Elizabethan bear garden, but its significance extends well beyond that. In the words of the Koran “The meanest of beasts in God’s sight are those that are deaf, dumb, and devoid of reason.” [PK 8:20].

In Islamic anthropology human beings are depicted as the only creatures that have freely chosen God over the world, the Real over the unreal. This choice is called the “Trust”: “We offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to carry it and were afraid of it; and human beings carried it.” [PK 33:72]. The beasts are cut off from “the Real thing” because they cannot taste God’s beauty, gentleness and nearness. The angels conversely are cut off from God’s love because they are without sin and therefore cannot experience God’s wrath, severity and distance. Only within man are all the contradictory divine attributes brought together. The character in the song has some of the attributes of a beast, a bear. He is deaf – in other words, he is like the unbelievers who “have ears, but they do not hear with them.” [PK 22:46]. This is a fundamental sin because in the Koran there are ample “signs for a people who hear.” [PK 10:67]. The character is also dumb and therefore unable to articulate the names of God in the practice of dhikr. However, he does quite literally have three saving graces. First, like all human kind, he possesses an innate awareness of his existence with God – his “old dancing” – in the state of non-existence that preceded

God’s calling him into being. Second, he retains the gift of sight. All the practices of Islam and Sufism are focussed on the goal of allowing people to open their eyes and see:

Such are those that barter guidance for error: they profit nothing, nor are they on the right path. They are like one who kindled a fire, but as soon as it lit up all around him God put it out and he was left in darkness: they do not see. Deaf, dumb and blind, they will never return to the right path. **[PK 2:16-18]**

Third, he possesses a human heart, which is capable of change and which, as Rumi confirms, is the key to self knowledge and to the fundamental “hearing” of all things: “The speech of water, the speech of earth, the speech of clay [i.e. mankind] – all are perceived by the Folk of the Heart [i.e. the Sufis].”

Thompson’s reference to “play[ing] sick in a feather bed” derives specifically from Rumi, who admonishes those who are afraid to give themselves up to the Beloved:

*If your head has no pain, why do you bind it up?
If your body has no suffering, why pretend to be sick?*

Note the reference to the “roller coaster [rolling] nowhere.” This prefigures the ride on the carousel, which goes nowhere in “Wall Of Death.”

Humphries is again right to flag up the historical, military context to this song. It is of course a close relative to “Sloth” and at one level similarly casts a light on the battle of the sexes. The underlying framework is however Islamic and the specific context is the fall of Adam. Rational Islamic thinkers typically interpret the Koranic account of the fall of Adam as evidence of God’s transcendence and wrath. For many Sufis, however, the story is more a proof of God’s loving mercy towards human beings. They emphasise that Adam disobeyed God at God’s instigation because He knew that without disobedience Adam would not realise the attributes of distance that enable him to become a lover. Ahmad Sam’ani (d. 1140) repeatedly makes the point:

From the throne down to the earth, no love whatsoever is sold except in the house of human grief and joy. Many sinless and pure angels were in the Court, but only this handful of dust [Adam] was able to carry the burden of this body-melting, heart burning verse: [“He loves them and they love Him”].

Adam is regarded as the first Prophet and his greatness derives from the fact that he carried the burden of the Trust, which is love for God. Only Adam understood the secret of love, for it was the underlying cause of his own existence. He knew that his love could be nurtured and strengthened only when he tasted the pain of severity and separation. As a result

of his fall, Adam recognises his own shortcomings, indeed his own worthlessness. He comes to understand that anything else comes from divine providence. Hence, Adam’s fall is the source of his self-knowledge and his wrongdoing is paradoxically the cause of his salvation and glory. Human imperfection leads to the perfection of love, humility and the desire to return to God. In the words of Sam’ani:

If a palace does not have a garbage pit next to it, it is incomplete. There must be a garbage pit next to a lofty palace so that all the refuse and filth that gather in the palace can be thrown there. In the same way, whenever God formed a heart by means of the light of purity, He placed this vile self next to it as a dustbin.

It is in the context of this archetypal pattern of the fall from and subsequent return to Grace that we should hear Thompson’s words in “Beat The Retreat.” From this perspective, the title in fact contains a telling pun. The character in the song is not only acknowledging defeat in the face of divine Omnipotence – remember that Islam means “submission” – but also expressing his determination to beat or “overcome” the weakness that led to his initial retreat from God. Sam’ani again provides a helpful and highly pertinent summary: “O dervish! On the day when Adam slipped, they beat the drum of good fortune for all human beings.”

This is the one really upbeat song on the album and the only one to feature some signature incisive electric guitar from Thompson. Even here, however, the underlying message is deadly serious. Both the speaker and the target listener are in a parlous state. The reported whinging of the listener runs contrary to explicit Koranic guidance:

We shall test your fortitude with fear and famine, with loss of property and life and crops. Give good news to those who endure with fortitude; who in adversity say: "We belong to God, and to Him we shall return." On such men will be God's blessing and mercy; such men are rightly guided. [PK 2:156]

But the speaker, too, in turning his back on one in need – "I run a steamship, I don't run a mission ... If I cared about you, I'd say it was a crying shame" – is ignoring God's instructions:

Have We not given him two eyes, a tongue, and two lips, and shown him the two paths? Yet he would not scale the Height. Would that you knew what the Height is. It is the freeing of a bondsman; the feeding, in the day of famine, of an orphaned relation or a needy man in distress; to have faith and to enjoin fortitude and mercy. Those that do this shall stand on the right hand; but those that deny Our rev-

elations shall stand on the left, with Hell-fire close above them. [PK 90:8-20]

The speaker's assertion that "you bend my ear and I see double" is particularly damning for, in Rumi's words "It is He alone who is first and last, all else grows up from the eye that sees double". Neither of the protagonists belongs to Thompson's "club" and the lively tone of the song does little to disguise the uncharitable sentiments beneath the surface. That said, some of the speaker's specific descriptions of the target – no money, wife ran away, ought to settle down and get a job – might well have been applied to Thompson himself by concerned family and friends at this stage.

Dimming Of The Day / Dargai

This is one of the Richard Thompson songs that transcends genres and ripples across the years. Key images – particularly those of the old house and the bonny birds – weave "Dimming Of The Day" firmly into the fabric of the Thompson catalogue. However, the reference to the force that can "pull me like the moon pulls on the tide" highlights the radical changes in Thompson's preoccupations at this stage in his life. Elsewhere, this phrase would have referred to the White Goddess; here, it addresses God directly. Clive Gregson calls the song "a massive, incredible expression of personal longing" and also highlights the fact that its apparent simplicity conceals a high degree of musical complexity and sophistication.

[PH 171]. The tacking on of James Scott Skinner's strathspey, "Dargai", to the end of the song is a tour de force, which perfectly captures the mood of longing and reflects the winding down of the day and of the song itself.

"Dimming Of The Day" is one of the great hymns of the twentieth century, underlining the statement in the Koran that "It is in the watches of the night that impressions are strongest and words most eloquent". [PK 73:5]. Throughout Thompson's career, night is the time for communing with his God, his muse, his partner and his inner demons. "Walking on a Wire" would later capture all four parameters but in "Dimming Of The Day" Thompson confines himself to a divine audience.

The consistency of the song with the spirit of Sufism should by now be readily apparent but one other concept is worthy of mention. The Koran calls its own verses and other divine revelations "signs" (ayat). It employs the same word to describe the things in the created universe. Just as the Koran is God's book announcing His "signs", so the universe is also God's book announcing His revelations. The created world can therefore be viewed from two perspectives. In one sense, all things are other than God; they are unreal, or "veils" which obscure the Real. In another sense, however, all things are "signs" of God. Sufis explain this distinction between phenomena as "signs" and phenomena as "veils" in many sets of terms. According to one polarity that is of particular relevance here, everything can be said to have two faces, an eastern and a western. If we look at the western face of things, we find no trace of the sun, since it has set. If we look at the eastern face of things, we see

the sun shining in its full glory. Everything displays both faces at the same time but most people only see the western face. They have no awareness that everything is a sign of God, in which He is disclosing His own reality. We might review the sad tale of "Poor Smiffy", with his "one eye pointing east and one pointing west", from this perspective. It is surely against this background that we should view the setting of the sun at the "Dimming Of The Day" and Thompson's assertion that "You know just where I keep my better side." His final affirmation – "I see you on the street in company" – is taken from the Koran: "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God." [PK 2:15] That seems an apt summary of the song and of the album as a whole.

Thompson acknowledged the validity of the general criticism that *Pour Down Like Silver* is a somewhat stark and ascetic record.

It was a stark record, but I think it was by accident in a sense – we were intending to have Simon [Nicol] come and play rhythm guitar but he wasn't available so everything ended up sounding very stark and I was always going to overdub rhythm guitar and stuff, but we thought we'll just leave it, what the hell ... [PH 170]

Thompson was right to leave well alone. The simple musical textures on the album accord perfectly with Thompson's explicit and heart-felt protestations of love and newfound belief. The album as it stands has a kind of purity entirely consistent with its directness of purpose.

In a sense, Thompson achieves the seemingly impossible on *Pour Down Like Silver*, in putting together a collection of songs that express his new faith, that talk directly for the most part to his God, but don't abandon the things that made him "Richard Thompson" in the first place. This is still recognisably a "Richard Thompson" construct. One reason for this, as Patrick Humphries rightly emphasises, is that this most Islamic of albums retains a very "English" feel by virtue of allusion and melody. The other main reason for the sense of continuity with what had gone before is that the change in subject matter in the songs is not accompanied by a change in dominant image and leitmotif. The imagistic density on *Pour Down Like Silver* remains as high as on preceding albums. The "Violence" cluster all but disappears, apart from a passing reference to "a bullet I can chew" on the opening track. However, a number of other dominant Thompsonian images are given strong emphasis – the "Road" cluster is featured in seven of the eight tracks, "Eyes" appears in six, and "Love", "Animals", "Buildings" and "Madness" each appear in five tracks. The language, in other words, is that of the Richard Thompson of old, even if it is here being put to new uses and given new shades of meaning.

Pour Down Like Silver stands as one of the few truly great religious albums of the rock era. In my opinion, only Dylan's *Slow Train Coming* really bears comparison. The songs on the latter were written during Dylan's fifteen-week period of study at the Vineyard School of Discipleship in 1979. The Vineyard fellowship embraced some of the more extreme aspects of Christianity and required converts to proselytise.

Not surprisingly, some of the songs on the *Slow Train* album unashamedly preach hell fire and damnation and the questionable sentiments deterred many listeners. However, other songs speak eloquently of Dylan's faith in terms not dissimilar to Thompson's expressions of Sufism:

*I believe in you even through the tears and laughter,
I believe in you even though we be apart.
I believe in you even on the morning after.
Oh, when the dawn is nearing
Oh, when the night is disappearing
Oh, this feeling is still here in my heart.*

Rolling Stone at the time declared *Slow Train* Dylan's best album. If they were wrong, it was probably only as a result of Dylan's congenital inability to leave well alone and his insistence on meddling with the production post recording. Blemishes notwithstanding, *Slow Train* is an album of majestic songs and brilliant music. As on *Pour Down*, we see one of the two truly great songwriters of the twentieth century demonstrating that rare ability to share profound thoughts in simple language without trivialising or condescending. Like *Pour Down*, Dylan's is maybe a difficult album to like but an easy album to come to respect and eventually to cherish.

FIRST LIGHT

1. Restless Highway
2. Sweet Surrender
3. Don't Let A Thief Steal Into Your Heart
4. The Choice Wife / Died For Love
5. Strange Affair
6. Layla
7. Pavanne
8. House Of Cards
9. First Light



All songs written by Richard Thompson except [7] written by Richard and Linda Thompson. Produced by John Wood and Richard Thompson.

Players – Richard and Linda Thompson with Andy Newmark (drums), Willie Weeks (bass), Neil Larson (keyboards), Simon Nicol (guitar, dulcimer), Chris Karen (percussion), Dave Mat-tacks (percussion), Dolores Keane (whistle), John Kirkpatrick (button accordion). Backing vocals – Dave Brady, Heather Brady, Dave Burland, Bill Caddick, Philippa Clare, Julie Cov-ington, Andy Fairweather-Lowe, Trevor Lucas, Ian Matthews, Maddy Prior, Peta Webb.

UK Release October 1978. Chrysalis CHR1177.

Following the tour to promote *Pour Down Like Silver* in autumn 1975, Richard and Linda Thompson largely disappeared from view for nearly three years. The Thompsons' second child – a son christened Abu Dharr, subsequently anglicized to Adam, and now known as Teddy – was born at Bristol Gardens in early 1976. Shortly thereafter, the family decamped to an Islamic commune at Hoxne, near Diss, on the Norfolk-Suffolk border, where they spent most of the next two years. Richard has subsequently attributed the retreat to artistic reasons and disenchantment with the music scene:

I was happy to not be playing music that much at that point because I really wanted to understand what music was better. And I thought, 'I've been doing this since I was 15 or something, and I'd really like to just look at it for a while'. So I just stopped and I did other things ... I think it was also a difficult time in music to really understand what was going on. It was just before Punk came along and saved it! You know, the seventies was sort of Elton John, and the Eagles, the Rolling Stones, and I thought, 'If this is what people want, what am I doing?' After Punk came along, it became much clearer that it was still possible to put some energy into music. I felt Punk, although I didn't play it, was a kind of a focus. It became a new reference point. There was a strong attitude by which you could gauge your own attitude. [R2B]

But Humphries reports Richard's comments to his manager, Jo Lustig, which suggest that he was under some pressure

from his Sheikh to abandon his career. Whatever Thompson's motivation, Bernard Doherty is explicit about the price paid by Linda: "I remember on tour, during the Muslim time, she was obviously wrenched apart with her love for him." [PH 169].

What's all the more remarkable about Linda's resilience and support for her husband is that, in a sense, she saw the ordeal coming a long way off:

Ever since he was in Fairport, he was the airy-fairy one: never ate meat, never wore leather. He read Gurdjieff and Madame Blavatsky while everybody else was reading the Beano. I always thought when he was forty he'd live on a mountain; I didn't think it would happen as young as it did. I thought, oh we'll have to trek off to the Outer Hebrides because I knew that he did get very uncomfortable in the world sometimes. [PH 152]

One might add as a fitting tribute to Linda that it's only given to really rare individuals to abandon a career, stick with a partner and raise children in such circumstances. Thompson himself recognised the burden placed on the family, but in dismissive terms that recall the Thompsonian adage that "even a chicken has to do what it has to do": "it was a thing you did in the 70s." He also admitted that there were a lot of things about commune life that he too hated. But if the commune failed to live fully up to his expectations, the period did include one of the great transformational experiences of Richard Thompson's life, an event to which in a sense his whole life

had been leading. In 1977 he undertook the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, in line with the tenets of his faith. Throughout this saga, one is constantly reminded of the disturbing parallels between Richard and Linda and “Tom and Viv.” The hajj certainly has echoes of *The Family Reunion*: “Where does one go from a world of insanity?/ Somewhere on the other side of despair,/ To worship in the desert ...” Thompson spoke at unusual length to Patrick Humphries about this experience, drawing the telling conclusion: “It’s a difficult journey, a very difficult journey, but you arrive at your own heart, I suppose. It’s like looking in a mirror.” [PH 174].

Thompson did make sporadic forays into the world of music during the years of absence. The guitar, vocal compilation album was released in 1976 to richly deserved critical acclaim. In 1977, Thompson guested on Sandy Denny’s final album, *Rendezvous*, and with Linda undertook a short tour accompanied by other Islamic musicians. Dave Pegg summed up the general reaction, describing it as a “complete disaster.” During the ill-fated tour, Thompson trailed a number of songs that would appear on the next two albums. Clearly, withdrawal from the world had not implied his complete desertion of the White Goddess or vice versa. In 1978, Richard and Linda contributed backing vocals on “Poor Old Horse” on the Albion Band’s *Rise Up Like The Sun*. The latter included Albion versions of demo-tracks cut by Thompson in 1972 – “Rainbow Over The Hill” and “Time To Ring Some Changes” – both of which reflect key Thompson preoccupations in those heady days in the early seventies.

The Thompsons’ return to the world in 1978 came about as a piece of serendipity. Thompson accepted Joe Boyd’s invitation to guest on Julie Covington’s eponymous solo debut album. The American session musicians – the rhythm section of Neil Larson, Willie Weeks and Andy Newmark – were blown away by Thompson and desperately wanted to extend their collaboration. Enter stage left, Joe Boyd, who pressured Thompson and Jo Lustig into recording *First Light*. “The material is there and these guys love Richard, they’re gonna kill to play with him. It would be great.” [PH185].

Boyd’s prediction of greatness was sadly somewhat misplaced. *First Light* is not *Pour Down*, let alone *Bright Lights*. The album sleeve-notes are spot on in declaring that Richard’s return places him on the threshold of “one of the most exciting, lifelong careers in music of our time.” But it would be another four years and the appearance of *Shoot Out The Lights* before that particular border would be finally crossed.

Restless Highway

Another stab at a “Ramblin’ Man” song. “Restless Highway” takes on personal connotations in the context of Thompson’s retreat to Norfolk and subsequent pilgrimage to Mecca. Unlike “When I Get To The Border”, where the land beyond the frontier smacks as much of Texas or Oz as it does of paradise, the “sweeter country” to which this protagonist is heading is in no doubt:

As for those that have faith and do good works, We shall not deny them their reward. They shall dwell in the gardens of Eden, where rivers will roll at their feet. Reclining there upon soft couches, they shall be decked with bracelets of gold, and arrayed in garments of fine green silk and rich brocade: blissful their reward and happy their resting-place! **[PK 18:30]**

The value of “Restless Highway” in a sense is in providing a benchmark for the later, much greater “Man In Need”. The former deals with archetypes; the latter constructs an intensely personal vision of the road to salvation. The former suggests a degree of artistic and personal smugness; the latter was the product of life crisis and artistic renaissance.

Sweet Surrender

The standout track on the album and, not coincidentally, the only understated track. For once, the electric lead is recognisably Richard Thompson and not Jerry Donahue and the ranks of the great and the good on backing vocals add depth and texture without undermining Linda. Whatever discomforts Linda endured as a result of her husband’s faith, her own belief was at times strong, to judge by her intense and captivating performance on this song. According to Humphries this is one of a number of songs on the album that are “devotional compositions, thinly disguised as love songs.” As we have seen, for a Sufi no pretence is necessary – divine and human love are

synonymous for a believer. This aching statement of fundamental submission to the Beloved is worthy of Rumi.

Don’t Let A Thief Steal Into Your Heart

Humphries is right to label this an unconvincing stab at the prevalent disco trend. Thompson and “hip” is indeed a strange affair. By comparison, his pugnacious acoustic solo versions of this song are at times riveting. The dissection of “Don’t Let A Thief” on the Richard Thompson guitar tutor tapes is particularly compelling, giving real insight into his tripartite genius. It is however good to hear a smile in Linda’s voice and her performance does remind one that she had the potential to become a great popular singer but instead chose to become the finest interpreter of Richard Thompson’s songs. The song is an elaboration on specific Koranic injunctions against the “mischief of the slinking prompter who whispers in the hearts of men” [PK 114:3]: “Let the life of this world never deceive you, nor let the dissembler trick you about God.” [PK 31:33]. And again:

Children of Adam! Let not Satan deceive you, as he deceived your parents out of Paradise. He stripped them of their garments to reveal to them their nakedness. He and his minions see you whence you cannot see them. We have made the devils guardians over the unbelievers. 00000 **[PK 7:27]**

The Choice Wife / Died For Love

The Chieftains play the Cairo Hippodrome. The arabesques are laid on with a trowel and the overall effect is of two separate tracks running in sync., rather than a seamless melding of Eastern and Western influences. The theme and structure clearly derive from the English ballad tradition and it seems strange for Thompson to be returning to his roots at this stage. I suspect “Died For Love” was included on the album as a companion piece to “Layla.” For Sufis, love of another human being is a divine imperative. According to Mathnawi:

*God's wisdom through his destiny and decree
Made us lovers one of another.
That foreordainment paired all the world's parts
And set each in love with its mate ...
The female inclines towards the male
So that each may perfect the other's work.
God placed inclination in man and woman
So that the world may subsist through their union.*

Fundamentally, love for any creature can only be love for God, but ignorance veils people from recognising what they love. In this context, Annie's farewell – “for now but never adieu” – carries crucial significance. Her “never to God” is in direct contravention of Sufic belief, for there is “no god but God.” Mathnawi again provides the perspective:

*Love is an attribute of God, who has no needs –
Love for anything else is a metaphor.
The beauty of the others is gold-plated:
Outwardly it is light, inwardly smoke.
When the light goes and the smoke appears,
Metaphorical love turns to ice.*

In Thompson's words:

*The summer turned into winter but Annie Painter never came.
A cold wind blew through the dark town
And it chilled the heart of John Dunblane.*

Strange Affair

As Humphries notes, this is a direct translation from the “Song and Praise of the Shaykh” by Huwari. The closing exhortation to “Turn your back on your self and if you follow, / You'll win the lover's prize” is, as we have seen, central to Sufi belief. Thompson's words also echo those of Sam'ani: “Love's affair is truly strange – it's thrown to [man by God] without a cause.” These in turn reflect the cryptic words of the Koran: “God is subtle to his servants.” [PK 42:19].

The “la la’s” and faux jollity should have made this a candidate for the 1978 Eurovision Song Contest. Terry Wogan would have made a meal of all the bewilderment and dismemberment. Humphries notes that “Layla” was inspired by an ecstatic song of yearning, which Thompson learned from an Algerian teacher. The story of Layla and Majnun is, of course, an ages-old Arabic folk tale that directly inspired the Eric Clapton classic. Its significance for Thompson resides in its consistent appearance in Sufi literature as an epitome of love for the divine – the “sacred” to balance the “profane” described by Thompson in “Died For Love.” A ghazal by Jami is a good example, which relates the love of Layla and Majnun to the eternal dance:

*Do you know what it is – the sound of lute and rebec?
“You are my sufficiency, You are my all, O loving God!”*

*The dry and dismal have no taste of sama’ –
Otherwise, that song had seized the world.*

Oh that Minstrel! One tune

And every atom of being began to dance.

The ascetic stands on the shore of imagination and fantasy,

The gnostic’s soul is drowned in the sea of Being.

The holy threshold of Love has no form,

But in every form It shows Itself alone.

It displayed Itself in the clothing of Layla’s beauty,

It stole patience and ease from Majnun’s heart.

Thompson’s language in “Layla” is at times wilfully obscure and undermines any sense of “ecstatic yearning”:

*Well you say you see some good in me, it’s only from her light
Take this being gone from me
Don’t look to her delight.*

A much more effective variation on the theme is the roughly contemporaneous Thompson composition “Madness Of Love.” This was almost certainly derived from Rumi and benefits from his directness and transparency:

*What would happen, youth, if you became a lover like me –
Every day madness, every day weeping.
His image not out of your eyes for an instant –
Two hundred lights in your eyes from that face.
You would cut yourself off from your friends,
You would wash your hands of the world ...
Leaving behind all selfish desires, you would become mad,
But not any madness a doctor could cure.*

The only secular song on the album, appropriately written largely by Linda Thompson. The depiction of the female assassin was inspired by the contemporary activities of the Baader-Meinhof terrorist group and, specifically, by the involvement

in the gang of Patti Hearst. The control of structure, rhyme and metre is remarkably assured and the central character is created in depth. The hints of childhood neglect and abuse that lie behind the genteel façade add a hint of sympathy to a presentation that could otherwise have been as “cold as the barrel of her gun”:

*And they say she grew up well provided for
Her mother used to keep her boys for sure
And father's close attentions led to talk
She learned to stab her food with a silver fork.*

The only Islamic reference is oblique and probably accidental. The statement that “she did it for the pleasure ... of the moment” recalls the famous aphorism “The Sufi is the child of the moment” [as-sufi ibn al-waqt].

House Of Cards

The Sharia according to Lewis Carroll with music by Andrew Lloyd Webber. This is a pretentious and pretty churlish reprise of the much earlier, uplifting “Time To Ring Some Changes”, sharing Thompson’s recurrent image of the crumbling house. “House Of Cards” is less a metaphor for a decaying political system, however, than a diatribe against the unbelievers – “if you don’t belong to my club, you can’t be any good” - that is couched in explicitly Koranic terms [my italics]:

- Who is a better man, he who founds his house on the fear of God and His good pleasure, or he who builds on the brink of a crumbling precipice, so that his house will fall with him into the fire of Hell? [PK 9:109]
- Do you not see how God drives the clouds, then gathers and piles them up in masses which pour down torrents of rain? From heaven’s mountains He sends down the hail, pelting with it whom He will ... [PK 24:43]
- As for the unbelievers, neither their riches nor their children shall in the least protect them from God’s scourge ... The wealth they spend in this world is like a freezing wind that smites the tillage of men who have wronged themselves, laying it waste. [PK 3:116/7]
- Those who have gone before them likewise disbelieved: but how grievous was the way I rejected them! Do they not see the birds above their heads, spreading their wings and closing them? [PK 67 18/9]
- Know that We send down to the unbelievers devils who incite them to evil. Therefore have patience: their days are numbered. The day will surely come when We will ... drive the guilty to Hell in thirsty hordes. [PK 19:86]
- Those who have gone before [these infidels] also plotted. But God smote their edifice at its foundations, and its roof fell down upon their heads. The scourge overtook them whence they did not know. [PK 16:26]

It is a measure of the change in Thompson’s outlook during the period of his voluntary exile to Hoxne that the songs that once poured “down like silver” are replaced here by lashing

torrents of rain. The beneficent “bonny birds” that formerly wheeled away at the dimming of the day transmogrify into hovering portents of God’s wrath, reminiscent of the apocalyptic kestrel in “Wheely Down.” Sunnyvista would show much more of the same lack of charity on Thompson’s part.

First Light

A welcome return to the merciful names of God beloved of the Sufis. Humphries reports that this is a translation of an Arabic text. Light is, of course, a Koranic name for God: “God is the light of the heavens and the earth.” [PK 24:35].

There can be no doubt that Joe Boyd did the world a great favour by playing *deus ex machina* in order to get Richard and Linda back into the studio and onto vinyl. Without that intervention there might have been no *Shoot Out The Lights*, no *Rumor & Sigh*, no *Mock Tudor* and Richard Thompson might have been filed away with Sandy and Nick and all the others who, in his words, “went to Mars and never came back.” However, Boyd’s tying of their return to the availability of American musicians was unfortunate. *First Light* ends up sounding over-elaborate and something of a stylistic mish-mash. One wonders what it would have sounded like if the Fairport trio of Messrs Nicol, Pegg and Mattacks had moved straight from the Julie Covington demo sessions to appear on a stripped down Richard and Linda album. That said, the collection of songs, with the honourable exceptions of “Sweet Surrender” and “Pavanne”, is probably the weakest overall

that Thompson has put his name to. *First Light* was never going to sit alongside the great Thompson creations. Later, he was very honest in his appraisal of the album: “*First Light* sounds like it’s trying to be commercial in a really kind of pathetic way, without understanding what that really means.” [PH 188/9].

Thankfully, this is as close to a poor album as Thompson ever came. The fully baked album was to be followed by a half-baked one.

SUNNYVISTA

1. Civilisation
2. Borrowed Time
3. Saturday Rolling Around
4. You're Going To Need Somebody
5. Why Do You Turn Your Back?
6. Sunnyvista
7. Lonely Hearts
8. Sisters
9. Justice In The Streets
10. Traces Of My Love
11. Georgie On A Spree

All songs written by Richard Thompson. Produced by John Wood and Richard Thompson.

Players – Richard and Linda Thompson with Timi Donald (drums, percussion), Michel Spencer-Arscott (drums), Dave Pegg (bass), Pat Donaldson (bass), Simon Nicol (acoustic & electric guitars), John Kirkpatrick (accordion, triangle), Dave Mattacks (drums), Bruce Lynch (bass), Sue Harris (oboe, hammered dulcimer), Pete Wingfield (keyboards), Rabbit Bundrick (keyboards), Louis Jardine (percussion). Backing vocals – Kate & Anna McGarrigle, Glen Tilbrook, Julian Littman, Marc Ellington, Olive Simpson, Nicole Tibbels, Lindsay Benton, Gerry Rafferty, Hafsa Abdul Jabbas, Abdu Rahim.

UK Release October 1979. Chrysalis CHR 1247.

The Thompsons beat their retreat back to civilisation in 1978 courtesy of Linda who, interestingly, had retained their flat in Hampstead during their rural idyll without telling her husband. From the evidence of Sunnyvista, which was released in the autumn of 1979, the reacclimatisation to city life was not easy for Thompson. The dark mood evinced in “House Of Cards” is intensified and we see the first signs of a renewed sense of self-doubt, which would erupt over the next two years. The album title itself conveys a degree of ambiguity that, as far as I am aware, has not been commented on. Apart from being the name of the community pulverised in the title track, “sunny vista” also implies a view that is sunny either in prospect or in retrospect. More significant, “sunny” is a pun on “Sunni”. The Sunnah is the traditionary portion of Islamic law, based on Muhammad’s reported words and actions. Its authenticity and authority is accepted without question by orthodox Sunni Moslems but disputed by the Shi’ite sect. The schism in no way affects the Sufi branch of Islam but one wonders why Thompson should have incorporated the suggestion of a doctrinaire Islamic view into the title of an album that takes a pretty harsh view of Western civilisation.

Civilisation

Cheap shot or heavy irony? The worldview of an implied Sunni intermediary or an unashamed bout of infidel bashing by a surrogate “wog”? Either way, it’s hard to say a good word about this track in which bitter cynicism and faux-folk levity

alike are loaded with a JCB. “Vegetables with a heartache” is clearly a Sufi value judgement – this is the world of blame-worthy sobriety. “Civilisation” is enough to drive anybody to drink. Whatever happened to the merciful name of God?

Borrowed Time

The theme is very similar to that of “House Of Cards” – “They’ll all pay double for what they’ve done” – but “Borrowed Time” works splendidly and avoids the superficiality and spleen of the earlier song. The trick, of course, is the “distancing” that Thompson achieves by “acting out” the message in a fully realised setting. The transposition of Koranic wrath to the mythic Wild West is a masterstroke and the welcome inclusion of some distinctive Thompson guitar playing adds an edginess that intensifies the mood of danger and imminent violence. The song is a near relative to “Genesis Hall”, not least because of the appearance of another sheriff figure. In the earlier song the father figure was relatively benign – “I know he would never mean harm” – but now he is deluded and collusive and head of a posse bent on rough justice. One wonders at the autobiographical implications, if any.

Saturday Rolling Around

From the badlands to the bayou. Thompson’s interest in Cajun music stretches from his earliest songs – “Cajun Wom-

an” on *Unhalfbricking* – to his most recent recorded work. His version of “Les Flammes D’Enfer” on the 2002 Cajun tribute compilation, *Evangeline Made*, is quite stunning. One of Thompson’s many outstanding guest appearances was on the 1988 album, *Hot Cajun Rhythm ‘N’ Blues*, by Michael Doucet and Cajun Brew. Thompson features on three songs, including a rousing version of his own “Woman Or A Man.” His appearance was a happy accident:

Three hours before my plane leaves, that nice Mr. Doucet invites me to stand in a room with other guests somewhere in the suburbs of New Orleans. The door is closed. By a miracle, many songs are performed – everyone’s playing at once – it’s like the old days! Yet strange to tell – Cajuns singing “Woolly Bully”? Toes will tap, critics will wink conspiratorially, old men in Bermuda shorts will swear F. P. Sylvester’s Playboys did it all in 1911. Vive le rock & roll Cajun!

It’s certainly alive and well here. The imagery in the first three verses of “Saturday Rolling Around” – wind, sun and moon, looking for a dream – is unobtrusively Koranic and is further masked by the local specificity of the images of blue collar America in the other verses. After the sombreness of so much of the previous two albums, it is a real pleasure to hear Richard and Linda rediscovering a joy in performance. Thompson commented on *First Light* to Colin Irwin:

Arabic's a very strong language, a very powerful language, an extraordinary language. There's this vast stock [of Arabic poetry] and in Arab countries it's still sung as pop music. There's all this twelfth- or thirteenth-century Egyptian [verse], very ecstatic poetry, and it's still sung on Egyptian radio with strings, electric guitar, drums. It's as well known as Shakespeare or the Beatles.

That blend of the ecstatic and the electric was missed completely on First Light but in "Saturday Rolling Around" and the two songs that follow we get a real sense of what divine intoxication feels like when translated into a western rock idiom.

You're Going To Need Somebody

The joyous mood continues, appropriately for a song that affirms God's mercy and proximity. The style and feel is Dylanesque, as is Thompson's aggressive delivery at the end of the third verse – "When your friends build you up just to watch – you - fall." Great stuff! For once, the Arabic feel doesn't jar and Kirkpatrick's playing is superb.

Why Do You Turn Your Back?

Another upbeat affirmation of faith, characterised by the controlled build up and release of tension generated by the

unusual structure of the song. The concept of God as Friend is important to the Sufis. Rumi makes the point:

*It is incumbent on lovers to seek the Friend,
Flowing like floods on face and head to His river.
He Himself does the seeking, and we are like shadows.
All our talking and speaking are the words of the Friend.
Sometimes we rejoice like water running in His stream,
Sometimes we're trapped like water in his jug.*

The first verse of the song refers to the state of non-existence with God before He called us into being: "How can you deny God? Did He not give you life when you were dead, and will He not cause you to die and then restore you to life? Will you not return to Him at last?" [PK 2:28]. The language in succeeding verses is again a careful blend of the colloquial and the Koranic. The source for "When you were drowning, he threw you ashore ... Why do you turn your back ..." is clear:

It is you Lord who drives for you the ships across the ocean, so that you may seek His bounty. Surely He is ever merciful towards you. When at sea a misfortune befalls you, all but He of those to whom you pray forsake you; yet when He brings you safe to dry land you turn your backs upon Him. Truly, man is ever thankless. [PK 17:65/7]

I don't know how much we should read into the following:

*And now you're like a bolted door
No-one can change the lock, your palace is secure
You're the king and the prisoner
But don't you hear the knocking at the door?*

We've noted that "dervish" derives from the Persian word for door. We should also note the similarity between this image and those who "won't take the chain off the door" in "Lonely Hearts." Above all, we should note the trailing of one of the dominant images from Thompson's next album: "Keep the blind down on the window. / Keep the pain on the inside. / Just watching the dark." To what extent was Thompson talking to himself in the songs on Sunnyvista?

Sunnyvista

Kurt Weill meets Joe Loss at a soiree hosted by Noel Coward. A clever-clever song that ends up sounding churlish and dumb. I do wonder if the reference to the place where "you always wanted to stay" and where you could "dance the happy hours away" is some perverse reference to the commune at Hoxne. Linda might have smiled wryly.

Lonely Hearts

Patrick Humphries is very anti the album and very pro this song: "honest and heartfelt sympathy is the song's strength,

and what makes it all the more outstanding is its inclusion on an album which reeks of heartlessness." [PH 191]

I believe there is another dimension to the song. The opening couplet takes us right back to "Dimming Of The Day" and "Night Comes In" – we are back on that street, looking for the Beloved. The references to the "ocean of loneliness" and the "shipwreck of pain" are not accidental – as we have seen, only the Friend can bring you "safe back to dry land." Note the reference to love, sold "by the pound." This recalls the world of the deluded and the dispossessed, "Down Where The Drunkards Roll", where "you can be Lord Jesus", and where "You can get the real thing / It will only cost a pound."

Sisters

Great song. Great vocal. Great uncertainty in my mind about who and what it is addressing. During the Hoxne years, families were a major issue for Richard and Linda. We heard earlier Thompson's admission that he had found it "difficult" to deal with his family in the seventies and Linda's comments to Humphries expose the degree to which she felt torn between her love for her husband and that for her family: "I didn't, and absolutely couldn't, have cut off contact the way Richard did with his family. Even if I lied about it, I would still see my family." [PH 173]

We've seen before how Thompson put "difficult" words in Linda's mouth and I suspect this is another case in point. I think this is a song addressed by Richard to his sister Perri. A

more appropriate title would have been “Siblings”. The references to “our people” who were “drab and defeated”, to the singer’s taking “to the highway to find some relief”, and to love – i.e. God – coming between us are admittedly not conclusive. But the sheer intensity of this song suggests that it meant far more to Thompson than just one more analysis of parting from your dearest on the old changing way.

Justice In The Streets

Funky “Pharaoh.” The distinctive spiky guitar and assured RT vocals put this among the good guys on this curate’s egg of an album. Here and elsewhere on the album, Thompson appears to be following Koranic injunctions to fight the good fight:

Therefore fight for the cause of God. You are accountable for none but yourself. Rouse the faithful: perchance God will overthrow the might of the unbelievers. God is mightier and more truculent than they. [PK 4:84]

Traces Of My Love

Arguably Linda’s finest hour. I always think of her and Sandy’s performance of the Everly’s “When Will I Be Loved?” when I play this. The only people who might be able to ap-

proach this performance of “Traces Of My Love” are the Five Blind Boys of Alabama. Even they could not capture that thrilling blend of the sensual and the spiritual that characterises her performances of all the great Thompson songs to his Beloved. There is a sad irony tucked away in there of course. The concept of the “traces” is central to Sufi belief. Chittick writes:

The Koran refers to prophetic revelation in general and to its own verses in particular as “signs,” since these give news of God and remind people of their true selves, created in the divine image. It also refers to the creatures and events of the universe as signs, since each of them displays the traces of God’s names and attributes. So also, everything within ourselves is a sign of God: “We shall show them Our signs upon the horizon and within their selves.” [41:53]

Georgie On A Spree

The BBC chose “Georgie” as the theme song for the drama “Kiss the Girls and Make Them Cry.” That presumably explains its repeat performance. I feel entitled to buy at least one Thompson bootleg album in retaliation – so long as it doesn’t include “Georgie”.

Thompson said, “I don’t think it’s a great record.” He was right. But it is an intensely frustrating record. This kind of instrumentation and production could have retrieved First

Light. Conversely, probably any three songs from First Light - to replace “Civilisation”, “Sunnyvista” and the unwarranted “Georgie” reprise - could have completely changed the mood and tone of Sunnyvista and placed it alongside the great Thompson albums. Richard looked back over the Islamic trilogy and drew obvious conclusions:

The regrets I would have would be career stuff, I was too flaccid in the 1970s, I just wasn't thinking tightly enough to make a difference. Especially the later 70s, where I made really indifferent records, I just didn't have my mind on the job. [PH 160]

Linda's later conclusions, not surprisingly, were rather more insightful. She no doubt wished that she didn't know now what she didn't know then: “It was tough, he didn't really have a life, then when he got out into the world again, I think he'd really just wasted his twenties and thought, I'm going to do something in my thirties.” [PH 181]. The “something” in question was Shoot Out The Lights, one of the great statements of existential angst in the late twentieth century. In 2002, Linda resumed her singing career with the magnificent album, Fashionably Late. The closing track surely encapsulates the sea change that took place in Thompson as he entered the eighties and set off to scale the second pinnacle of his career:

*Here's to the man that we thought was dead
Singing like he's got a gun to his head*

*Hanging on sweet notes and a thread
That dear old man of mine.*

SHOOT OUT THE LIGHTS

1. Don't Renege On Our Love
2. Walking On A Wire
3. Man In Need
4. Just The Motion
5. Shoot Out The Lights
6. Back Street Slide
7. Did She Jump Or Was She Pushed?
8. Wall Of Death

All songs written by Richard Thompson except [7], written by Richard and Linda Thompson. Produced by Joe Boyd.

Players – Richard and Linda Thompson with Simon Nicol (rhythm guitar), Dave Pegg (bass), Pete Zorn (bass and backing vocals), David Matlack (drums). Brass – Stephen Corbett, Brian Jones, Phil Goodwin, Stephen Barnett. Mark Cutts. Backing Vocals – Norma Waterson, Mike Waterson, Lal Waterson, Martin Carthy, Clive Gregson.

UK Release April 1982. Hannibal HNBL 1303.

On her 1970 album, *Fotheringay*, Sandy Denny recreated in the song “Nothing More” an eerily prophetic dialogue between two special friends. Another special friend of both participants in the dialogue, Linda Peters, did not sing back up on this particular track:

*Oh it's true, it's very true, he said
Some hard times I have known,
But I have always overcome them on my own ...*

*For you are like the others, he said,
I never can be sure
That you wish just to see the pearls and nothing more.*

In one of those sad ironies and coincidences that peppered the history of Fairport Convention in the early years, Sandy's dialogue is strangely reminiscent of those between Yeats' “Crazy Jane” and the Bishop. Sandy and her special friend Richard would play out their appointed roles until her untimely death in April 1978.

Sandy's death was one of the four “accidents” that precipitated crisis and reappraisal in the three prime areas of Thompson's life – artistic, personal and spiritual - between April 1978 and the release of the “definitive” version of *Shoot Out The Lights* four years later. The others were:

- The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. This prompted a reappraisal by Thompson of what it meant for him to be a Muslim in late twentieth century Britain.
- The offer by Gerry Rafferty to sponsor the album that would become *Shoot Out The Lights*. The fundamental disagreements that arose between artist and producer during the recording of the “Rafferty tapes” in September and October 1980 compelled Thompson to confront the ex-

tent to which he had lost [control of] the plot through the 1970s.

- The chance encounter between Thompson and an American folk club manager, Nancy Covey, in the spring of 1981. Nancy, in her own words, was “a catalyst for something that looked like it needed to happen.” [PH 217]. The marriage between Richard and Linda subsequently ended in early 1982, immediately prior to the release of *Shoot Out The Lights*.

Three other important secondary “synchronicities” are also worthy of mention:

- The release in 1979 of Francis Ford Coppola’s compelling depiction of American involvement in Vietnam, *Apocalypse Now*. This gave Thompson a modern myth on which to hang his renewed questioning of faith and belief.
- The conception of Kamila Thompson, Richard and Linda’s second daughter, in May 1981. Simplistically, Linda’s difficult third pregnancy gave Thompson a need and a space in which to recreate a solo performing persona. Linda’s indisposition also facilitated the developing relationship between her husband and Nancy.
- The reappearance, stage left, in the summer of 1981 of Joe Boyd. His desire to exploit Thompson in the launch of the latest Boyd venture, Hannibal Records, gave a committed channel to market for *Shoot Out The Lights*. Boyd’s involvement as producer also meant that Thompson’s latest pearls found an appropriate middleman, a vehicle to trans-

late Rafferty’s populist merchandise into high art. The Boyd sessions, in November 1981, are one of the pivotal points in Richard Thompson’s career.

If, as D. H. Lawrence observed, it is in art that “we shed our sicknesses”, it is worth pausing to dwell on Thompson’s relationships with three of the main protagonists who most affected the malaise that we see diagnosed in the artistic triumph that is *Shoot Out The Lights*.

SANDY

In the last week of March 1978, Sandy Denny took her young daughter, Georgia, to visit her grandparents at their holiday cottage in Cornwall. According to Sandy’s biographer, the ubiquitous and unashamedly intrusive Clinton Heylin, a drunken Sandy suffered a heavy fall down a flight of stairs and sustained serious head injuries. In Heylin’s words, Sandy’s mother “simply refused to take her down to Casualty to have her x-rayed, more fearful of the damage to her own reputation than [that to] her daughter’s skull.” [CH 236]. Heylin’s thesis is that the effects of this fall – “an untreated subdural hematoma” – led to Sandy’s death a month later, when she suffered a second minor fall at the home of a friend, Miranda Ward. Sandy’s pain, and the horror of the event for bystanders, was intensified by the decision of husband Trevor Lucas to abandon her, accompanied by their daughter Georgia, the weekend before her death. All of Sandy’s friends had reason

to feel guilty. As Chris Pegg noted, they'd all seen it coming: "We all felt incredibly guilty. Deep down we knew it had all been going wrong ... but we'd got into the habit of keeping our heads down while the storm passed – and this time it didn't." [CH 10]. The Thompsons had more reason to feel guilty than most. The vacuum that Sandy had felt acutely in the final years of her life was in no small measure due to the withdrawal, literal and metaphoric, of Richard and Linda. The burden placed on Linda Thompson was heavier than that placed on Richard, who at the time was able to maintain the implacable, righteous façade of the devout. Linda remained accessible and all too human as the evidence in Heylin's biography of Sandy makes clear. Linda took one of those calls on Sandy's final sensate weekend: "She sounded mad. Just mad. Doo-lalley. She was a bit out of it, whether through shock or whatever. By that time, it's perfectly possible that she didn't really know [Trevor had gone], that she was too far gone, that it didn't really register." [CH 236]. Richard took a stoical attitude to the death, as reflected in his reported comment to Dave Cousins: "she wasn't destined to write any more music, she was destined to die when she died." He later amplified on the comment:

Somehow she just couldn't handle the world anymore. I just thought that in a sense, that was it, creatively, and in terms of her life – that it wasn't the wrong time, that that was the way it was going to happen and there was nothing you could do about it. There wasn't some great body of

music that was going to come in the next twenty years.[CH 247]

Thompson's public attitude reflects a conventional Islamic view – "Men cannot forestall their doom, nor can they retard it" [PK 15:5] - and also helps explain his valediction to Sandy twenty years on: "She gave as much as she had to give." On *Shoot Out The Lights* Richard and Linda exorcised their specific ghosts in the jointly written "Did She Jump Or Was She Pushed?" But there can be little doubt that Sandy's premature death also fuelled a general questioning by Thompson at this time of what his allotted span and role as a major creative artist might be. Sandy herself raised the issue in a 1971 interview: "I do appreciate being slightly well-known, because I've got a bit of an ego. But I never want to reach the top. It's such a long way down. I'd rather hover about near the top, and never actually reach the height." [CH 112]. Her literal fall is reflected in Thompson's resurrection of the image of the metaphorical fall that awaits all performers who choose to walk on the wire. After three albums dominated by the voice of the Bishop, in *Shoot Out The Lights* the ghost of Crazy Jane stalks the tracks.

RAFFERTY

The lukewarm public response to *Sunnyvista* prompted Chrysalis to pass up the option of renewing the Thompsons' recording contract. The previous two-album deal had hardly

been an unqualified success for either party. In June 1980 Richard and Linda spent time at Dave Pegg's Woodworm Studios cutting demos which they intended to hawk around in the hope of securing a new contract. The Woodworm sessions included six of the tracks that would eventually appear on the "official" version of Shoot Out The Lights. "Man In Need" and "Did She Jump Or Was She Pushed" were not recorded at this time. A significant inclusion at this stage was a cover of Sandy Denny's "I'm A Dreamer." Other inclusions, which might give some clue as to Thompson's state of mind, were the bleak "Speechless Child" and the jaunty "How Many Times Do You Have To Fall?" Both songs are dominated by images of the inability to articulate love and loss:

*I tried to give you all I have to prove that I'm not bluffing.
They say it's a man with nothing to lose who ends up losing
nothing.
My head is full of scheming schemes; my tongue's tied up with
talking.
How many times do you have to fall before you end up walking?*

Both songs prefigure themes that would dominate Shoot Out The Lights. In particular, the upbeat tone of "How Many Times" should not obscure its similarities to "Walking On A Wire." It is in essence Thompson's first song to his muse in nearly a decade, albeit one that is dressed up as a silly love song.

Thompson's desire that someone should "open the door to see the wares I'm hawking" went unsatisfied. He and Linda

were still sans contract, sans opportunity by the autumn of 1980. It was then that Gerry Rafferty stepped in to offer his services. Rafferty had shot to worldwide fame with the success of "Baker Street" in 1979. He had guested on Sunnyside and had returned the favour by employing Richard as a session guitarist on Night Owl and by taking Richard and Linda out as guests on his spring 1980 tour to promote the album. Rafferty generously offered to finance the recording of a Thompson album, armed with which he could hope to secure a new recording contract for them. While Rafferty has attracted criticism for his handling of subsequent events, it should be stressed that his initial motivation seems largely altruistic and driven by admiration of Thompson. No one was going to get rich sponsoring Richard and Linda.

The Rafferty-produced sessions took place at Chipping Norton Studios in Oxfordshire during September and October 1980. Linda's comments at the time show that she was particularly enthusiastic at the prospect of working with Rafferty. They also imply that Rafferty had influenced track selection for the putative album: "Gerry has been selective about the material." [PH 195]. There has been some controversy concerning the composition of the Rafferty version of Shoot Out The Lights. Patrick Humphries quotes Pete Zorn to substantiate the view that the track selection on the Rafferty version was identical to the final album, track for track. This conflicts with Thompson's own recollection of events:

"Don't Renege", "Walking On A Wire", "Just The Motion", "Shoot Out The Lights", "Back Street Slide" and "Wall Of

Death” were all on the Rafferty one. We changed the vocalist on a couple of those. “Don’t Renege” was originally sung by Linda, but because she was quite pregnant when we came to record the [Joe Boyd] Shoot Out The Lights, she found it hard to breathe on that one, so we had to change the key and I had to sing it. And on “Wall Of Death”, which is a duet, we turned around the parts. We swapped parts over to make it easier for her.

The bootleg release of the Rafferty sessions is consistent with Thompson’s view. “Man In Need” and “Did She Jump Or Was She Pushed” are missing – as they were in the Woodworm sessions – and the Rafferty version of the album is fleshed out with Sandy’s “I’m A Dreamer”, a remake of “For Shame Of Doing Wrong”, “Modern Woman” and “The Wrong Heartbeat.” The latter would of course eventually appear on Hand Of Kindness. The subsequent dropping of the four extra tracks and the inclusion of “Man In Need” and “Did She Jump” had a material impact of the tone and thematic emphasis and coherence of the finished album. Track selection and changes in lead vocal apart, the differences between the Rafferty and Boyd versions are not that great. The arrangements are broadly similar. The core instrumentation is identical. The Rafferty version includes Betsy Cook’s keyboards and Phil Pickett’s hurdy gurdy as embellishments. The Boyd version includes a quintet of brass players. No big deal. The material differences are all a result of Rafferty’s meticulous and layered approach to production compared with the typical Boyd and Thompson cut-and-run philosophy. The Raf-

ferty version is by no means a bad album, though it’s hard to disagree with Pete Zorn’s view that the clean and polished Rafferty version lacks the thrilling “raw edge” that characterises the final release. In the Rafferty mixes, Thompson’s lead guitar is often submerged. In the Boyd album, the lead is up there, in your face, and this gives a sense of real menace to tracks such as “Wall Of Death”. The net result in the Boyd version is the re-emergence of Richard Thompson as one of the world’s great guitar players, a prominence that, guitar, vocal notwithstanding, was increasingly in danger of being forgotten as the seventies unfolded.

Thompson’s later comments on the Rafferty sessions suggest that his own dissatisfactions with the experience had much more to do with the process than the product. He made it clear to Patrick Humphries that he found Rafferty’s need for control particularly hard to deal with: “When he got to the mixing, I just didn’t bother to turn up ... because if I said something it was totally ignored and I thought ‘hey, whose record is this anyway?’” [PH 196]. The effect of the whole experience seems to have been a desire on Thompson’s part to revisit his roots, to regain control over his own artistic destiny and to reassert himself as a “name” and a player. The recording of the Strict Tempo album was surely prompted by more than a desire to while away the days while Rafferty unsuccessfully touted Lights Mark 1 around the record companies. In context, the decision to record a collection of predominantly traditional tunes with minimal support – just Dave Mattacks on assorted percussion – was a bold one. In effect it was an audacious affirmation of identity and integrity – “this is what

made me what I am and this is what I can do". There is no doubt about "whose record this is" – no one else could have conceived, performed and produced it. The "stringband version of the entire Duke Ellington Orchestra" that is "Rockin' In Rhythm" is a work of outrageous virtuosity. Listen to the deconstruction on the Thompson guitar tutor tapes and you still can't imagine how on earth he pulls it off. Most telling in a sense, however, is the one original track on the album, "The Knife-Edge." Thompson's arrangement in fact encapsulates the polarity implicit in the title – a slow air is played on electric guitar accompanied by acoustic embellishments; a jig is played on mandolin and acoustic guitar, backed with electric flourishes; a final reel is played on electric and acoustic instruments going head to head, reminiscent of the closing passage to "When I Get To The Border". As the sleeve note suggests, "All music is a knife-edge!" and the electric/rock vs. acoustic/traditional duality runs throughout Thompson's work. No "layers" of anyone over the top here: this is the genius of Richard Thompson given naked expression.

Just as I tend view *Strict Tempo* as the result of a conscious and important career choice by Thompson in the wake of the "Rafferty experience", so I regard Thompson's other major extra-curricular activity in 1981 as more than an accident. Part of the motivation behind the GP's was undoubtedly Ralph McTell's desire to put the blue-haired brigade behind him, to let down his own hair, to loosen his strap and play in a rock band. DP and DM were always going to be willing accomplices. But participation in the ultimate bar band also gave Thompson an opportunity to revisit those areas of his

musical background that remained largely unexplored on *Strict Tempo*. Country, Cajun and Rockabilly music are an important part of what makes Richard Thompson one of the great writers and guitarists. One recalls Linda's comment that he was "into" American music long before Swarb, Tyger and Sandy variously introduced him to "Eng. Trad. Arr.". It is in fact a sad commentary on our times that Thompson would probably have earned more, in terms of dollars and kudos, as a Nashville session player than he has ever earned as the greatest writer and guitarist England has produced. Although Thompson is dismissive of the GP's experiment – "irrelevant" – one cannot argue with the intensity with which he attacks his lead performances. His version of Jerry Lee's "Great Balls Of Fire" is probably his greatest recorded rock 'n' roll cover. Similarly, his rendering of Buck Owens' "Together Again" – "in the style of Fats Domino, who's a plumber in Chelmsford" – is stunning. But the significant Thompson performance in the GP's set at the annual Fairport reunion at Broughton Castle in August 1981 was of a more modern song by another of his dominant influences, Bob Dylan.

Planet Waves was released by Dylan in 1974 during his first extended "fallow" period. Its main distinctions lie in the fact that it was the only album Dylan recorded in full with The Band – which is in itself ample reason for Thompson to be familiar with it – and that, with the benefit of hindsight, it pointed towards the full-blown renaissance that appeared in 1975 as *Blood On The Tracks*. If *Planet Waves* was not the obvious album to hunt out for a Dylan cover, nor was "Going, Going, Gone" the obvious track to select from the album.

“Forever Young” was the one universally acknowledged success on the album. According to Patrick Humphries, Thompson “savaged” “Going, Going, Gone” at Broughton Castle, with all the “inconsolable tragedy of a penitent.” Yes, but what Patrick overlooks is the fact that Thompson also rewrote the song in part. This was not a case of ad-hoc-ing an under-rehearsed borrowing. Thompson knew exactly what he was saying and, one supposes, exactly why he was choosing to say it to the “Cropredy Crowd”, the one audience in the world on whom he could rely to listen to him. Thompson’s insertion and repeating of the lines “I’ve been walking on the edge”, “I’ve been walking the room”, and “Before it gets too late” take on major significance in the context of Shoot Out The Lights. I find it hard to believe that the choice of “Going, Going, Gone” or the specific changes noted are accidental. “Going, Going, Gone” is Dylan’s “Man In Need”, in content and in context. By choosing to perform it in this way, Thompson is expressing his own sense of pent-up frustration and his determination to “cut loose”, and he is choosing to do so in the words of the other great song writer of the twentieth century who, stumbling in the mire that followed *Blonde On Blonde*, could nonetheless aspire to a return to the high wire. In many ways, Shoot Out The Lights was to be Richard Thompson’s *Blood On The Tracks*. At Broughton Castle, Thompson’s declaration of intent is essentially an artistic manifesto in response to those who, like Rafferty, “totally ignored” what Thompson had to say on matters affecting the integrity of his own work. But in the crowd at Broughton Castle was the person who would also stand Thompson’s personal life on its head.

NANCY

Shoot Out The Lights achieved notoriety as the great “marriage break-up” album. The detailed chronology contained in *Strange Affair* confirms that it can’t have been. Most of the songs that became Shoot Out The Lights were written over a year before Thompson first met Nancy Covey, two years before the final album was released. The chronology is however instructive in highlighting the pressures that Thompson was under – put himself under – in the twelve months leading up to the release of Shoot Out The Lights.

Nancy and Richard first met at a folk club in London around the middle of 1981. Linda specifically remembers that she did not attend because at the time she was “very sick” in the early stages of her third pregnancy. The second encounter took place at Broughton Castle in August. Nancy was keen to persuade Thompson to appear at her club, McCabe’s, and he agreed in principle. This appearance took place in December as part of a US solo mini-tour organised by Nancy. The Joe Boyd Shoot Out The Lights sessions had taken place in London the previous month. Nancy makes it clear that the December tour was the crucial point:

When I met him at the club that had nothing to do with it, and even when I met him in Cropredy, it was business, I was trying to get him over to McCabe’s. But then when I set up a solo tour for him in order to get him to play McCabe’s, we spent a lot of time together, you know, at gigs and interviews. That’s when we met each other properly

and we spent a lot of time together ... things didn't happen then, but it was interesting. [PH 211]

Thompson returned to England as planned for the Christmas holiday and for the birth of Kamila, intending to return to the USA after the holidays to complete the tour that Nancy had organised. From Linda's perspective, events looked rather different:

I guess he waited until the baby was born, and when the baby was about four days old he left. He said "I've got to go and do some music in Florida" and he actually went off and had a holiday with Nancy. Then he came back and told me, and I remember him saying, "I've got somebody else", and I said, "can she sing?" [PH 211]

The "music in Florida" actually included the performance at New York's Bottom Line on 8th January 1982, extracts from which subsequently appeared on *Small Town Romance*. At least Richard had an alibi for part of his trip. His version of events and underlying motivations has the ring of truth about it:

I'm probably a bad communicator, so whatever I was feeling, maybe for a long time, probably didn't get communicated. And sometimes with relationships, you're not aware of how badly you're communicating or how depressed you are or how kind of lifeless your marriage is until you meet somebody else. Unfortunately, that's the way it works usu-

ally. So you meet somebody else and go "Whoaaa, Crikey, where have I been for the last ten years?" So I think I was completely the instigator and mover in breaking the marriage up. It was a terrible time to do it – we had a young baby ... [PH 210]

If *Shoot Out The Lights* was not – could not have been – the diary of a marital breakdown, it was surely coloured substantially by what Thompson had been "feeling, maybe for a long time." Linda, as ever, put her finger on it with admirable balance, insight and succinctness:

I think if Richard hadn't gone he would have imploded. He just had lived too narrow for too long and I think he had to shed me and the kids to get out of it. And it was painful and.... people say to me, it was acrimonious. I mean, it wasn't that bloody acrimonious. I mean, we're not Larry and Liz for God's sake! I may have cut up a few sweaters or something. You know, it's a difficult time. Divorce is a very, very difficult thing. Much more difficult for the children than it was for either of us. That's always the horrible thing. [R2B]

The saving grace for Thompson in all of this is Linda's own remarkable ability to pick herself up, dust herself down and start all over again. This particular remake of *Tom and Viv* eventually had a happy ending for all the protagonists, crowned by the release of *Fashionably Late* in 2002. Thompson plays an uncharacteristically understated electric lead on

the opening track. Without that, history might have cast a very jaundiced eye at Thompson's handling of affairs while his masterwork awaited its long overdue release in the spring of 1982.

After three albums that constitute a more-or-less unambiguous and uninterrupted affirmation of faith and that express an undiluted longing for the mutuality of love with the Beloved, *Shoot Out The Lights* comes as a real shock to the system. Nothing in the Islamic trilogy of albums prepares us for the consistently bleak depiction of the human condition contained in *Shoot Out The Lights*, or the ambiguities that surround previously unequivocal statements of belief. The three earlier albums had occasionally pointed the finger at the unbelievers whose day was coming but in *Shoot Out The Lights* the finger is a loaded gun pointed in most cases at the protagonists of the songs. The move from the generalised to the intensely personal parallels the similar swing in mood and focus that occurs between *Henry and Bright Lights* and similarly marks the transition from a "nearly" album to a work of genius. We are in fact looking at a broader movement in Thompson's life and work, from the spiritual quest described in *I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight*, to the attainment of the goal of spiritual fulfilment in *First Light*, to the ambiguous nightmare of *Shoot Out The Lights*. This might seem something of an exaggeration but an examination of the structure of imagery and motif in *Shoot Out The Lights* fully supports the contention.

Graphic images of violence, danger and death permeate *Shoot Out The Lights*. The titles of four of the songs amply

describe their dominant imagery – "Walking On A Wire", "Shoot Out The Lights", "Did She Jump Or Was She Pushed" and "Wall Of Death" – but "Just The Motion" and "The Backstreet Slide" both contain powerful images of violence:

*Knocked down a hundred times,
Rescued and carried along,
Beaten and half-dead and gone ...*

*They're gonna get you dead or alive,
Stab you in the back with a kitchen knife ...
Stab you in the back and they just don't care,
Doing the slide.*

Even "A Man In Need" has its share of handbags at four paces: "I want to shake them/ Till they pay me some heed." Only "Don't Renege On Our Love" is free from this cluster of primary images, but here the elements provide the threat of implied violence: "If you leave me now, I'll thunder forever." This in turn echoes the title song, where the anonymous threat "thunders through the night." The sense of a hostile universe is further reinforced by the threatening winds in "Walking On A Wire" and by the roiling ocean, the "hundred winds", the "restless wind" and the "sleepless rain" of "Just The Motion."

Against this background, the human condition is characterised by pain, suffering, illness and insanity. Every track on the album contains at least one such image:

- *You've got a pulse like fever ...*
- *When all the pain is on my side of the fence ...*
- *Who's going to cure the heart of a man in need?*
- *You're just feeling seasick,/ You're just feeling weak,/ Your mind is confused ...*
- *Keep the pain on the inside.*
- *She's got no teeth, she's got no sense ...*
- *Lying in a pool of herself with a twisted neck ...*
- *You can go with the crazy people in the Crooked House ...*

And human relations are characterised by lies, deceit and breaches of trust. "Don't Renege On Our Love" and "The Backstreet Slide" are both dominated by such images, of course, but we see it elsewhere on the album:

- *You just hand me that same old refrain ...*
- *I left a letter lying on the bed ...*
- *And your friends are confusing ...*
- *She crossed a lot of people, / Some she called friends ...*

Underpinning all of this is the sense of being locked in, trapped, in the minefield that is human existence:

- *Give me my chains of liberty./ There's a rope that binds us ...*
- *I hand you my ball and chain ...*
- *Too many spells to break ...*
- *This grindstone's wearing me ...*

- *All the pain is on my side of the fence.*
- *Who's going to feed you and cut you free?*

Against this background, the album not surprisingly contains images of escape, the two key ones being positioned at crucial points in the album:

*O the Motion won't leave you,
Won't let you remain,
Don't worry.
It's a restless wind
And a sleepless rain,
Don't worry.
Under the ocean
At the bottom of the sea,
You can't hear the storm,
It's as peaceful as can be –
It's just the Motion.*

*Let me ride on the Wall of Death one more time.
Let me ride on the Wall of Death one more time.
You can waste your time on the other rides
But this is the nearest to being alive.
O let me take my chances on the Wall of Death ...
On the Wall of Death, all the world is far from me.
On the Wall of Death, it's the nearest to being free.*

The tension within the album derives from this polarity – the soporific attractions of eternal peace with the Beloved

set against the fatal attractions and attendant risks of the mutable world. The greatness of the album resides in its failure to resolve this tension, its willingness to let the songs speak for themselves, its readiness to give Crazy Jane at least as good a hearing as the Bishop. And whilst “Just The Motion” sits at the pivotal and “influential” midway point in the album, its sense of comforting reassurance is followed by the apocalyptic title track, by the slanders and the violence of the back-streets, the horrors and ambiguities of “Did She Jump” and the final exhilarating nihilism of “Wall Of Death.” Shoot Out The Lights in its totality closely resembles the ambiguity that lies at the heart of arguably Yeats’ finest poem, “Sailing To Byzantium”. Here, the aged poet has “sailed the seas and come/ To the holy city of Byzantium” in order to study “monuments of [the soul’s] magnificence.” The poem is however torn between the somewhat sterile images of the “monuments of unageing intellect”, on the one hand, and the teeming fertility of the world the poet has abandoned, on the other:

*That is no country for old men. The young
In one another’s arms, birds in the trees –
Those dying generations – at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music, all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect ...*

*O sages standing in God’s holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.*

This kind of ambivalence, the dynamic creative tension between the compulsion to pontificate and the compensating need to celebrate life in all its craziness, appears for the first time in Shoot Out The Lights. It is a tension that would characterise all the great Thompson albums of the eighties, culminating in the next creative peak of Rumor & Sigh.

Don’t Renege On Our Love

Musically, a welcome return to top form. Lyrically, a departure from the unambiguous songs to the Beloved that had populated the previous three albums. This sounds and, at first sight, reads like a “straight” profane love song, albeit an uncomfortably prophetic one. The key image of “the rope that binds us [that] I don’t want to break” is however straight from the Koran: “Cling one and all to the cord [i.e. “faith”] of God and let nothing divide you”. [PK 3:103]. This is therefore, at least on one level, a song addressed to God. What is striking, however, is that divine mercy is no longer regarded as a given

– “Give me just an ounce of sympathy” - and eternal damnation – “It’ll thunder forever” – becomes a distinct possibility.

Walking On A Wire

One of the great songs of twentieth century angst. Linda’s performance is stunning. Thompson has continued to perform this song for twenty years, attesting its acute personal significance. We have already considered “Walking On A Wire” as a song to the muse. It works just as well as a song to a soon-to-be-ex partner or a wrathful Beloved.

A Man In Need

A late addition to the album, for which we should all give thanks. The answer to the overtly Sufic dilemma – “Who’s going to cure the heart of a man in need? – ought to be obvious in the song but isn’t. The confidence of the related “Restless Highway” has somehow evaporated. The reality of “some sweeter country” is submerged in a sea of questions and what comes across most forcibly is the difficulty of the quest. The phrase “It’s so hard to find” is repeated six times and, while the speaker has “sailed every ship in the sea”, he has nonetheless “travelled this world in misery.” Part of that misery is the need to abandon family and friends. The protagonist in “Restless Highway” was unencumbered by such difficulties:

*I am a travelling man, I have no country,
And travelling people are my kin by birth.
No chains will keep me from my destination
And far-flung are my footsteps on this earth.*

From the blithe alliteration of unfettered “far-flung footsteps” we are now faced with puns and ambiguity:

*I packed my rags, went down the hill,
Left my dependants a-lying still.
Just as the dawn was rising up,
I was making good speed.
I left a letter lying on the bed,
“From a man in need”, it read.*

The pun on “good speed” [i.e. “God speed”] might imply progress, but the path is downhill. Nor do the two puns on the word “lying” instil confidence as to the speaker’s integrity and purity of purpose. Note how the images of family and friends and sailing the seas are carried into the next song on the album.

Just The Motion

Rumi explains the central conceit but also in a sense highlights the reason for the ambivalence that seems to lie at the heart of the song:

*The world is foam, God's attributes the ocean –
The foam veils you from the Ocean's purity.*

The song may end with an affirmation of the peace and serenity that lie “Under the ocean/ At the bottom of the sea, / [Where] you can't hear the storm” but the whole song is, in Yeats' words, “caught in that sensual music” that is playing on the surface. The phrase “it's only the pain/ That's keeping you sane” seems to encapsulate the feel of the song and, indeed, of the whole album.

Shoot Out The Lights

In December 1979 the Soviet armies of Leonid Brezhnev invaded Afghanistan and overthrew its Muslim government. As a follower of Islam, Thompson understandably opposed the invasion. “Shoot Out The Lights” was written in the course of the next six months as a protest against the invasion and was then first recorded at the “Woodworm sessions” in June 1980. So runs the conventional wisdom.

“Shoot Out The Lights” has generally been regarded as some kind of political allegory. From this perspective, the “he” who “thunders through the night” is an embodiment of the invading forces of the Soviet Union. The song clearly “works” on this level and the imagery that Thompson employs to describe Soviet brutality and the human response to it has been used elsewhere. Ken Follett's 1985 novel, *Lie Down With Lions*,

which is based on the war in Afghanistan, paints a remarkably similar picture:

He stood at his window, looking over Kabul at night. For a couple of hours the power had been out all over the city, due presumably to the urban counterparts of Masud and his guerrillas. The only noise was the howl of engines as army cars, trucks and tanks hurtled through the city hurrying to their mysterious destinations ... He could not smell the night air, for his window was nailed shut.

On a political level, Thompson's protest, if veiled, was still a brave act. The invasion and subsequent war of attrition between the Soviets and the various Mujahidin guerrilla groups attracted a generally tepid public response in the West and was generally under-covered by the Western media. This seems surprising given the barbarity of the Soviet action: the war eventually resulted in the Russian bear killing 1.3 million people, and making 5.5 million Afghans refugees in Pakistan and Iran. Western apathy in part reflected the unattractive character and geography of Afghanistan. The country was mired in medievalism and was a place where, put crudely, terrible things had always happened to people. In the January 20th 1980 issue of *Village Voice*, the left-wing writer Alexander Cockburn employed just this rationale to justify the invasion:

We all have to go one day, but pray God let it not be over Afghanistan. An unspeakable country filled with unspeakable people, sheepshaggers and smugglers ... I yield to none

in my sympathy to those prostrate beneath the Russian jackboot, but if ever a country deserved rape, it's Afghanistan.

There is of course a British Imperial history associated with Afghanistan. The British invaded the country three times and on each occasion were driven out. Of the 4500 British soldiers who retreated from Kabul in 1842, only one man was eventually left alive. Perhaps surprisingly, it was the arch Imperialist, Rudyard Kipling, who paid tribute to the Afghans in his "The Ballad of East and West". This tells the story of how a friendship is forged between the son of a British colonel and an Afghan brigand named Kamal, whom the colonel's son was sent to capture:

*They have looked each other between the eyes, and there they
found no fault.
They have taken the Oath of the Brother-in-Blood on leavened
bread and salt:
They have taken the Oath of the Brother-in-Blood on fire and
fresh-cut sod,
On the hilt and the haft of the Khyber knife, and the Wondrous
Names of God.*

The Soviet armies had little room for such noble sentiments. They were harried by the Mujahidin until the Soviet Union signed an agreement to withdraw its troops in Geneva in April 1998. For most of the period of occupation the Sovi-

ets were as embroiled and bogged down in Afghanistan as the Americans had been in Vietnam.

This nexus of Soviet invasions, missions to capture renegades and American foreign policy comes together in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. According to the *Virgin Film Guide*, this is

... one of the most complex and unforgettable war movies ever made. With a plot structure inspired by Joseph Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness*, *Apocalypse Now* follows Willard (Martin Sheen), a cold and amoral army captain, as he journeys upriver into Cambodia to assassinate Col. Kurtz (Marlon Brando), a renegade Green Beret who has broken from the American military and set himself up as a god among a tribe of Montagnard warriors, using them to wage his own private war. What follows is a hallucinatory look at the madness of American involvement in Vietnam.

The significance of the movie in terms of Thompson's "Shoot Out The Lights" comes in the first seven and a half harrowing minutes of the film. The opening sequence is a montage from hell, comprising a shifting panorama of superimposed images: battle scenes, the jungle in flames, Willard's face in the darkness of his hotel room, a ceiling fan, a picture of his wife, the blinds drawn on the windows, a brandy glass and bottle, a gun on a pure white sheet, an expanse of orangey-brown ceiling. The first few seemingly endless minutes are punctuated by the sound of chopper blades, the whirling of the ceiling fan and the sinister music of the Doors: "This is the

end ... of everything that stands, the end ... I'll never look into your eyes again." Then we hear Willard's flat, staccato interior monologue:

Saigon. Shit. I'm still only in Saigon. Every time I think I'm going to wake up back in the jungle. When I was home after my first tour it was worse. I'd wake up and there'd be nothing. I hardly said a word to my wife until I said "yes" to a divorce. While I was here I wanted to be there. When I was there all I could think of was getting back into the jungle. I've been here a week now. Waiting for a mission. Getting softer. Every minute I stay in this room I get weaker. And every minute Charlie squats in the bush he gets stronger. Each time I looked around the walls moved in a little tighter.

As Willard's voice drones over the surreal collage of shuffling images, one specific image crystallises in the mind. He picks up the picture of his wife, puts it to his lips and pierces it with his lighted cigarette. The final shots in the sequence comprise a gallery of pain and horror. Martial arts. Watching the dark. Punching out his own image in the mirror. Chugging brandy from the bottle. Blood. Howling. More blood. Curled up naked on the floor. Like a child. Black screen. Shoot out the lights.

Look at the album cover. The similarities in imagery, the layout of the room, the photo of Linda, the similar calligraphy in film and album titles all leave no doubt. Thompson saw this film and was profoundly influenced by it. In the blank verse

of "Shoot Out The Lights" he is replicating his own picture of Willard, of Everyman, of "Richard Thompson."

The Backstreet Slide

Return to the urban jungle. In "Night Comes In", Thompson had predicted such a transition: "I may find/ That street tomorrow,/ Leave the shadow/ Of my lonely room." This time around, however, there is no "one and only heart and soul" to greet the speaker. Instead, we find the "gatemouth woman leaning on a fence" and her loose-lipped sisters. The Koran has a great deal to say about the gossips and the slanderers, always in terms of unequivocal condemnation: "Those who delight in spreading slanders against the faithful shall be sternly punished in this life and the hereafter." [PK 24:19]. While "Backstreet Slide" is integrated fully into the thematic fabric of the album, it is still a pretty heavy-handed song in its own right. The vindictiveness of the back streets was captured much more effectively by Thompson in "Small Town Romance." It is also interesting to compare his treatment of the theme with that of Jez Lowe whose Durham villages are alive with the unofficial Parish Notices, which break news and lives. The central image of the stab in the back with the kitchen knife recalls "The End Of The Rainbow" and the man who "holds a bread knife/ Up to your throat." It also looks forward to the hellish chorus of the righteous in "Can't Win" who "shoot down dreams,/ Stiletto in the back."

Thompson always denied that “Did She Jump” was “about” Sandy’s death, claiming it was “like a cinematic song. You’re not making judgements, you’re recording events, recording someone’s path through something – which path people choose to take.” [PH 193]. The cinematic analogy is a fair one and I have already noted the similarities between the fate of Vivienne Eliot and that of Thompson’s victim. But to claim that the song is totally unrelated to Sandy’s fall is disingenuous. Heylin’s detective work shows that “did she jump or was she pushed” was a valid question to ask, at least on a metaphorical level. Linda’s epitaph to Sandy implied pretty much the same: “Like Nick, she didn’t expect to make old bones.” [CH 246]. If only in terms of their artistic collaboration, Thompson also had reason to feel he owed Sandy an epitaph:

I’m not sure how much of the real Sandy went onto record. I don’t think she was always at her best in the studio, and I’m not sure that her various producers and arrangers really did the best job for her – and I would number myself among this culpable crew. [CH 251]

Linda also emphasised the effect that Richard had on Sandy: “She loved Trevor, but the people that she really adored were people where the relationship was never consummated. She adored Richard, and whatever he told her to do, she’d do.” [CH 111].

Yeats’ Crazy Jane recalled a conversation with the Bishop:

I met the Bishop on the road

And much said he and I.

“Those breasts are flat and fallen now,

Those veins must soon be dry;

Live in a heavenly mansion,

Not in some foul sty.”

“Fair and foul are near of kin,

And fair needs foul,” I cried.

“My friends are gone, but that’s a truth

Nor grave nor bed denied,

Learned in bodily lowliness

And in the heart’s pride.”

Bishop Thompson, who at the time couldn’t “hear the storm”, told her: “You’ve got to ride in one direction/ Until you find the right connection.” Crazy Jane, who “used to live life with a vengeance”, replied: “When I was [home] all I could think of was getting back into the jungle.”

One recalls William Booth’s question: “Why should the Devil have all the best tunes?” One recalls Yeats’ profound perception: “Only an aching heart conceives a changeless work of art.” One recalls D. H. Lawrence’s acerbic insight: “In art we shed our sicknesses.” Shoot out the lights.

CHAPTER EIGHT

RUMOR & SIGH

Second time around proved the winning formula, personally and professionally. Hand Of Kindness launched the second solo career with, not so much a bang as a joyous explosion. The pyrotechnics continued through the eighties with three albums of sustained excellence. Across A Crowded Room, Daring Adventures and Amnesia stretched minds and broke hearts, if not sales records. Just when you thought it couldn't get any better, Rumor & Sigh hit the streets and, for once, the album charts.

HAND OF KINDNESS

1. Tear Stained Letter
2. How I Wanted To
3. Both Ends Burning
4. A Poisoned Heart & A Twisted Memory
5. Where The Wind Don't Whine
6. The Wrong Heartbeat
7. The Hand Of Kindness
8. Devonside
9. Two Left Feet

All songs written by Richard Thompson. Produced by Joe Boyd.

Players – Richard Thompson with Simon Nicol (guitar), Dave Pegg (bass), Pete Zorn (saxophone and backing vocals), Dave Mattacks (drums), Pete Thomas (saxophone), John Kirkpatrick (accordion and concertina), Aly Bain (violin [8]). Backing vocals – Clive Gregson, John Hiatt, Bobby King.

UK Release June 1983. Hannibal HNBL 1316.

The level of critical acclaim for Shoot Out The Lights, particularly in America, seems to have taken everyone by surprise. A US tour to promote the album was obviously imperative but the timing was hardly auspicious. The May 1982 "Tour From Hell" has passed into rock mythology. Max Boyce's "I Know 'Cos I Was There" seems to apply as much to this tour as to "Australia vs. England, Sydney, 2003" or any other truly momentous occasion. Patrick Humphries gives a comprehensive account, viewed from a number of interesting perspectives. The following alternative summary from the engaging and articulate Pete Zorn, contributing to the Radio 2 biography of Thompson, will suffice:

The States tour was the real volcano on wheels. I've said it before – I may as well say it again, because I haven't figured out a better way to say it. If they ever issued campaign badges in the music industry, Dave and Simon and I would each have one that just had "Richard and Linda – Farewell Tour". I think it was a moral victory for everyone to get from one end of it to the other in one piece. We would look at a song list at the beginning of the evening and go, "Oh God, it's trouble tonight!" It was like "Man In Need", "Walking On A Wire." I mean, there'd be fights by that time! You know, Linda would be off on one corner of the stage biting her hand. But again, they were all great songs. And I think the real chance taking in that particular set of circumstances made everyone's performance better. The stage, with very few exceptions, was neutral territory, the only neutral territory. I think everyone was so relieved to get on-stage and dispel the tension, or at least redirect it, that it made for some electrifying evenings. I know people on the last tour, last year, in the States, they said, "Oh yeah, I remember the last Richard and Linda tour." They said, "It must have been a really hard tour." Well, it was the best of times; it was the worst of times. And certainly, some of the best things I've ever stood on stage and played and listened to. The songs had something to do with it. They were so a propos – you could see the audience wincing. But that's what made them special.

At the conclusion of the tour, Richard and Linda effectively separated for the last time. Thompson stayed on with Nancy

in California and next resurfaced publicly in the Folk City performances on 29th and 30th September 1982 that are captured on *Small Town Romance*. The title song of the album – which was finally released in 1984 – reflects what must have been weighing on Thompson's mind at the time of the separation from Linda. The split had attracted media attention – tabloid "celebrity-break-up-shock-horror" style – in the US and the UK and the desire to just get away from it all was surely strong:

*Midnight packing and leaving,
A note pinned upon the sheets,
Tail lights off in the distance,
A drive to the painted streets.*

The allusion to the earlier "letter lying on the bed" in "Man In Need" is particularly striking. "Small Town Romance" is Thompson's "Born To Run" and has all the poignancy of the acoustic versions of that classic song, as performed by Bruce Springsteen in recent years. It is also one of Thompson's most effective critiques of the intrusive, stultifying atmosphere of the English suburbs.

The official and unofficial recordings of the Folk City concerts highlight the fact that this was – almost inevitably – a time of reassessment, re-learning and rediscovery for Richard Thompson. The parallels with the public convalescence undertaken in the wake of Henry are strong, but this time around Thompson stood alone with his guitar. The set lists

were an eclectic mix of the old, the new, the borrowed and the blue and included:

Genesis Hall	Strange Affair
Nobody's Wedding	Streets Of Paradise
The Old Changing Way	Dargai
The Great Valerio	Dimming Of The Day
Hokey Pokey	Woman Or A Man?
Never Again	Love Is Bad For Business
Rainbow Over The Hill	How Many Times ...
A Heart Needs A Home	For Shame Of Doing Wrong
Walking On A Wire	Backstreet Slide
Man In Need	Small Town Romance
Flowers Of The Forest	Why Don't Women Like Me?
Honky Tonk Blues	

One can perhaps read too much into set lists and I'll largely resist the temptation. In any case, it is the performances themselves that are of greater interest. Thompson is in good humour – almost too relaxed in fact. Some of the playing is slipshod, many of the vocals are tentative or strained and there is a high percentage of memory lapses. You get the impression of someone re-learning the art of performance and the inclusion of "The Great Valerio" and "Walking On A Wire" is consequently "interesting", if not profoundly "significant." The same combination at Union Chapel in 2001 set bells ringing.

At Folk City, there is nothing from *Hand Of Kindness*, of course, and little to suggest the seismic stylistic shift that was about to occur. Maybe the inclusion of "Honky Tonk Blues" was genuinely significant.

Patrick Humphries observes that with *Hand Of Kindness* Thompson "left the darkness behind him and walked out into the light." It's hard to think of a better way of capturing the mood swing between *Shoot Out The Lights* and its successor. *Hand Of Kindness* represents the musical renaissance of Richard Thompson. By his own standards, the album is a collection of eight good songs and one great song but, in common with virtually any other album recorded by anyone in the eighties, it lacks the lyrical intensity of *Shoot Out The Lights*. *Hand Of Kindness*, not surprisingly in context, reflects a number of Thompson's conflicting emotions and preoccupations - two overtly Islamic songs, two pretty explicit "Linda" songs, three other quirky break-up songs but also a couple of great feel-good songs. It therefore lacks the thematic coherence of *Shoot Out The Lights*. It does however surpass its predecessor in the breadth, variety and sheer exhilaration of the playing.

Much of the credit goes to the band. The core group of the unsurpassable Fairport rhythm section, the incomparable Pete Zorn on saxophone and the inimitable John Kirkpatrick, recalled from the subs' bench, are on top form. They clearly relished working according to the usual Thompson/Boyd formula of "record as near live as possible." Pete Zorn called the experience "a lot of fun" and that sense of great musicians having a ball comes across throughout the album. Thompson's playing, too, is from the top drawer – as Geoff Brown

said in Time Out, it is “breathtaking”. Clive Gregson raised questions about Thompson’s vocals on the album: “Richard had not figured out what he wanted vocally. I think on that record he was a little bit stuck as to how to work it.” [PH 224]. I’d have to disagree. Gone is the tentativeness and occasional overreaching reflected in the Small Town performances. Thompson here is in total control in terms of every aspect of the finished album.

Tear Stained Letter

The word that springs to mind is “cocksure.” The opener sets the tone – joyous and supremely confident. The guitar licks and the rhymes pour down like silver: apart & heart, Murray & hurry, forget her & letter, Clash and cash, dizzy & busy, better & letter, tea & fiddle-di-dee, hives & fives. Audacious.

How I Wanted To

John Kirkpatrick was sure that this song is a farewell to Linda: “I took it he was singing about Linda, all the things that he wasn’t able to say to her, kind of owning up.” [PH 225]. That must surely be the case. The sombre vocal and the aching guitar solo are heart breaking. However the song is also one in a catalogue of Thompson works on the theme of repression and keeping “the pain on the inside.” There is also

an Islamic undercurrent. “Now hearts do what hearts will” has obvious Sufic implications. Similarly the phrase “my nights are sleepless still” has Koranic resonance, as well as echoing “Walking On A Wire”:

I seek refuge in the Lord of Daybreak from the mischief of His creation; from the mischief of the night when she spreads her darkness; from the mischief of conjuring witches ... [PK 113:1]

I think the important point to make is that, unlike the great Thompson hymns of the seventies, here Islamic references are buried deep and are by no means transparent. “How I Wanted To” might be interpreted as a yearning, penitent song to the Beloved. With, say, “Dimming Of The Day” there is absolutely no room for misinterpretation.

Both Ends Burning

Funky guitar and sax. Like the E Street Band on a good night. Great fun. “The Angels Took My Racehorse Away” Mark II. Note the link to the title track – “Only fit for a bullet” vs. “Shoot that old horse.”

A Poisoned Heart And A Twisted Memory

A yowl of exhilaration rather than pain at the outset. More outrageous rhymes – touch & double-Dutch, rank & petrol tank – and an appropriately Dylanesque vocal delivery. Note the personal inferences, for a Muslim, in the following:

*Whatever I say is in a book
Whatever I do there's someone there to look ...*

Any dark thoughts are quickly submerged in the colloquial levity of the final verse and some fluent Eric Clapton style guitar.

Where The Wind Don't Whine

Peggy does his Led Zepp bit. A great pop song, whining guitar and signature bagpipe-style embellishments notwithstanding. Some more Dylan style vocal – note the sneer in “nearer and nearer.” I think this is perhaps one of Thompson’s oblique songs about his recalcitrant muse. “Her face shone white” is reminiscent of Graves’ “pale faced lady”, while “Out in the night you’ll see her shine” recalls the linkage between the White Goddess and the moon.

The Wrong Heartbeat

The arrangement is very close to the Rafferty sessions’ version. One can still hear Linda singing this song, which inevitably gives it a tinge of sadness. In some ways, the change in vocalist marks the end of an era. The control of rhyme and rhythm in support of the logic of the song is masterful:

*If you should see a tear, you won't see many
If you should hear me sigh, it's not for many
If you should greet me as I am walking along
You only want to see just the shell of me,
You don't know the other part,
But you're listening to the wrong heartbeat
Listening to the wrong heartbeat
You're listening to the wrong heartbeat
My love is strong.*

The song also has a serious subtext:

When you recite the Koran [Muhammad], We place between you and those who deny the life to come a hidden barrier. We have cast veils over their hearts lest they understand it, and made them hard of hearing. When you make mention of your Lord alone in the Koran, they turn their backs in indignation. [PK 17:45]

In that context, “The Wrong Heartbeat” – i.e. the right heartbeat – can be taken as an affirmation of faith that ap-

proaches the exultant: “Yeah, yeah, yeah – you’re listening to the wrong heartbeat ...”

The Hand Of Kindness

A great bluesy vocal and some superb atmospheric noodling on guitar. Again, the Koranic imagery is not obvious but I think the significance of “Hand Of Kindness” as a song to the Prophet – the “stranger” – is clear. The central image – the reaching out of the hand of kindness – refers to the oath of allegiance taken by the faithful at Alast: “God was well pleased with the faithful when they swore allegiance to [Muhammad] under the tree.” [PK 48:18]. The image of suicide by hanging reflects a number of Koranic precepts:

- The fate of each man We have bound about his neck. [PK 17:13]
- We created man. We know the promptings of his soul, and are closer to him than his jugular vein. [PK 50:16]
- Do not kill yourselves. God is merciful to you, but he that does that through wickedness and injustice shall be burned in fire. [PK 4:29]

The reference to Jonah is also as much Koranic as it is Biblical:

When [Jonah’s people] believed, We spared them the penalty of disgrace in this life and gave them comfort for a while. [PK 10:95]

The allusion therefore captures the idea that the speaker is at one and the same time beyond redemption – “It’s a sin I survived” – yet still within potential reach of God’s mercy. In context therefore we have an unbeliever who is “near out of time” and seeking salvation by way of Prophetic intervention. The striking thing is that deliverance is by no means assured:

- *The hung are many/ The living are few ...*
- *Maybe ... Maybe ... Maybe ...*
- *Stranger will you reach me in time?*

Devonside

The great song on the album – I haven’t yet decided exactly where it sits in the Thompson Top Twenty but I will have done by the time we get to Phoenix. Aly Bain’s violin prompts the thought that this would have been a wonderful song for Fairport to tackle in their prime. The title has an appropriately “antique” feel but may have a more specific relevance: there is a Devon Street on the outskirts of Govan in Linda’s home city. “Devonside” is a song of universal resonance, not least in terms of Graves’ view of the theme of “true poetry”, but its roots are very close to home. The world now knew that Thompson had “looked for comfort otherwise.” The “gang of

no great size” may also be an oblique reference to the Bunch sessions, way back in 1972, when the relationship of Richard and Linda first blossomed. The song is beautifully constructed. The balance of dependence and independence between the protagonists reverses in the course of the four verses. The “heroine” moves from independence and dominance to dependence and subservience: from “she dropped her banner and took her prize” to “I’ll be your lover, mother, whore and wife.” Imagery of “eyes” and “seeing” also runs through the song and the album, prefiguring *Mirror Blue*:

- *Hungry was the shiver in her eyes*
- *He fed on the shiver in her eyes*
- *She held him with the shiver in her eyes*
- *He knew that he had loved and never seen her*
- *The light fell from the shiver in her eyes*

What a testament and what an admission: “He knew that he had loved [but] never seen her.” One wonders when the light finally fell from “her eyes.”

Two Left Feet

Cajun cacophony fuelled by brilliant sax playing by Messrs Thomas and/or Zorn. You could construct some abstruse Sufic interpretation based on the significance of the dance and the left-hand path, but why bother? This was meant to be enjoyed.

There is a missing link in all of this. Exactly how Thompson got from the stuttering steps of independence reflected in the Small Town performances in the autumn of 1982 to the mastery and exuberance of *Hand Of Kindness* a few months later is a matter of conjecture. Most of Thompson’s history is relatively predictable – or as predictable as genius ever gets. This transformation genuinely was a “strange affair.”

ACROSS A CROWDED ROOM

1. When The Spell Is Broken
2. You Don't Say
3. I Ain't Going To Drag My Feet No More
4. Ghosts In The Wind
5. Fire In The Engine Room
6. Walking Through A Wasted Land
7. Little Blue Number
8. She Twists The Knife Again
9. Love In A Faithless Country

Bonus track on CD – Shine on Love

All songs written by Richard Thompson. Produced by Joe Boyd.

Players – Richard Thompson with Simon Nicol (guitars), Bruce Lynch (bass), Pete Thomas (tenor saxophone), Dave Mattacks (drums, percussion and keyboards), Dave Bitelli (baritone sax), Alan Dunn (accordion), Phil Pickett (shawm, crumhorn, recorder). Backing Vocals – Clive Gregson, Christine Collister, Phil Barnes, plus the Soutlanas on [9].

UK release April 1985. Polydor POLD 5175.



On a personal level, the period between the releases of *Hand Of Kindness* in the spring of 1983 and *Across A Crowded Room* in April 1985 was one of consolidation for Thompson and Nancy Covey. Nancy left McCabe's in 1984 and moved to be with Richard. The couple married on 6th January 1985. To complete the happy ending, Linda's first solo album, *One*

Clear Moment was released to critical acclaim in the spring of 1985 and in the autumn of that year she married Steve Kenis. On the professional front, the cash-strapped Joe Boyd chose not to exercise his option to extend Thompson's contract in 1984 but the release of *Small Town Romance* on Hannibal was negotiated as part of an amicable separation. A subsequent switch to the Polydor label gave Thompson a degree of artistic and financial security for the first time in over a decade. During 1984/5, he established the kind of life style that would obtain into the 21st century with few excursions: transatlantic commuting with Nancy, frequent solo and occasional band tours, guest slots on the albums of other oddballs and luminaries and an album release every couple of years or so. The life upheavals that had helped to shape Richard Thompson's personal and artistic development for fifteen years essentially lay behind him. Henceforth, the subject matter of his songs would largely come from deep within or from external stimuli.

Across A Crowded Room was recorded in London in September and October 1984. The move to a major label was not accompanied by a change to a big name producer. Thompson asked Joe Boyd to produce the record and the choice of Boyd again proved the right one. The latter's impact on the trilogy of albums that relaunched Richard Thompson's career in the early 1980's is immeasurable. Although *Across A Crowded Room* attracted its fair share of uncomprehending, middling reviews, the "exciting, live- in-the-studio crackle" remarked on by Kurt Loder in *Rolling Stone* was never questioned.

The rich tapestry that is *Across A Crowded Room* is woven from many apparently disparate strands: Margaret Thatcher, the White Goddess, a pair of notorious Mancunian serial murderers, the Prophet Muhammad, and a Rodgers and Hammerstein musical. It's like a Turkish carpet. Only when you have unravelled the threads and begun to understand the painstaking craft that has gone into its construction is the full beauty and complexity of the tapestry revealed.

On listening to *Across A Crowded Room* from "start to finish" the obvious dominant strand is the 1949 Broadway musical and 1958 movie, *South Pacific*, from which the album title is derived:

*Some enchanted evening
You may see a stranger,
You may see a stranger
Across a crowded room ...*

The Rodgers and Hammerstein musical is set on a South Sea island during World War II and charts the progress of Nellie Forbush, a young American Navy nurse. She meets and falls in love with Emile de Becque, a charming middle-aged French plantation owner who has lived in a hilltop villa overlooking the island for twenty-five years. The history of Nellie and Emile is a fairly convoluted and somewhat banal tale of people who are caught up in the circumstances of war but are able to overcome numerous obstacles – not least the barriers erected by their own prejudices – and find true happiness together. The musical is redeemed by some terrific songs and it's

worth investing in the 1986 “superstar makeover” recording to hear just how terrific the songs can be in the hands of singers of the calibre of Kiri Te Kanawa, Jose Carreras and Sarah Vaughan. Thompson’s album sits somewhere between loving tribute and savage parody.

When The Spell Is Broken

Richard’s take on “Some Enchanted Evening” – “When love has died, there’s nothing starry-eyed.” Alan Hanson meets Stevie Ray Vaughan. From the promise of expansiveness – “you may hear her laughing across a crowded room” – to the repression and constriction implicit in Gregson and Collister’s mournful mantra – “You can’t cry if you don’t know how.” R&H’s slant on this was:

*It’s got to be drummed
In your dear little ear,
You’ve got to be carefully taught.*

Thompson favours a rather more immediate form of tuition: “Love letters you wrote are pushed back down your throat/ And leave you chokin’.” Note the distant echo between the R&H song and “Can’t Win”: “it was drilled in our heads, now we drill it into your head too.” At one level – how many times do you have to fall back on that phrase when talking about Thompson? – this song invites us to look back. The “broken spell” and the “same old line” recall “Walking On A

Wire” – “Too many spells to break” and “You just hand me that same old refrain.” The ghost of the Goddess is whispering in our ear. By the time we’re walking the same “fine line” later in the album, she’ll have her knife out.

You Don’t Say

Thompson attributed this song to his current interest in Elizabethan poetry. I think Jacobean tragedy might have been closer to the truth but, in any case, the immediate hook to hang it on is R&H’s “Dites Moi.” I can’t think why else Thompson should be singing back-up on his own record. Note the way that the imagery rolls forward from “When The Spell Is Broken.” The absence of a “farewell souvenir, not even a token” in the earlier song is echoed here by “half a ring” and a gift of rosemary. Spot another use of “havering” in a popular song post 1700 and win a major prize.

I Ain’t Going To Drag My Feet No More

A great near-live performance. The opening pedestrian pace accelerates to a stunning ensemble finale, enriched with falsetto Thompson vocals. He said that this song is a “sort of neo-Caledonian, pseudo 50s gospel. It’s about not pursuing something as fervently as one should.” [PH 233]. The superficial theme recalls Emile’s argument to Nellie that they risk losing that which they have waited so long to find – carpe

diem for the blue rinse brigade: “Then fly to her side/ And make her your own.” The song works equally well as a penitent admission to a neglected Muse, a forsaken lover or the Beloved. The sense of repressed violence that runs through the song also enforces an important sub-text that will become all too apparent by the end of the album.

Shine On Love

The decision to include this song on the CD version of *Across A Crowded Room* rested with Thompson’s new record company, Polydor. I think on balance that his instinct was right, and it was best included out. Whilst “Shine On” does reinforce the strand of South Pacific parody – how else are you going to force-fit “A Cockeyed Optimist” onto a Richard Thompson album? – the tone of the song dilutes the overall impact of the album. “Now you steered me right and I’m standing in the light/ So shine on love” feels uncomfortably close to Cliff’s gospel albums and, for me, “Muhammad goes Morris” is best filed under “strange affairs.”

Ghosts In The Wind

Back to the plot. The standout track on the album. More falsetto vocals emphasise the sense of yearning, reinforced by some great Ricardian string noodling. Bill Flanagan, writing in *Musican*, drew comparison between the imagery in

“Ghosts” and that in “Dimming Of The Day.” Up to a point, he’s right, of course: more nocturnal storms, more creaky old houses and more yearning for reunion with the Beloved. But the resonance of this song goes well beyond that. Think first of South Pacific: “night after night,/ As strange as it seems,/ The sound of her laughter/ Will sing in your dreams.” Or even more pertinent, the ghostly calls from Bali Ha’I: “Come to me, come to me.” But think also of Richard’s relationship with his Muse. The night-time communing with the Goddess in “Ghosts” is very reminiscent, again, of nights stretched out on the wire: “Too many nights awake ... It scares you when you don’t know/ Whichever way the wind might blow.” “Ghosts” may be the closest Thompson has ever come to a metaphorical description of his own creative processes – a ghostly wind tearing through a ruin. And, much later in *Mock Tudor*, the Eliotian image of the ruin reappears: “A romantic ruin am I./ Funny how I catch the eye.” Note also the pivotal position of “Ghosts” within this album, harking back to the “straws in the wind” of the opening track and forward to the loose-tongued Luke, Danny and Betsy and to the closing admonition: “A loose friend is an enemy, keep it tight.” Other loose friends abound on the album, of course, epitomised by the garrulous chorus in “You Don’t Say.”

Fire In The Engine Room

A great big band blast with sax to the fore – eat your heart out Clarence! The stokers on Thompson’s frigate share the

frustrations of their R&H shipmates, “hungry as the wolf felt/ When he met Red Riding Hood.” There is also a strong Islamic sub-text. “You better stop doing the things you do/ ‘Cos there’s fire in the engine room” is tantamount to a Koranic injunction: “Truly, those that commit evil and become engrossed in sin shall be the inmates of the Fire; there they shall abide for ever.” A similarly framed exhortation appears on Thompson’s next album in the shape of “Dead Man’s Hand-le.”

Walking Through A Wasted Land

Great polemic punched home with spiky guitars and soaring saxes. Thompson acknowledged to Patrick Humphries the fact that he “dislike(d) greatly the attitude of this [Thatcher] government” and flagged the change that characterises this song and a number that were to follow:

I’ve never felt the need to champion any particular British political party – I’ve thought they were all severely faulted, so it’s easier just to criticise and ham and spoof and that sort of stuff. I think a lot of [my] kind of personal songs can be considered political and vice versa. Politics starts with two people – so, often, rather than writing a political song, I’ve written a sort of political metaphor. Political songs sometimes have a short shelf life. I think there’s a time and a place for them absolutely, but I think other people probably do it better. There’s absolutely the time to stand up and be

counted – there’s a time to write the overt political song that says, you know, kick out the tyrants or throw off your chains – you are many, they are few. Absolutely a time for that. I’d like to write more political songs. I probably will. [PH 234]

He did, of course. Inter alia, “Pharaoh”, “Al Bowlly” “Mother Knows Best” and the Hard Cash and Industry projects lay ahead. The generic infidel bashing of the Islamic trilogy is abandoned for something a lot closer to home and, for most listeners, a lot more meaningful. That said, the language of the song makes it clear that this “wasted land” is also, in the words of the closing title, a “faithless country.” The reference to “rust” is not arrived at courtesy of the rhyming dictionary. The 11th century Sufi scholar Hujwiri summarises the importance of “rust” as one of the veils that separate man from God, in terms derived from the Koran and the Hadith:

There are some servants whose very “essence” veils the Real, so the Real and the unreal are the same in their view ... The veil of essence, which derives from rust, will never be lifted. Here, the meaning of “rust”, “seal”, and “stamp” is one. God says, No indeed, but what they were earning has rusted upon their hearts [83:14]. Then He makes manifest the ruling property of this and He says, Surely those who disbelieve, equal is it to them if you warn them or do not warn them – they will not have faith [2:6]. Then He explains the cause for this: God has sealed their hearts and

their hearing [2:7]. He also says, God has stamped their hearts [16:108].

For the unbelievers who hesitate to attribute so much significance to a four letter word, it's worth noting a similar use of the same word in "Can't Win": "Stand there and rust and die if you must ..." But lest we fear Richard is getting too serious, we're also back with Emile on his hilltop, looking down on "a mean little world/ Of mean little men."

Little Blue Number

"Happy Talkin'" on a cool blue guitar. Dire Straits meet R&H. Thompson's verbal dexterity is straight out of Tin Pan Alley. The line, "I wish I was glad for you, but I'm sorry" recalls "Hard Luck Stories" – "If I cared about you I'd say it was a crying shame" – and in a sense the two songs share the theme of "heedlessness." It's probably accidental, but Margaret Thatcher famously strutted her stuff in a sharp royal blue twin set and pearls.

She Twists The Knife Again

"Honey Bun" Thompson style: "I'm her booby,/ She's my trap." Note the exposed boob and nipple on Thompson's album cover. On a general level, this is an early portrayal of the "Razor Dance." On a specific level, the song is a very close

relative of "Backlash Love Affair" and, one would have to say, a more successful exploration of the theme of the vindictive Muse, one of whose incarnations might well have been "Bloody Mary." The imagery in the song also strongly reinforces the sense of violence and pain that runs throughout the album. The guitar playing is Thompson at his "spikiest."

Love In A Faithless Country

The South Pacific parody culminates in a vision of the potential modern reality of love on an island whose presiding presence is Bloody Mary, trafficker in everything from grass skirts to shrunken heads – the South Seas equivalents of "little blue numbers" and "farewell souvenirs" and tokens. We have progressed from "When love has died there's nothing starry eyed" to the German refrain that Thompson lifted from Rilke and that translates as, "Put out my eyes and I can see you still." But the latter is also an allusion to the popular myth that the image of a murderer is burned into the retina of his or her victim. We have moved from the enchanted kingdom "where the sky meets the sea" to the grimy suburbs of Greater Manchester, 1960, 1970, 1980 ...

On 23rd November 1963, Ian Brady and Moira Hindley murdered a twelve-year-old schoolboy, John Kilbride. On 26th December 1964, they killed ten-year-old Lesley Ann Downey. These bodies they buried on Saddleworth Moor in the Pennines south of Manchester. On 6th October 1965, Brady beat seventeen-year-old Edward Evans to death. Evans'

body was discovered at Brady and Hindley's home in Hattersley when the police, acting on a tip-off, searched the premises. The bodies on the moor were subsequently discovered and disinterred after an extensive and very public police search. Brady and Hindley subsequently confessed to two further murders. Hindley's death in 2002 reopened old wounds and demonstrated the fear and loathing that the Moors Murderers were still able to inspire in the hearts and minds of the British public. Thompson has acknowledged that "Love In A Faithless Country" is "about" the Moors Murderers, Brady and Hindley: "They murdered without the usual kind of motive, like jealousy or money, just for the fun of it." [PH 233]. Richard and Linda had explored a similar theme in "Pavanne", whose protagonist kills for "the pleasure of the moment." And there we might leave it, were it not for *Beyond Belief*, the first definitive study of the Moors Murders first published by the Welsh writer Emlyn Williams in 1967, at which time, only the murders of Kilbride, Downey and Evans were known.

In addition to his undoubted proficiency as a writer, Emlyn Williams is both actor and dramatist and the skills and perspectives of both disciplines are brought to bear in his writing of *Beyond Belief*. Much of the book comprises created internal monologues from and constructed dialogues between major protagonists in the gruesome story of Brady and Hindley. Williams' work is based on exhaustive research and contains massive forensic detail but it "reads like" fiction or, perhaps more appropriately, a screenplay. This sense of "created reality" may have been what particularly attracted Thompson to this book but, whatever the reason, *Beyond Belief* informs

not only "Love In A Faithless Country" but, in retrospect, the whole of the *Across A Crowded Room* album. If the logic of *South Pacific* propels us forward through the album from start to finish, *Beyond Belief* and its latter-day mythology of Brady and Hindley drives us back again, from finish to start. Given the sensitive and controversial nature of the book, Williams' agent refused to grant permission for me to quote from *Beyond Belief*. I understand and respect the decision. I will however summarise the areas of interest in the hope that it will encourage you to obtain a copy for yourselves.

"Love In A Faithless Country" is constructed around a series of simple instructions – "How To Succeed At Mass Murder Without Really Trying." Richard's version of the Hadith for a faithless country. Behind Thompson's simple statements lie Williams' imagined recreations of real events. We will summarise Williams' version of the murder of John Kilbride and compare the lessons that Thompson derives and expresses in his song.

- On the morning of 23rd November 1963, Brady and Hindley hired a car from Glazier's Autos in South Manchester – a Ford Anglia, registration number 9274 ND – and drove up into the moors to prepare a burial site: Thompson's dictum: "Always move in pairs and travel light."
- In Williams' script, Brady was well prepared and very methodical. He hides his spade in the back of the hire car with a sack and a rug. Thompson's dictum: "Always keep your tools well out of sight."

- On the evening of 23rd November, Brady and Hindley lured John Kilbride from Stalybridge town centre into their Ford Anglia with the promise of an ice cream and a lift home. All of Brady and Hindley's "jobs" were conducted, if not "late at night", at the very least on dark autumnal evenings. Thompson's dictum: "Always make your best moves late at night."
- Once up on the moor, the child became fractious and Brady reassured him with a combination of cheap white wine and Celtic charm. Thompson's dictum: "Never hurts to be a little nice."
- The murder is committed up on the ghostly moors. It's greatly to Williams' credit as a writer that he doesn't seek to – doesn't need to – recreate the deed. Having buried the body in the moor-top grave – here's one we made earlier – Brady returns to the car and the waiting Hindley. He likens tidying up the gravesite to cleaning up peel after having eaten an orange. Thompson's dictum: "Always leave a job the way you found it."
- The couple drives back down into the late evening suburbs and has close shaves with people on a pedestrian crossing and a policeman on his beat. Thompson's dictum: "Look for trouble coming, move around it."

Thompson's other dicta are "generic" – i.e., not specific to the murder of John Kilbride – but are nonetheless very "close" to Williams' descriptions in *Beyond Belief*:

THOMPSON: "A loose friend is an enemy, keep it tight."

WILLIAMS: Brady and Hindley were betrayed by her brother-in-law, whom Brady had sought to recruit as a disciple in his neo-Nazi ministry and as an accomplice in their inhuman deeds.

THOMPSON: "Never pays to work the same town twice."

WILLIAMS: reported facts – John Kilbride was "lifted" in Stalybridge, Lesley Ann Downey in Ancoats and Edward Evans in Manchester city centre.

THOMPSON: "Learn the way to melt into a crowd."

WILLIAMS: Brady encouraged Hindley to wear wigs for their special nights out.

THOMPSON: "Got to be invisible, my friend."

WILLIAMS: Brady wove a fantasy of personal salvation from the memorabilia of the Third Reich that he collected obsessively – note Thompson's borrowing of a German quotation as a refrain in the song – and the murder and spy thrillers that he watched avidly in his local cinema. He saw himself as a spy on the run.

We're then left with Thompson's final dictum: "Never catch an eye or dress too loud." That takes us way back. Williams' history of Brady and Hindley is permeated by three motifs – "dress", "ghosts" and "spells" – that, in retrospect, similarly dominate *Across A Crowded Room*. We'll look at each in turn.

First, "dress." The most striking stylistic aspect of Emlyn Williams' book is the extent to which descriptions of "dress", dress sense and clothing form part of his characterisations of

perpetrators, victims and police alike. “Dressing to kill” was a literal imperative for Brady and Hindley. On this basis, we might choose to backtrack to “Little Blue Number”:

*My-oh-my, but you do look the killer ...
Do you go on the prowl while other folks slumber ...
Little blue number, little blue number ...*

Next, “ghosts.” Williams’ history of Brady and Hindley is shot through with the ghostly whispers of voices from beyond. Even the policemen hunting for victims believe they hear children’s voices. With this in mind, we might want to revisit “Ghosts In The Wind.”

Next, “spells.” Williams’ account is peppered with references to the spells that affected the players in this modern Greek tragedy. Hindley constantly feared her ability to hold on to Brady and brooded on the spells she might cast to keep him. The spell was finally broken by the convictions of Brady and Hindley on charges of multiple murder. If their union was forged in the course of their joint hunt for victims across the metaphorical crowded rooms of the Manchester suburbs, it ended with each confined separately in prison cells.

There are other specific allusions to the history of Brady and Hindley that are worthy of remark as we backtrack through *Across A Crowded Room*. “She Twists The Knife Again” has obvious relevance to the personal history of Hindley, but what of Brady’s inner life? One line from “I Ain’t Going To Drag My Feet No More” is important in the context of Brady’s complex motivations: “Now where I come from feeling is a

crime.” Humphries interprets this as a general reference to repressed British habits, but it also has a particular relevance to Brady. Williams consistently couches Brady’s repressions in the terms of the glass walls that enclose him. Thompson was later to exploit this image in “Killing Jar.” But the key song in terms of gaining insight into Brady is “Fire In The Engine Room” which captures the intense intemperate jealousy for which Brady was notorious.

The final verse of “Fire In The Engine Room” with its enigmatic references to the rattlesnake ring and the bridal toast also relates to Brady and Hindley, who whilst on remand applied for permission to get married.

The sentence imposed on Brady and Hindley was, of course, life imprisonment. By then, capital punishment had been abolished and hanging was not an option. However, Thompson maybe captured the sympathies of many in his sly pun in the final verse of “Love In A Faithless Country”: “To find the joy on which we must depend.” “Depend” has an archaic meaning of “to hang.”

I’ve argued that there are twin dynamics running through *Across A Crowded Room* – front to back is South Pacific; back to front is Beyond Belief. Is there any “proof” that this crossover is what Thompson was seeking to construct? One of the motifs running through Emlyn Williams’ book is the catalogue of films that Brady saw at his local cinemas. Williams lists dozens of films. More pertinently, he comments very specifically in two separate passages on what was “playing” in Stalybridge on 23rd November 1963, the night that Hindley melted into a crowd and John Kilbride fell for the

Hokey Pokey man: South Pacific. Coincidence? I don't think so. But one real coincidence in all of this did leave me somewhat uncomfortable. The name of Myra Hindley's brother-in-law, who reported the murder of Edward Evans to the police, was David Smith.

Colin Irwin captured the mood of the nation in his review of *Across A Crowded Room* in *Melody Maker*: "This, simply, is the most powerful, single-minded rock album he's ever made. Not necessarily the best ..." In fairness, *Across A Crowded Room* isn't the best but it's certainly amongst the most complex and expertly constructed of Thompson's albums. The attention to detail put into the album is epitomised by the sleeve photograph, a montage of objects that underpin the themes of the album. Some references are obscure, maybe wilfully so, but there is no doubting the relevance of the South Sea fetishes and the photo of a South East Asian city. Nor is the inclusion on the cover of the French newspaper *Le Monde* accidental: Emil Le Becque and his children were, of course, native French speakers. I'd also just point out the significance to the Moors Murders of a number of the other objects on the album sleeve:

- The pin up photo. Williams reports that Brady took thirty amateurish pornographic pictures of himself and Hindley. The nine mildly pornographic pictures that he took of Lesley Ann Downey formed an important link in the evidence chain against the pair.
- The four oranges – reminiscent of Brady cleaning up orange peel.

- The dog. Brady and Hindley were dog lovers. Hindley's dog, Puppet, died while she was in custody.
- The Playtime Bumper Book for children. Bumping off children was playtime for Brady and Hindley.
- The Truman Capote *Bildungsroman*. Williams' *Beyond Belief* is a chilling attempt to create a dramatised study of the growth and development of two mass murderers. Their victims, of course, would never grow beyond adolescence.
- The saw – recalls Brady hiding his spade in the boot of the car.
- The handbrush. Brady, Hindley and Smith had to clean house after the murder of Evans. Williams comments that Lady Macbeth had merged into Mrs Mop.
- The open dictionary. Brady was notoriously verbose at times and is accused on more than one occasion of having swallowed a dictionary.
- The exposed nipple. Hindley was notably prudish with everyone but Brady.

And what, ultimately, does it all mean? In the words of Emile de Becque:

*Who can explain it? Who can tell you why?
Fools give you reasons - wise men never try.*

DARING ADVENTURES

1. A Bone Through Her Nose
2. Valerie
3. Missie How You Let Me Down
4. Dead Man's Handle
5. Long Dead Love
6. Lover's Lane
7. Nearly In Love
8. Jennie
9. Baby Talk
10. Cash Down Never Never
11. How Will I Ever Be Simple Again
12. Al Bowlly's In Heaven

All songs written by Richard Thompson. Produced by Mitchell Froom.

Players – Richard Thompson with Jerry Scheff (bass), Mitchell Froom (organ, piano, emulator, theramin), Mickey Curry (drums), Jim Keltner (drums), Alex Acuna (percussion), Chuck Fleming (fiddle), Phil Pickett (shawm, recorder), Ian Peters (euphonium), David Horn (tenor horn), Brian Taylor/Tony Goddard (cornets), Clive Gregson and Christine Collister (backing vocals).

UK Release June 1986. Polydor 829-728-1.

Unsurprisingly, relatively few citizens of the U S of A crossed the street to purchase the macabre melange of Moors

Murder and Broadway Musical that was Across A Crowded Room. Thompson again found himself under pressure to deliver on the expectations of a supportive – but not that supportive – record label. Exit stage left, Joe Boyd, reportedly of his own volition. His place as producer was taken by Mitchell Froom, introduced to Thompson by their common manager, Gary Stamler. Later, Thompson made it clear that he was inclined to jump to a different producer, even if the initial push came from Boyd:

Mitchell has ways of making it sound a little more like a record and less like a performance. Which is something I've always wanted to do, I've always wanted to make something that was – not slicker – but that had the right "attitude" in the studio. [PH 233]

That search for a style of production with more of an "attitude" than a straight live-in-the-studio cut had seduced Thompson into the Rafferty fiasco. This time around, he got it right, and Mitchell Froom would produce all of Thompson's "mainstream" albums over the next ten years. The other significant change that accompanied the recording of Daring Adventures was the dropping of the extended Fairport family in the studio and the introduction of top-notch American session players. The pattern of "one band for the studio, another for the road" would become the norm for most future albums and tours.

Thompson's sense that he was embarking on a radical departure from his historical approach to making records – his

first “proper” CD for the CD age - was captured in the album title: in many ways this was a daring adventure. However, the title also reflects a high degree of ambiguity and a typical self-deprecating humour. There are two allusions implicit in the title. The first comes from the Victorian poet, George Leybourne:

*O he flies through the air with the greatest of ease,
This daring young man on the flying trapeze.*

Shades here of Valerio, dancing through the air, when Thompson was himself a daring young man. But the other allusion is darker and closer to home – we recall Prufrock, frozen in indecision and hovering on the edge of the crowded room: “Do I dare/ Disturb the universe?” The storming opening track suggested that the answer might be “yes”, but would the universe respond?

A Bone Through Her Nose

Jungle drums and an ironic nod back to Bloody Mary and the headhunters. Thompson’s vocal is striking – mature and assured and a measure of how far he’d come over the previous four years. He told Bill Flanagan in *Musician* that the song is about

... a certain breed of English girl who comes from a fairly good family, gets out of school at about eighteen and has a

couple of years of token rebellion. She becomes a social sort of anarchistic animal, extremely fashion-conscious in the most downbeat possible way. Then, at about twenty-two or twenty-three, it’s time to get married. So she marries Henry, who has a very nice house in Smith Square and a charming manor house in Berkshire. They’ve got dogs and a couple of horses. It’s frightfully good. Yet in their rebellious time some of these sorts become quite serious media figures and spokespersons for their generation and stuff. And it’s all a total sham.

Sloane Rangers and Hooray Henries were fair game for social satirists in the late eighties but one wonders why Thompson got so worked up: why choose to break these particular butterflies on his wheel? A strong vein of social comment runs throughout *Daring Adventures* and subsequent albums, recalling Thompson’s avowed intention to write more “political” songs, but the results are mixed. He is not a deep political thinker and, as a generalisation, his political songs work best when his sympathies are engaged on the side of the oppressed and the “have-nots” – “Genesis Hall”, “Al Bowlly’s In Heaven” – rather than when his ire is aroused by the oppressors and the “haves”. Note the way in which the faded “yeah, yeah, yeah’s” prefigure “Baby Talk,” another song based on an inconsequential political metaphor.

Valerie

Classic Thompson. A silly love song with social overtones but also one of his finest rock 'n' roll "originals". Humphries detects echoes of Mark Knopfler's guitar playing but, for me, Hank Marvin is the dominant influence. The imagistic density is high and the linking of the "love", "money" and "violence" clusters is particularly striking and characterises the whole album.

Missie How You Let Me Down

Asked which song he most wished he had written, Thompson cited Hank Williams' "My Sweet Love Ain't Around":

*Listen to the rain a-fallin',
Can't you hear that lonesome sound?
Oh, my poor old heart is breakin'
'Cos my sweet love ain't around ...*

*On that train tonight I'm leavin'
And don't ask me where I'm bound.
I can't stay here any longer
'Cos my sweet love ain't around.*

As an example of stark, elegiac writing, "Missie" surpasses even Hank Williams. As an example of pure "white soul", Thompson's vocal performance also eclipses that of another

of his mentors, George Jones, whose classic song of lost love, "The Grand Tour", was released in 1974:

*Step right up, come on in,
If you'd like to take the Grand Tour
Of the lonely house
That once was home sweet home.*

Dead Man's Handle

Uncle Mac meets Muhammad. Thompson explained part of the genesis of "Dead Man's Handle" to Paul Zollo:

That came [about] because I'm a real train fan. Since when I was a kid I knew about the dead man's handle ... I used to collect cigarette cards. I had a set of railway safety cards. Quite a bizarre idea. They were an amazing educational tool because you would look at them and read them, whether it was football or sports cars or something, you'd look at each one and read it. So the dead man's handle came from that. [PZ 528]

One can imagine young Richard, sitting in his suburban bedroom on a wet Saturday morning and poring over his set of railway safety cards while "The Runaway Train" plays in the background on Children's Favourites. Thirty years later he makes the connection with specific imagery from the Koran:

- There shall be no compulsion in religion. True guidance is now distinct from error. He that renounces idol-worship and puts his faith in God shall grasp a firm handle that will never break. [PK 2:256]
- He that surrenders himself to God and leads a righteous life grasps the firmest handle. [PK 31:21]
- Woe to every back-biting slanderer who amasses riches and sedulously hoards them, thinking his wealth will render him immortal. By no means! He shall be flung to the Destroying Flame. Would that you knew what the Destroying Flame is like! It is God's own kindled fire, which will rise up to the hearts of men. It will close upon them from every side, in towering columns. [PK 104 1-9]

Definition of genius – “only connect.” The moral of the story is spelled out in a famous passage from the Koran on the theme of predestination:

We have ordained a law and assigned a path for each of you ... it is His wish to prove you by that which He has bestowed upon you. Vie with each other in good works, for to God you shall all return and He will resolve for you your differences. **[PK 5:49]**

The “law” is the dead man's handle; the “path” is the railway track; the heedless soul is a runaway train bound for the abyss. Simple. Simply astonishing. Simply the best.

Long Dead Love

A beautifully constructed song, underpinned by subtle Hammond organ from Froom and some more penetrating Hank Marvin style chords from Thompson. The Gregson/Collister backing vocals are superb and are surpassed only by Thompson's masterful rendition. The switch from the measured, evenly stressed verses to the soaring chorus – “Grave robbing is a sin and it's a cry-ing dis-grace” – demonstrates Thompson's emergence as a vocal stylist of real distinction. The overt theme of a love that won't just fade away and a lover that won't let go is prevalent throughout *Daring Adventures* and subsequent albums, reaching its apotheosis in “Keep Your Distance”, but here the theme is opened out by the enigmatic bridge:

*Deep in the night
That cruel intention comes stealing.
Deep in the night
I can't close my eyes for that feeling.*

This is too close to the mood and the language of “Walking On A Wire” to be totally accidental. The Goddess is again lurking enigmatically in the background.

Lover's Lane

"Lover's Lane" starts out like a parody of a Steeleye Span version of a Scottish ballad, circa Commoner's Crown. The song never really gets out of second gear, and arguably doesn't need to. The simple words and the long stretched out vowel sounds are spooky – this sounds like ghosts in the wind. The phrase "On your back I'll climb/ Or you climb on mine" is reminiscent of "Hand Of Kindness" – "You stretch out your hand,/ I stretch out mine" – and suggests that this song of broken trust may have Koranic overtones.

Nearly In Love

The nearest Thompson ever gets to "poppy." This is an upbeat treatment of the theme explored in "How I Wanted To" – hesitancy on the verge of commitment and the compulsion to keep strong emotion on the inside. The "odd" reference to "my heart ... my wallet and my gun" underscores the relationship between love, violence and commerce. There are also nods in the direction of the Muse. "You stop me dead in my tracks" might be an accidental reference but the allusions to the "pale moonlight" and turning the headlights on seems to take us right back to "Where The Wind Don't Whine":

*The roads were empty as the day turned into night.
At every streetlight, her face shone white.*

The clincher is the terpsichorean statement that "I'm almost aware of walking on air": is this song truly inspired or am I just going through the motions?

Jennie

Thompson told Paul Zollo that the composition of "Jennie" "started with the first line. I think that's another good place to start, with the first line of a song. If you can nail that, you're in good shape." [PZ 532]. With "Trouble becomes you,/ It cuts you down to my size", Thompson is in great shape. Dory Previn devoted a whole career to this idea. This is one of Thompson's most affecting performances from among his extensive catalogue of songs of love lost. The quality of the vocal performance is matched by the echoing simplicity of the guitar solo: the great Blues guitarist Britain never had. Scheff's bass playing, understated yet forceful, is equally eloquent. This song, like "Missie", also recalls Hank Williams, whose "On that train tonight I'm leavin'" is extended and reversed by Thompson: "And if my tears were a train,/ I'd cry all the way back into your arms again." A similar twisting of a conventional image occurs with "how hard I tried,/ To kill the vision of you as another man's bride." This subverts the conventional Country picture of the forsaken lover as a passive observer at his true love's wedding to an interloper. The same conventional image is, of course, to be found in British folk music:

*When I saw my love to the church go,
With bride and bride maidens she made a fine show.
I followed her on with a heart full of woe.
She's gone to be wa' tae another.*

Thompson's narrator's desire to "kill the vision" is entirely in keeping with the strong undercurrents of death and violence that run throughout the album.

Baby Talk

The Everly's go Cajun – pop rhymes put in the mouth of a retard. No one else would dare try this. This seemingly slightest of throwaways reinforces one of the important themes of the album. The innocence of the heroine in "How Will I Ever Be Simple Again" is epitomised in her singing "like a child, 'Toora-day, Toora-daddy'." This contrasts starkly with the target of "Baby Talk", whose inarticulacy is a function of emotions coarsened by experience in the back seats of cars. Her linguistic and emotional impoverishment recalls that of the Witch, Barbara, in Keith Waterhouse's *Billy Liar*:

What I most disliked her for were the sugar-mouse kisses
and the wrinkling-nose endearments which she seemed to
think symbolised some kind of grand passion ... Later on
she would start the ear-nibbling, the nose-rubbing, and the
baby talk. [BL 55/6]

Cash Down Never Never

Dr Thompson meets the Daleks. The reference to the young lovers "vegetating" is a real give-away. We're back in the world of Sunnyvista: "You're a vegetable with a heartache." It's hard to disagree with Patrick Humphries' condemnation of this blinkered view of civilisation: "not everyone may share the composer's value judgements, or aspire to the same high moral ground." [PH 247].

How Will I Ever Be Simple Again

A reminder, if one were needed, of what a superlative acoustic guitarist Thompson is. The song nails the myth that Daring Adventures marked the final "Americanisation" of Richard Thompson – nothing could be closer to the uniquely British branch of his genius. He told Bill Flanagan that the song is "about the confusion in a man's mind between his life and the terrible experiences life shows him, and what he sees in this girl – a real pastoral simplicity ... He's confused by her innocence and her reality. He's very complicated but he yearns for her simplicity." [PH 248]. As such, the obvious precursor might appear to be William Blake. However, I believe the inspiration actually came from Yeats' poem, "To A Child Dancing In The Wind":

*Dance there upon the shore;
What need have you to care*

*For wind or water's roar?
But tumble out your hair
That the salt drops have wet;
Being young you have not known
The fool's triumph, nor yet
Love lost as soon as won,
Nor the best labourer dead
And all the sheaves to bind.
What need have you to dread
The monstrous crying of wind?*

But Thompson's depiction is more complex and ambiguous than this. In his song, the girl is herself caught up in the toils of bitter experience – the guns, the “dirty grey river”, “her poor burned-out house”, “the dust and the ruin” – but has preserved her innocence nonetheless. Note the way in which the motifs of war and of “seeing” – and by implication the Sufi concept of “right seeing” – run through this and the final song on the album:

- *And I wanted to weep and my eyes ached from trying.*
- *O, teach me to see with your innocent eyes, love.*
- *Can't close me eyes on a bench or a bed/ For the sound of some battle raging in my head.*

Al Bowlly's In Heaven

Arguably, the highpoint of Thompson's output as a songwriter up to this point in his career. Everything that makes him a great writer is here – mythic and allusive underpinning, pervasive imagery, mastery of rhyme and metre, strong characterisation. Presumably, the performance represents the “attitude” Thompson was seeking in making the switch to Mitchell Froom – a “live track” plus a certain *je ne sais quoi*. The production is smoother and richer than the conversational, “bad jazz combo” feel of subsequent live renditions, which to my mind were more appropriate and satisfying.

Patrick Humphries, whilst being fulsome in his praise of a number of the individual songs on *Daring Adventures*, nevertheless seems to regard the album as some kind of sell-out by Thompson, as “the one album on which Thompson seemed prepared to follow the dictates of a record label, to try and give them what they wanted, on the assumption that they knew what they were doing ... It saw him cast his nets out to a wider audience, acquiesce to the need for commercial acceptance, and embrace the type of production and song structure which Mitchell Froom suggested.” [PH 245]. There is clearly an element of truth in this. *Daring Adventures* does have a strong “American” feel and a richness and spaciousness of production unlike any of its predecessors. That said, in the quality of the song writing and guitar playing and the drama and intensity of the vocal performances it is still distinctively, uniquely a Richard Thompson album. He was now on a roll and even greater things were to follow.

AMNESIA

1. Turning Of The Tide
2. Gypsy Love Songs
3. Reckless Kind
4. Jerusalem On The Jukebox
5. I Still Dream
6. Don't Tempt Me
7. Yankee Go Home
8. Can't Win
9. Waltzing's For Dreamers
10. Pharaoh

All songs written by Richard Thompson. Produced by Mitchell Froom.

Players – Richard Thompson with Jerry Scheff (bass), Mitchell Froom (electric harp, organs), Mickey Curry (drums), Jim Keltner (drums), Alex Acuna (percussion), Tony Levin (bass), Fred Tackett (acoustic guitar), Ally Bain (double bass), Frances Kelly (baroque harp), John Kirkpatrick (vocals, accordion, concertina), Phil Pickett (curtal, shawm, Peking that, recorder, bass racket), Alistair Anderson (Northumbrian pipes), Ian Peters (euphonium), David Horn (tenor horn), Brian Taylor/Tony Goddard (cornets), Clive Gregson, and Christine Collister (backing vocals).

UK Release October 1988. Capitol EST 2075.

Polygram demonstrated the discernment and the commitment to musical quality of most of their ilk and declined to take up their option on Thompson after the relative commercial failure of *Across A Crowded Room* and *Daring Adventures*. Gary Stamler eventually landed a deal with Capitol, the label where Thompson was to remain up to the release of *Mock Tudor* in 1999. The interregnum between the *Daring Adventures* and *Amnesia* recording sessions was filled with the usual mixture of mini-tours and guest outings but also featured three more significant collaborations.

Thompson first worked with Loudon Wainwright III in 1983, when he was invited to appear on the latter's *Fame & Wealth* album. Thompson co-produced Wainwright's 1985 album, *I'm Alright*, and repeated the favour on *More Love Songs* in 1986. The pair toured the Far East and Australia together in the summer of 1986. The strong vein of social comment with a particular American slant which becomes apparent on Thompson's albums in the mid eighties may well have been influenced by Wainwright's work. One wonders, for example, whether Wainwright's "The Back Nine" inspired another song built on the notion of playing the game:

*In this game you got eighteen holes
To shoot your best somehow.
Where have all my divots gone?
I'm in the back nine now.*

Another significant collaboration in 1987 was Thompson's appearance on *Live, Love, Larf, & Loaf*, alongside John

French, Fred Frith and Henry Kaiser. The album featured three Thompson songs – “Killerman Gold Posse”, “Drowned Dog Black Night” and “A Blind Step Away” – and an impenetrable and predominantly instrumental joint composition with Henry Kaiser, “Tir-Nan-Darag.” “Killerman Gold Posse” became a stage favourite for many years and audiences seemed to relish the opportunity to play delinquents presented by the chorus: “We are children, please don’t take our freedom away.” On a serious note, the notion of disenfranchised youth confronting the rich in an affirmation of tribal identity was to play out in *Amnesia*. “A Blind Step Away” also provided phrases and the germ of ideas that were to be explored more fully in the subsequent album:

*Around he spins and around he spins.
Darkness is his whole domain.
Truth! Dare! Kiss! Promise!
Aren’t you tired of party games?*

“Drowned Dog Black Night”, meanwhile, is a one-off. It sits somewhere between Shakespeare’s depiction of Lear in his madness on the heath and Munch’s painting *The Scream*. Probably only Richard Thompson could turn the morbid picture of a boy burying his dead dog in the rain into a definitive expression of existential angst:

*Oh little hand in my hand!
Ah, the madness of the world is on the move!*

*Wind is crashing like it’s dead drunk and angry
And feeling in the dark for a poor man’s door.*

Thompson first worked with Pete Dinklage when the latter invited him to play on the soundtrack to the BBC TV series, *The Life & Loves Of A She Devil* in 1986. This was followed by their joint composition of the music for the three-part BBC series, *The Marksman*, which was screened in December 1987. The music, it should be said is pretty uninspiring and at times sounds like the Chieftains providing backing on a *Spirogyra* album. Mark Knopfler and Larry Adler impersonators provide occasional fillers. Richard Thompson as we know and love him is largely conspicuous by his absence. It is however interesting that *The Marksman* was followed by a definitive Thompson album that *inter alia* explored the themes of role-playing and armed reprisal.

A specific lead-in to *Amnesia* is provided by a comment Thompson made to Patrick Humphries concerning “Yankee Go Home”: “America’s on the way out as Japan now buys the world. In Britain we understand this declining empires thing, so I thought I would offer a few words of consolation, to soften the blow.” [PH 265]. The theme of the rise and fall of empires pervades the album. Various, we find references to the Egyptian, Spanish, English, Roman and US empires. The Holy Roman Empire also gets an oblique mention in “Don’t Tempt Me”: “If he’s your Uncle [Sam], I’m the Pope.” Even US armed expansionism at home is suggested in “I Still Dream”: “Like a cowboy shooting bad men on the range.” And as we have seen previously, the exhortation to “play up

and play the game” was the rallying cry of the British Empire in its Victorian hey day.

“Yankee Go Home” articulates an explicit sense of the decline of civilisations in the long sweep of history:

*Dow Jones going into a stall,
Spray paint saying it on every wall,
The climb was fine, now it's time to decline and fall ...
The Hun's at the gates of Rome,
Yankee go home.*

Even Pharaoh in his tower of steel is not immune, for as “Can’t Win” reminds us: “Towers will tumble and locusts will visit the land.” The theme is reinforced by a number of references to mutability, death and decay on a purely personal level. This sub text is there from the outset:

*Too many nights staying up late,
Too much powder and too much paint,
You can't hide from the turning of the tide.*

But most of the songs on the album reinforce it:

- *Dying stars of the silver screen ...*
- *The wounds of time kill you ...*
- *And ten years is a time/ But your looks, love, it's a crime*
...
- *But time winds down ...*
- *That gorilla ... may not have too long to live.*

- *The sun is setting on another day.*
- *Stand there and rust and die if you must ...*
- *And we'll drink out old memories and we'll drink in the dawn.*
- *Another day on earth is flown.*

Up-tempo songs notwithstanding, the prevalent mood of the album is profoundly world-weary. Specific images of falling and drowning reinforce the sense of mankind on the brink of apocalypse:

- *I went into a tailspin.*
- *The room was going somewhere without me.*
- *I reached out to catch your fall.*
- *Love lies shattered on the ground,/ Jagged pieces all around.*
- *Heaven help the Pharisee whose halo has slipped down to his feet.*
- *Like a drowning man I clung to my defences.*
- *The climb was fine, now it's time to decline and fall.*
- *Oh towers will tumble ...*
- *We shoot down dreams ...*
- *... the pendulum swings ...*
- *Idols rise into the sky,/ Pyramids soar, Sphinxes lie ...*
- *Pharaoh sits in his tower of steel ... Far below we shoulder the wheel.*

However, Thompson’s dissection of the human condition is far more than a simple expression of millennial angst. He gives

a clear picture of what will follow the collapse of the empire that the USA built, based on its industrial and military power, in the second half of the twentieth century. The final verse of “Jerusalem On The Jukebox” reveals all:

The bride checks her hair and her make-up, and here comes the groom.

*What one-eyed monster comes slouching into your front room?
Rudolph Valentino or the curse of all two-legged things?
Jerusalem on the jukebox, little angels beat your wings.*

On one level, we’re seeing the personification of “S-E-X” as the heartthrob Valentino, his one-eyed monster dangling – presumably dangling – between his legs, lurches forward to take possession of his bride. But that word “slouching” is altogether significant:

*And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*

Thompson’s rough beast of the new Millennium is the Cyclops that sits, its blue light flickering and flaming, in the front room of every home in video-suburbia. But his vision of the new empire goes well beyond that. The album presents a cohesive picture of the moving images that are portrayed on the television screen. The content of these images is summarised, in “Gypsy Love Songs”, as “stillborn love, passionate dreams, pitiful greed.” Thompson characterises them generically as “amnesia”, the wilful forgetting of what it is to be human and

the wilful failure to remember that there is no god but God. “Amnesia” is Thompsonian shorthand for spiritual death.

In a far-reaching and thought-provoking study of the global politico-economic landscape, published in 1995, Benjamin R. Barber described the demise of an old empire and the birth of a new world order. Barber characterises this new order as “McWorld”, by association with some of the “M’s” which epitomise the forces that increasingly dominate the planet – MTV, Macintosh and McDonald’s. It is no coincidence that these corporations are all American, for the template for McWorld is American and it forms the blueprint for a new empire:

The United States, no longer the dominant manufacturing entity it once was, nonetheless has a sure command of the softer powers that are forging McWorld, which positions it to recapture global leadership. What this suggests is that the story of America’s rise and decline as a manufacturing power is only part of a larger, not yet finished, journey. [JvM 51]

Furthermore, in the third millennium, the selling of American products to the world increasingly implies selling the American dream:

For America’s largest brand-name consumer goods corporations like Coca-Cola, Marlboro, KFC, Nike, Hershey, Levi’s, Pepsi, Wrigley, or McDonald’s, selling American products means selling America: its popular culture, its putative prosperity, its ubiquitous imagery and software, and

thus its very soul. Merchandising is as much about symbols as about goods and sells not life's necessities but life's styles – which is the modern pathway that takes us from the body to the soul. [JvM 60]

Finally, and most tellingly in the context of Thompson's album, to move to McWorld entails the shedding of one form of servitude in favour of one that is equally pernicious:

McWorld is a product above all of popular culture driven by expansionist commerce ... It is a new world of global franchises where, in place of the old cry, "Workers of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!" is heard the new cry, "Consumers of the world unite! We have everything you need in our chains!" [JvM 78]

Although the release of *Amnesia* pre-dated the publication of Barber's study by several years, the similarities in the theses developed and the examples cited are striking. In Thompson's "Yankee Go Home", the expulsion of the armed invader is the easy task. What is far more difficult is the eradication of the invader's lifestyle and the form of enslavement that it implies:

*You turned my sister into a whore,
With a pair of silk stockings from the PX store.
Why don't you leave us alone?
Yankee, go home! ...
I've lost count of the chewing gum that I've had
And coca-cola makes my teeth go bad.*

*We'll handle this on our own.
Yankee, go home!*

The Dow Jones Index as barometer of Barber's "ancient capitalist economy" may be going into a stall but the stock of Pretty Polly, Wrigley's and the Coca-Cola Corporation is set to rise spectacularly. Similarly, Pharaoh symbolises not only the despotic tyrants who have subjugated the masses throughout human history, but also the new slave masters who deploy the commercial might of McWorld. The "dogs of money are at his heel" as his magicians conjure up images of televisual reality – "men of shadow" – to feed our fears and keep us enthralled, in a trance.

And what of the individual human response to the new imperialism? One possible reaction is inaction: "Turn the cheek, take it on the chin." However, a related image makes it clear what price is paid for passive acceptance:

*And nothing satisfies
And the soul inside me dies
As I duck each punch and never risk the change.*

Far better, then, to go with the flow, to "play the game", and to buy-in, literally and metaphorically, to the consumer paradise on offer:

*At poolside picnics, they chant for Ferraris and furs.
Their muscle tone sharpens, but their hold on reality blurs.*

You can have your cake and eat it and never have to puke up a thing.

Two other potential responses are reflected in clusters of primary images in the album. The first relates to dreams and an associated blurring of the boundary between what is real and unreal:

- *I swallowed down my Mickey Finn ... The room was going somewhere without me.*
- *Stillborn love, passionate dreams ...*
- *Their muscle tone sharpens but their hold on reality blurs.*
- *But I still dream ...*
- *If you have a dream, brother, hush not a sound.*
- *Just let me dream on, oh just let me sway ...*
- *Waltzing's for dreamers and losers in love.*
- *Magicians cry, Oh Truth! Oh Real!*
- *Don't stir in your sleep tonight my dears.*

The second relates to dance and ritual and to music:

- *Did they find some tender moment there in your caress?*
- *She danced that famous gypsy dance ...*
- *Don't sing me no more gypsy love songs.*
- *I begged the band don't play that tune./ Please, don't beguine the begun!*
- *That gorilla you're dancing with ...*
- *... jitterbug ... jive ... shimmy ...*

- *... the dancehall girl you banged's in the family way.*
- *One step for aching, two steps for breaking, waltzing's for dreamers ...*
- *And Mr. Bandleader, won't you play one more time.*

The two strands are combined in the enigmatic third verse of "Pharaoh":

*Hidden from the eye of chance,
The men of shadow dance a dance
And we're all struck into a trance.
We're all working for the Pharaoh.*

This takes us back to First Light and to the song co-written with Linda:

*How do you stop this woman,
When everyone is moving in a trance,
Like prisoners of some slow, courtly dance?*

The response of the heroine of "Pavanne" to the oppression of the ruling classes – "His Excellency" and "another Charge d'Affair" – was singularly violent. The same is true of the response to US imperialism in "Yankee Go Home": "They're burning effigies out in the street./ Man the lifeboats, sound the retreat." The "patient man" in "Don't Tempt Me" similarly threatens to unleash the dogs of war in response to an invasion of his metaphorical territory:

*Get yer mittens off my gal
Or you'll end up as mincemeat, pal.
I've got friends, mean sons,
They've got knives, chains, guns,
Gas, grenades, knuckle-dusters,
Lazy Susans, Blockbusters.*

Barber was later to characterise this violent tribal response as “Jihad.” In an Islamic context the term Jihad is associated with the moral struggle – in extreme instances, the armed struggle – against faithlessness and the unbelievers. One might regard some of Thompson’s earlier more uncharitable tilts at the faithless as manifestations of his own artistic Jihad. Barber makes it clear, however, that in his book Jihad vs McWorld he is using the term as an extended metaphor that encompasses all forms of anti-Western, anti-universalist struggle that are motivated by religion and/or nationalism. The Islamic world is just one breeding ground for the anti-democratic forces of Jihad. Barber identifies manifestations of Jihad in all parts of the world. He draws prime examples from the Former Soviet Union and from the Balkans but even America is not immune. At one extreme he cites the neighbourhood gang’s imperative to secure some kind of crude self-determination: “Don’t dis me! I gotta get some respect.” At the other, he points to the religious bigotry of the Christian Right.

It seems to me that in *Amnesia* Thompson is moving towards this kind of vision of McWorld and Jihad. This dialectic would play out on his albums throughout the early nineties and would provide a context for songs as seemingly disparate

and inconsequential as “The March Of The Cosmetic Surgeons”, “Fast Food”, “MGB-GT” and “Psycho Street.” For the first time we see him coming to terms with the reality of living and working in the USA and reconciling that with both his personal belief in a deeper underlying reality and his dissection of the aberrant reactions of lost souls who are caught up in the turning tide of history.

Turning Of The Tide

The relevance of the opening track to the wider themes of the *Amnesia* album is captured in Thompson’s allusion to Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar:

*There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and miseries.*

However, “Turning Of The Tide” has a specific antecedent in popular song. Thompson has not, as far as I am aware, acknowledged Noel Coward as an influence on his work but the similarity of this song to Sir Noel’s “Half-Caste Woman” is striking. The latter was performed by Ada-May in Charles B. Cochran’s 1931 *Review* and was reprised later the same year by Helen Morgan in *The Ziegfield Follies Of 1931*. The song was not well received – Coward called it a “flop” – presumably because audiences were discomfited by its deep sense of moral

ambivalence. In Coward's own later versions of the song, we receive the customer's-eye view but in the original revue versions, the speaker is the Eurasian call girl:

*Sailors with sentimental hearts who love and sail away,
When the dawn is grey
Look at me and say –
“Half-caste woman, living a life apart,
Where did your story begin ...”*

As ever, Thompson doesn't simply borrow from Coward – he steals and subverts, as do all great poets. The deliberate tension between the jaunty, commercial “feel” of “Turning Of The Tide” and its dark undercurrents is typically Thompsonian. Typical, too, is the use of complex narrative perspective to create ambiguity and generate heightened emotion in the song. The listener's sympathies for the ageing call girl are strengthened by the knowledge that she is being addressed by just one more boy who won't come back for a second time. But unlike all the other boys, who at least had the grace to say that she “looked so fine”, this customer rubs her nose in her own fading beauty, her own cheap clothes, her own mutability. He is a soul brother of the wretch who, years before would vow to “regret it all in the morning.”

Three other “echoes” are worthy of note. The phrase “tender moments” implies moments when money is tendered and as such links to the reference to “good folding money in this pocket of mine” in “Waltzing's For Dreamers.” The reference to the “poor little sailor boy [who] never set eyes on a woman

before” foreshadows three other unfortunates adrift on the sea of life: the callow protagonist, “young enough and dumb enough”, of “Gypsy Love Songs”; the “sailor from the Land of the Free” in “Yankee Go Home”; and the speaker in “Can't Win” who was taught to fail, “better sink than sail.” Finally, the phrase “turning of the tide” recalls “Dimming Of The Day” – “You pull me like the moon pulls on the tide” – and underlines the point that the amnesia induced by a “creaking bed in the hotel room” represents a wilful turning from God.

Gypsy Love Songs

Spooky guitar intro, a nightmare solo that replicates the room going “somewhere without me” and a howling outro a la “Can't Win.” A wonderfully – and appropriately – dramatic performance. Noel Coward again stalks the scene in “Gypsy Love Songs.” The general setting and Thompson's specific exhortation to the band not to “beguine the begun” recalls Coward's “Nina.” The latter, unlike Thompson's gypsy girl, is obdurately opposed to dancing:

*She refused to begin the Beguine
When they requested it
And she made an embarrassing scene
If anyone suggested it
For she detested it.*

Thompson describes “Gypsy Love Songs” as “a true story, only the names have been changed. A musical Day Of The Locust, my view of Hollywood.” [PH265]. On an autobiographical level, one wonders as to the timing and nature of the encounter that is described. However, the reference to *The Day Of The Locust* is in any case more germane. Nathanael West’s powerful 1939 novella finally appeared on film in American cinemas in 1975. The film flopped. Its depiction of the seamy side of tinsel town did not strike a responsive chord. The closing passages of West’s novella do however capture the mood and message of *Amnesia*. The hero, Tod Hackett, is caught up in a riot that mirrors his own design drawing, “The Burning Of Los Angeles”:

Across the top, parallel with the frame, he had drawn the burning city, a great bonfire of architectural styles, ranging from Egyptian to Cape Cod colonial. Through the centre, winding from left to right, was a long hill street and down it, spilling into the middle foreground, came the mob carrying baseball bats and torches. For the faces of its members, he was using the innumerable sketches he had made of the people who come to California to die; the cultists of all sorts, economic as well as religious, the wave, airplane, funeral and preview watchers – all those poor devils who can only be stirred by the promise of miracles and then only to violence.

Barber again suggests the significance of Hollywood in the wider thematic context of the album:

Hollywood is McWorld’s storyteller, and it inculcates secularism, passivity, consumerism, vicariousness, impulse buying, and an accelerated pace of life, not as a result of its overt themes and explicit storylines but by virtue of what Hollywood is and how its products are consumed. Stories told to a tribe around a campfire, whatever their content, knit people together and reflect a common heritage. Stories that pass through the magic lantern and reappear on a movie screen are conditioned by their own media context. [JvM 97]

The sense of people being conditioned by “their own media context” and playing out appointed roles runs throughout *Amnesia*. The protagonist in “Turning Of The Tide” in a sense acts out a screenplay that he is in the process of writing and incorporates flashbacks of all the other cheap encounters that have occurred in the hotel room. The persona in “Gypsy Love Songs” finds himself in a bizarre film set – “Tropical night, Malaria moon,/ Dying stars of the silver screen.” The lover addressed in “Reckless Kind” lives her “love scenes right out loud,/ Break(s) hearts all around” which, incidentally, relates her to the gypsy girl who “hi-jacked a few hearts all right.” In “Jerusalem On The Jukebox”, “they try that Joan of Arc look again,/ Two parts Ingrid Bergmann to one part Shirley MacLaine.” Even God dresses the part – “the sharpest suit and the cleanest chin.” The female lead in “I Still Dream” looks at the protagonist with “that same old used to be” while he plays the part of “a cowboy shooting bad men on the range.” The combatants in “Don’t Tempt Me” play a variety of roles

– “gorilla”, “patient man”, “uncle”, “Pope.” The fallen sister in “Yankee Go Home” takes on the role of whore as she dons her costume, a new pair of silk stockings. The persona in “Can’t Win” is forced to suppress his instincts and play his required role, “play the game”. The dancer in “Waltzing’s For Dreamers” encourages his partner to “pretend that we care for each other.” And finally we arrive at the starring role, that of Pharaoh, performing for “a thousand eyes, a thousand ears” while his magicians cry “Oh Truth! Oh Real!” In the world of Amnesia, there is no Real – “no god but God.”

Reckless Kind

An atypically “simple” song of “stillborn love”. I can imagine the Everly Brothers doing a close harmony version of “Reckless Kind.” Thompson’s delivery works equally well with verses sung in a low growl and the choruses sweet and understated.

Jerusalem On The Jukebox

The pivotal song on the album. “Jerusalem On The Jukebox” is a remarkably rich and resonant song, delivered in Thompson’s finest Dylanesque sneer. Patrick Humphries describes it as “a withering, scornful condemnation of the vapid values of Jimmy Swaggart and his ilk.” That is the obvious starting point but “Jerusalem” goes way beyond that and prefigures a

number of other Thompson songs. The surgeon’s knife in the third verse reappears in “March Of The Cosmetic Surgeons.” The setting of this verse brings to mind a great Thompson song from You? Me? Us?:

*Midnight in her room,
There was music and incense and mirrors all around.
By the light of the moon,
Her silver dress slipped to the ground.
Then she knelt like Saint Joan
And invisible armies attended her there
And her knife brightly shone
As she cut off her long silken hair.*

And the little angels beating their wings to the music on the jukebox are surely serving the same Archangel as those who would swoop down from heaven “on Ariels in leather and chrome” to carry James Adie home.

In terms of the breadth of vision within the song, Barber makes the point in terms remarkably similar to Thompson’s lyrics:

For all their dialectical interplay with respect to democracy, Jihad and McWorld are moral antinomies. There is no room in the mosques for Nintendo, no place on the Internet for Jesus – however rapidly “religious” channels are multiplying. Life cannot be both play and in earnest, cannot stand for the lesser gratification of a needy body and simultaneously for the greater glory of a selfless soul.

Either the Qur'an speaks the Truth, or Truth is a television quiz show. History has given us Jihad as a counterpoint to McWorld and made them inextricable; but individuals cannot live in both domains at once and are compelled to choose. Sadly, it is not obvious that the choice, whatever it is, holds out much promise to democrats in search of a free civil society. [JvM 216]

The McWorld vs. Jihad dynamic is highlighted in the third verse by the reference to Joan of Arc. The latter represents an early European manifestation of Jihad in her attempts to fight on God's side to rid France of the imperial English. Indeed, echoes of American TV evangelism notwithstanding, "Jerusalem" is anchored as firmly in northern Europe as in the Hollywood of poolside picnics, Ferraris and furs. Blake's preface to Milton has long since been transformed into the archetypal English hymn:

*And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?
And did the Countenance Divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among these dark satanic mills?*

The converted satanic mills in Lancashire today provide the backdrop to Coronation Street, the archetypal British soap

opera. The Countenance Divine now has the cleanest chin and flickers on the screens of England's suburbia. And the jibes at those who would resist the turning of the tide – "The wounds of time kill you but the surgeon's knife only stings" – owe as much to England's Noel Coward as to Loudon Wainwright. The Master was much perplexed by the question of what would happen to the children of those who tried to halt the march of time:

*Think of the shock when Mummy's face
Is lifted from its proper place.
What's, what's, what's going to happen to the tots?*

I Still Dream

The analogy of the cowboy at the heart of the song ties "I Still Dream" firmly into the fabric of Amnesia: a cowboy shooting a badman is an archetypal Hollywood image and, sadly, a metaphor that seems to have shaped the foreign policy of all-too-many American post-war Presidents. But the song stands on its own merits as one of Thompson's finest and most affecting songs of lost love. The mournful brass, the soulful organ and the disjointed noodling on guitar are magnificent. The song is built around a profound ambiguity: "And ten years is a time/ But your looks, love, it's a crime." What does she see when she looks in the mirror? What does she see when she looks at him?

Don't Tempt Me

Bust up in the bazaar. Richard's take on Public Enemy. According to Barber, what Jihad and McWorld have in common is anarchy. It should be said that "Don't Tempt Me" is more interesting as a metaphor than as a song.

Yankee Go Home

Thompson positioned "I Still Dream" as Bruce Springsteen meets George Formby. Right analogy, wrong song. "Yankee Go Home" crosses the heavy irony of "Born In The USA" with the hometown humour of "Our Fanny's Gone All Yankee". Formby's 1945 single stopped short of advocating the forcible expulsion of the imperial invader, but in terms of the effect of the invasion on the native female, his analysis is very close to Thompson's:

*She drinks whisky, gin and rum
And she's always chewing gum.
Our Fanny's gone all Yankee.*

Fanny, too, is "wearing Yankee hose", with a predictable effect on her sense of propriety and moral rectitude: "In a bus or train she does her hanky panky." And like Thompson's characters, she longs for amnesia in the Land of the Free: "And she says she'll make good/ When she gets to Hollywood." Anyway, our George did do some interesting numbers, and this is one

of them. Sir Noel also did some interesting numbers, one of which pre-empted Thompson's reference to Gibbon's Decline And Fall by fifty years:

*Gibbon's divine Decline and Fall
Seems pretty flimsy,
No more than a whimsy,
By way of contrast
On Saturday last -
I went to a marvellous party.*

For Coward's decadent Riviera gatherings read Thompson's "poolside picnics [where] they chant for Ferraris and furs." I am convinced that "Crash The Party" is Richard's take on the party that Noel Coward attended at Cap Ferrat, where "Poor Lulu got fried on Chianti."

Can't Win

Another of the songs, based on which Richard Thompson's reputation as a songwriter will endure. Unfortunately, the album version lacks the bite and the bile of the live version on *Watching The Dark* and the fading out of the guitar solo at the end of the track is a serious artistic misjudgement.

Waltzing's For Dreamers

From “the blue light [that] flickers and flames” in video-suburbia to a blue song and a fading light. From the cowboy on the range to the cowboy on the pull in a Texas dance hall. The model for this song comes from the great George Jones. His 1957 hit, “Don’t Stop The Music”, provides mood, melody and motif:

*Don't stop the music let it play one more song,
The same one that's played tonight for so long.*

Thompson’s chorus, too, owes much to another Jones classic:

*This aching, breaking heart of mine is crazy over you
And I'm afraid to let you know I love you like I do.*

And so, from Nashville to Nasser ...

Pharaoh

Technically, “Pharaoh” functions in much the same way as “Love In A Faithless Country” works on Across A Crowded Room. From the top of Pharaoh’s tower we look back across Amnesia and find that phrases take on renewed relevance and resonance. The tower itself is a symbol of the lack of faith that characterises the spiritual wasteland portrayed in the album.

According to the Koran, Pharaoh instructed Haman: “Build me a tower that I may reach the highways – the very highways – of the heavens, and look upon the God of Moses. I am convinced that he is lying.” [PK 40:37]. We can also revisit the prophecy in “Can’t Win”:

*Oh, towers will tumble and locusts will visit the land.
Oh, a curse on your house and your children and the fruit of
your hand.*

Pharaoh’s refusal to accede to Moses’ instruction and release the Children of Israel from bondage caused God to unleash a series of plagues on his kingdom. These are detailed in Exodus in the Old Testament and alluded to repeatedly in the Koran: “So We plagued them with floods and locusts, with lice and frogs and blood: clear miracles, yet they scorned them all, for they were a wicked nation.” [PK 7:133].

We can look back, too, from Egypt Land to the Land of the Free in “Yankee Go Home”. Barber makes the interesting observation that in a sense McWorld is itself a theme park called Marketland. In this context, we can compare Egyptland with Thompson’s later theme parks, Lotteryland and Metroland.

We should also note the applicability of the phrase “Head of dog, Osiris eye” to the theme of mutability, death and decay that, as we have noted, runs throughout Amnesia. Osiris was the Egyptian God of the dead and of resurrection and the afterlife. The name means, “many eyed”. Osiris was usually depicted as a mummy, wearing a white crown and holding the royal sceptre and flail. His is presumably the mummy’s mask

that we see on the cover of *Amnesia*. Osiris's son was Anubis, whose office was to take the souls of the dead before his parent, the judge of the infernal regions. Anubis was usually represented with a human body and a jackal's head.

Amnesia is, to say the least, a complex and multi-faceted album. At one level, it is Thompson's most consistently "political" album, at least up to this point in his career. The old forms of human servitude were all too obvious. In the words of Exodus, "the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigour: And they made their lives bitter with hard bond-

age, in mortar, and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field: all their service, wherein they made them serve, was with rigour." But the new forms of enslavement are subtler, if no less oppressive: "we're all struck into a trance." Thompson, for the first time, is sketching a comprehensive and cohesive vision of a world dominated by the tension between what Barber would later call Jihad and McWorld, a world "where the only available identity is that of blood brother or solitary consumer, and where these two paltry dispositions engage in a battle for the human soul." [JvM 224].



The question of the destiny of the human soul, of course, underlies Amnesia as it does all of Thompson's albums post Fairport. The key phrase in the whole album, from this standpoint, is "stand there and rust." Sufism differentiates itself from other perspectives in Islamic thought by maintaining that true understanding lies in the lifting of the veils – *kashf* – that obscure the face of the heart. As we have seen, *Hu-jwiri* distinguishes between two categories of veil. "The veil of rust" cannot be lifted because it is a function of the kind of fundamental inadequacies that afflict all of the amnesiacs on the album. "The veil of clouding" by contrast can be lifted and the clouds on the album cover should be seen as a sign of potential salvation. The mirror on the album cover also carries Sufic overtones. According to Ibn Arabi:

The perfect human being brings together the form of the Real and the form of the cosmos. He is an isthmus between the Real and the cosmos, a raised-up mirror. The Real sees His form in the mirror of the human being, and creation also sees its form in him.

How should we view the mirror image of Thompson himself in this regard: perfect human being or jester? Bard or juggler? In terms of the attitude of the artist behind the album, the position is implied in the only "personalised" verse of "Pharaoh":

*I dig a ditch; I shape a stone;
Another battlement for his throne.*

The echo of "The Poor Ditching Boy" is obvious, but why is the digging of ditches linked metaphorically to the shaping of stones? I suspect the answer lies in the identity of Thompson's new record label. The Capitol was originally the Temple of Jupiter on Tarpeian Hill in Rome. The term is nowadays applied to the Congress or State Legislature buildings in the USA. Then as now, Capitol buildings were constructed at the cost of "hard bondage". Amnesia is another battlement for the corporate throne, another brick in McWall.

RUMOR & SIGH

1. Read About Love
2. I Feel So Good
3. I Misunderstood
4. Grey Walls
5. You Dream Too Much
6. Why Must I Plead
7. 1952 Vincent Black Lightning
8. Backlash Love Affair
9. Mystery Wind
10. Don't Sit On My Jimmy Shands
11. Keep Your Distance
12. Mother Knows Best
13. God Loves A Drunk
14. Psycho Street

All songs written by Richard Thompson. Produced by Mitchell Froom

Players – Richard Thompson with Mitchell Froom (keyboards), Jim Keltner (drums), Mickey Curry (drums), Alex Acuna (percussion), Jerry Scheff (bass), Simon Nicol (guitar), Phil Pickett (shawm, curtal, crumhorn), John Kirkpatrick (accordion, concertina), Aly Bain (fiddle), Clive Gregson and Christine Collister (backing vocals).

Released May 1991. Capitol CDP 7 95713 2.

The hard bondage that Thompson endured in order to produce *Amnesia* was at least rewarded by record sales for one of his albums up to that point – around 100,000 copies worldwide – and by the usual clutch of rave reviews. Dave Sinclair's tribute in *Q* was fulsome and fully justified: "*Amnesia* shows Thompson has forgotten none of his skills as a technically elite player, richly characterful singer, a literate and emotional songwriter and a truly original stylist. When will the world wise up to this remarkable man?" Amen to that. The Chairman penned a report for the annual Fairport reunion programme, in which he appeared to take sardonic pleasure in his new found status as a contributing citizen of McWorld: "Although this year has been an unspectacular one for Thompson Music and Leisure plc, it has been a time of quiet consolidation and satisfying growth. After our successful floatation in 1986, we are close to our target of six per cent worldwide profit on European holdings, and are confident of retaining our nine and a half per cent worldwide market return." Events conspired however to raise the spectre of Jihad back to the top of his personal agenda and ensured that *Rumor & Sigh* would contain the most diverse range of oddballs and deviants to be found on any Richard Thompson album. The events centred on a cerebral novelist and a radical politician.

Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* was published at around the time *Amnesia* appeared in 1988. In February 1989, the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran pronounced a death sentence [fatwa] on the novelist for alleged blasphemies against the Prophet and his wives contained in the novel. Rushdie's caricature of Khomeini as the Imam in exile may

also help explain the Ayatollah's unprecedented response to a work of fiction in the English language. Rushdie's Imam broadcasts chillingly prophetic words to the Believers from his flat in London:

Death to the tyranny of the Empress Ayesha, of calendars, of America, of time! We seek the eternity, the timelessness of God. His still waters, not her flowing wines. Burn the books and trust the Book; shred the papers and hear the Word, as it was revealed by the Angel Gibreel to the Messenger Mahound and explicated by your interpreter and Imam. [SV 211]

The fatwa outraged Western public and political opinion and generated a high degree of sympathy and support for Rushdie. Thompson, clearly in an invidious position, resorted to equivocation and weak humour as his only means of defence:

I think the reason [the fatwa] was said was for local consumption. I don't think the Iranian mullahs understand the West at all, they don't understand world politics – it's all for internal consumption – it's all for local votes and to continue the war that's been going on for about two thousand years [sic] inside Iran between the mullahs and the kings and the royal family. I'm not thrilled with Rushdie's book anyway – it was offensive to me actually, I mean, I wouldn't have killed him for it – I'd have kind of slowly tortured him for a while and thrown him back! I didn't read the whole

thing, it was so bloody boring. I read salient parts of it and I did find it offensive and I think he knew what he was getting into – I think he knew he was insulting a whole lot of Muslims – everybody actually. But he knew what he was doing and I think he has to accept the consequences. [PH 270]

In fairness to Thompson, it should be said that, from an Islamic judicial standpoint, the fatwa, or at least some form of retribution could be justified. Rushdie had been raised as a Muslim and, in turning his back on his faith and in using "inside knowledge" to subvert Islam's sacred symbolism, he was acting in direct contravention of explicit Koranic injunctions:

- But those that recant after accepting the true faith and grow in unbelief, their repentance shall not be accepted. They are the truly erring ones. [PK 3:90]
- As for those who break God's covenant after confirming it, who put asunder what God has bidden to be united and perpetrate corruption in the land, the curse shall be laid on them; the scourge of Hell awaits them. [PK 13:25]
- ... those who deny God after professing Islam and open their bosoms to unbelief shall incur the wrath of God; grievous punishment awaits them. [PK 16:108]
- Those who speak ill of God and His apostle shall be cursed by God in this life and in the life to come. He has prepared for them a shameful punishment. [PK 33:57]

Rushdie also intimates in his novel that he was well aware of the risks he was running. The poet Baal's suggestion that the girls in the desert brothel should assume the roles of the Prophet's wives provokes a stern reminder: "If they heard you say that, they'd boil your balls in butter." [SV 380]. At another point, the hero Saladin broods on the power of the spoken word: "he was going to die for his verses but he could not find it in himself to call the death-sentence unjust." [SV 537]. Up to that point, therefore, Thompson is correct: Rushdie did know what he was doing and must have expected some form of backlash. The point that Thompson evades, however, is that what Rushdie was doing – deploying religious iconography in the service of the Muse – is what writers throughout the ages have done and what Thompson himself had already done and was to do again.

Thompson's mentor, Robert Graves, published the novel *King Jesus* in 1946. His retelling of the life story of Jesus is flagrantly heretical: "My solution to the problem of Jesus's nativity implies a rejection of the mystical Virgin Birth doctrine, which no longer has the same force in religious polemics as it had in Justin's day; to the mass of people nowadays the choice is between a Jesus born in the ordinary course of nature and one as mythical as Perseus and Prometheus." Graves resolves the dilemma by casting Jesus as a man born in the "ordinary course of nature", albeit one of royal descent, who is locked in a titanic struggle with the Triple Goddess: "[He was] determined to measure and subdue the power of the Female." The nature of Jesus' quest is deeply ironic, for He is presented unequivocally by Graves as both a poet and singer-songwriter:

"to the mass of the people who were not subtle enough to understand either deep poems or complex religious theory, he sang songs and told fables ... Jesus put some of his fables into rough ballad form." [KJ 290]. Thompson, of course, perpetuated Graves' heresy quite deliberately in "Calvary Cross" and repeated the sin years later in "Hard On Me." Those songs might prove as repugnant to devout Christians as *The Satanic Verses* undoubtedly was – and is – to devout Muslims.

Thompson acknowledges that he read only edited highlights from *The Satanic Verses*. That is a great pity, because he might have identified in Rushdie a kindred spirit, at least in an artistic sense. The contentious *Satanic Verses* relate to the temporary acceptance, under political duress, by the Prophet "Mahound" of the Triple Goddess into the iconography of Islam and into the Koran: "Have you thought upon Lat and Uzza and Manat, the third, the other? They are exalted birds, and their intercession is desired indeed." [SV 114]. He later repudiates the verses: "He stands in front of the statue of the Three and announces the abrogation of the verses which Shaitan whispered in his ear. These verses are banished from the true recitation, al-qur'an. New verses are thundered in their place." [SV 124].

Closer to home, Rushdie's Saladin encounters the Muse in one of her human incarnations as the "beautiful vampire" Zeena. Saladin is a figure to whom Thompson could have related. The former's attempts to ingratiate himself into English middle-class society are rebuffed in familiar terms: "Eff off. Go crawl back under your stone". Zeena's true identity

is couched in terms that Thompson would have recognised instantly as deriving from Eliot's "Prufrock":

"[Saladin arose] from a long slumber racked by a series of intolerable dreams, prominent among which were images of Zeeny Vakil, transformed into a mermaid, singing to him from an iceberg in tones of agonising sweetness, lamenting her inability to join him on dry land, calling him, calling ..." [SV 135].

By a strange coincidence, Saladin's first sexual encounter with Zeena uses much the same language as Thompson's "Gypsy Love Songs":

Five hours after she entered his dressing room they were in bed, and he passed out. When he awoke she explained "I slipped you a Mickey Finn." He never worked out whether or not she had been telling the truth. "There's something strange going on," he wanted to say, "my voice," but he didn't know how to put it, and held his tongue. [SV 52/3]

The same Thompson song also resonates in the desert brothel that aroused the wrath of Khomeini: "The fifteen-year-old whispered something in the grocer's ear. At once a light began to shine in his eyes. 'Tell me everything,' he begged. 'Your childhood, your favourite toys, Solomon's-horses and the rest, tell me how you played the tambourine and the Prophet came to watch.'" [SV 380]. And to complete the circle, Jesus too encountered a girl with a tambourine – with a hole in it, no

less – in Graves' version of the Gospel: "She thrust out her tongue, returned to the dance and began beating her tambourine, but he followed her with his eyes and no sooner had she begun the movement called the Horse Leech than the drum suddenly split across." [KJ 248].

All of which demonstrates that great minds think alike. It also makes Rushdie's own point: "all metaphors are capable of misinterpretation." Thompson more than most might have had the grace to accept that at the time. He was to revisit the same dialectic of the sacred and the profane – of service to God vs. service to the Muse – from a very different perspective in 2003 when, in a song that gave a "Taliban's eye view of the world," he reasserted the validity and legitimacy of "books" as well as the Book.

For most of the 1980's Thompson viewed events in his native land as I did from the relative safety of semi-exile. The headline chronology of the decade does nothing to suggest the seismic shifts in British politics and society that occurred under the Premiership of Margaret Thatcher. She was elected in 1979 on a radical Right Wing manifesto that seemed to offer some alleviation of the mounting problems that culminated in the "Winter of Discontent." She was re-elected in June 1983 on the strength, *inter alia* of the "Falklands Factor." The election victory of 1987 seemed to confirm the hegemony of radical Thatcherism and to legitimise and institutionalise the other two "F's" – the "Feelgood" and the "Fuck You Jack" factors. By the late eighties she faced mounting unpopularity, not least because of her obdurate support for the ill-fated "Poll Tax." By 1990 she was viewed as an electoral liability and was

dumped ungraciously by her Cabinet colleagues. The impact of her economic and social policies was well documented but, as an expatriate, what really hammered home were the graphic images of catastrophe and mass violence that mushroomed in the mid/late eighties. It's worth recalling some of the higher profile events:

- Between March 1987 and August 1989, over eight hundred people died in catastrophic occurrences – the sinking of the Herald Of Free Enterprise; the fire at Kings Cross Underground Station; the Piper Alpha explosion; the Clapham Junction rail crash; the Lockerbie bombing; the British-Midland M1 crash; the sinking of the Marchioness.
- The IRA remained active throughout the decade, with three atrocities achieving particular notoriety – the Brighton bombing [1984]; the Remembrance Day Massacre at Enniskillen [1987]; the bombing of Inglis Barracks in London [1988].
- Events at football matches proved that “it's a dangerous game we play” – Bradford [1985 – 53 dead]; Heysel [1985 – 38 dead]; Hillsborough [1989 – 90 dead].

What were even more appalling in some ways, however, were the pictures of new levels of destructive violence in the country as Briton battled Briton. It was seen in a series of confrontations between the police and striking workers, most notably in the miners' strike of 1984/5. The Times' unemotive, factual reporting of events at Orgreave in May 1984 was bad enough:

Trouble began yesterday morning when 35 lorries, heavily protected by wire mesh, arrived at the coke works to load up. Pickets surged forward under a hail of missiles and firecrackers, and police, using riot gear for the first time since the dispute began, went in to make arrests. One officer broke a leg falling from his horse. The convoy got through. Violence broke out again when the lorries returned, and pickets scattered across a field as a posse of mounted police pursued them, followed by officers carrying riot shields. Fighting continued as the second convoy left for Scunthorpe.

But the miners' leader, Arthur Scargill, showed no such restraint in his description of events:

Anyone who has been here today has seen police tactics of the most brutal nature. We have seen riot shields and riot gear in action. We have seen truncheons and staves in action. We have seen mounted police charging into our ranks. I was appealing to the police to show restraint. There were baton charges. I saw truncheons wielded and our people hit. I saw people punched to the ground. Quite honestly, there were scenes of brutality which were almost unbelievable. What you now have in South Yorkshire is an actual police state tantamount to something that you are used to seeing in Chile or Bolivia.

Even more scary, because unprecedented, were the urban riots that erupted in the late autumn in 1985, fuelled by a toxic

combination of urban deprivation, racial tension and insensitive policing. Handsworth, Brixton, Toxteth and Broadwater Farm all became world news. Even CNN took the feed. In cold print, the Observer report of events in Brixton on the night of 28th/29th September was scarcely credible:

Tension rose until the early evening when youths broke into the back of Brixton police station and set its upper stories ablaze with petrol bombs. Scores of riot police poured out of the station, dispersing the crowd but spreading the violence. Brixton Road, the central spine of the area, rapidly became “no go” for the police. Youths broke into a petrol station and used the fuel to make dozens of petrol bombs. Police retreated south without sealing off the area and more rioters were able to pour into the streets. Ordinary motorists strayed into the riot and some were attacked. In almost every side street running off Brixton Road cars were overturned and set on fire. On the west of Brixton Road an entire terrace of shops were smashed, looted and then set ablaze. There were reports of stabbings. Occasionally police vans raced into the area before retreating under a hail of bricks and petrol bombs. People were feared trapped in the biggest blaze covering a block of three buildings, flats and shops in Gresham Road.

In related developments, the eighties also saw the burgeoning culture of the “lager lout.” Professor Arthur Marwick, writing in the excellent Penguin Social History Of Britain series, makes it clear that Maggie should take part of the

credit for this phenomenon also. You could blame “high unemployment; despair and aimlessness among the country’s youth; the fostering of aggressive economic selfishness; and the policies of polarisation and confrontation pursued by the Thatcher Government.” Marwick notes that, in fairness, you could also blame longer-term shifts which meant, “the old reference points by which individuals and groups measured their behaviour, by which their behaviour was constrained, had changed drastically.” Significantly, in a Gallup poll carried out for London Weekend Television in August 1986, 77% of respondents said that their main aim in life was “to live life as I like.” Rumor & Sigh was to be populated by characters with a similar aspiration. The world-view reflected in the album was deeply coloured by the shadow of apocalypse that seemed to have settled permanently over the streets of Britain during the eighties.

Unlike an increasing number of people in Britain, Thompson was at least gainfully employed through the late eighties. Back on the work front, the period between the release of Amnesia in October 1988 and that of Rumor and Sigh in May 1991 was again taken up in part by major collaborations with established partners. In 1989, Thompson extended his partnership with Peter Filleul. They explain the background in their sleeve note:

We were asked to write the music for the BBC series “Hard Cash” at the beginning of 1989 but it was only after we had seen some of the completed filming that we hit upon the idea of expanding the project to record an album including

contributions from other songwriters on the same theme of exploitation at work, written from whichever angle they chose. It's hard to find a songwriter or, indeed, any musician who cannot relate to the reality of being exploited, an irony that many of those involved were quick to point out and it may have been this that fired their extraordinary efforts on this projects ... they all rose to the occasion surpassing all our expectations by writing and performing some truly excellent songs, sometimes expressing views that do not necessarily reflect their own sentiments!

The praise is not misplaced. Hard Cash is an excellent album and it seems a criminal waste that the four part series on which it was based, which was scheduled for screening in March 1990, was never released. Filleul explained to Patrick Humphries that the main reason for dropping the programme was fear at the Beeb of mounting Government hostility – “Bring me your scholars, I'll have them all lobotomised.” The context for the album was provided, ironically, by a January 1989 report from the right wing Adam Smith Institute in which it was observed “that the chosen course of the Government would appear to be rationing by squalor – that social security should be sufficiently difficult, sufficiently degrading and sufficiently inconvenient to limit the numbers that will have access to it.” The pernicious alternative for many to life on the dole was life on or below the minimum wage. Hard Cash tells their story, but with an eye to the ages old history of exploitation in the workplace, which ensures that the album

transcends the merely topical and sentimental. Ron Kavanagh's contribution is typical:

*A living wage is all that we demand
From a government sworn to uphold that cause
Not betrayal of precious rights, bought with precious lives
In the course of two World Wars.*

Even the most topical song on the album – the Waterson's “Hilda's Cabinet Band” – avoids the mawkish by deploying vicious humour:

*Dancing to Hilda's cabinet band
Doing the one where you never turn around
Up the hall slowly, down the hall fast
And a dignified finish on your arse*

Thompson's contribution to the album was substantial. He co-produced with Filleul, performed two of his own songs, provided a third for June Tabor and sang back-up and/or played on a further seven tracks. His version of “Time To Ring Some Changes” is updated and includes two additional verses that tie the song firmly into the fabric of the album:

*Now listen here to the self-made man.
He says, “Why can't you if I can?
Can't you push buttons, can't you make plans?”
It's time to ring some changes.*

*I'm going to tear this mansion down,
Get my feet back on the ground.
Penny for penny and pound for pound,
It's time to ring some changes.*

The song's opening image of a decaying house is a frequent Thompson metaphor, but the stated intention in the new final verse to "tear this mansion down" opens up a new and relevant perspective. Robert Tressell's magnificent novel of working class life, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, was published in 1915 and finally appeared in an unexpurgated version in 1965. The philanthropists in question were a gang of painters, decorators and craftsmen who, in working themselves into an early grave for a pittance on the homes of the great and the good, were unwittingly demonstrating the kind of Christian charity that would never have occurred to their well-heeled employers who thronged the churches and chapels every Sunday. The dominant image running through the novel is of a house undergoing repair and redecoration. The house stands for an economic system that delivers for the Many the soul-destroying despair of poverty, the brutality of labour relations and the crushing of dreams. The socialist tradesman Owen expounds on the need to ring some changes:

Suppose some people were living in a house, and suppose that they were always ill, and suppose that the house was badly built, the walls so constructed that they drew in and retained moisture, the roof broken and leaky, the drains defective, the doors and windows ill-fitting and the rooms

badly shaped and draughty. If you were asked to name, in a word, the cause of the ill health of the people who lived there you would say – the house. All the tinkering in the world would not make that house fit to live in; the only thing to do with it would be to pull it down and build another. Well, we're all living in a house called the Money System; and as a result most of us are suffering from a disease called poverty. There's so much the matter with the present system that it's no good tinkering at it. Everything about it is wrong and there's nothing about it that's right. There's only one thing to be done with it and that is to smash it up and have a different system altogether. We must get out of it. [RTP 147]

Tressell's novel also provides perspective for "Mrs Rita", one of many superlative interpretations of Thompson songs performed over the years by the incomparable June Tabor. Filleul provided some background to the song to Patrick Humphries: "He found a book in the library, *The Sweatshop Report* by Derek Bishton. There's a story in there about a woman in Birmingham accused of stealing two hundred pairs of knickers from her employer, Rita O'Connor Hosiery." [PH 255]. But one is also reminded of Tressell's Mr Sweater, the Mayor of the fictional town of Mugsborough [Hastings] and Managing Director of a drapery business. He had discovered outsourcing a century before Pond Drew Inc and employed a host of home workers to churn out fancy goods for the fine mouthed:

But it was not in vain that these women toiled every weary day until exhaustion compelled them to cease. It was not in vain that they passed their cheerless lives bending with aching shoulders over the thankless work that barely brought them bread. It was not in vain that they and their children went famished and in rags, for after all, the principal object of their labour was accomplished: the Good Cause was advanced. Mr. Sweater waxed rich and increased in goods and respectability. [RTP 197/8]

Thompson's other new contribution to *Hard Cash* was the magnificent "Oh I Swear." The song works superbly as a metaphor on a number of levels but in the context of the album it is the image of the resigned acceptance of imprisonment-through-poverty that stands out: "Like jailbirds locked in a cell/ We go well together." Tressell's Owen again makes the point:

If you were to commit some serious breach of the law and were sentenced next week to ten years' penal servitude, you'd probably think your fate a pitiable one: yet you appear to submit quite cheerfully to this other sentence, which is – that you shall die a premature death after you have done another thirty years' hard labour. [RTP 130]

Hard Cash is in a sense the work that, from an artistic standpoint, validates Thompson's extended collaboration with Peter Filleul. Their joint work during 1990 on the film soundtrack to *Sweet Talker* [released 1991] has some interest-

ing aspects but did little to enhance Thompson's reputation or stretch him as performer or writer. The theme of the film – a satire on greed and people's susceptibility to a good sales pitch – was in line with Thompson's broader preoccupations at this time. But, like *The Marksman* opus, there is rather too much wallpaper music and too little distinctive contribution from Thompson. Admittedly, on *Sweet Talker*, Thompson is more in evidence as songwriter and singer/player, but the three songs on which he does contribute vocal lead – "Put Your Trust In Me," "To Hang A Dream On" and "False Or True" – are, to use a word that one would never ever associate with Richard Thompson, inconsequential. There are two honourable exceptions on the album before we file it under "Other Projects". The instrumental "Persuasion" is a near-perfect homage to Hank Marvin. Tim Finn's subsequent addition of lyrics has made this a worthy addition to the Thompson stage canon. The duet versions with Teddy Thompson in recent years have been consistently emotive and appealing. The other Thompson song on the album, "Boomtown", is an altogether different manner of beast. The song is a wonderful and loving pastiche of the country music that Thompson grew up with and that has lurked in the background of his own oeuvre for the past thirty-odd years. It also manages to pull together a number of the motifs that were running through Thompson's "mainstream" output in the late eighties:

*Oh Boomtown is busted, the rigs are all rusted,
There's no lights on my Christmas tree.*

*Well, I tried El Paso and I tried Amarillo
But I didn't find a drop of Texas "T".*

*Well, they hit us when we're down and we can't get [it] up,
Though we're trying with all of our might.
Now the bottle's run dry and I'm wondering why
I'm flushed out and busted in Boomtown tonight.*

Eat your heart out Merle Haggard! Sadly – and bloody typically – Thompson's contribution to the recorded version of "Boomtown" is some background mandolin. Vocals were courtesy of John Andrew Parks – respectable but hardly George Jones – and guitars by Richard Brunton. You can just imagine the live version of this by the Richard Thompson Band ca. 1999! At least Pete Zorn did get to play tambourine on the 1991 studio version! Filleul made it clear that the experience of producing the album wasn't all sweet talking for Thompson: "Richard was fed up by the end of it with people faffing about, not knowing what they wanted, changing their minds, expecting that the world would respond to their whims. He wanted to get on with his life, after vowing he'd never do another soundtrack." [PH 257]. One of Richard's better careers decisions.

A second collaboration with Messrs French, Frith and Kaiser was altogether more satisfying. Invisible Means was released in 1990. Thompson's quirkiest contribution is probably the inclusion of a rock version of "Loch Lomond", which was a staple of his live band performances in the eighties. Noel Coward also performed the song regularly in concert, bring-

ing to it his unique blend of suavity and cheap innuendo. As with the earlier FFKT collaboration, Thompson's four original contributions were an interesting mix of experiments with song forms and improvisations on themes that were being developed in his lyric notebook at the time and would appear on "mainstream" albums. "March Of The Cosmetic Surgeons" falls in the former category. Not surprisingly, Thompson took its exploration of cod-opera no further. "Peppermint Rock" exploits a complicated song structure in treating the theme of teenage sexual experimentation that featured subsequently in "Read About Love":

*Peppermint rock and a sticky sticky chip bag,
Love is a zip and a fumble away.
Cold cold hands and teenage tipsy,
Ocean wash my sins away.*

Bruce Springsteen described similar fumbblings on the New Jersey shore to greater effect. "Begging Bowl" is an effective treatment of the themes that had been handled in Hard Cash. The plight of the homeless and impoverished in the capital city was a national disgrace by the end of the eighties. Arthur Marwick gives a dispassionate summary: "one of the most evident consequences of the Thatcher revolution was the sight of street beggars and rough sleepers, in doorways, and in the 'cardboard cities' set up in squares and open spaces, and in covered areas such as that under the roundabout at Waterloo. Nobody could miss them." Thompson frames his perspective as a nineteenth century street song, which generalises the

theme of poverty on the streets of London. The most striking images relate to the exclusion that poverty implies:

*The party rings with merriment and laughter.
Locked outside are we for ever after ...
Youth and gold, how they shine.
Bright toys they make you blind.
Out of sight and out of mind
Are the beggars up so early.*

The “bright toys” which the children of the poor will never own recalls a scene in Tressell’s novel in which Barrington observes the children of one of his workmates as they look longingly into the window of the toyshop of the rich:

They did not notice him standing behind them as they ranged to and fro before the window, and as he looked at them, he was reminded of the way in which captive animals walk up and down behind the bars of their cages. These children wandered repeatedly, backwards and forwards from one end of the window to the other, with their little hands pressed against the impenetrable glass, choosing and pointing out to each other the particular toys that took their fancies. [RTP 574]

The image of confinement behind “impenetrable glass” forms the title of Thompson’s fourth song on Invisible Means, one of the great dark Thompson songs on the human condition. The “Killing Jar” is both gas chamber and glass coffin for

Tommy Burns’ songbird and also a metaphor for the repressive regime under which Tommy is raised and leads his meaningless life of drudgery. The broader theme of bringing up children “to be just like daddy” and the violence that lies at the end of that road would be fully developed in Rumor & Sigh.

The answer to the riddle, “what does the invisible mean?” is picked up in the title to Rumor & Sigh. The phrase - and the spelling of “rumor” - is taken from an obscure, untitled poem by the American man-of-letters, Archibald MacLeish. The poem was written in the 1920’s but was not published until the definitive edition of MacLeish’s works appeared in 1985, three years after his death. Even then, the fragment appeared in an appendix of minor poems. Thompson would have had to search hard to find the fragment that, judging by the photograph in the centre of the CD booklet and the 1992 tour programme, appears to have carried significant meaning for him:

*Rumor and sigh of unimagined seas,
Dim radiance of stars that never flamed,
Fragrance of petals never strewn from trees,
Meaning of words unsaid and never named;*

*So from a silence I have made you songs,
So from a starless night a rose of stars.
Can you not hear how all the stillness jars
With music, and the darkness throngs?*

It is of course the poet's role to convey the meaning and significance of "words unsaid and never named." Salman Rushdie agreed that it is the poet's work "to name the unnameable" but added that the poet also has a duty "to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep." Rushdie discharged his responsibility in *The Satanic Verses*. Thompson discharged his, fully and magnificently, in *Rumor & Sigh*. If *Amnesia* was the album in which Richard Thompson began to come to terms with the global market forces of McWorld that were emanating from the USA, then *Rumor & Sigh* was the work in which he chose to depict in all its crazy manifestations the forces of Jihad that eleven years of Thatcherism had fostered and fuelled on the streets of Britain. The fourteen songs on the album cover the full spectrum of human aberration, from mild eccentricity to criminal violence to full blown psychosis. The catalogue of twisted lives and poisoned relationships, of emotional repression and clinical depression, reaches its climax in the final song on the album, but everything in a sense leads up to the mayhem that is unleashed on *Psycho Street*. And as the opening track makes plain, the problems begin at home in childhood.

Read About Love

In his succinct programme notes to the 1992 tour to promote *Rumor & Sigh*, Thompson said that "Read About Love" is "about sex education, or rather the lack of it, in Britain in the fifties and sixties. It was always a taboo subject between

parents and children. Kids were left to find out about it for themselves, either through talking to friends or by reading medical books and the like." The song goes well beyond that however in establishing some of the key motifs that run through the album. For example:

- "Asked my daddy when I was thirteen" – the teenage protagonist foreshadows the slightly older deviant featured in "I Feel So Good," who is "old enough to sin but too young to vote." James Adie, too, proudly declares: "I've fought with the law since I was seventeen./ I've robbed many a man to get my Vincent machine."
- "Daddy, can you tell me what love really means?" – the uncertainty is repeated in a number of misunderstandings, double meanings and ambiguities throughout the album:
 - *"I'm going to break somebody's heart tonight."*
 - *"I'm going to make somebody's day ..."*
 - *"I thought she was saying 'Good luck' -/ She was saying 'Goodbye.'"*
 - *"I heard my darling say,/ She don't know who I am."*
 - *"You dream too much/ If you think I've a thing for you."*
 - *"I ask you what's wrong and you say, 'I'm all yours.'"*
 - *"I ask who your friend is and you say 'Santa Claus.'"*
 - *"Her siren's song seemed to call to me ..."*
 - *"Mystery wind make a fool say Grace ..."*
 - *"Just don't rest your cheeks against my man."*

- *"Don't grasp my hand and say/ Fate has brought you here today./ Fate is only fooling with us, friend."*
- *"So you think you know how to wipe your own nose?/ You think you know how to button your clothes?/ You don't know shit, if you hadn't already guessed!"*
- *"His shouts and his curses are just hymns and praises ..."*
- *"If you need a hand, need a friend, we understand."*
- *"Now are you going to talk ... or am I going to have to get nasty."*
- "He poured another beer and his face turned red" – other conspicuous drunks appear in "Don't Sit On My Jimmy Shands" and "God Loves A Drunk."
- "She never looked up, she seemed so ashamed" – there are a number of haunted and distressed looks on the album:
 - *"Things I try to put shine in her eyes ..."*
 - *"She didn't blink an eye."*
 - *"She stared out from her room/ Into the dying gloom/ And I saw her poor tears glisten."*
 - *"All your bitterness and lies/ Sting like tears in my eyes ..."*
 - *"... the smoke bombs made me blind."*
 - *"Mystery wind you just can't see it."*
 - *"Bring me your visionaries, I can put out their eyes."*
- "Asked my teacher" – the educational motif reappears in the form of big brother who teaches that "a boy's got to know what a man's got to do;" in the didactic Mother who knows best; in the dreary suburbanites who "bring up the babies to be just like Daddy;" and in the good neighbour on Psycho Street who schools his son in the art of vandalism with fatal consequences.
- "He reached for the cane" - the violence in the classroom is mirrored in the carnage on Psycho Street and in numerous other references to violence, brutality and death throughout the album:
 - *"I feel so good, I'm going to take someone apart tonight."*
 - *"Cigarette burns down her arm -/ Said she tried to do herself harm."*
 - *"Seventy volts through her head."*
 - *"She fell on her food like a lioness."*
 - *"Velvet dream on an iron fist."*
 - *"And a thousand love-sick tunes/ Won't wash away the wounds ..."*
 - *"But I'll tell you in earnest I'm a dangerous man."*
 - *"Shotgun blast hit his chest, left nothing inside./ Come down Red Molly to his dying bedside."*
 - *"She spat her thrash metal lyrics right into my mind."*
 - *"They wrap around you and the cold knives cut and stab./ I can't live my life as someone else's shish-kebab."*
 - *"It's a cruel wind, screams and moans."*
 - *"Too many good men blown away by the mystery wind."*

- *"You had that six-pack in a stranglehold."*
- *"Wounds that can't be mended."*
- *"She got a zombie army to serve her well,/ She got a thousand bloodhounds from the gates of hell,/ She got a hundred black horses with sulphur and coal on their breath,/ And she rides the unbelievers down."*
- *"And maybe you'll be there when He gives out the wings."*
- "Written by a doctor with a German name" – the doctor reappears, of course, behind grey walls and is parodied by the Rhine Maiden who gives remedial sex education to struggling poets. Mother, too, gets in on the act by volunteering to lobotomise all the scholars.
- "Got you on the test-bed, test-bed, test-bed" – forms of restraint and confinement appear throughout the album:
 - *"They put me in jail for my deviant ways."*
 - *"Society been dragging on the tail of my coat."*
 - *"Tied her arms in the back,/ Trussed her up like a sack."*
 - *"Tied her down on the bed."*
 - *"I ask you to come home, you say you're tired of being indoors."*
 - *"And he pulled her on behind."*
 - *"They wrap around you and the cold knives cut and stab."*
 - *"Driving rain, close up tight -/ Don't leave a crack for the rain to get in."*
- *"You had that six-pack in a stranglehold."*
- *"Put another string of barbed wire in your little love nest."*
- *"But a drunk's only trying to get free of his body."*
- *"A man stakes his neighbour's cat to the barbecue and turns on the gas."*
- "So why don't you moan and sigh" – throughout the album, we hear, not the "rumor and sigh of unimagined seas" but howling winds, the cries of the distressed and the screams of the demented:
 - *"She's out of control -/ Crying out for help."*
 - *"There was a ringing in my ears like an SOS."*
 - *"Her siren's song seemed to call to me – O destiny!"*
 - *"It's a cruel wind, screams and moans."*
 - *"He can't hear the insults and whispers go by him."*
 - *"He screams at his demons alone in the darkness."*
- "When I touch you there, it's supposed to feel nice" – making love isn't half it's cracked up to be if we judge by the evidence contained in "I Feel So Good", "You Dream Too Much", "Why Must I Plead", "Backlash Love Affair", "Mother Knows Best" and "Psycho Street."
- "I've never been to heaven" – James Adie does go to heaven, as do a number of the inhabitants on Psycho Street. Mother dispatches friend and foe alike to the great beyond. The

drunk longs to “soar like an eagle high up there in heaven.”
Prayers are also made at critical junctures:

- “O Lord have pity on her.”
- “Mystery wind make a fool say Grace.”
- “God loves a drunk – for ever and ever, Amen.”
- “Great One ... I have done my penance. I bring my offering. Grant me pest-free roses”

To say the least, Patrick Humphries’ dismissal of “Read About Love” as a “smutty memoir of an adolescent’s obsession with sex” is something of an oversimplification. The song in fact sets the tone for the whole album, not only in terms of theme and motif but also in the exhilaration of Thompson’s vocal delivery and the richness of the musical arrangement. These characteristics help explain the enduring popularity of Rumor & Sigh, helped for once by the initial push given by some half-decent promotion from Capitol.

Two sections of the song are worthy of particular praise. The first evinces Thompson’s perennial attention to telling detail:

*So I read about love – read it in a magazine.
Read about love – Cosmo and Seventeen.
Read about love – in the back of Hustler, Hustler, Hustler.
So I know what makes girls sigh
And I know what makes girls cry.
So don’t tell me I don’t understand
What makes a woman and what makes a man.*

“Girls sigh” at the female perspective provided on sexual love in Cosmopolitan and on romantic love in Seventeen. “Girls cry” at the male brutalisation of women typified by Hustler magazine and played out on the test-bed and in the next song. That same brutalisation is implied also by the conjunction in the first verse of a red-faced, drunken father, a downtrodden, red faced – “seemed so ashamed” - mother who “never looked up” and the sense of suppressed violence implicit in a cane. The same combination of drink, sex and violence was present in graphic detail in a much earlier song:

*Whisky helps to clear my head.
Bring it with you into bed.
If I beat you nearly dead,
I’ll regret it all in the morning.*

The second noteworthy passage in “Read About Love” demonstrates Thompson’s consummate control of rhythm and phrasing:

*Read about love --- now I’ve got you.
Read about love --- where I want you.
Read about love --- got you on the test-bed, test-bed, test-bed.
So why --- don’t you moan and sigh?
Why --- do you sit there and cry?
I do everything I’m supposed to do.
If something’s wrong, it must be you.
I know the ways of a woman,
I’ve read about love.*

The sheer physical exertion expressed in the first three lines conveys the thrust of the dominant male in the sex act. The pauses in the fourth and fifth lines reflect male frustration at female passivity, with a final push on “sigh” and “cry” to ram the point home. The acceleration in the next three lines can only be leading to one exultant, unfeeling climax and a seminal rush into the next song.

I Feel So Good

The ultimate Thompson sucker punch. We start on an instrumental high – “Can you not hear how all the stillness jars/ With music and the darkness throngs?” We feel sooo good. But by the end of the second line we’re confused. By the end of the first verse we’re confronting what Thompson called “a very twentieth-century moral dilemma.” By the end of the song, we don’t know what the hell to think. The reprobate protagonist is damned by his own words – jailbird, deviant, sinner, thief, and abuser of women. We can’t possibly empathise with him but we’re caught up in that joyous, sensual music and seduced by the sheer vitality of his devil-may-care assertion of independence and identity – maybe we could all use a suitcase full of fifty-pound notes and a half-naked woman with her tongue down our throat. The effect is quite deliberate, as Thompson emphasised in his programme notes: “I was originally going to call this song ‘The Lost Sheep Returns To The Fold.’ It’s a very nihilistic song, intended to leave the listener with a moral dilemma. The central character is made out to be a hero, but

really he has no redeeming qualities and you have to decide whether the society that created him is perhaps worse than he is.” The reference to “redeeming qualities” is important in the context of the album. The comparison between the aspiring Dr Feelgood and James Adie is an inevitable one but James is redeemed, in this life at least, by his love for Red Molly and for his soulful Vincent Black Lightning. Thompson’s reference to the society that created the renegade is also crucial. He is “too young to vote” but if he were old enough who would he vote for – a politician who regards him as a “bump on the log of life,” who thinks that he “don’t know shit” and intends to treat him and his like accordingly? If he did follow Mother’s panacea and get a job, would he really be better off with “a dull little life, full of dull little things”?

I Misunderstood

From the crude in-your-face physicality of the first two tracks, we make a welcome diversion into a different world, one of caring, of tenderness and of encounters on an intellectual plane:

*She said, “Darling, I’m in love with your mind.
The way you care for me, it’s so kind.
Love to see you again, wish I had more time.”
She was laughing as she brushed my cheek –
“Why don’t you call me, angel, maybe next week.
Promise now, cross your heart and hope to die.”*

And it is all an illusion, based on the meaning of a word “unsaid and never named” – “Goodbye.” Thompson’s gloss was that “(t)he end of a relationship can be painful and can lead people to say things that they don’t really mean.” The equivocation of the female speaker in this song sits in stark contrast to the directness and explicitness of Red Molly: “That’s a fine motor bike./ A girl could feel special on any such like.” James in return did succeed in putting “shine in her eyes -/ Wire wheels and shimmering things,/ Wild nights when the whole world seemed to fly.” His final wild flight, of course, was with the angels.

Thompson’s comments emphasise that this was not an easy song to record: “Many of the tracks on the album were virtually recorded live and needed little work to finish them off but this song was the exception. It was probably the hardest track to record. We tried to create a certain deadness of sound to create the feel of the song and that included putting towels on the hi-hat cymbals.” It was well worth the effort of all concerned.

Grey Walls

The one deliberately grey interlude – in terms of language, if not in terms of music – on an album that is peppered with splashes of strong colour:

- “...his face turned red.”
- “I’m back on the street in a purple haze.”

- “I don’t mind the red wine.”
- “It’s a Vincent Black Lightning 1952.”
- “Red hair and black leather, my favourite colour scheme.”
- “She’s got a hundred black horses ...”

The grey walls, according to Humphries, are those of Colney Hatch Mental Hospital in Whetstone, which Thompson used to pass on the bus as a teenager. Richard was presumably heading out to “the streets again” to hear Jimi play “Purple Haze.” In his programme notes, Thompson generalised the song: “This is about mental institutions.” Whether or not he had a specific location in mind, the “big grey house down the lane” is a powerful image in the psychopathology of the album. On a political level, the asylum stands as a metaphor for Great Britain plc, a madhouse taken over by the head lunatic who, fittingly, was born outside its walls, “in a ditch.” On a societal level, it is a suburban semi-detached house, crammed with people who live monochrome existences, “dull little [lives], full of dull little things.” On a physical level, we are invited to compare the walls that enclose the patient with the constriction “in her head.” On a spiritual level, we are looking at an “uninhabited (wo)man”: in there, “somewhere there’s a soul.” And in this cosmic loony bin that echoes with mystery winds and with rumours and with sighs, where the precise location and significance – or even the existence – of the human soul is in doubt, we find the central compelling image of a mythical motor bike that has staked a firm claim in the hereafter – “They don’t have a soul like a Vincent ’52.”

On a general level, “Grey Walls” is littered with phrases that resonate throughout the album:

- “It’s in her head./ She’s never going to be right again” vs. “I’m back on the street in a purple haze” vs. “I’m in love with your mind” vs. “You dream too much and it’s going to end bad” vs. “a thousand love-sick tunes/ Won’t wash away the wounds from my mind” vs. “She spat her thrash metal lyrics right into my mind” vs. “Call me precious, I don’t mind” vs. “I’ll have them all lobotomised” vs. “His shouts and his curses are just hymns and praises/ To kick-start his mind” vs. “Psycho Street.”
- “I kissed my love goodbye” vs. “She was saying ‘Goodbye’” vs. “it’s going to end bad” vs. “Forever till the end of time” vs. “He gave her one last kiss and died” vs. “I can’t live my life” vs. “some morning without number and some highway without end” vs. “Will the pubs never close? Will the glass never drain?”
- “She’s out of control” vs. “I’m going to take someone apart tonight” vs. “Wild nights when the whole world seemed to fly” vs. “She fell on her food like a lioness” vs. “we were low as dogs and high as kites” vs. “And when we get back home, she lets me know she’s in command” vs. “Now you stagger, now you sway./ Why don’t you fall the other way” vs. “When I feel you close to me what can I do but fall” vs. “I see angels on Ariels in leather and chrome/ Swooping down from heaven” vs. “He wets in his pants and he falls off his stool.”

On the most specific level, certain phrases have enormously powerful individual associations:

- “They took her down the hall -/ She never looked back at all” links clearly with the title “Keep Your Distance” and with the final phrase in that song, “I’m sweeping out the footsteps where I strayed.”
- “She walks every minute that she can” echoes the chronological precision of the jail sentence passed on Dr Feelgood, “Two years, seven months and sixteen days.”
- Her face “looked so pale in the distance./ She stared out of her room/ Into the dying gloom” suggests MacLeish’s “(d)im radiance of stars that never shined.”

One final phrase stands out – “She don’t know who I am” almost invites us to complete the full declension:

- *She don’t know who I am*
- *She don’t know who she is*
- *I don’t know who she is*
- *I don’t know who I am*

And from there, we’re back to the first line and the fundamental question – who caused all of this misery? Answer: “I took my darling down, I took my darling down.” It’s not easy to like “Grey Walls” – it’s impossible not to admire it.

You Dream Too Much

Thompson's comments capture the hallucinatory quality of the song: "You can sometimes wake up out of a dream and find yourself going straight into another which you keep trying to get out of. This is a song with shifting perspective and from verse to verse you're left never being sure of what's actually real." With its emphasis on misapprehension and self-delusion, it is a companion piece to "I Misunderstood" – "You dream too much/ If you think I've a thing for you." The protean heroine, with "a chassis like an XJS,/ Skull necklace like a high priestess," is also soul sister to the Iron Maiden who will appear shortly and to other female characters in Thompson songs over the years who represent the Triple Goddess in her more dominant moods.

Why Must I Plead

The emotion in this song is unusually close to the surface and Thompson suggested that there might be some underlying personal significance: "It's very difficult to say anything about this other than it's a love song and one that I found really difficult to write." The possibility of an adulterous office liaison is captured beautifully, with a telling half pause at the key point in the line:

*You got a better deal and you took his invitation.
You've been sitting on his lap and taking his dic --- tation.*

The innuendo has been sharpened in concert in recent years by a change to the salacious "You've been licking his stamps and taking his dictation." Note the way that the trite phrase "low as dogs and high as kites" is picked up and extended in "God Loves A Drunk":

*O God loves a drunk, the lowest of men,
With the dogs in the street and the pigs in the pen.
But a drunk's only trying to get free of his body
And soar like an eagle high up there in heaven.*

The polarity between "down" and "up", between the earth-bound and the truly liberated, between human abasement and divine aspiration permeates the album and reaches its climax in the next track.

1952 Vincent Black Lightning

So from a silence I have made you songs.

Backlash Love Affair

Mother's sassy sister dissects the ditching boy.

From the benign and creative “rumor(s) and sigh(s) of unimagined seas” to something profoundly dark and dangerous. In Thompson’s words, “(t)he mystery wind blows the Unseen into everything in our lives. It blows in and out of creation, brings war, famine, pestilence and everything else. I suppose it’s a song of warning. There’s morality in all music.” In the Koran winds are typically presented as signs of God’s beneficence: “It is He who drives the winds as harbingers of His mercy.” [PK 25:48]. But the wind that “screams and moans” in Thompson’s song is clearly a sign of God’s wrath: “And among his signs are the ships which sail like mountains upon the ocean. If He will, He calms the wind, so that they lie motionless upon its bosom (surely there are signs in this for steadfast men who render thanks); or cause them to founder as a punishment for their misdeeds.” [PK 42:33]. The mystery wind is ultimately a test of faith: “Yet if We let loose on them a searing wind they would return to unbelief.” [PK 30:51]. It is in this context that we should interpret Thompson’s central question: “Are you strong enough/ To fight for the right when the time gets tough?” Based on events in Britain in the eighties, this was a valid question to pose. From the evidence presented in *Rumor & Sigh*, there appears little doubt as to the answer. The song also recalls a real-life mystery wind that raised rooftops and alarms in 1987. Around midnight on Thursday 15th October a hurricane built up across the English Channel and by dawn had created a broad band of dev-

astation from Dorset to the Humber Estuary. To many at the time, the answer seemed to be blowing in the wind.

Don’t Sit On My Jimmy Shands

If you’re totally bonkers you get seventy volts through the head. If you’re only slightly loopy, you get to “crank the handle.” If you’re totally off your rocker, you get taken down the hall in an asylum. If you’re just a wee bit eccentric, you get to lead the loony by the hand. Thompson’s finest hour as a comic writer – Sir Noel would have been proud. Richard is having a laugh at his own expense and at Bobby Dylan’s: “Jimmy Shand played Scottish dance music with his band in the fifties and sixties. I collect his 78’s especially on the Beltona label. The song is about a nerd at a party who wants to play Jimmy Shand records all night. I was probably reminded of a story about Bob Dylan at a party with a Robert Johnson LP. It was a throw away story but I had this vision of Dylan jealously guarding the record player to get every ounce out of the record.” It is rumoured that some people sigh over Richard Thompson records and pore over strange texts in a futile attempt to get inside his head. Call me precious, I don’t mind. Listen to this track if you want to know how good it feels.

Keep Your Distance

"Another song with moral undertones. It's about skating on the thin ice of morality and falling through to wish you hadn't!" Richard's gloss ties this great song into one of the main strands on the album: "It's a desperate game we play,/ Throw our souls, our lives away." But "Keep Your Distance" also comprises a serious dialogue between writer and Muse. We're in the territory of "Calvary Cross" – "Did a black cat cross your path" vs., "If I cross your path again." We're back on the high wire: "When I feel you next to me, what can I do but fall?" We're again being told that "she demands either whole-time service or none at all": "With us it must be all or none at all." Richard "played and [he] got stung."

Mother Knows Best

Thompson's programme notes report that Margaret Thatcher resigned on the day this song was recorded in November 1990, so he can't quite claim that the pen is mightier than the sword. The rant speaks for itself but there is some nice exaggeration of the Thatcher legend. The grocer's shop in Grantham becomes a ditch and the famous hair is back-combed "till she looks like a witch." On second thoughts, the latter is probably quite close to the truth. The song captures to perfection her pieties and platitudinous homilies concerning the road to success in a world where society is dead. John F Kennedy once famously remarked on Churchill's oratory that

he had mobilised the English Language and sent it into battle against the Third Reich. Thatcher did the same but her enemy was the British people. The individual response could only be to seek escape through "one more pint bottle" or to join battle on Psycho Street.

God Loves A Drunk

Thompson gave a superficial interpretation of the song, saying that it was intended as a "swipe at Mormons and Seventh Day Adventists, those people with the polyester suits, those people who are very clean and neat and clean-shaven, which [they think] means they're right with God." [PH 277]. Clearly the song has to be seen also in the context of the political, spiritual and personal themes in the album. Patrick Humphries makes a telling connection to the much earlier "The World Is A Wonderful Place", which was recorded by Richard and Linda in 1973 and appeared as a "mystery" track on the 1993 Thompson tribute album of the same name:

*Envy the bodies asleep on the floor,
Dreaming some comfortable dream.
Envy the drunk as he falls through the door,
For the world is drunk, I see.
You live and you die, there's no reason why –
The world is a wonderful place!
The poor live in pain; they're sick and insane –
The world is a wonderful place!*

*How does it feel to be nothing?
How does it feel to be small?
Pull hard on that wine, it's the end of the line –
The world is a wonderful place!*

“God Loves A Drunk”, it should be emphasised, is a much finer song – one of the great Thompson creations and interpretations. For one thing, it benefits immeasurably from being placed in the context of an album which brings to life the drunkenness, pain, sickness and insanity of a world on the brink. For another, it derives richness and complexity from the ambiguity of the narrative perspective. The three quatrains could well be “spoken” by the drunk himself: indeed, many of the sneering dismissals of the suburbanite worms make most sense coming from his mouth. The other voice in the song is that of an omniscient observer – “Thompson” – whose sympathy for the drunk is matched only by his faith in divine mercy. And finally, “God Loves A Drunk” is simply a great piece of writing. The page from Thompson’s lyric notebook reproduced in the 1992 tour programme gives a fascinating insight into his working methods and into the creative intelligence that translated a so-so draft into the finished article. Spot the difference:

*Will there be any pen pushers up there in heaven
Will there be any wage-slaves and taxmen around
Who never once dared to stand up and be different
Their dreams never managed to get off the ground*

*Will there be any pen pushers up there in heaven?
Does clerking and wage-slaving win you God's love?
I pity you worms with your semis and pensions
If you think that'll get you to the kingdom above.*

Psycho Street

Patrick Humphries regards “Psycho Street” as “largely unlistenable.” Certainly, it is “different” and would not have sounded out of place alongside some of the quirky experiments that found their way onto the FFKT albums. It’s worth observing that the same quirkiness places it alongside the handful of other songs in which Thompson has resorted to blank verse, notably “Calvary Cross” and “Shoot Out The Lights.” Thompson positioned the song as a soap opera parody: “This song is an anti-theme for ‘Neighbours’, the Australian soap opera, which purports to be gritty and realistic when obviously it isn’t. It’s mediated reality. The verse about a naked man getting on a train was, as far as I know, a true story about a man in New York who travelled on the subway to work each day with no clothes on – no-one said a word.” It hardly needs to be repeated that Psycho Street, a sleepy suburban enclave where all the residents are in a purple haze, is also the ultimate symbol of Thatcher’s Britain and an encapsulation of the mediated reality that is Rumor and Sigh. In this regard, I would like to indulge myself and focus briefly on the fourth verse:

A man pushes a lawnmower two hundred miles on his knees to the Tomb of the Unknown Gardener. “Great One,” he cries. “I have done my penance. I bring my offering. Grant me... Grant me ...Grant me pest-free roses.

One is struck immediately by the bathos of “pest-free roses” in the context of an album implicitly scented by the “fragrance of petals never strewn from trees.” One is also drawn to the lawnmower as a strong symbol of male potency, “held out throbbing and thrusting in front of the male at approximately groin level, demanding and securing entry to the world outside and changing that world.” The quotation comes from *The Grass Is Greener – Our Love Affair With The Lawn* by Tom Fort. Of all the oddball tomes I have been driven to peruse by my love of Thompson’s music, this book probably gave me greatest pleasure. I recommend it unequivocally. Fort somehow manages to relate the first cut of the year to religious ritual and to the music of the spheres:

Now, for the first time, we hear the Saturday music of the mower. As sound, it is horrible: loud, discordant, disconnected, structureless. But to those of the faith there is mysterious sweetness to it. Familiarity annihilates its brutishness, leaving its rhythms, its pauses, its cadences, its crescendos and diminuendos, to exercise their role as indispensable accompaniment to the ritual. [GIG 8]

And a later description ties the cutting of grass to some of the perverse motivations that are addressed in *Rumor & Sigh*:

Thus, by measurable degree, the task is performed. Somewhere deep inside our man, a need is answered. Were he to be questioned, he would mumble something about having to keep the place tidy. His machine has brought order to the lawn; he orders the machine. A psychologist might identify a different order of precedence among the elements of man, machine and herbage; wondering who or what was really in control, who was whose servant, who whose master; might search deeper still, into the possible symbolism of the stripes, recollections of marks inflicted or suffered in school canings, sublimations of flagellistic or masochistic urges. Our man’s need might be inadequacy, his desire for control an obsession, his adherence to ritual a mask for a pathetic deficiency of self-esteem. [GIG 11]

Old lawnmowers earn the same kind of respect as old Jimmy Shand records, if Fort’s report of the proceedings of the 250-strong “Old Lawnmower Club” is anything to go by. A mower and a stripy lawn were of course later emblazoned on the sleeve of *Mock Tudor*.

Talking to Ken Hunt, Thompson admitted that the “first couple” of verses of “Psycho Street” were written while he had *The Satanic Verses* in mind. One can see the obvious connections. From one point of view Rushdie had written a book in which he told Muslims that their Prophet’s wife was a whore

and then used as his defence the feeble excuse that “in my country, this is definitely not offensive.” I do wonder however if the connections extend further. The riots on the streets of “Brickhall” [Brixton] in Part VII of Rushdie’s novel are very reminiscent of what happens on Psycho Street, while Zeena’s exhortation to Saladin to wake up from the world of dreams and embrace reality is very close to “You Dream Too Much”:

You should really try and make an adult acquaintance with this place, this time. Try and embrace this city, as it is, not some childhood memory that makes you both nostalgic and sick. Draw it close ...Something is about to happen. It’s going to happen, and you don’t know what it is, and you can’t do a damned thing about it. Oh yes: it’s something bad. [SV 541]

The similarities may be accidental but it does go to demonstrate that, as I said earlier, great minds do occasionally think alike, particularly when they share a common antipathy for a mad woman with a mission who was wreaking havoc on a country they loved and a common commitment to an implacable Muse from whom they could not escape.

Rumor & Sigh stands as one of the creative peaks of Thompson’s long career. Exceptional music, exceptional lyrics, exceptional coherence, exceptional confidence. The only question that remains in my mind is prompted by Archibald MacLeish: “So from a silence I have made you songs.” Who is “you” in the context of Rumor & Sigh? A number of candidates spring to mind: God? Terpsichore? Nancy? Rushdie?

Thatcher? Capitol? We the punters? Some or all of the above? None of the above? Words unsaid and never named.

CHAPTER NINE

MOCK TUDOR

The run up to the millennium saw Thompson slowing the pace of work and increasingly in introspective mood. Post Rumor & Sigh, his three mainstream releases – Mirror Blue (1994), You? Me? Us? (1996), and Mock Tudor (1999) – all display a growing preoccupation with the complex and tortured relationships between muse, writer, performer and audience. Thompson entered the 21st century on the back of his finest album to date and, in “Hope You Like The New Me”, with a renewed assertion of integrity and identity. His wider credibility and reputation was strengthened by the release of three tribute albums and a magnificent career retrospective, Watching The Dark. A flexible arrangement with Capitol permitted the release of three live albums, which only served to emphasise the emergence of Richard Thompson as a performer of unique ability. On the fringes, a laudable collaboration with Danny Thompson, Industry, appeared in 1997.

MIRROR BLUE

1. For The Sake Of Mary
2. I Can't Wake Up To Save My Life
3. MGB-GT
4. The Way That It Shows
5. Easy There, Steady Now
6. King Of Bohemia
7. Shane And Dixie
8. Mingus Eyes
9. I Ride In Your Slipstream
10. Beeswing
11. Fast Food
12. Mascara Tears
13. Taking My Business Elsewhere

All songs written by Richard Thompson. Produced by Mitchell Froom.

Players – Richard Thompson with Pete Thomas (drums, percussion), Jerry Scheff (bass, double bass), Danny Thompson (double bass on [5]), Mitchell Froom (keyboards), Alistair Anderson (concer-

tina, Northumbrian pipes), Tom McConville (fiddle), Martin Dunn (flute), Phil Pickett (shawms), John Kirkpatrick (accordion, concertinas), Christine Collister and Michael Parker.

UK Release January 1994. Capitol CDEST 2207.

The unprecedented – for Richard Thompson – commercial success of *Rumor & Sigh* did not spur Capitol to release an early follow-up. There was a gap of over two-and-a-half years between the release of *Rumor & Sigh* in May 1991 and that of *Mirror Blue* in January 1994. The lull in activity in 1992 was probably due in part to the birth of Nancy and Richard's first child – a son, Jack – and to the death in September of John Thompson. Richard's own response to the death of his father would appear in the form of "Burns' Supper" on *You? Me? Us?* The *Mirror Blue* sessions were recorded in January 1993 and the subsequent delay in releasing the album reflected changes at the top of Capitol Records, where long time Thompson supporter Hale Milgrim was replaced by Gary Gersh. As so often, record company politics and lack of real corporate commitment impeded effective development of Thompson's career. The mini-peak represented by *Rumor & Sigh* was really the second sitting for the Last Supper in terms of gaining wider recognition of Thompson's work. Thereafter, he was confined to the "Miscellaneous – Genius" shelves.

The period 1992 to 1994 did however feature a number of releases that at least helped to confirm Thompson's position as a writer and performer of rare distinction, who was therefore deserving of unusual forms of recognition. Dave Burland's

tribute album, *His Master's Choice*, appeared in 1992. Burland's laid-back, folksy treatment succeeds in draining the vitality and much of the layered meaning from a collection of superlative songs. "Dimming Of The Day" becomes a lullaby; "Crazy Man Michael" gets the Val Doonican treatment; "I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight" is stripped of any sense of danger. Thompson's guest appearance on guitar on a number of tracks does little to lift the spirits and to shift the album from the "loving tribute" to the "imaginative interpretations" category. The same could not be said of *The World Is A Wonderful Place*, which was released in 1993. The House Band's "Pharaoh", Christine Collister's "How Will I Ever Be Simple Again", and Tom Robinson's "The End Of The Rainbow" all take real risks and liberties with some "difficult" songs and in so doing generate real excitement. Standout track for me however is Ivor Cutler's lugubrious and cynical recitation of "Wheely Down" which totally eclipses Thompson's own muddy and pedestrian version on *Henry*. In 1994 a third tribute appeared. *Beat The Retreat* is a collection of some of the great Thompson songs by a superstar cast, including long time fans REM, Bonnie Raitt and David Byrne. Patrick Humphries detects an element of "going through the motions" in a number of the performances and that is a valid criticism. The less stellar participants on *The World Is A Wonderful Place* do demonstrate a consistent commitment to the songs and the music that is sadly lacking for much of *Beat The Retreat*. That said, Graham Parker's "Madness Of Love" and the Five Blind Boys of Alabama's take on "Dimming Of The Day" are both worth the price of admission on their own. The album also

features Martin Carthy's unique guitar playing on "Farewell, Farewell" and "The Great Valerio" though even here Maddy Prior's austere, overly reverential vocals do little to enhance either song.

More significant in terms of the burgeoning cultlet of Richard Thompson was the release in 1993 of *Watching The Dark*, a three-CD canter through Thompson's career from 1969 to 1992. Perhaps inevitably, the compilation's mixture of "greatest hits", "rare or unreleased", studio and live cuts ended up leaving no one totally satisfied. However, *Watching The Dark* does succeed in encompassing the diversity of Thompson's output and gives a fair reflection of his genius as a writer, a guitarist and a performer. That is in itself no mean feat. The chronologically disjointed running order, for which Joe Boyd claims credit, helps to emphasise the cohesiveness of Thompson's work in the long run, while the mix of studio and live cuts serves to demonstrate both the live feel of Thompson's studio work and the polish and refinement of his live performances. The overriding reaction however is surely one of awe: who else could put together 47 performances of such a consistently high standard and present 42 self-penned compositions of such quality and richness? The quality of the live tracks in particular is exceptional. The performances of "Can't Win", "Crash The Party", and "Calvary Cross" are electrifying while, in quieter mood, those of "Devonside", "Al Bowlly's In Heaven", and the peerless – and previously unreleased – "From Galway To Graceland" are amongst the most emotive live performances captured on a Richard Thompson record.

Given the upsurge in the release of Richard Thompson bootleg recordings in the early nineties, the inclusion of seventeen live tracks on *Watching The Dark* was timely. Thompson has made no secret of his total and understandable opposition to the bootlegging of his concerts, but absent a reasonable supply of official live material, what was a poor boy to do? Thompson sensibly went on the offensive and negotiated a deal with Capitol whereby he was henceforth allowed to release an official live recording in between studio releases. The first fruits of this welcome initiative were recorded at Crawley Jazz Festival in 1993. Thompson appeared there with Danny Thompson, who had made his first appearance at a Thompson recording session earlier that year. Typically, by the time the official release of *Live At Crawley* appeared in 1995, the identical bootleg had already been on sale for over a year. Those of us with a conscience bought the belated official duplicate anyway. A fitful flow of official live recordings has subsequently been maintained. *Two Little Words* (1996), *Celtschmerz* (1998), *Semi-Detached Mock Tudor* (2002), *More Guitar and 1000 Years Of Popular Music* (both 2003) have all helped to enrich our lives and living rooms and helped to stem the flow of bootleg material in recent years.

Mirror Blue proved to be the most controversial of Thompson's album releases and sadly the hoo-ha concerning Mitchell Froom's production of the record distracted attention from the quality of many of the songs and much of the playing and from the ambitious scope of the album. Thompson made it clear that he and Froom were consciously striving for a different sound and feel on *Mirror Blue*: "I thought it was a sort of

deconstruction of the rock rhythm section in some ways ... a sound that was really trying to strip away some clichés, like why have a snare drum, why the back beat? And just looking at the song and seeing what does the song need, what's going to work?" [PH 320]. Paul Zollo responded positively to the experiment:

When Thompson connects rock verses with ancient Celtic-sounding riffs – almost a signature of his work – Froom embraces the opportunity to flesh out these diversions with an acoustic smorgasbord of medieval sounding instruments: shawms, concertina, fiddles, flutes, pipes and more. As Thompson searches for fresh avenues of expression within a song, he and Froom share the urge to discover alternatives to routine methods of record production. [PZ 524]

Patrick Humphries was however unconvinced, feeling that "an overwhelming pall hung over the album. Its deconstruction seemed wilful, without any substance to replace what had been taken away. For all its avowed newness, there was a feeling that we had all been here before." [PH 322]. Danny Frost in NME pulled few punches:

Swamped by thundering, know-nothing drums and suffocating sonic shimmer, *Mirror Blue* is one of the most heavy-handedly produced records you'll ever hear. The songs themselves peek out all too rarely from beneath a swathing blanket of reverb, and Thompson's strengths – his

vulnerability, intimacy, the pin-sharp thrusts and parries of his guitar – are all very nearly negated.

The killer punch – or maybe the ultimate low blow – came however from erstwhile collaborator Clive Gregson, reviewing the album in *Mojo*. Having professed his undying love, respect and admiration for Richard – yada, yada, yada – Gregson opines that in recent years Thompson's recordings "seem to have become rather divorced from his live performances. This is a shame, as it is on stage that he really excels." The blame for the unwelcome separation is laid on a fall-off in the standard of Thompson's writing and on his producer:

Mitchell Froom tinkers away with odd sounds, processing and effects as if to distract the listener from the shortcomings of some of the material. Sadly, to these ears at least, it simply sounds as though he's trying to shore up the weaker songs with the modern prop of "production values"; that's never seemed necessary on a Richard Thompson record before. Some magazines will probably make this their album of the year: they get their records for free. If I'd paid for *Mirror Blue*, I'd have to confess (at the risk of upsetting a friend) to being rather disappointed. I'd rather have any Richard Thompson record than the combined output of U2, REM, and Dire Straits, but this time I'll wait for the tour; Richard's shows have always been special for me.

It's probably no coincidence that Thompson's next studio album would feature a stripped-down "Nude" side – no dan-

ger of Mitchell tinkering with that! It's maybe no coincidence either that one of the songs on the next album should find "Richard" brooding on the nature of friendship:

*I know you mean well – call me a sentimental fool! –
I know sometimes you've got to be kind to be cruel.
When you patted me on the back, that was quite some slap.
That kind of compliment could kill a chap!
So I'll drink your health – this emotion's given me a thirst –
But maybe I'll have my food-taster drink it first.*

In some ways, it's easier to argue the toss on the (over) production on *Mirror Blue* than it is to discuss the songs themselves. We've already seen how the title of a Thompson album can help shape our response to that album in quite striking and surprising ways. The phrase "across a crowded room" drives a chain of logic right through that album, only to have it bounced right back by the sucker punch in the final track. The phrase "rumor and sigh" sets up tremendous resonance within that album. Thompson clearly didn't want us to miss the significance of the phrase "mirror blue." The quotation on the album sleeve and Thompson's own comments in interviews point us firmly in the direction of Tennyson's *Lady Of Shalott*. From there, it's up to us. As Tennyson himself pointed out "every reader must find his own interpretation according to his ability, and according to his sympathy with the poet." My ability is questionable but in Richard Thompson's case, my sympathy with the poet is unsurpassable.

The poetic and dramatic works of Alfred Lord Tennyson both spanned and embodied the Victorian period in Britain. His first collection of lyric poems was published in 1830, seven years before Victoria ascended the throne. His death in 1892 preceded his monarch's by only nine years. Tennyson was the first poet to become a popular public figure and many admirers made the pilgrimage to his home on the Isle of Wight in hopes of catching sight of the great man. In some ways he was the Elvis Presley of Victorian Britain and, fittingly, his readings of his own poems were recorded on the phonograph by Thomas Edison. A. N. Wilson in his kaleidoscopic and fascinating study, *The Victorians*, emphasises the extent to which Tennyson had his finger on the pulse of the Victorian era:

The notion that this generation was different, that its achievements, its metaphysical self-understanding, marked it out from anything which had gone before, can be attributed to the change in economic circumstances brought about by the Industrial Revolution, to the sheer force of the market economy, driving men and women into cities, wrecking some lives and improving more; dazzling them with the range of its technological changes ... More than any poet before or since, Tennyson openly exposed himself to the mood of his age, mopping up its angsts and its excitements and triumphs, and transforming them into haunting lyric forms; caught up by the peculiar disturbances to be found "In the steamship, in the railway, in the thoughts that shake mankind." [ANW 98/9]

Wilson's emphasis on the angst that characterises the era and Tennyson's work is entirely appropriate. Modern criticism has stressed Tennyson's questioning of the values of Victorian Britain in terms of religious belief, material progress and gender and sexuality. But the world in which he lived was itself experiencing a period of profound self-questioning. The Victorian period was characterised by massive compressed changes as the Industrial Revolution, scientific discoveries, progressive revelations in terms of the Theory of Evolution and technological advances - notably in the fields of transportation and communications - all resulted in an undermining of values, previously held to be absolute, in the spheres of religion, morality, politics and society. The Victorian zeitgeist is a prevalent sense of doubt and transitoriness, a disconcerting feeling, in the words of Thomas Arnold, of "wandering between two worlds, one dead/ The other powerless to be born." Tennyson's response, in common with that of a number of other major 19th century writers and painters, was to give meaning to the present by drawing on the past. He drew parallels from Classical Mythology and, notably, from medieval legend. His magnum opus, *Idylls Of The King*, attempts to provide reassurance and to stimulate action in a Victorian world riven by doubt with reference to a past Arthurian social order that is progressively diseased by corruption and lack of faith. In all of this one can perhaps sense what so attracted Thompson to Tennyson's work. Just as Tennyson held up a mirror to Camelot to cast light on nineteenth century Britain, so too Thompson is holding up a mirror to the Victorian age

in order to cast light on the state of Britain as the millennium approaches.

Idylls Of The King presented an epic vision of British imperial growth and decline, a theme that Thompson had explored, *inter alia*, in the *Amnesia* album. In *Mirror Blue* we are presented with two striking visual images of British imperial power, at its zenith in the late nineteenth and at its nadir in the late twentieth centuries. One of the strongest advocates of British imperial might and right in the late Victorian period was Cecil Rhodes: "we are the finest race in the world and the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race." [ANW 603]. Rhodes famously drew his hand over a map of the African continent and pronounced: "That is my dream - all (British) red." I believe that this is one of the contexts in which we can visualise and interpret the striking image contained in "Easy There, Steady Now"; "Nosebleed down the bathroom wall/ Leaves a pool down in the stall." At the time that Rhodes and his peers were brutally colonising Africa, Britain was the dominant political and cultural influence on the planet. One hundred years later, another colonial power occupied an

even stronger position of world dominance: in the 1990s it was, in Thompson's words, "Fine to dine at the Golden Arches."

In general terms, Tennyson's poetry and the Victorian age that for many he epitomised therefore provide a conceptual and contextual framework within which Thompson explores themes and preoccupations that had been apparent in his work from the mid eighties onwards. But *The Lady Of Shalott*

provides specific hooks on which the songs on *Mirror Blue* are hung. Tennyson's tale of the lady is firmly entrenched in the British psyche. While notable phrases from other Tennyson works have entered the common language – “’tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all” perhaps has particular resonance for many of Richard Thompson's characters – *The Lady Of Shalott* remains one of the nation's best known and best loved poems. That popularity derives partly from the accessibility of the poem but it also reflects its amenability to a wide variety of interpretations. It has been deconstructed from a host of standpoints and the polarity at its heart has variously been portrayed as Art vs. Life; Life vs. Death; desire for autonomy vs. desire for social commitment; the private sphere of the Female vs. the public sphere of the Male; aesthetic detachment vs. social responsibility and so on and so on. Two aspects of the story of the lady and Sir Lancelot are however of particular relevance to *Mirror Blue* and to Thompson's work in general: the nature of the artistic vocation and the nature of identity and the playing of roles in human relations.

Tennyson's heroine is an artist, a weaver of dreams, and one whose endeavours carry a heavy obligation:

*There she weaves by night and day
A magic web with colours gay.
She has heard a whisper say,
A curse is on her if she stay
To look down to Camelot.
She knows not what the curse may be,*

*And so she weaveth steadily,
And little other care hath she,
The Lady of Shalott.*

The sense of commitment and dedication to her craft – “night and day” and “little other care” – is similar to the view of the artistic vocation contained in Thompson songs such as “Walking On A Wire”: “your grindstone's wearing me ... don't use me endlessly.” Similar too is the notion that possession of artistic inspiration carries with it a curse: “Everything you do, everything you do, you do for me.” In the lady's case, the curse contains a heavy ambiguity as a result of the dual meaning of the verb “to stay.” The lady is cursed if she remains in her tower but also if she ceases her weaving. Damned if she does, damned if she doesn't. One of Thompson's heroines faces a similar dilemma, which is couched in very similar terms, on *Mirror Blue*: “As long as there's no price on love I'll stay.” Another key characteristic of the lady's art is that it is based on a reflection of reality and not on a direct experience of that reality:

*And moving thro' a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear ...
And sometimes thro' the mirror blue
The knights come riding two and two:
She hath no loyal knight and true,
The Lady of Shalott.*

Here, too, there are echoes of Thompson's portrayal of the role of the artist. The lady's lofty detachment – literally embowered behind the “grey walls” of her tower – recalls Valerio's. Her fixation on the images in her mirror also recalls Valerio's gaze, which is “steady on the target.” Her sacrifice – “no loyal knight and true” – recalls Valerio's literal physical isolation and that of the speaker in “Walking On A Wire”: “too many nights alone and no one else.” Once the lady is enticed by an image of Sir Lancelot and literally turns her back on her art in order to confront reality, the spell is broken:

*She left the web, she left the loom,
She made three paces thro' the room ...
She look'd down to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack'd from side to side;
“The curse is come upon me!” cried
The Lady of Shalott.*

Of particular interest here is the reference to the three paces taken by the lady as she forsakes her vocation and moves to the window to look down on Camelot. This recalls St. Peter's thrice denial of Christ and places the lady's action in a religious context. She is forsaking a sacred vocation: she too in a sense was under the Calvary Cross.

The character and behaviour of both the lady and Sir Lancelot have specific relevance to the songs that comprise Mirror Blue. Tennyson's hero and heroine are both in a sense acting out roles, as are the majority of the characters who ap-

pear on Thompson's album. Lancelot's appearance in Tennyson's poem is described in graphic detail in four stanzas that contain dazzling images of brightness, vitality and noise. His physical appearance and the reflection of that appearance in the river are captured in the lady's mirror:

*From the bank and from the river
He flash'd into the crystal mirror.
“Tirra lirra,” by the river
Sang Sir Lancelot.*

His ordained role – the image he is supposed to live up to – is enshrined in the emblem on his shield:

*A red-cross knight for ever kneel'd
To a lady in his shield,
That sparkled on the yellow field,
Beside remote Shalott.*

His shield is itself a sparkling mirror that reflects the image of the conventional “reality” of courtly love. But the gap between the ideal to which Lancelot aspires and the underlying reality is implied in his song. “Tirra lirra” is part of the chorus of Autolycus's song in *The Winter's Tale*. In the song, he ponders the delights of “tumbling in the hay” with prostitutes:

*The lark, that tirra-lirra chants,
With heigh! with heigh! the thrush and the jay,*

*Are summer chants for me and my aunts,
While we lie tumbling in the hay. [The Winter's Tale, IV.iii]*

As Herbert Tucker has suggested, we should perhaps view Lancelot as “a man of mirrors, a signifier as hollow as the song he sings.”

Tennyson's lady, too, is a singer and a performer. Early in the poem, the reapers hear her song “that echoes cheerly/ From the river winding clearly.” Once the curse has fallen on her, she sets about stage managing her last performance and playing out a role that she has scripted for herself:

*Down she came and found a boat
Beneath a willow left afloat,
And round about the prow she wrote
The Lady of Shalott.*

*And down the river's dim expanse –
Like some bold seer in a trance,
Seeing all his own mischance –
With a glassy countenance
Did she look to Camelot.
And at the closing of the day
She loosed the chain and down she lay;
The broad stream bore her far away,
The Lady of Shalott.*

*Lying robed in snowy white
That loosely flew to left and right –*

*The leaves upon her falling light –
Thro' the noises of the night
She floated down to Camelot:
And as the boat-head wound along
The willowy hills and fields among,
They heard her singing her last song,
The Lady of Shalott.*

The lady has herself become an artistic creation, a figment of her own imagination. This is made clear by the reference to the robe that “flew” as she “floated” down to Camelot, recalling the earlier phrase, “Out flew the web and floated wide.” Just as her own magic web had unravelled, so the lady's own image of herself is unravelling. In the first song on *Mirror Blue*, we find Mary, who has herself experienced “bad times [that] shook her about”, scripting a part and dressing an actor for the supporting role she wants him to play.

For The Sake Of Mary

Musically, the album gets off to a bad start. The “thundering, know-nothing drums” that Danny Frost so resented are at their most obtrusive, but that shouldn't detract from the quality of the writing. As so often on a Thompson album, the opening track sets up themes and motifs that ripple through the rest of the album. Mary's goal in life is “a pretty little place” and a bosom companion who can finance and adorn it. The speaker in the song is one in a succession of men who

have auditioned for the part: "She thinks I'm like the rest but I'm the best she's ever had." He is an erstwhile ship's cook and member of "the old rat pack" but Mary turns him around. His appearance, dress and behaviour all get a makeover:

*Straightened my teeth, bent my back ...
She bought me this silk suit, watch and chain.
She put the rhythm in my stride again.
She showed me the way to make her feel good ...*

The speaker is still struggling to come to terms with his part – "I say the right thing but my timing's bad" – but he is determined to persevere in his new role as hero: "For the sake of Mary, I keep the flame./ I don't want to be the villain again." For Mary's sake he gives up his life on the ocean wave: "I changed my drift./ Got a good job on the graveyard shift." Tellingly, she buys him a watch and chain.

In many ways, this tale of the prodigal's return is a dark inversion of the storyline in "Beeswing", where the protagonist's attempt to impose his own version of Mary's "pretty little place" on the "lost child" whom he has come to love is thrown back in his face:

*And I said that we might settle down, get a few acres dug –
Fire burning in the hearth and babies on the rug.
She said, "Oh man, you foolish man! It surely sounds like hell!
You might be Lord of half the world, you'll not own me as well!"*

The heroine in "Beeswing" refuses the protagonist's offer of "chains", refuses to junk the juice and ends up "sleeping rough, back on the Derby beat,/ White Horse in her hip pocket..."

In this testing of stereotypical masculine and feminine roles, Thompson is reflecting one of Tennyson's major preoccupations. At times in the latter's works we hear the voice of Victorian patriarchy. For example, the Prince's father in *The Princess* affirms in words very reminiscent of "Beeswing" the conventional gender ideology, which assigns "Man for the field and woman for the hearth." But in the lengthy monologue Maud, the heroine is associated not only with hearth and home but also with martial songs and a strong nationalist spirit. Significantly, the name Maud means war or battle. Conversely, the speaker in the poem sees himself as both sentimental lover and militant soldier. Throughout the poem, the language of passion, desire and life is fused with that of violence, aggression and death:

*She is coming, my own, my sweet;
Were it ever so airy a tread,
My heart would hear her and beat,
Were it earth in an earthy bed;
My dust would hear her and beat,
Had I lain for a century dead;
Would start and tremble under her feet,
And blossom in purple and red.*

A similar fusion sets the tone for the next song on *Mirror Blue*.

"Can't Wake Up" is one of those typical upbeat Thompson songs that touch lightly on death, depravity and all manner of mayhem. As such, it is a companion piece to, say, "Backlash Love Affair" or "You Dream Too Much" and on one level treats similarly with the tortured relationship between poet and vengeful muse. The specific context comes however from Tennyson's *Maud*. The poem is a long interior monologue – it has been termed a "psychic monodrama" – that tells of the speaker's changing fortunes in his relationship with the eponymous heroine. As a result of a family feud, he kills Maud's brother and flees to France. He is confined for a time in a madhouse, an experience that he compares in graphic detail to being buried alive. On his release, he is overcome by patriotic fervour and enlists to serve in the Crimea. A brief synopsis does nothing to suggest the variety and potency of Tennyson's lyrics. The scene set in the French asylum in particular – "Dead Long Dead", Part II, v – contains a terrifying inverted image of Maud, last seen in the romantic setting of a country garden at dawn:

*... she is standing here at my head;
Not beautiful now, not even kind ...
She is not of us, as I divine;
She comes from another stiller world of the dead ...
But I know where a garden grows,
Fairer than aught in the world beside,
And made up of the lily and the rose ...*

*And I almost fear they are not roses, but blood;
For the keeper was one, so full of pride,
He linkt a dead man there to a spectral bride.*

Thompson's depiction of the "spectral bride" goes somewhat further than typical Victorian tastes would have accepted, though Mary Shelley or Bram Stoker would have appreciated this:

*Then the lightning streaks across the room.
You smell like something fresh from the tomb.
You squeeze too hard, you insist on kissing
When it seems like half your face is missing
And your hair's turned into reptiles hissing.*

But Thompson is clearly following Tennyson's script in terms of the speaker's confinement – "my feet won't move when I run the other way" – and the crime that placed him there:

*In my nightmare, you forgive me –
The cruellest gift you could ever give me.
You say that you understand me now,
But your eyes say, brother, I'll get you somehow.*

Thompson's protagonist returns home and draws consolation from the Scriptures: "What ye reap, so shall ye sow." Tennyson's speaker, too, returns, if not to Dad, then to Queen and

country and a commitment to “embrace the purpose of God, and the doom assigned.”

MGB-GT

“MGB-GT” is one of the songs on *Mirror Blue* that suffer from a surfeit of packing-case percussion and “sonic shimmer.” By contrast, the crisp live band version on *Two Little Words*, sympathetically embellished with Zorn clarinet and Mattacks percussion, is an absolute treat. “MGB-GT” is also one of the two “weird” songs on *Mirror Blue* – the other being “Fast Food” – that leave you convinced that Thompson must be making a point, even if it’s not entirely clear what. One lead-in to both songs is provided by our old friend Richard Barber in *Jihad vs McWorld*. Barber highlights the cultural diversity that characterised the good old days:

In the world before *McWorld*, the Swedes drove, ate, and consumed Swedish; the English drove, ate, and consumed English, and the rest of the world’s inhabitants either mirrored their colonial masters or developed domestic consumption economies around native products and native cultures. [JvM 52]

From this perspective, “MGB-GT” is a song that yearns for the time when the English “drove English”; “Fast Food” is a song that bewails the fact that, colonial masters no more, we nowadays “eat American.” But of course, nothing’s ever

that simple with Richard Thompson. In “MGB-GT”, in the course of celebrating a British icon, he is also debunking an American myth. His introduction to the performance of the song at Crawley makes the point:

When I was growing up, there was a lot of car songs coming in from America – you know, Chuck Berry and Jan & Dean and all that sort of stuff. And it was really hard to understand, ‘cos it was all about bits – you know, bits of metal. These all have names and unless you’ve actually taken a car to pieces, it doesn’t mean very much. But you stick it to a jolly rollicking tune and it sounds alright. So this is what we’ve done – but we’ve done the reverse. This is our revenge on American music. This is an English car song. And you won’t understand any of this either – unless you’ve restored an MG. It’s called “MGB-GT” ... Buy British! Doing our bit for the economy! Queen’s Award to Industry! To make it even more catchy, we’ve coupled these remarkable lyrics to an unwieldy little 15th century dance tune ... We did another song a couple of years ago about a motor cycle, and it didn’t sell many. Disappointing sales – ‘cos they only made 27 of that particular model. Now the MG, they made quarter of a million, so we’re looking for a comparative boost.

The reference to “1952 Vincent Black Lightning” is entirely appropriate, and there are echoes of the earlier song in “MGB-GT.” Both vehicles inspire a response in their owners more appropriate to a mistress than a machine. Both are anchored

in very English locations – Boxhill and the Old Hog’s Back. Other bikes don’t have “a soul like a Vincent 52”; other cars “don’t have the same attraction” as an MGB. But there is also a fundamental difference between the “fabulous beast” beloved of James Adie and the mere “runner” depicted in “MGB-GT.” If my memory serves me well, the MGB wasn’t that great a car. The one I owned “might go far” but you could never be sure. You might have fitted “two in the back” but only if they were severely vertically challenged. You might have touched “one hundred and ten” but only with an E-type up your exhaust pipe. And “in case of the weather” you could attach the hard top but it would take forever.

The protagonist in Thompson’s song is viewing the MGB through the mirror blue of nostalgia and in stripping her right down and building her up again, he is in a sense recreating the car in line both with his own self-image and with his perception of what the car should be. In Tennyson’s *Lady Of Shalott* we have a heroine who weaves for her own delight a magic web, based on “shadows of the world” that appear in her mirror. In Thompson’s song we have a “man with a retro style” viewing himself in the rear-view mirror of a mediocre motorcar. Lest the analogy between *The Lady of Shalott* and “MGB-GT” seems too far-fetched, note the way in which Thompson invites the comparison. The knights riding “two and two” reflected in the lady’s mirror surely relate to the “two in the front and two in the back” of the MGB. And Thompson’s song, as a song, mirrors the protagonist’s reconstruction of the car: the excruciating near-rhymes – “hacksaw” and “axle”; “back

some” and “attraction” – the disjointed structure and the percussive implosion at the end all give the game away.

For the Victorians, there was a fundamental link between technological progress and military and economic might. The relationship between technology and the God-given right to rule an empire was expressed in its most bizarre form in the words of an old ship’s engineer in Kipling’s “McAndrew’s Hymn”:

*From coupler-flange to spindle-guide I see Thy hand O God –
Predestination in the stride o’ yon connectin’ rod.*

But a “65 with an overdrive” not only “looks like a dream”, it is a dream. No wonder that “when I drive through town, all the girls all smile.”

The Way That It Shows

Musically, this is one of the more satisfying songs on the album and Thompson, for once, really stretches himself on lead guitar. As Dave Sinclair observed, “on the increasingly agitated climax ... the notes rain down like the tears of a mournful god.” Paul Zollo praised the song’s “aching melody” and observed that, unusually, the musical tension is in the chorus rather than the verse. Thompson responded in terms that validate the contention that for him the musical aspects of his craft are largely instinctual [my italics]:

I wasn't really conscious of that. I know it changes tempo and it holds tension. But I wasn't really aware of the mechanics of it. Unless I think about it. The chords in the chorus cycle. And the way it cycles, it doesn't ever really resolve. It's the kind of chord cycle where, in a sense, you can keep building and you can keep solos rising. And the fact that there's a key change also helps to keep the tension. [PZ 532]

On a less technical level, Patrick Humphries is dismissive of the song, regarding it as "a late night stroll down the familiar hallways of a seedy, downtown motel." But in reality, it's far more than that, far more than a variation on the theme of "Turning Of The Tide." The context for "The Way That It Shows" is surely suggested in the couplet:

*There's a chink in your armour, a crack in your defences,
When your iron will gives way to your senses.*

This clearly links the song to The Lady of Shalott. When Tennyson's heroine gave way to her senses and turned to view Sir Lancelot in the flesh, her defence against the world – her mirror – "crack'd from side to side." On a more general level "The Way That It Shows" is a further example of characters on the album who are playing out assumed roles – in this case Casanova and courtesan. The precise location of the role-playing – "a backstage sofa" – is chosen quite deliberately by Thompson. Humphries is however quite right to emphasise

the "seedy" nature of the song. The tackiness and sleaziness of the encounter are beautifully evoked:

*There's glycerine in the tear, rouge in the blush,
Your artful stammer a little too rushed,
All passion to the eye and cold to the touch,
And then he'll guess – your mind has drifted in the kiss.*

Easy There, Steady Now

Interviewed by David Cavanagh in Mojo, Thompson suggested that "human minds don't vary that much from one person to another. I think everyone contains all the bits. You can be Mozart or you can be Jack the Ripper, the potential is all in there somewhere. But being human beings, we have morality and there are triggers to stop us doing bad things and lead us to do good things." In that sense, the theme of "Easy There" follows logically from the reference in the preceding song to "the sin ... the enemy within." The emphasis in "Easy There" however is less on creating an image than on suppressing the enemy within and thereby maintaining a front. Thompson's reference to Jack the Ripper was picked up by Humphries, who placed the song "back on the familiar stalk of the psycho let loose." [PH 323]. But the "stalk" in this case is quite specifically Whitechapel in the year 1888. In their study of the psychology of the criminal mind, The Serial Killers, Colin Wilson and Donald Seaman outline the facts of the matter:

The murders took place in the Whitechapel area of London between 31 August 1888 and 9 November 1888. The first victim, a prostitute named Mary Ann Nicholls, was found in the early hours of the morning with her throat cut; in the mortuary, it was discovered that she had also been disembowelled. The next victim, a prostitute named Annie Chapman, was found spreadeagled in the backyard of a slum dwelling, also disembowelled; the contents of her pockets had been laid around her in a curiously ritualistic manner ... The two murders produced nationwide shock and outrage – nothing of the sort had been known before – and this was increased when, on the morning of 30 September 1888, the killer committed two murders in one night. A letter signed “Jack the Ripper”, boasting of the “double event”, was sent to the Central News Agency within hours of the murders. When the biggest police operation in London’s history failed to catch the murderer, there was unprecedented public hysteria. As if in response to the sensation he was causing, the Ripper’s next murder was the most gruesome so far. A twenty-four-year-old prostitute named Mary Jeanette Kelly was killed and disembowelled in her room; the mutilations that followed must have taken several hours. Then the murders ceased – the most widely held theories being that the killer had committed suicide or was confined in a mental home. From the point of view of the general public, the most alarming thing about the murders was that the killer seemed to be able to strike with impunity, and that the police seemed to be completely helpless.

This should remind us of another Thompson hero who, on Mock Tudor, is “Walking The Long Miles Home” having “lost” a friend:

*So I'm walking the long miles home
And I don't mind losing you.
And there's nobody out but a cop on the beat.
He's snoring so loud that he don't hear my feet.
I just laugh to myself and move off down the street.
Walking the long miles home.*

It is surely in the context of Jack the Ripper that we should relate and react – with a shudder – to one of Thompson’s most precise and chilling couplets: “Jack-knife with a precious load/ Spills its guts all over the road.” The Ripper murders also have modern relevance, of course. Peter Sutcliffe, the Yorkshire Ripper, murdered thirteen women in a five-year period from late 1975. In May 1981 he was sentenced to life imprisonment and subsequently removed to Broadmoor, a hospital for the criminally insane.

We should also note that “Easy There, Steady Now” marks the debut on record of the partnership of Richard and Danny Thompson, the ripest fruits of which would appear on the Industry album. Danny Thompson has the rare distinction of having played in a duo with two of the truly great British writers and guitarists – Richard Thompson and John Martyn – and one senses that Danny’s jazz roots have accounted for an extra dimension in Thompson’s playing in recent years.

In the Thompson canon, this is one of the greatest songs and one of the most “interesting” titles, as Thompson suggested with typical understatement to Paul Zollo:

It’s a little misleading and maybe a little obscure. I thought about that song and there wasn’t an obvious title from the lyric. And I thought, this song is never going to be Top Ten, it’s never going to be a hit. So I think I can indulge my own whim and call it whatever I damn well please. It’s named after a pub, actually. Near my house. Which is the setting for the song. But I realised it’s a little obscure. And I had people try to read strange things into the song. There was one journalist who thought the song was about Dylan. They thought that Dylan was the King of Bohemia. They had this whole theory which I thought was quite good. I was almost encouraged to take it up. [PZ 530]

In search of “strange things”, we might start by placing the song in the context of Victorian Britain. It would certainly be fitting if a song that refers directly to the most notorious criminal of the nineteenth century were followed by one that alludes to the century’s most famous detective. The idea is not that far fetched. The first appearance of Sherlock Holmes in the Strand Magazine was in Arthur Conan Doyle’s “A Scandal In Bohemia.” In the story the femme fatale, Irene Adler, attempts to blackmail the King of Bohemia, of whom she has a compromising photograph. Holmes thwarts her – only

just – but fails to recover the photograph. According to Dr. Watson, the moral victory was undoubtedly hers and she thereby earned Holmes’s undying respect:

And that was how a great scandal threatened to affect the kingdom of Bohemia, and how the best plans of Mr. Sherlock Holmes were beaten by a woman’s wit. He used to make merry over the cleverness of women, but I have not heard him do it of late. And when he speaks of Irene Adler, or when he refers to her photograph, it is always under the honourable title of the woman.

The actress Adler captivates not only the King of Bohemia, but also Holmes, who otherwise “loathed every form of society with his whole Bohemian soul.”

Before returning from the Planet Zog, we might also pause to reflect on another Bohemian Victorian, Walter Pater. According to A. N. Wilson, Pater’s works “were the beginnings of the modern. They helped a whole generation to lose their faith in Bentham and Mill and Utilitarianism and to embrace the notion that Imagination fashions the world. He saw religion as purely aesthetic, and aestheticism was his religion.” [ANW 554]. His most celebrated and influential work was *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), which Oscar Wilde described as “the very flower of decadence; the last trumpet should have sounded the moment it was written.” Perhaps the most famous passage in the book is Pater’s description of da Vinci’s *La Gioconda*. When Yeats compiled *The Oxford Book*

of Modern Verse in 1936, he began with a passage from Pater's prose description of the Mona Lisa, recast in blank verse:

*She is older than the rocks among which she sits:
Like the vampire,
She has been dead many times,
And learned the secrets of the grave.*

Echoes here, perhaps, of "something fresh from the tomb" and echoes, certainly, of the Mona Lisa in Thompson's second verse:

*Your eyes seem from a different face, they've seen that much, that
soon.
Your cheek too cold, too pale to shine, like an old and waning
moon.*

Pater's most celebrated and recalcitrant disciple – maybe a "borstal boy" coming home to "pater" – was another renowned Bohemian, Aubrey Beardsley, whose erotic drawings epitomised late Victorian decadence and established new paradigms for the visual arts. In the words of A. N. Wilson:

Beardsley's drawings do not merely illustrate, they define their age, as with his design for a prospectus of The Yellow Book, showing an expensively dressed, semi-oriental courtesan perusing a brightly lit bookstall late at night while within the shop the elderly pierrot gazes at her furiously, quizzically. Half the square is black; the whitened

spaces of books, shop window, lantern, seem shockingly bright. She is an emblem of new womanhood and erotic power ... It is hard to think of any British artist who had a more certain sense of composition. Every small square and oblong is an innovation, an experiment in how to arrange black and white shapes. The draughtsmanship is impeccable. And, as is the case with all great art, no one who has imbibed these drawings is quite the same person as before. [ANW 555]

It probably is fanciful, but since reading Wilson's passage, I can't shake a mental picture of the geometric precision of white bathroom tiles, violated by splotches of colour, of a harlot's red dress held up against naked white flesh:

*Nosebleed down the bathroom wall
Leaves a pool down in the stall.
I wonder where you are tonight –
Red dress, skin so white?*

Less "strange" and more directly relevant is a placing of "The King Of Bohemia" in the context of the "mirror blue" of Tennyson's Lady Of Shalott. The poem ends as the lady's boat – the stage for her grand finale – reaches Camelot:

*Who is this? And what is here?
And in the lighted palace near
Died the sound of royal cheer;
And they crossed themselves for fear,*

*All the knights at Camelot;
But Lancelot mused a little space;
He said, "She has a lovely face;
God in His mercy lend her grace,
The Lady of Shalott."*

Shades here, perhaps, of "a refugee from the seraphim, in [her] rich girl rags and all", about to "melt into the night, with Adieu, and rue the day."

But Thompson's song, at its most literal level, is a lullaby – "Let me rock you in my arms. I'll hold you safe and small" – and in terms of mood and impact, its nearest literary precursor seems to me to be Yeats' "A Prayer For My Daughter":

*I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour
And heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower,
And under the arches of the bridge, and scream
In the elms above the flooded stream;
Imagining in excited reverie
That the future years had come,
Dancing to a frenzied drum, Out of the murderous innocence of
the sea . .
It's certain that fine women eat
A crazy salad with their meat
Whereby the Horn of Plenty is undone.*

Shades here, surely, of "there is no rest for the ones God blessed,/ And He blessed you best of all." And the "you" in the case of "King Of Bohemia" is someone very close to home.

Remember Thompson's reference to a pub "Near my house. Which is the setting for the song." Remember, too, Linda's enigmatic second verse to "Dear Old Man Of Mine":

*Here's to a father oft times blessed.
Here's to the child that he loved best.
Does anybody care what happened to the rest?
Dear old man of mine.*

Two of "the rest", Teddy and Kamila Thompson, appear with Linda on this track but it is Thompson's eldest daughter, Muna – note the pun on "waning moon" – to whom the song is devoted. Muna told Patrick Humphries:

"King Of Bohemia", that was written for me, which I love, it's such a wonderful song. But he never says anything. I was at an interview with him, and they asked him "was that written about someone?" ... and he kind of looked at me ... He hates bringing any meaning to his songs. He's always said to me he wants people to come to their own conclusions about a song, if there's a picture story already there it can sometimes ruin it. [PH 149]

Muna also provides perhaps a telling paternal gloss on the moving line, "If tears unshed could heal your heart, if words unsaid could sway":

He's not openly affectionate, he's quite reserved in all areas ... We all knew that he loved us in his own way, as a kind

of quiet, unsaid thing. I don't think any of us doubted it, but we didn't see him very much. It was a long-distance relationship a lot of the time. He is fairly self-sufficient, definitely. He only lets people know as much as he wants them to know. I don't think ever, in my life, he's really ever lost control. I should think I've seen him cry once. He's the sort of person who can tell you off, or look at you, and you just shake. I remember being so fearful of him, because he's one of those people who commands authority and respect, without ever raising his voice. He's very self-contained. [PH 326]

So self-contained, indeed, that one of his most naked and eloquent expressions of emotion should be articulated by the enigmatic persona of the King of Bohemia.

Shane And Dixie

For once, the phrase “from the sublime to the ridiculous” appears entirely appropriate. “Shane And Dixie” is the worst song Thompson has ever released, a real stinker. He told Paul Zollo that he had another version of the song – “not so dark” – that he preferred, but thankfully this has yet to see the light of day. Shane and Dixie's desire to be “famous, like you read in the books” ties the song firmly to the theme of role-playing that runs throughout the album, and there are specific echoes of preceding songs. Shane is spread “all over the walls like paint”, recalling a nosebleed down the bathroom wall. Dixie

“turned her back on a life of crime” like the protagonist in the opening track who turns his back on “the old rat pack.” There is also a nice Victorian resonance in the allusion to the “News of the Screws.” The 1880s saw the mushrooming of what A. N. Wilson calls “the hydra of the new journalism, a monster machine whose twin-turbo was fuelled by sensationalism and moralism.” [ANW 463]. Wilson refers to a faux expose of child prostitution that appeared in the Pall Mall Gazette in July 1885, which “had all the hallmarks which this type of journalism has had ever since. That is, while professing to deplore what it describes, it offers the reader the pornographic thrill of reading all about it.” [ANW 474]. But none of this – and not even an ambitious rhyme scheme that nearly works most of the time – really redeems the song. It's like the old adage – no man is entirely worthless; he can always serve as a horrible example.

Mingus Eyes

Back to form and a more overt and satisfying treatment of the theme of adopting a pose. The stark, haiku-like simplicity of the lyric and the clarity and directness of the vocal delivery stand in sharp and effective contrast to the clangorous murk of the musical background. Unlike the preceding track, “Mingus Eyes” is mercifully cliché-free.

At one level, the voice of “the enemy within” but the image of the “TV Eye in the Sky” takes the song into another dimension. A. N. Wilson remarks on the rapid advances in photography made in the 1880s and the consequent sense of immediacy that the Victorian era assumes from that decade onwards in the eye of the modern beholder:

The very fact that we look at these photographic images at all and take them as emblems of reality, or imagine their reality to possess a new authenticity denied for example to the author of an Icelandic saga or to the canvas and brush of Sir Joshua Reynolds, is a symptom of how deeply we colude in the Victorian love-affair with science, the confused empiricism which supposes that the distinction between Appearance and Reality can be made by some organ independent of the human mind. The camera is then elevated into an arbiter. The belief that it can never lie becomes itself not merely an invitation to hoaxers but the source of a tremendous confusion about the very nature of truth.
[ANW 438]

In Thompson’s words, “Good road, bad road, just don’t mean a thing.”

PS. I remarked earlier on Thompson’s familiarity with Holman Hunt’s painting “The Awakening Conscience” that is reproduced on the sleeve of Loudon Wainwright’s album *More Love Songs*. The painting provoked a letter to *The Times* on 25th May 1854 from John Ruskin who argued that the hideous furniture in the painting was indicative of a moral destructiveness that had resulted from the unprecedented wealth creation stimulated by the industrial revolution: “it becomes tragical, if rightly read, that furniture so carefully painted, even to the last vein of the rose wood – is there nothing to learn from that terrible lustre of it, from its fatal newness; nothing there has the old thoughts of home upon it, or that is ever to become part of a home.” In the coming decades William Morris was to lead the Arts and Crafts Movement in a moral crusade against the factory-made ugliness of the typical nouveau riche Victorian home. One might view the statement of Thompson’s heroine that she is “not the factory kind” as an assertion not only of her own awakening conscience, but also that of an earlier age.

For Patrick Humphries, “Fast Food” is “a song as disposable as its subject matter.” He’s probably right, but the song does fulfil a significant purpose in the architecture of the album. There is of course an ironic counterpoint between the predi-

lection of the monied classes in Victorian Britain for eating and drinking on a lavish scale and the tawdry modern equivalent. The seemingly throwaway references to the minimum wage and to “Blood down your shirt [that’s] going to get you the sack” also carry historical weight. Britain’s first Workmen’s Compensation Act appeared in 1897 in the wake of the Albion Colliery disaster in which 251 men and boys were killed in a pit explosion. The cynical assertion that “I’d rather feed pigs than humanity” similarly has Victorian resonance. Darwin’s theory of evolution was outlined in *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. The suggestion that mankind, far from being the ultimate creation of a benevolent God, was just one more evolving component in world of total flux had a profound impact on the Victorian psyche. Most disturbing was the implication that evolution did not by any means necessarily guarantee progress. This was captured famously by Tennyson at the end of *Idylls of the King*, where Arthur laments as his realm “Reels back into the beast.” Thompson’s song, whilst casting a long glance in the rear view mirror has also proved strangely prophetic. On 19th September 2002, *The Guardian* carried under the banner headline “Turmoil underneath the arches” a lengthy article on the problems facing the McDonald Corporation. Against a background of falling sales the company was forced to conclude, “our marketing messages did not resonate as well with consumers as we had hoped.” Pond Drew speak for “we fucked up.” A consumer survey by industry specialists Sandelman & Associates placed McDonalds bottom of 77 chains in a range of categories from food quality to service and concluded: “The main problem is that,

generally, consumers don’t rate McDonald’s food very highly.” Changes were reportedly underway – including healthier, tastier menus and the introduction of waitress service to its diners – but analysts at Salomon Smith Barney were not impressed: “The approach McDonald’s is taking does not do enough to fix what customers complain about most: rude service, slow service, unprofessional employees and inaccurate service.” Thompson, for once, begins to sound like the epitome of balance and objectivity.

Mascara Tears

Companion piece to “The Way That It Shows” and “Easy There, Steady Now.” On this occasion, both protagonists in the relationship have a suppressed alter ego:

*There’s another man inside me trying to break us apart ...
There’s another girl inside you and she never got a break.*

The cruelty, the unkindness and the “hell and hoodoo” would find an extended and more effective voice on Thompson’s next studio album.

Taking My Business Elsewhere

Humphries feels the song is “insubstantial in the Richard Thompson scheme of things” and one couldn’t argue with that

assessment. That said, “Taking My Business Elsewhere” does succeed in pulling together some of the key strands that run through the album. The recognition of the role played by the absent paramour is accompanied by a maudlin piece of self-awareness on the part of the protagonist and indifference on the part of a bit player who won’t stick to the conventional script:

*It wasn't for me that spark in her eyes.
It wasn't for me that halo in her hair.
When she touched me, a lump rose in my throat
But she must act that way with any old soak.
And waiter, you don't seem to share in the joke –
So I'll be taking my business elsewhere.*

We’ve already heard Clive Gregson’s avowed intention to take his business elsewhere, at least until his next free back-stage pass arrives, but others were more charitably disposed to Mirror Blue. Paul Zollo says all the right things:

It’s an album that does everything albums should do: lyrically, it’s about love, romance, fire, desire, joy, disappointment, humour, memory, crime, marriage, divorce, birth, death and more. Musically it incorporates folk music – both American and Celtic – blues, rock, reggae, jazz and funk, and fuses them all with Thompson’s visceral singing and fluidly expressive guitar playing. [PZ 523]

He misses the key point, of course, that most of Thompson’s other albums “do” these things and many “do” them very much better. David Sinclair, similarly, uses the wrong example to support something like the right conclusion:

Still no evidence of the quality slipping as Thompson turns in another superlative batch of songs about poisoned relationships and untrustworthy paramours, leavened with humorous observations about convenience restaurants and other pressing affairs. He still has the vocal tone of an undertaker, a guitar sound as hard as harpoon steel and songs no less capable of piercing the heart ... The best singing, songwriting guitarist in England? You bet.

To state the obvious, this isn’t a superlative batch of songs by Thompson’s standards. For one thing, there is a real issue with the album’s production. Patrick Humphries was probably exaggerating to make a point when he said that at times the songs sound as if they are “struggling under a skip of discarded cutlery.” But one has only to listen to the live cuts that subsequently appeared on Thompson’s “official bootlegs” to recognise that Mirror Blue could have – should have – sounded very different. And then there is the quality of the songs themselves. One photograph on the album sleeve shows a trunk-load of miscellaneous possessions laid out on a blanket in front of a car parked on wasteland. This is an appropriate metaphor. This is in many ways a car boot sale of an album. And like many car boot sales, here you can find a bunch of useful stuff that represents good value, a few of bits of real tat

and, tucked away where no one will notice, two absolute gems of inestimable value.

The album sleeve is in some ways one of the most interesting aspects of *Mirror Blue* on a conceptual level. The front cover photograph comprises a cod statuette of “Richard Thompson” – courtesy of Mr. Mick of Hollywood, no less – which is positioned in front of a series of adjoining blue mirrors. Reflections of the statuette multiply so that the whole effect is prismatic and images of the statuette recede into the distance. Just as Tennyson’s lady had turned herself into an aesthetic image, so too Thompson on his album sleeve. In the middle of the photo sequence, the statuette stands in splendid, unrefracted isolation in front of a round blue mirror. In the penultimate photograph, the statuette is discarded in a box of junk. In the final photograph, broken pieces of the statuette are arranged on a cloth of gold, again like Tennyson’s lady, laid out and artfully arranged for her final journey to Camelot. But the pieces of the “Thompson” statuette lie under a bust of Elvis Presley: snow-white head on a jet-black plinth, so very Aubrey Beardsley. There is obviously some “message” about art and reality, about the ephemeral and the enduring. At Presley’s first recording session after completing his military service in March 1960, he recorded one classic track – “A Mess Of Blues” – and, as a portent of things to come, a lot of so-so material. The latter included the Wise/Weisman song “Fame And Fortune”:

*Fame and fortune,
How empty they can be.*

*But when I hold you in my arms
That is heaven to me ...
I know that I am nothing,
If you should go away,
But to know that you love me brings
Fame and fortune my way.*

Fame and love will never die. Maybe I was wrong about “Shane And Dixie.”

YOU? ME? US?

Voltage Enhanced

1. Razor Dance
2. She Steers By Lightning
3. Dark Hand Over My Heart
4. Hide It Away
5. Put It There Pal
6. Business On You
7. No's Not A Word
8. Am I Wasting My Love On You?
9. Bank Vault In Heaven
10. The Ghost Of You Walks

Nude

1. Baby Don't Know What To Do with Herself
2. She Cut Off Her Long Silken Hair
3. Hide It Away
4. Burns Supper
5. Train Don't Leave
6. Cold Kisses
7. Sam Jones
8. Razor Dance
9. Woods Of Darney

All songs written by Richard Thompson. Produced by Mitchell Froom and Tchad Blake.

Players – Richard Thompson with Simon Nicol (guitar), Jerry Scheff (electric bass), Jim Keltner (drums), Pete Thomas (drums), Mitchell Froom (keyboards), Danny Thompson (acoustic bass), Suzie Katayama (cello), Sid Page (violin), Tchad Blake (guitar [*]), Christine Collier and Teddy Thompson (backing vocals).

UK Release April 1996. Capitol CDEST 2282.



The definitive Thompson touring band hit the road in 1994 to promote *Mirror Blue*. The partnership on stage with Danny Thompson, Pete Zorn and Dave Mattacks would last into the next decade and would result in some of the most exciting live music of Thompson's career. The stripped down four-piece – seasoned performers and musical maestro's all – placed a much heavier burden on Thompson. He missed the opportunity for load sharing offered by earlier, larger touring ensembles but he seemed genuinely to relish the extra responsibility and the headroom. Sets became a mix of solo Thompson interludes, duets with Zorn and Danny Thompson and full band numbers. The variety and virtuosity were astonishing at times. If you had to pick one moment that symbolised the emergence in the mid-nineties of Richard Thompson as a performer of genius, it would be at the end of the version of "Beeswing" that appears on *Two Letter Words*. As the final notes of Zorn's whistle die away, there is silence in the auditorium, a stillness in which you could hear a bee's wing flutter:

*And in the lighted palace near,
Died the sound of royal cheer;
And they cross'd themselves for fear ...
Richard Thompson had crossed his final border.*

The other activity worthy of note in 1994 was Thompson's guest appearance on the Ashley Hutchings-inspired album *Twangin' & Traddin'*. The project allied fifties and early sixties classic rock'n'roll instrumentals to folk dance tunes. Hutch-

ings's sleevenote captures the spirit of the album and the motivation behind it:

This album is fondly dedicated to every group of fledgling musicians who ever played in a drafty church hall to a dozen disinterested teenagers who didn't appreciate how difficult it was to keep the back-up guitar pattern in "Pipeline" going when your wrist ached and your equipment was sub-standard and practise time after finishing homework was short and girls were such a distraction and ... It's also dedicated to any long-suffering mum who had to put up with a budding Sandy Nelson in the front room, to any long-suffering Dad who had to share his garage with the neighbourhood's version of the Tornados, to any long-suffering teacher who had to put up with the simulated drum breaks in "Wipe Out" tapped out on a classroom desk, and to any long-suffering sometime sweetheart who had to share her fella with three furry-faced boys with Hofners and one creep with a Vox Continental.

The album is generally unexceptional but the time spent revisiting his roots seems to have rubbed off on Thompson. His next album would be redolent with echoes of the fifties and sixties.

You? Me? Us? hit the streets in early 1996. For Thompson die-hards it was a real bonanza – nineteen tracks spread over two CDs - and was well worth the by-now-typical two-year wait. This time around, the seventeen songs - "Razor Dance" and "Hide It Away" appeared on both sides – genuinely merit-

ed the appellation “superlative batch”, even if no one track hit the ethereal heights of a “Beeswing” or “King Of Bohemia.” The elegant simplicities of, say, “Mingus Eyes” are typically replaced by long songs of metrical complexity and lyrical richness. Ironically, Thompson discovers a Tennysonian voice one album too late. The sound also changes. Tchad Blake took on the responsibility of co-production with Froom and the resulting sound was materially different to that on *Mirror Blue*. The full band “Voltage Enhanced” side is at times reminiscent of Neil Young at his grungy best, without ever degenerating into the metallic clangour that characterised and spoiled much of the earlier album. The predominantly acoustic “Nude” side is a masterpiece of understatement, a sombre tone poem on the dark side of life. Thematically, the album sees Thompson returning to what he does best. As the title implies, the album is superficially “about” relationships gone, or about to go, bad. As the question marks in the title imply, however, there is also a searching exploration of identity and the disparities between appearance and reality. At first hearing, only the dark and enigmatic “Bank Vault In Heaven” and “Sam Jones” stand out as distinctly “different” and open up new dimensions. But as always with the songs of Richard Thompson, the devil is in the detail.

Razor Dance

No ambiguities in the opening track, no “just a roll, just a roll.” “Razor Dance” is Thompson’s most in-your-face depiction of the battle of the sexes ever:

*After the death of a thousand kisses
Comes the catacomb of tongues.
Who can spit the meanest venom
From the poison of their lungs?
Cruellest dance is the Razor Dance ...*

This sets the tone for the album. Images of violence, madness, pain and death abound. Just assess the cumulative impact of only one line from every song that follows “Razor Dance” on the album:

- *She takes a knife to my seatbelt*
- *She primed a time-bomb in my heart*
- *But deep and wide is the hurt inside*
- *You shot me down with friendly fire*
- *Blood of Popes, Tyburn ropes from the Black Museum*
- *And the worship hurts to pieces*
- *You chewed my ear*
- *To insanity*
- *Blue murder on the dance floor*
- *She might wipe her tears on a rusty nail*
- *And her knife brightly shone*
- *One more Black and Tan on the barricade*

- *She pokes at my nose with the old South paw*
- *Tougher than me if it came to a fight*
- *Noble dukes and princes stripped of flesh and finery*
- *Sniper's bullet took his eyes and his breath away*

There is also a pervasive sense that all this mayhem is part of some macabre dance or ritual or ceremony:

- *Swear my allegiance nightly*
- *They're going to write you down in the Hall of Fame*
- *I've got all the magic I need./ I'm going to do the Business On You*
- *All my life is a ritual dance*
- *Going to shine down from Heaven/ And do my snake charm*
- *Blood wedding in the water*
- *She catches her breath and she falls to her knees*
- *Then she knelt like saint Joan*
- *I close my eyes, close my eyes*
- *How a little minute can cast its spell*
- *Roomful of skeletons a-dancing the quadrille*
- *Was he there as you stood in your grandmother's wedding dress*

Since its release, “Razor Dance” has remained a staple of Thompson solo acoustic sets. His versions have typically offered far more by way of guitar pyrotechnics than Tchad Blake’s pedestrian playing on the “Nude” version.

She Steers By Lightning

Spiky guitar and clashing cymbals and an “ah, ah” chorus like a dervish chant. The surface theme of the mad bird at the wheel recalls “Where The Wind Don’t Whine”:

*The wheels were moaning. We were hitting ninety-five.
The rain was pelting down. My engine was alive.
The roads were empty as the day turned into night.
At every street light, her face shone white.*

As in the earlier song, one senses an invocation of the muse: “She uses Milton as a road map.” A collection of “Voltage Enhanced” songs might be an appropriate metaphorical response to her exhortation to pick up the pace and take real risks:

*She says the volts are inviting ...
She takes a knife to my seat belt.
She says the brakes need mending.
She says my mood needs heightening.
She talks in couplets,
She steers by lightning.*

Immortality of a kind is in prospect – “I feel eternity biting” – and will soon be found in a celestial bank vault.

Dark Hand Over My Heart

First appearance on this album of two recurrent Thompsonian themes. The shadows cast by old flames – in this case Becky – darken several new relationships while the propensity of Thompson's characters to "hold back, hold back" and keep their distance rarely slackens. The "horseman riding" appropriately recalls Yeats's self-penned epitaph:

*Cast a cold eye
On life, on death –
Horseman pass by.*

Hide It Away

Delicate guitar noodling and a lightness of touch in terms of production stand in stark contrast to the heavy, murky outro to "Dark Hand." The "ghost" of a lost love "walks" again in a later track. The song is also an extended metaphor for artistic detachment, again couched in Yeatsian terms: "I keep the flame/ Go on my way/ Laugh at the game" and "I smile through the mask of my face."

Put It There Pal

A light guitar introduction and a deceptively familiar and "comfortable" opening line: "Old friend, it's been so long, and it's been so real." From there on in, the knife is inserted between the ribs with increasing pressure. The paper-thin platitudes of social intercourse are screwed up into tight balls and shoved back down the throat of the treacherous erstwhile chum:

*Put It There Pal, Put It There -
You deserve everything you got coming.
Put It There Pal, Put It There -
Call me up if you want to come slumming.
Some say, you're a rattlesnake in the grass,
But I say, the sun shines out of your arse.
So it's no hard feelings, live and let live.
With a gift like yours, you're born to give -
You're so full of love, it leaks out like a sieve.
So Put It There Pal
Put It There Pal, Put It There*

A two-minute closing guitar solo of increasing venom and intensity suggests that this song mattered to the "character" singing it. The whole song is a vicious enactment of a "Razor Dance", wit shining in "withering lines" and the milk of human kindness curdled by the bile and venom that result from treachery and desertion.

On one level “Business On You” is just another of Thompson’s silly love songs, cast quite deliberately as a dark voodoo incantation and aimed at securing the love and the loins of an unspecified maiden:

*I’ve got all the magic I need
I’ve got all the magic I need
I’ve got all the magic I need
I’m going to do the Business On You
I’m going to do the Business On You
I’m going to do the Business On You
I’ve got all the magic I need*

But, as with most of Thompson’s other seemingly inconsequential chansons d’amour, the language of “Business On You” suggests at least one other radically different interpretation. The contents of the singer’s “rattle bag” are entirely appropriate for a writer of Thompson’s calibre and one possessing his sinister preoccupations. Amidst the body parts and the paraphernalia of the torture chamber, the heavyweight poets are represented by Keats and Wordsworth, and great music by Delius. Toss in a soupcon of Elvis’s sweat and we’re ready to rock! Note also the reference to the “mad dog’s eye”, which relates back to our old friend Hank Williams and the song “Move It On Over” – “Move over nice dog, ‘cos the mad dog’s coming in”. Thompson alluded to the Williams song in the title of the first track on Henry and he also performed the

song in his live sets throughout the 1970’s. Hank casts a long shadow over the career of Richard Thompson. Against this allusive background, “Business On You” is a song about a singer – call him “Richard Thompson” – and his relationship with “us”, his audience.

Thompson had dealt with the theme of the “manipulation” of audience by performer and the “compromise” that is performance much earlier in his career in “The Great Valerio.” In that song, as we shall see in a later chapter of this book, the performer in question was based on a very specific historical figure but in Thompson’s hands Valerio’s act of performance acquired symbolic, even mythic, dimensions. In “Business On You” – and later on this album in “Bank Vault In Heaven” – performance is viewed in far more prosaic terms, as a commercial transaction between artist and audience. These are songs centred on business, money, and consumption. This is entirely appropriate for works that on one level relate to the performance of contemporary songs. In Simon Frith’s words, “If it is through consumption that contemporary culture is lived, then it is in the process of consumption that contemporary cultural value is created”. In what he terms the “pop discourse”, Frith argues in his book *Performing Rites* that “values are created by and organised around the music industry, around the means and possibilities of turning sounds into commodities – musical value and monetary value are therefore equated, and the sales charts become the measure and symbol of ‘good’ pop music.” And, to extend the metaphor, the motif of consumption takes us neatly back to “The Great Valerio” and the ultimate consumption, as reflected in the audience who feed on

what they see above. Nor should the sacramental implications of that key word “feed” be overlooked, for the notion of holy communion takes us right back to the other great song on the Bright Lights album, “Calvary Cross”. Across the decades, most roads lead there sooner or later. Nor I think is it coincidental that in the electric guitar and mandolin counterpoint at the heart of “Business On You” we are hearing the same tension that characterised “When I Get To The Border.”

Connotations of the Eucharist and the Crucifixion are also present in “Business On You” in the form of “Virginia McKenna’s tears.” McKenna co-starred in the film adaptation of Nevil Shute’s romance *A Town Like Alice*. The book tells the story of the love affair between an English secretary, Jean Paget, and an Australian ranch hand, Joe Harman. They meet in war torn Malaya during the Japanese occupation but are separated when he is arrested for stealing from the local Japanese commandant in order to provide food and medicines for Jean and her fellow peripatetic prisoners of war. Joe’s punishment – the reason for the heroine’s tears – is crucifixion. For Jean’s older companions, the event takes on mystical associations:

The final horror at Kuantan was a matter that they never spoke about at all, each fearing to recall it to the memory of the others, but each was secretly of the opinion that it had changed their luck. With Mrs Frith this impression struck much deeper. She was a devout little woman who said her prayers morning and evening with the greatest regularity ... Mrs Frith sought for the hand of God in everything that happened to them. Brooding over their experiences with

this in mind, she was struck by certain similarities. She had read repeatedly about one Crucifixion; now there had been another. The Australian, in her mind, had had the power of healing, because the medicines he brought had cured her dysentery and Johnny Horsefall’s ringworm. It was beyond all doubt that they had been blessed in every way since his death for them. God had sent down His Son to earth in Palestine. What if He had done it again in Malaya?

What if He had done it again in London in 1973 or Los Angeles in 1995? But the latter day Messiah in “Business On You” is not so much healer, as medicine man and the spells he casts are sinister and dangerous.

In all of this, of course, Thompson’s tongue is firmly in his cheek. We take him more seriously than he takes himself at our peril. We can detect some of the humour of the song in another resonant phrase that resides in the couplet, “I’ve got a hair from the underwear of the Empress Josephine/ And I’m going to come for you darling in the middle of a dream.” The salacious pun on the word “come” is in a way atypical: Thompson’s songs usually steer well clear of the messy details of the physical act of love. What is far more typical is the jokey allusion to an earlier Thompson song – in this case, to “Doctor Of Physick”. The latter song, from 1970’s *Full House*, is a generic partner of many traditional songs. (One recalls with a wistful smile Steele’s stage introduction to “One Misty Moisty Morning”, a song according to Maddy Prior “about a girl who lost her Aylesbury on the road to Maidenhead”.) Thompson and Swarbrick’s song is framed as an admonition

from a worried Victorian father to his vulnerable daughter – “the Doctor comes to steal your goods in the dead of night”. He instructs her to wear her “relic” – something like a hair from the underwear of someone famous, perhaps! – next to her person, in order to protect herself from the predatory attentions of Doctor Monk. The good Doctor is set fair to unpack “his trunk tonight”, much as Thompson is unpacking his rattle bag in “Business On You.” The father’s words of warning sadly come too late – the good doctor came first as the loving daughter shamefacedly admits:

*Oh father dear,
I dreamed last night a man sat on my bed.
And - I fear -
When I awoke, I could not find my maidenhead.*

No’s Not A Word

A classic example of Thompson’s mastery of song structure and pacing. Both extended verses move from a clunky, half-chanted introduction, through a lyrical transition to an exhilarating rock chorus:

*I’m going to pretend you like me too
All of my messages come from you
If I keep it up it might even drive you crazy.
I’m going to pretend you’re my squeeze*

*Arm in arm on the Champs Eleeze
If I keep it up it’s the only thing might save me.
All my life is a ritual dance
A ritual dance around you
And the worship hurts to pieces.
Touch me here
Touch me here on the precious jewel
I wear in my head for you
That only your hand releases.
Let me steal your thunder, won’t you
Let me be your boy wonder, won’t you
Let me thrill you, will you, won’t you
No’s Not A Word we use around here ...*

Despite the heavy emphasis on sheer carnality – “Bending the bedsprings, dogs on heat” – the overriding impression is of the struggling writer, caught up in a ritual dance that is orchestrated by a wilful muse.

Am I Wasting My Love On You?

An upbeat version of “Norwegian Wood.” Terpsichore – cosy on Greek philosophy – is playing hard to get.

Reassuringly spiky riffs and a howling extended guitar outro notwithstanding, “Bank Vault In Heaven” is a strange song, even by Richard Thompson’s idiosyncratic standards! At first hearing, it sits alongside other Thompsonian rants against the “Cash Is King” ethos of the Thatcher years and the debasement of spiritual values in the face of global market economics – a combination of “Jerusalem On The Jukebox”, “Yankee Go Home” and “Mother Knows Best”. But how should we “place” it in the context of an album that treats explicitly with the relationships between you, me and us? For once, I think the song is about just that: “you” (the audience), “me” (“Richard Thompson”) and a heavily ironic dissection of the relationship between “us”. In that sense, the closest analogy to “Bank Vault In Heaven” comes not from another Thompson song but from the French/Blair classic “Now That I Am Dead”. This merry ditty appeared on the second FFKT album, *Invisible Means*, in 1990 but was featured on stage by Richard Thompson in solo gigs throughout the nineties. The song certainly could have been – probably was – written with “RT” in mind. Certainly, the irony implicit in a number of lines was not lost on Thompson’s audiences: “My songs the critics they are praising./ Yes, they’ve even learned to spell my name” or “They say that I’ve been overstressed/ Since that break-up with my wife” or “My cheque was in the post all of my life” are all pretty close to home. The same theme of the posthumous fame and riches, which await the undervalued singer/songwriter, is developed in “Bank Vault In Heaven”. The “name on

the door” in the first verse gives the game away: “add a little bit more” – i.e. delta - to “richer” and you get “Richer-d”. And associations with “Richard” pervade the song:

- the fly on the wall in the angels’ first chorus, recalling the alter-ego in the title of Thompson’s first solo album;
- the “tellers and lenders” from whom Thompson stole his best ideas and the debt to whom he acknowledged in “Hope You Like The New Me” on the 1999 *Mock Tudor* album;
- the echoes of Valerio, dancing in the air, in the phrases “shine down from Heaven” and “vault in Heaven”;
- the sly allusion to Keith Waterhouse’s sequel novel, *Billy Liar On The Moon*;
- the reference to “the same happy tune ...even hound dogs can croon” which recalls at one remove Thompson’s favourite songwriter, Hank Williams, and, at one more remove, the greatest live performer of the early rock era, Elvis Presley;
- the nod to T. S. Eliot in the exhortation to “run to the wasteland”.

But the “Richard” who emerges from the song is, above all, an invasive (“right into your room”), devious (“do my snake charm”) and manipulative (“pulling your strings”) performer. We, the audience, are “Punches and Judys”, mere puppets, archetypal participants in a brutal staged dance of disintegrating relationships. This Richard character is soul brother of the protagonist in “Cold Kisses”, going through his girlfriend’s

“stuff” in her absence, searching for “secrets” and “signs”, but stage-managing a scene of reassuring domestic harmony and tranquillity to greet her on her return:

*Time to put the past away.
That's your footstep in the street, I'd say.
Tie the ribbon back around it,
Everything just the way I found it.
I can hear you turn the key
And my head's buried when you see me
In a Margaret Millar mystery.*

In this context, “the warmth of cold kisses” might stand as a metaphor for the consolation taken by both performer and audience for the compromise that is performance.

Does the portrayal of “us” in our performer and audience relationship in “Bank Vault In Heaven” represent a cynical put-down of “you”, the paying punters, or an expression of self-deprecation on the part of “me”, the writer and performer? The answer depends on the extent to which you believe “Richard Thompson” expected us to recognise and react to the joke in the first place. Peter Bailey has argued [SF 209] that the central performing trope in late 19th century British music hall was a kind of “knowingness”, a kind of collusion between performer and implied audience, between audience and implied performer, which was both inclusive and exclusive. That same kind of collusion is very obvious in Thompson’s performances of “Now That I Am Dead” – “We, the cognoscenti, all know I’m the greatest. Now all I have to do in

order to convince the plebs is die. Ho, ho, ho”. I also believe that the same, very British sense of irony underpins “Bank Vault In Heaven”. My certainty is strengthened by the fact that Thompson is in essence repeating the joke told earlier on the album in “Business On You”.

The Ghost Of You Walks

A complete change in mood and tempo. “The Ghost Of You Walks” foreshadows the understated feel and sombre mood of the “Nude” songs. Complex structure, rhyme scheme and shifts in tempo are all characteristics of the dark introspective songs that follow:

*If that was our goodbye kiss
Seems a habit too good to miss
Once more for the memory.
Hit the heights too well that time
To leave it there would be a crime
Seems more like beginning to me.
At least we tried
Took the biggest bite
At least we did it right
With all our souls and all our might.
Blue murder on the dance floor
French kisses in the rain
Blood wedding in the water
Till I see you again*

*Dutch courage is the game
And The Ghost Of You Walks.*

The nods back to the Champs Eleeze in the reference to “French kisses in the rain”, and to the ritual dance in “Blue murder on the dance floor” anchor “The Ghost Of You Walks” centrally in the architecture of the album and place it unequivocally in the category of songs to Thompson’s muse.

————— **Baby Don’t Know What To Do With Herself** —————

An acoustic folk introduction with subtle bass and cello and a great bluesy vocal. The first sucker punch comes with the violence in the third line – “She might wipe her tears on a rusty nail.” The second low blow turns the song on its head – “And I gaze on, gaze on.” A sense of voyeuristic detachment and a propensity for cynical manipulation of other people were disturbing undercurrents in the “Voltage Enhanced” songs:

- *You call me fraud and faker/ You call me user, taker*
- *I’ve got all the magic I need/ I’m going to do the Business On You*
- *Going to shine down from Heaven/ And do my snake charm*
- *All you Punches and Judys/ I’ll be pulling your strings*

On the “Nude” side of the album, some of Thompson’s most complex and ambiguous character creations play God with the people around them. The dark fatalistic mood of the song cycle is reminiscent of the bleak closing passage to Hardy’s *Tess Of The D’Urbervilles* in which Angel Clare and Tess’ sister gaze on the prison in which Tess is to be hanged for the murder of her lover, Alec d’Urberville:

Upon the cornice of the tower a tall flag was fixed. Their eyes were riveted on it. A few minutes after the hour had struck something moved slowly up the staff, and extended itself upon the breeze. It was a black flag. “Justice” was done and the President of the Immortals (in Aeschylean phrase) had ended his sport with Tess. And the d’Urberville knights and dames slept on in their tombs unknowing. The two speechless gazers bent themselves down to the earth, as if in prayer, and remained thus a long time, absolutely motionless: the flag continued to wave silently. As soon as they had strength they arose, joined hands again, and went on.

————— **She Cut Off Her Long Silken Hair** —————

One of the great Thompson opening verses – stately ritual desecrated by the flash of a knife, wielded in an act of self-mutilation that parodies Joan of Arc’s act in dedicating herself to her God and to France:

*Midnight in her room
There was music and incense and mirrors all around
By the light of the moon
Her silver dress slipped to the ground
Then she knelt like Saint Joan
And invisible armies attended her there
And her knife brightly shone
As She Cut Off Her Long Silken Hair.*

In the bridge and the second verse the focus shifts completely to a self-serving and self-deceiving narrator who hovers on the brink of self-recognition with unconscious irony:

*And I measured my life
And my heart fairly broke with the sorrow and care ...*

In the final verse, the narrator is irretrievably in denial: "I don't see why ... I don't see why ... I don't see why ... I don't see why."

Burns Supper

Another of those delicious Thompson titles that send reverberations through a specific song and a whole album. The supper to commemorate Robert Burns is held annually in February, and is probably the most "Scottish" of the traditional festivals in the British Isles. While latter day celebrations typically degenerate into raucous, drunken highland flings, the

underlying significance of the Burns Supper lies in its remembrance of absent friends, enshrined in Burns' immortal words, "Should auld acquaintance be forgot,/ And never brought to mind." At its most elemental Thompson's song, surely, is an intensely personal remembrance of his recently deceased father, John. The profoundly moving second verse strikes chords in the context of Thompson's early upbringing:

*What a new found friend is honesty
To see ourselves as others see
To see the shy boy inside the man
Is that all I am
Just starved of loving?*

There are echoes here of an early song to a dead friend:

*Old man how you tarry, old man how you weep,
The trinkets you carry, the garlands you keep,
For the salt tears of lovers and the whispers of friends
Come never, O never, O never again.*

Closer to home, we should be reminded of the protagonist's recognition in "She Cut Off Her Long Silken Hair":

*There's some who believe there are reasons to lie
And there's some who deceive
When the truth is right there in their eye*

At the heart of “Burns Supper” is the tragic moment of self-awareness when the old man recognises the extent to which he has sought to “Hide It Away”, the lifelong effort he has expended in keeping people at a distance, at the point of a metaphorical bayonet:

*One more Black & Tan on the barricade
To keep me safe from loving.*

Thompson’s fractional pause on either side of the poignant word “safe” is masterful.

Train Don’t Leave

A light-hearted interlude between the shuttered night of “Burns Supper” and the frozen passions of “Cold Kisses.” The track is vintage Thompson rock’n’roll in the style of Wynonie Harris. The fluid guitar is reminiscent of Thompson’s superlative versions of “Mystery Train” that have appeared on bootlegs over the years. Unlike most of its fifties precursors, “Train Don’t Leave” employs a sophisticated, tongue-in-cheek rhyme scheme and a control of metre – this train is p-p-pulling away – that just add to the fun:

*She’s sitting on the train, the train’s going to leave
Bags in her hand, tears on her sleeve
Banging on the window with all of my might
But she won’t look to the left or the right*

*We had a fight and it wasn’t pretty
Now she’s leaving, ain’t it a pity
Going to wait tables down in the city
Hold that red light one more minute
6:18’s got my baby in it
Train don’t leave, heart don’t break
Train don’t leave, heart don’t break*

Cold Kisses

Most of the interpersonal conflicts on the album are fought out in the open, on “battle fields white with human ivory.” This song deals with covert operations, “behind enemy lines/ Looking for secrets, looking for signs.” The voyeuristic protagonist going through his girlfriend’s “stuff” in her absence is one of Thompson’s nastiest creations. There is real menace in the air and the music and a salacious delight in the “lacy things” hidden away with the “beads and bangles and rings.” The implied inadequacy of the speaker – suggested in the repeated “Got to see how I measure up”, like a schoolboy with a three-inch tape measure – recalls a similar degenerate who “measured [his] life” in “She Cut Off Her Long Silken Hair.” There is a dark irony in the title and in the crucial question: “Do you still feel the warmth of Cold Kisses.” Are the kisses those of passionate but long-departed ex-lovers or those of a cold-hearted and cynical current paramour? In context, the Margaret Miller murder mystery might be a chilling portent.

Sam is one of Thompson's most audacious creations and Sam's song is the repository for some of Richard's blackest humour. There is little in the first verse to alert the listener to delights to come. The neat pun on "consideration" – in part judicious appraisal of the bones, in part appropriate payment for them – might sound the merest tinkle of an alarm bell. The second verse gets nearer the knuckle. The reference to the shamrock and the thistle opens up political and historical as well as geographic vistas and we're then into an unhealthy, microscopic interest in anatomy:

*I like it all picked over as clean as a whistle
No sign of meat on and no sign of gristle
Sam Jones, deliver them bones*

But the first bridge explodes the song into unimagined places and horrors. "Old hocks" become those of human pigs, mere cannon fodder and Sam, no longer a latter-day Steptoe, takes on the significance of Hardy's President of the Immortals:

*And I've seen battlefields white with human ivory
Noble dukes and princes stripped of flesh and finery
When the crows have done their work they say that's the time
for me
Sam Jones deliver them bones*

In the third verse, the perspective again shifts dramatically from the carnage of the cosmic battlefield to a cloistered, clammy boudoir. Sam shares with us the fruits of his fevered imagination:

*And I even dream of bones when I'm lying very ill
Roomsful of skeletons a-dancing the quadrille
Rows and rows of skulls singing Blueberry Hill
Sam Jones deliver them bones*

This brings us much closer to Sam's creator, someone with more than a passing interest in sickness and diseases, razor dances and the twisted pavannes of modern society. Someone, too, whose life's work one might characterise as "rows and rows of skulls singing Blueberry Hill."

The rest of the song continues to shift seamlessly between these three levels – what we might characterise as the personal, the metaphoric and the mythic – with a smattering of gruesome puns to lighten the load. Given Thompson's grouses to Patrick Humphries concerning the inconveniences of small tour buses, Sam's reference to his "old boneshaker" is especially pleasing. In one of the most telling transitions on any Thompson album, the final "Sam Jones deliver them bones" leads straight into a reprise of "Razor Dance" and its "catacomb of tongues." This in turn leads us into the charnel house that is the "Woods of Darney."

The ultimate menage a trois. “Robin’s Nest” for the survivors of the Somme. In a sense, the song all hangs on a repeated pun on the verb “to lie” – to make love and, picking up an allusion to a previous song on the album, to deceive “when the truth is right there in [your] eye”:

*Now we lie in the darkness together
Often we lie without speaking this way
As you stare in the dark do you see your young corporal
Who never came back from the Woods of Darney*

I’m intrigued by the title of this song and its acronym, which recalls another Thompsonian “WoD” take on the human condition:

Now the bugle sounds, they say this is the big one
A curse on the life of a soldier you say
But don’t you know that’s a soldier’s small comfort

For the bugle to sound, and to hear, and obey

Vs

*Let me ride on the Wall of Death one more time.
Let me ride on the Wall of Death one more time.
You can waste your time on the other rides*

*But this is the nearest to being alive.
O let me take my chances on the Wall of Death.*

The CD sleevenote includes two words at the end of the printing of the lyrics to “Woods Of Darney”: “To insanity.” This repeats the exhortation in “Bank Vault In Heaven”:

*And the angels say,
Sing, Sing, Sing
The whole world singing the same happy tune
Something so low even hound dogs can croon
To insanity*

Is the reprise at the end of the lyric sheet an allusion, an exhortation, a prediction or a misprint?

Serendipity. The novelist Iris Murdoch was back in the news when I was writing the above section on You? Me? Us? The biopic starring the ludicrously talented Jim Broadbent and the peerless Dame Judi Dench had recently hit the cinema screens. As ever, in keeping with the classic serial syndrome, I was prompted to re-read novels that had been gathering dust for thirty years and I was pulled up short by Murdoch’s 1970 masterpiece *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. For the first time, I was taken by the ambiguity implicit in Murdoch’s title, an ambiguity that Thompson enshrined in his enigmatic line, “my heart fairly broke.” From there, I was increasingly struck by the similarities, at least at a metaphoric level, between Murdoch’s dark comedy of errors and Thompson’s own darkest album. Murdoch’s anti-hero Julius King is a cynical

intellectual who conducts a Machiavellian experiment with the people around him. He uses misinformation to persuade loving couples, caring friends and devoted siblings to betray their seemingly cast-iron loyalties and cheat on and compromise relationships that lie at the very centre of their existence. Julius' exercise in social engineering is convoluted and ends in disaster but he sees his manipulations as both easily done and relatively harmless:

I could divide anybody from any body. Even you could. Play sufficiently on a person's vanity, sow a little mistrust, hint at the contempt which every human being deeply, secretly feels for every other one. Every man loves himself so astronomically more than he loves his neighbour. Anyone can be made to drop anyone ... They'll gain a little experience. It will all unravel quite painlessly, you'll see. Any revelations now would just be senseless and ugly. Let them have their little drama, their little dance together. Let them work the machine themselves. They'll feel the better for it afterwards, even if they are a bit let down. [AFHD 225/258]

There are some specific echoes here of Thompson's album. Note the phrase "every man loves himself so astronomically" and revisit "Bank Vault In Heaven." Think about "their little [razor] dance together." Revisit the montage on Thompson's album cover: "let them work the machine themselves." All of that may be coincidental. But on a general level, Murdoch's novel, like Thompson's album, is exploring the tendency that we all have to embrace drama and intrigue when the opportu-

nity is foisted on us; to prefer the easy thrill of confrontation to the difficult effort of communicating openly and honestly with those closest to us. The polarity at the heart of Murdoch's novel is that between the human "love of their little dance together" and the contempt that "every human being deeply, secretly feels." The polarity at the heart of Thompson's album, similarly, is between the love of the "Razor Dance" and the fundamental need to "Hide It Away." I don't think it is coincidental that these two songs are repeated on *You? Me? Us?* I don't think it is coincidental that one answer to the riddle, what truth is "right there in their eye" is iris. Above all, I can't shake Philip Hensher's introductory comment on the scene in Murdoch's novel when Julius cuts up the clothes of his erstwhile lover, Morgan:

There is some overt symbolism here, but the scene is chiefly so successful because of the certainty that no one, neither reader, author, or character, quite understands its import. Only Julius understands, and he is as implacable and unreadable as the world ... What should remain after all those luxuries of deception and lying are swept away? Lying, we may reflect, is close to the novelist's art, and Julius attracts our fascination in part because his ruthless manipulation is so close to the kind, loving figure of the novelist herself.

A Fairly Honourable Defeat and Thompson's album both centre on the dark arts of the manipulator of people, the cosmic puppeteer. Thompson warns all of us Punches and Judys that he'll be pulling our strings, like his own Jolly Hangman,

who kept Poor Will dangling on a string. Julius, too, in a long philosophical debate on the nature of good and evil with his future victim Rupert, sees us all as puppets. I have recast Murdoch's passage in the interests of clarity:

- RUPERT: You make human beings sound like puppets.
JULIUS: But they are puppets, Rupert. And we didn't need modern psychology to tell us that. Your friend Plato knew all about it in his old age, when he wrote *The Laws*, after he had given up those dreams of the high places which so captivate you.
RUPERT: But if goodness isn't important, what is important, according to you? Though if we're all puppets I suppose "important" is the wrong word too!
JULIUS: Precisely! Well, we know what moves people, dear Rupert. Fears, passions of all kinds. The desire for power, for instance. Few questions are more important than: who is the boss?
RUPERT: Though of course some people prefer to be bossed!
JULIUS: Yes, yes. It's all a question of choosing one's technique. [AFHD 216]

Both Iris Murdoch and Richard Thompson are masters in the "technique" of character creation, the rhetoric of manipulation. But in terms of the symbol of the puppet and the string, Thompson's conceptual framework extends well beyond Mur-

doch's. On this album, unbroken but tangled strings connect muse, writer, characters, performer, and listeners. And somewhere in this cat's cradle is an eminence grise, a "lover of all broken things,/ Standing waiting in the wings." We might call him Sam Jones. We might call him Richer-d. We might well adopt our own punning Germanic appellation and call him YOU-LI-US.

INDUSTRY

1. Chorale [*]
2. Sweetheart On The Barricade
3. Children Of The Dark [*]
4. Big Chimney
5. Kitty ... Tommy ... [*]
6. Drifting Through The Days
7. Lotteryland
8. Pitfalls [*]
9. Saboteur
10. New Rhythms [*]
11. Last Shift

All songs written by Richard Thompson except [*], composed by Danny Thompson. Produced by Richard Thompson and Danny Thompson.

Players – Richard Thompson and Danny Thompson with Dylan Fowler (cor anglais, oboe, guitars), Paul Dunmall (saxophones), Tony Roberts (saxophones, border pipes, bass clarinet, flute, harmonium), Albert & Harold Thompson (trombones), Peter Knight (violin), Dave Mattacks (drums, percussion), Paul Clarvis (dums, percussion), Christine Collister (vocals).

UK Release June 1997. Hannibal HNCD 1414.

Given Thompson's increasing preoccupation in the nineties with the decline of empire, the Industry album in a sense

came as no surprise. He and Danny Thompson had planned a collaborative studio project for some time and Industry represented the outcome of several years of intermittent research and sporadic writing. According to Danny, "We agreed it would be good to do some music based on something you feel passionate about." The album was known to be in preparation and was "trailed" for some time – Patrick Humphries alludes to its probable eventual appearance in *Strange Affair* - and I confess to a slight feeling of being let down when it was finally released in mid 1997. I suppose that, after all that time, I'd expected the definitive, panoramic statement of Thompson's view of affairs chez Maggie. His comments – which form part of Kevin Howlett's admirable sleeve notes - make it clear that this was never the intention:

It wasn't going to be a history of industry from the 1700s to the present day – I don't think that's possible. The nature of a three minute song is that you have to paint little pictures. I think it's impressions of industry and the end of industry ... and the transition from industrial to post-industrial ... that is hopefully reflected on the album.

Chorale

Most of the other musicians present on the album are members of Whatever, an ensemble led by Danny Thompson for several years. Their tastes and talents are reflected in the

jazz arrangements of many tracks, but the album also includes rich English traditional textures. In his youth, Richard had rolled over Vaughn Williams. On this track, Danny welcomes Ralph back. Danny explained to Howlett that the track represents the goodbye to pastoral society: “the images I saw were of hamlets, church spires and the rector being the spiritual head – and all that was just wiped out by the industrial revolution.” The spiritual vacuum in an industrial society is an important sub-text. Religious imagery appears in all six songs on the album:

- *She’s passing hymn books at the rally. Hallelujah!*
- *Taller than the church’s steeple! Forever the Big Chimney owns my soul.*
- *A man needs work for his own salvation.*
- *In a padded cell eternity.*
- *The hand of man steered by God to make the wondrous mill.*
- *Old Grimey’s lost its soul.*

Sweetheart On The Barricade

The song evokes the role of women throughout the industrial age. According to Thompson, the lack of specific historical context was intentional: “It’s based on several different stories about female emancipation, factory lockouts and picket lines ... I couldn’t say what period the song’s set in ... so it’s deliberately a little vague.” There is a nice tension running

through the song between the innocence and naivety of young love – “My heart it skips a beat” – and the harsher realities of poverty, political activism and “fighting in the street.” The song also sets up two important motifs that cycle through the album. A sense of mutability runs through the whole collection of songs, anchored here by Jennifer’s youth – “really just a child” – and culminating in the “smell of death” in the final song. Her assumption of a traditional male role – “The equal of a man” – is also reflected in a number of images in which the historical dominant position of the Male is undermined:

- *I’m midwife to a pig of iron.*
- *A man needs work for his own salvation.*
- *Be a pram-pusher on parole.*
- *Leave your manhood, leave your pride.*
- *Now we’re nursemaids, now we’re cooks.*

Danny and his uncles Albert and Harold play the brass arrangement on the track.

Children Of The Dark

The instrumental is a lyrical evocation of the miseries caused by child labour through the ages. According to Richard, it was prompted by a visit to a mining museum: “It was a chilling experience. When we got to an example of the latest mining, we were expecting it to be somehow modern but it seemed

incredibly savage, crude, dangerous, primitive and dark.” If you ever doubted Richard’s debt to Hank Marvin ...

Big Chimney

According to Hewlett, “Big Chimney” was inspired by Seven Shifts, James Stirling’s account of life in a steel mill. A phallic chimney, a throbbing, thrusting beat and a real sense of the sheer power of the industrial machine in its heyday. I’m not sure that Thompson’s liberal sprinkling of arcane technical terms actually works but the sheer energy of the instrumentation probably rides roughshod over the meaning. One of the few pure rhymes in the song – “soul” and “coal” – is repeated in a very different context in the final track: “Old Grimey’s lost its soul/ Fifty million tons of coal.”

Kitty ... Tommy ...

Lovely dialogue from the Durham coalfield – “KITTY: Tommy, quick! Get up. I can hear clogs goin’ up the street. TOMMY: Well stick mine out and see if they’ll go with ‘em!” The extended title repeats an early morning exchange between a miner and his wife passed on to Danny by their son. The track captures in a language beyond words the sense of community and integrity and the rich humour of Northeast pit villages.

Drifting Through The Days

A poignant reflection on the effect of unemployment. Thompson summarised the song in prosaic terms: “To not be able to get work, and have no prospect of it, is absolutely soul destroying and you read reports of people who don’t care if they get out of bed in the morning. We’re not pointing political fingers on the record, we’re just trying to reflect the frustration and despair of people who – with the best intentions – just cannot find work.” His song captures the resigned, elegiac feel of Yeats’ “The Old Men Admiring Themselves In The Water”:

*I hear the old, old men say,
“Everything alters,
And one by one we drop away.”
They had hands like claws, and their knees
Were twisted like the old thorn-trees
By the waters.
I heard the old, old men say,
“All that’s beautiful drifts away
Like the waters.”*

Lotteryland

A glance back to Pharaohland and forward to Metroland. Thompson emphasised the sad irony that what took many

generations centuries to construct took one woman a decade to demolish: “That’s the extraordinary thing. How quickly the industrial landscape – and lifestyle – has become a museum item, a part of Theme Park Britain, a tourist attraction.” He also stressed the cynical political reality underpinning the National Lottery: “Because it’s new here, you notice the change in people. It’s a real distraction from politics and a kind of weekly hypnosis – Well, you might win millions! – and it’s that hope, that’s really only going to be fulfilled by a handful of people, that just keeps people quiet.” As I am writing this, I am aware that fifty miles to the north, Beamish Museum – a loving, living tribute to the pit communities of the Durham coalfield – is struggling for funding, having been rejected by the National Lottery. “Left wing, right wing, curse the lot!” Bastards!

Pitfalls

An instrumental reflection on the impact on communities of pit closures. Danny Thompson comes from Durham mining stock and the impact of the depredations wrought in the eighties and early nineties was close to home: “I’m proud that I come from a backdrop of brass bands and miners. The Industry album was never meant to be any kind of political thing; it comes from a love of the people involved in the work. But the closing down of these communities – obviously, this touched my heart.”

Saboteur

The song is the fruit of extensive research conducted by Thompson in the Karl Marx and Trades Union Congress libraries: “I was looking at first hand accounts of people working throughout the industrial period; there were wonderful stories in there and some were translated into song – for example, ‘Saboteur’ is a direct version of a statement I found.” I also detect a distant echo of the old ship’s engineer, McAndrew: “From coupler-flange to spindle-guide I see Thy hand O God.”

New Rhythms

The repetitive, mechanical instrumental sounds encapsulate to dramatic effect the seismic impact of industry at the time of its birth in the 18th century. The repetition of “Chorale” at the beginning and end of the track serves to emphasise the spiritual vacuum at the heart of the new social order.

Last Shift

A sombre and deeply moving finale to the album. “Last Shift” was inspired by the closure of Grimethorpe Colliery in 1993. According to Richard, this was the song that sparked off the whole project: “a friend of ours who used to teach at Grimethorpe sent us some press cuttings about the closure of

the pit and the state of the town since then.” Thompson has continued to perform this song in concert to this day.

Kevin Howlett describes *Industry* as “an album of exceptional emotional commitment and musical invention.” Musically, I’d agree entirely. Lyrically, I’m not so sure. There is something rather cerebral, rather “literary” about the songs and a studied tone that is couched more in sorrow than in anger. If you want a sense of what the ravages suffered by British industry through the final decades of the 20th century actually meant to people, turn instead to one of Thompson’s most talented disciples, Jez Lowe. Born in County Durham in 1955, Lowe has made a living playing around the world, solo and with various incarnations of his band, the Bad Pennies, for over twenty years. His intelligent, achingly melodic songs describe life in the declining towns and villages of the North-east and bring vividly to life the characters who people those communities. By turns acerbic and wickedly funny, at his best Lowe creates moods of savage indignation, bitter poignancy and moral outrage that Thompson never quite strikes on *Industry*. In Lowe’s world, the poor and disenfranchised make a symbolic sacrifice to the powers that be in the form of a baby boy, whose tiny mangled corpse is found by a gang of bikers, “like last night’s chips wrapped in last Monday’s *Daily Mirror*” in a quarry on the edge of town:

*Some were born to tend the crops but waste away on parish slopes
Some were born to scale the heights but are washing screens at
traffic lights
Some were born with artist’s hands but cursed by governmental*

*plans
Some were born to heal the sick but are thankful they can wield
a pick
And still they sing – accept this sacrifice we bring.*

In Lowe’s world, the derelict super-structure of an abandoned mine is viewed, not by Thompson’s archetypal old men drifting through their days, but by an embittered narrator, gazing through the begrimed windows of the pit out-buildings. In a chilling parallel, the pithead is also “seen” through the sightless eyes of the gallows – the blind pit ponies – liberated by the pit closure and now grazing in the blazing sun. The human price paid to unearth black diamonds is epitomised for Lowe by a collier’s widow, reunited at the point of her own death with her husband, who had died with over eighty others at Easington in 1951:

*And in the fields above the dangers of Gresford, Trimdon
Grange,
Hadsell, Hartley Beam and Markham Main
The last of the widows of the Duckbill seam
Is walking with her miner lad again.*

Industry is a good album of its kind – no, a really good album. I don’t doubt for a moment Thompson’s sincerity and commitment in embarking on the *Industry* project and the end product is compelling and challenging and worthy of his and Danny Thompson’s immense musical talents. But Richard Thompson’s poetic roots lie deep in myth, magic and

mystery. If you want to experience what a modern song feels like when it is rooted in the people and comes from the people discover Jez Lowe. Log on to jezlowe.com now. Lowe's homespun philosophies could never have yielded "The Great Valerio" or "Beeswing" or probably any of a hundred other songs that make Richard Thompson the English songwriter of the 20th century. Equally, Richard Thompson has never written the equivalent of "Last Of The Widows" or "These Coal Town Days."

Jez Lowe - the best singing, songwriting guitarist in England not called Richard? You bet.



MOCK TUDOR

Metroland

1. Cooksferry Queen
2. Sibella
3. Bathsheba Smiles
4. Two-Faced Love
5. Hard On Me

Heroes In The Suburbs

6. Crawl Back (Under My Stone)
7. Uninhabited Man
8. Dry My Tears And Move On
9. Walking The Long Miles Home

Street Cries And Stage Whispers

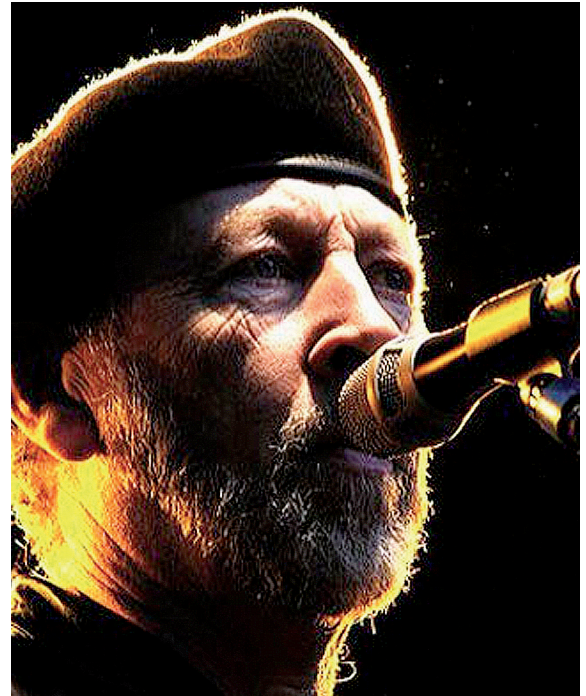
10. Sights And Sounds Of London Town
11. That's All, Amen, Close The Door
12. Hope You Like The New Me

All songs written by Richard Thompson. Produced by Tom Rothrock and Rob Schnapf.

Players – Richard Thompson with Dave Mattacks (drums, percussion), Teddy Thompson (guitar, vocal), Danny Thompson (double bass), Atom Ellis (electric bass), Mitchell Froom (keyboards), Joey Waronker (drums), Jeff Turmis (baritone saxophone), David McKelsy (harmonica), Larry Hall (cornet), Charles Davis (cornet), Leslie Ben-

edict (trombone), Randall Aldcroft (trombone), Judith Owen – vocal harmony.

UK Release September 1999. Capitol 7243 4 98860.



Mock Tudor marked Thompson's swan song on the Capitol label. The subsequent retrospective, *The Capitol Years*, hammers home the superlative, sustained quality of this body of work. Two unarguable masterpieces – *Rumor & Sigh* and *Mock Tudor*. Two superb albums – *Amnesia* and *You? Me? Us?* – which bear comparison with any non-Thompson album released in the last fifty years. And, in *Mirror Blue*, one album of huge ambition but patchy quality, that nonetheless included Thompson's finest song, "Beeswing". Not bad going for a niche player!

I took two big slices through *Mock Tudor* in Chapters Two and Three. There are numerous other ways we might choose to dissect the album – as Bildungsroman; as mock heroic comparison of the two Elizabethan ages; as an extended pastiche of musical styles of the sixties; as a sustained metaphor for the impact of (sub) urban life on the human spirit; as a portrayal of a mythic quest, based in part on the Bible, in part on Kerouac, in part on Kerish's *Night And The City*; as yet another masterful study in the razor dance between men and women. All of these perspectives are relevant and I doubt if the list is exhaustive. But as previously noted, *Mock Tudor*, like *The Wasteland* is above all "a series of entertainments" and it is on that basis that the album should stand.

My closing thought on the album would, however, centre on the entertainer himself since, more than any other of his albums, *Mock Tudor* is ultimately about the writer and performer we know as "Richard Thompson." The question of identity is treated in a light-hearted way on the album front cover. An archetypal suburban father and son are placed against a styl-

ised suburban backdrop. The father's head is missing. *Mock Tudor* is, of course, the album where Teddy Thompson came of age before moving on to release his own eponymous solo debut album. The king is dead: long live the king. A heavily ironic note is however struck by the three sleeve photographs that show Thompson in sharp three-piece suit, sitting on a garden wall. The Great Valerio portrayed as Humpty the Stockbroker – from walking the high wire to sitting on the fence. How are the mighty fallen! Thompson's tongue is, of course, firmly in his cheek but the image requires us to return to where it all started, nearly thirty years earlier, when Valerio first embarked on the tightrope to stardom.

PART THREE

CHAPTER TEN

“RICHARD THOMPSON” AND THE GREAT VALERIO

Richard on a good night doing “Calvary Cross” or “Tear Stained Letter”, or one of those guitar solos – when they really get there, that gets to me. I get teary – I think this is the guy I live with. When he goes off on another planet.

Nancy Covey.

The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,
And, as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

William Shakespeare.

Of all the sights in England now,
And I’ve looked everywhere,
There is not one, of any sort,
With Blondin can compare.

R. Flemin Lowell.

Mutato nomine de te fabula narratur. (Change the name and the tale is told of you)

Horace.

I stole your walk – the one with purpose,
That says, there is no mountain I can’t climb.
It fools people all of the time.
Hope you like the new me.

Richard Thompson.

Cast off, cast off that mask of burnished gold... .

W.B.Yeats.

The performance of songs is a wonderful opportunity. It is a great privilege. It is a great way to test your courage. And to test the song. And even to test the audience.

Leonard Cohen.

At around 5:30 PM on the 30th June 1859, a man sat astride the border between Canada and the United States of America. The man himself was unremarkable. He was a stocky, bearded Frenchman, 5'8" in height and weighing around 140 pounds. His precise location was however unprecedented. He was balanced precariously on a 3¼ inch rope, 150 feet above the Niagara River. The placards, which had heralded his departure from the USA out onto the rope towards Canada, described him as The Great Blondin.

At the time of his first tightrope walk across the Niagara Gorge Blondin was 35 years old. He had been a professional performer for nearly 30 years. Until his mid twenties, he had lived the peripatetic life of a travelling circus entertainer, establishing a wide reputation in Europe for the originality and skill of his performances on the high wire. International fame came in 1827 when he was approached by an agent of the Ravel family, the most famous acrobatic troupe in France. With them, he toured the USA, under contract to the great showman, Phineas T. Barnum.

Blondin's original plan for his unprecedented Niagara stunt had been to walk from Table Rock on the Canadian side of the Niagara River to Terrapin Point, located on the American territory, Goat Island, which separated the Horseshoe Falls from the American Falls. His plan was stymied when the owner of Goat Island refused to allow any part of his land to be used for the enterprise. Blondin was therefore forced to settle on a less spectacular site over half a mile down river from the falls. The Gorge nevertheless represented an awesome obstacle. The point on the American bank where Blondin's rope

was suspended was 160 feet above the water. The Canadian bank was 170 feet above the floor of the Gorge. The distance between the anchorage points of the rope was 1100 feet in a straight line but the weight of the rope caused it to sag by 60 feet, with a gradient of 1 in 10. On his first crossing, Blondin made leisurely progress, taking rests along the way and sitting down at the mid point, straddling the international boundary, while he drew up a bottle of refreshment from the pleasure boat, Maid of the Mist, which was circling 150 feet below. The crossing took around 17 minutes. The return journey was accomplished in 7 minutes, Blondin pausing only once, to sit on the rope and wave to the crowds gathered on the banks above. The effect of the crossings on spectators was dramatic. According to the reporter from the Lockport Daily Advertiser and Democrat:

A noticeable circumstance was the silence that pervaded the host of spectators. It was like the hushed stillness of the forest during a lull of the winds. Not a voice was heard, not even a word of encouragement: people were holding their breath, absorbed in the result. So intently engaged was the mind, that we have our doubts whether there was even one who heard the roar of the cataract which was thundering on the ear ...A similar emotion prevails among large masses while contemplating the peril of a fellow being on a rock in the rapids, on witnessing a shipwreck, or while waiting the result of a battle and the pending victory.

Over the next 15 months, Blondin repeated his remarkable feat over twenty times. Arguably his finest hour was represented by one of his earliest crossings, on 17th August 1859, when he carried his agent, Harry Colcord, across the Gorge on his back. The total load, including Blondin's balancing pole, was 190 pounds and the trip took 42 gruelling minutes. His final Niagara walk took place on 18th September 1860 in the presence of Edward, Prince of Wales. Blondin offered to carry His Royal Highness across, an offer that HRH appeared to consider seriously until dissuaded by his anxious aides. Not one to be down-staged, Blondin carried Colcord in one direction and made the return journey on stilts. By the time of Blondin's final Gorge walk, public enthusiasm for the spectacle was diminishing and competition had appeared in the form of one Signor Fabrini – AKA William Leonard Hunt – an upstart contender who made the walk on 15th August 1860. By then, the Frenchman's exploits had, in any case, attracted criticism from those in high office who were concerned at the risks involved. As *The Times* observed:

Extraordinary feat. One that fits the performer for the highest place in the lunatic asylum ... When you reflect that the distance is so great that, with all care, the slack of the rope made a descent of 60 feet at the centre, and that a single false step must have plunged him to certain death in the current that runs with a rapidity that defies the sounding lead, you can have some idea of the difficulties and dangers and can appreciate the foolhardiness of the man who did such a feat.

Other critics questioned what perverse motivation prompted people to attend performances of such feats. Charles Dickens observed at a later performance at London's Crystal Palace: "Everybody seems afraid that Blondin will fall before they are able to take their seats ... The chiding voice, whosoever it may be, is drowned by the tramp of unreasoning and hurrying feet". Blondin died in London on 19th February 1897 and finally came to earth and, in Chesterton's immortal words, went to "paradise by way of Kensal Green" where he lies in grave #13,198, square #140, row #1. Blondin had been an active performer and lived under stage names for over 65 years and during that time had made an estimated 4000 "ascensions". At the height of his fame he drew crowds of tens of thousands to his performances in provincial cities in England and received substantial honours from world rulers, including the rank of Chevalier of the Legion d'Honneur conferred on him by Napoleon III of France. He is remembered as the consummate professional and the ultimate performer. In the words of the title of Ken Wilson's biography, *Everyone's Heard of Blondin*. Richard Thompson certainly has.

The *Sunday Telegraph* – a paper I never usually buy or read – published a full page feature-spread on the hundredth anniversary of Blondin's death. By another improbable piece of pure serendipity, I came across a crumpled copy in an airport departure lounge when I was many thousands of miles from home and in desperate need of reading material. But what caught my eye was not the article per se but the reproduction of the painting. The original sits in the Kelvingrove Gallery in Glasgow and is called "Blondin Crossing Niagara Falls On

A Tightrope". The anonymous nineteenth century artist took liberties with the precise location of the walk – Blondin, as we have heard, crossed the Gorge, not the Falls – and with many other aspects of the event. The painting is nevertheless a marvellously atmospheric and evocative depiction of the near-mythical Blondin poised halfway between Canada and America, halfway between heaven and earth. Cloud and spume separate him on canvas from the sheer drop beneath. He is top- and back-lit with sunlight and looks down – more artistic licence – on a dark, rocky, spray-lashed ledge where his spectators are clustered, shrouded in murk. Some stand in groups looking up towards Blondin, transfixed by the drama unfolding above them. One group is more interested in their own company and stands laughing and chattering with backs turned towards Blondin. The most clearly delineated figure stands on the edge of the precipice, waving his top hat and clearly keen to join the great man on the wire. If you had a dozen or so lines available in which to describe this scene and you happened to be the finest songwriter on the planet, you could well be moved to write:

*High up above the crowd,
The Great Valerio is walking.
The rope seems hung from cloud to cloud,
And time stands still while he is walking.
His eye is steady on the target;
His foot is sure upon the rope;
Alone, and peaceful as a mountain,
And certain as the mountain slope.*

*We falter at the sight.
We stumble in the mire.
Fools who think they see the light
Prepare to balance on the wire.
But we learn to watch together
And feed on what we see above ...*

"The Great Valerio" has elicited mixed critical response over the years. Patrick Humphries, for once, gets it totally wrong. He doesn't like the song, describing it variously as "stark and unsatisfactory", "one-dimensional", "dragged down by its cumbersome vocal imagery". He finds Linda's vocal on the original album-cut "steely and unbending". Berman is neutrally descriptive: "[the song] couches its scold about heroics and idolatry in a circus metaphor, twisted recognisably by its minor-key signature, and building to an eerie hammered dulcimer and acoustic guitar coda of Erik Satie's *La Balancoire* from 'Sports et Divertissements'." Brian Eno, interviewed for the 1996 BBC Radio 2 biography of Thompson, was typically positive, thoughtful and perceptive:

It's very hard to choose just one song from [the Thompsons'] repertoire, because they did so many fantastic songs. But this song, called "The Great Valerio", is the kind of song that probably only they could ever have written. There's something very plaintive and sad and dark about the feeling of it. It's a song about failure, I think, or the prospect of failure, of someone trying to do something and possibly not succeeding. A sort of looming catastrophe. And it's one

of the great pieces of female singing, I think. Linda's singing on this is absolutely gorgeous.

Eno's comments certainly evoke the palpable tension in the song, the sense of "looming catastrophe" which takes on a vivid reality in the context of Blondin, swaying 150 feet above the water. Thompson's only extended personal commentary on the song is to be found on the wonderful home tutor tapes, *The Guitar* of Richard Thompson, where he emphasises another aspect of the mood which he is seeking to create in the song:

...the lyric is to do with a man who's walking on a high wire and somehow we have to get this across in the music. So there has to be a kind of balance in the way it's played, and this is achieved by a kind of evenness in the right hand picking and a regularity to it. And I think also we have to find a kind of stillness in the playing, something that will demand the attention of the listener, somehow (find) a way of making a room quiet. Now I don't know exactly how you do this. I think it has to do with the intensity of your own playing. So this is maybe something (I) can't really demonstrate or advise on ...

The linkage of music to balance is something we have encountered elsewhere in Thompson's work – for him "all music is a knife-edge". But why was Thompson's imagination so captured, why was he so roused to intensity, by the painted image of a long-dead tightrope walker?

"The Great Valerio" was composed in 1973. Following the critical lambasting received by the *Henry The Human Fly* album on its release in 1972, questions of success and failure, of the difficulty and fragility of the relationships between the writer and his muse, the performer and his audience, preyed on Thompson's mind. In his inevitable mood of despondency and self-doubt, the dramatic image of a performer literally on the edge – viewed during a hometown visit to Glasgow with Linda – provided an ideal metaphor for these preoccupations. A conventional circus metaphor of the high-wire walker might have "worked" – and Thompson subsequently used such a metaphor in his own "Walking On A Wire" of course. But the image of Blondin, threatened by massive elemental forces and in a position of terminal risk, was so much more powerful, relevant and resonant. Thompson's description of the rope, "hung from cloud to cloud" and of the crowd, far below and "stumbling in the mire", make it clear that events are not taking place in a circus tent. Look at the painting – the clouds and the mire are all too real! Compare Thompson's encapsulation of Blondin himself in the song – his eye "steady on the target" and his foot "sure upon the rope" – with the New York Tribune's description at the time of the first crossing of Niagara: "light gray eyes, very keen and piercing, and the manner of a man perfectly self-possessed, and with the most complete confidence in himself". There can be little doubt that "The Great Valerio" is grounded in a physical reality and centres on a historical event. But where does it go from there?

On one level, "The Great Valerio" deals with the three key relationships implicit in any performance or, more specifically,

in any musical performance, in any public singing of a song. The relationships are those between the muse and the writer, between the writer and the performer, and between the performer and the audience. Thompson encapsulated these relationships in 1996 in the title of his album *You? Me? Us?* – where “Me” and “Us” is of course an anagram of “muse”. A number of songs contained on that album treat with specific aspects of the pivotal relationships as we have seen but “The Great Valerio” foreshadowed these songs by twenty years. At the heart of these relationships sits the question of identity: who is speaking to whom and who, ultimately, is the performer, the singer-songwriter, we know as “Richard Thompson”? That is what “The Great Valerio” is ultimately “about”, as we shall eventually see.

The importance of “The Great Valerio” in Thompson’s career-long dissection of the tortured, ambiguous relationship between a writer and his muse is discussed in Chapter Three. In the song, the White Goddess is presented as the artist’s source of inspiration and of inner peace and security. But at the same time, she is the one who exposes

the writer/performer – motivates and equips him to expose himself – to the dangers implicit in public performance, the dangers of balancing on the wire. For the upstarts who lack talent and life-long dedication and commitment to her service, the lure of the muse is both seductive and dangerous: “Fools who think they see the light/ Prepare to balance on the wire”.



In the original album version of the song, the would-be performer’s exposure is encapsulated in a question: “Who will help the tightrope walker/ When he tumbles to the net?” In more recent live performances of the song, however, Thompson has couched the danger in unambiguous terms: “No unseen hand is going

to save you/ As you tumble to the net.” But the distancing of the muse from the fate of the neophyte is also mirrored in the song by the distance, literal and metaphorical, between

the performer and his audience. The most striking imagistic and semantic feature of “The Great Valerio” is the contrast – the literal and metaphorical “space” – between performer and audience. Polarities are established throughout the song. Valerio is “high up above the crowd” who are “watching far below”. He is already attuned and rigorously focussed – “His eye is steady on the target” – but they must “learn to watch together.” His foot is “sure upon the rope” but the crowd can only “falter”, “stumble” and even, in later versions of the song, “tumble”. Valerio is “alone and peaceful as a mountain” while they are collectively scrabbling “in the mire”. He is “certain” but they can only “wonder ...wonder”. Valerio is a dancer but they are mere acrobats. He is a “great hero”. They are “fools”. The fundamental contrast between the performer dancing “in the air” and the crowd below, who escape the mire to become “acrobats of love”, is in fact encapsulated in the performer’s name: “Valerio” is an anagram of “love” and “air”. His name also incorporates that of the legendary French troupe – the Ravel family – who schooled Blondin and led him on the road to international stardom: “I” am “O” without the schooling and opportunity provided by “RAVEL”! That particular anagram is fanciful but, as we shall see, others of more weight and significance might be contained in Valerio’s stage-name.

The contrasts between performer and spectators highlighted in the language and imagistic structure of the song serve at one level to emphasise the polarity of art and reality, the timeless and the temporal. Thompson’s placing of the spectators in the “mire” invites comparison with Yeats’ depiction of the immutable glories of art as set against the passing attractions

of the merely mortal, similarly captured in the words “mere” and “mire” in “Byzantium”:

*A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
All that man is,
All mere complexities,
The fury and the mire of human veins ...
Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,
Planted on the star-lit golden bough,
Can like the cocks of Hades crow,
Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud
In glory of changeless metal
Common bird or petal
And all complexities of mire and blood.*

At another level, we are presented in “The Great Valerio” with a view of the art of performance that is similarly polarised, similarly elitist. Valerio is “superior”, again both literally and metaphorically, and is to be envied: “we would all be that great hero”. Simon Frith, in his comprehensive and insightful study of popular music, *Performing Rites*, argues that music nowadays is heard through three overlapping and contradictory “grids”, grids mapped by what he calls the “art discourse”, the “folk discourse” and the “pop discourse”. In Frith’s terminology, what we are hearing in Valerio is a metaphor for the “art music discourse” central to which is the notion of hierarchy [SF 39]:

There is a clear distinction, that is, between the composer of a work and its performers, between performers and their audience; and the central bourgeois music event, the concert, offers (in its ideal) a transcendent experience, something special, something apart from the everyday world. As Thomas Russell put it ... “To leave a concert hall after a vital experience and fight for a seat in a bus or a train, to jostle for a place in a crowded café, surrounded by people not blessed with the same experience is to become aware of an anti-climax.” [*My italics*].

For the crowd watching Valerio, theirs is indeed a transcendental experience. They may start out stumbling in the mire, but Valerio’s performance transforms them into “acrobats of love”. For Valerio, by contrast, the only potential transformation that awaits him is to tumble to the net. He lifts them up at the risk of suffering a punishing fall. And the sense of physical danger is intensified once we identify Blondin as Valerio’s pre-cursor – there was no net between Blondin and the Niagara River. No unseen hand was ever going to save Blondin if his eye was less than steady or his foot less than sure.

The performer vs audience dialectic which lies at the heart of “The Great Valerio” extends to the concept of time, as experienced differentially by Valerio and the audience. Valerio himself exists in a time vacuum – “time stands still while he is walking.” For the spectators, the concept of time is qualified by the natural world – their “hearts turn like the seasons” – and by their own everyday experience of the mire in which they stumble. Overriding these two dimensions of timeless-

ness and experiential time is a third dimension, that of metrical time. The Satie coda is chosen not only for the appropriateness of its theme – La Balancoire – but also for its metrical precision. John Blacking argues that whereas “ordinary daily experience takes place in a world of actual time, (the) essential quality of music is its power to create another world of virtual time”. [SF 149]. Valerio’s performance – and Thompson’s own guitar playing – creates just such a world, an oasis amid the mire and the murk. Satie himself said that his music “creates a vibration; it has no other goal; it fills the same role as light and heat – as comfort in every form”. [SF 155].

The imagery of contrasting experiences enjoyed by performer and spectator in “The Great Valerio” reinforces an observation by Simon Frith that the experience of performance leads with a seeming inevitability to the performer’s sense of alienation from the audience. This in turn becomes a kind of contempt for the audience. Frith continues:

This is, in one sense, a sociological response: what is work for the musician is play for the audience; the very rhythm of their lives is different, in terms of day and night, let alone status and attention. But what’s more significant here is that the bases of musical appreciation are also different, a necessary consequence of the power relation involved: on the one hand, musicians learn to read and manipulate audiences, to please them with tricks and devices that they, the musicians, despise; on the other hand, the musicians experience rejection by audiences, often of the things with which they are most pleased. . Performance inevitably comes to feel

like a compromise, a compromise which is blamed on the audience. [SF 53]

The complexities and ambiguities inherent in the relationship between writer and performer and audience multiply when we think about real performances of “The Great Valerio” set in specific physical settings at specific points in time. The live performances of “The Great Valerio” in the 1970’s cast Linda Thompson in the role of performer and her writer husband literally as a bystander, albeit one who was required to provide guitar accompaniment to her voice. Thankfully, one great live example is to be found legally on Linda’s retrospective compilation album, appropriately entitled *Dreams Fly Away*. The rendition fully validates Brian Eno’s praise for the quality of Linda’s singing and there is a sad unintentional irony in listening nowadays to Linda, whose career was interrupted for many years by dysphonia, as she delivers this song, which centres on the fear of failure in performance. But a more pertinent irony relates to Thompson himself. The great hero, who, according to most critics, had fallen to the net on the *Henry The Human Fly* album, now finds himself as a fly on the wall, listening to and watching his wife as she sings the song through which he sought to come to terms with that failure. What role should we ascribe to Thompson in these live performances – upstart juggler, Valerio himself or just one of us, who “would all be that great hero”?

The resonance and dynamics of a live performance of “The Great Valerio” alter significantly if we now jump forward to 1982 and the solo performance by Richard Thompson at Folk

City in September of that year, captured on the CD release of *Small Town Romance*. As discussed in Chapter Eight, in live performances in the period immediately following the break-up of the Thompsons’ marriage, Richard went back to his roots and his own back-catalogue as he sought to reinvent himself as a performer. Linda had in a sense represented his safety net throughout their collaboration, providing the vocal quality and the stage presence, which he believed he lacked. His struggle to find both voice and persona is painfully apparent on *Small Town Romance* and, more particularly, on the bootlegged tracks, which were omitted from the official releases of the album. The fear of failure at the heart of the song is amplified by the recognition that the performer himself is failing and knows it only too well. Simon Frith detects some of the same ambiguities in the work of a writer who has been greatly influenced by Thompson:

Elvis Costello, probably the best contemporary writer of character songs, uses a person (and in this context even ‘his own character’ is clearly an act) and a situation to encapsulate particular sensations – lust, jealousy, meanness, betrayal – but, at the same time, his songs are about the enactment of those sensations, about the embarrassment, humiliation and frustration of trying to make such feelings known. Even at their most emotionally intense, Costello’s songs are self-conscious (a self-consciousness reflected, most obviously, in the drawing-attention-to-itself cleverness of his word schemes). For Costello, character songs are not so much ...about people as about characterization.

In Frith's terms, not only does "The Great Valerio" encapsulate the sensations associated with the eponymous hero's impending catastrophic failure but also the writer's feeling of embarrassment, humiliation and frustration when trying to make such feelings known. When Thompson as singer asked his fellow upstart jugglers if they were "really ready yet" his own self-consciousness at the pertinence of the question must have been acute.

"The Great Valerio" takes on an added dimension of meaning and significance if we now consider a more recent solo performance of the song, at Union Chapel in London during Thompson's summer 2001 acoustic tour. The end of the Millennium had been another period of reflection and reappraisal for Thompson, the outcome of which was the career-high Mock Tudor. It was therefore not too surprising to see "The Great Valerio" included in the set list on his first night at Union Chapel. On the second night, tellingly, it was effectively replaced by its sister song, "Walking On A Wire". Looking back, the overriding feeling generated by this performance of the song was one of deep ambiguity, a sense of the profound discrepancy between the setting, the song and the singer. There, in a cavernous de-consecrated chapel, were the true believers – those who had learned "to watch together" over decades – gathered to pay homage to their great hero, Richard Thompson. The song, appropriately, does deal in a sense with hero worship but it places the worshippers themselves in the mire, where they falter and stumble. Those among the congregation who "think they see the light" are characterized as fools. And the hero himself? As ever, he cut an innocuous

figure, clad from head to toe in his usual anonymous black. I referred earlier to Simon Frith's concept of the three "discourses" through which our hearing of music is mediated. The song, "The Great Valerio", as I have argued above, deals directly with the "art discourse." In Chapter Nine, I related the song's emphasis on consumption to Frith's "pop discourse." At the very start of his solo career, Thompson had set his stall out in opposition to the third, "folk discourse" and to the folk establishment:

*Fool your friends, or fool yourself – the choice is crystal clear ...
Do you laugh or do you stick your finger in your ear?
Live in fear, live in fear, live in fear.*

But at Union Chapel, Thompson himself personified the folk discourse, which in Niall MacKinnon's words offers "a very conscious destroying and destruction of glamour" [SF 40] in pursuit of the collective and the "natural", the integration of art and life. A conceptual framework for reconciling the apparently irreconcilable was provided by the jazz critic, Ernest Borneman who argued, in language entirely consistent with the central image in "The Great Valerio", that

...every cycle of civilization re-enacts the Fall of Man in every generation and on every level of experience. Awareness wrecks the naïve innocence of a folk culture and divides it, like Cain and Abel, into embodiments of an ever widening conflict between the eclectic upper-class culture of the few and the epigonic cliché culture of the vast masses who have

lost the innocence of a naïve folk art without gaining the awareness of a fully developed aesthetic. [SF 42]

But Borneman's thesis doesn't help us to resolve the specific ambiguities and ironies which abound when one returns to Union Chapel and to a consideration of Richard Thompson performing this song, in this setting, at this point in time. Here we have a cult singer/songwriter pretending to be a superstar. Here we have a shambling black-clad folk singer likening himself to the man who walked the Niagara Gorge dressed in tights and a skirt. Here we have the writer who nailed himself to the Calvary Cross identifying himself with the audience who "feed on" Valerio. Conversely, here too we have someone who, over the last thirty years, has proved himself to be the consummate English writer and guitarist pretending to be a failure. Who does "he" really think he is and why does he keep returning to this song?

The simple answer is that it's all in a name. The painting of Blondin crossing the Falls gave Thompson the starting point for "The Great Valerio" and he may also have been struck, sardonically amused even, by the physical similarity between himself and Blondin. But it is in the name Great Valerio that the ultimate significance of the song resides. That shouldn't surprise us: Thompson has always set great store by song titles. As we have heard him tell Paul Zollo, "I love titles. I'm obsessive about titles; I love to find a good title. You know, a title can paint a picture." Or in this case, call to mind a very specific picture.

The name on the gravestone in Kensal Green cemetery is Jean Francois Gravelet Blondin. He is buried there next to his wife, Charlotte, and a second woman. I like to think that the second woman was his muse, but in reality she was his second wife. He is always remembered by his stage name but he was born Gravelet. Thompson's songs are littered with linguistic "jokes", puns and anagrams and word games, but one of the most significant lies in the close – too close – correspondence between all the available letters in GRAVELET and those in GREAT VaLErio, or if you prefer, GrEaT VALERio.

We might at this stage also note the serendipitous similarity between "Gravelet" and "Graves", the poet-scholar whose philosophies and beliefs so informed Richard Thompson's view of his own art and of his relationship with his muse. Graves was forced to recognize that, whilst the poetic language of myth should inform and sensitize our lives, we all nowadays use a language – letters, words, meanings, significances – which has become progressively mis-informed, de-sensitized and decoupled from myth and magic. We typically communicate in the language of Stradhoughton, like Keith Waterhouse's Rita:

There was little meaning left in anything she actually said; her few rough phrases had been so worn through constant use that she now relied not on words but on the voice itself, and the modulation of the animal sounds it produced, to express the few thick slabs of meaning of which she was capable. In moments of tenderness certain gruffness, like Woodbine smoke, would curl into her throat, but she had

long ago forgotten, and probably never knew, the vocabulary of human kindness.

In *The White Goddess*, Graves sought to restore to language its lost potency and sensitivity and to reconstruct “a historical grammar of the language of poetic myth”. To that end, he devoted much of his life to the deconstruction of ancient texts, seeking to solve ancient word games buried deep in those texts, in pursuit of the meaning and magic to be found in poetry and, hence, in our own lives. Thompson of course acknowledged his debt to Graves’ verbal “jokes” in the fourth verse of “Hope You Like The New Me”:

*I stole your jokes - just the good ones -
How the gang all laughed with glee.
I also stole the way you tell them.*

A minor Thompsonian epiphany: the uncomprehending “gang”, fittingly, are all “gleemen.” Graves’ personal epiphany ultimately came in the form of revelations regarding the profound significance of certain names in ancient texts and the truth which the initial letters of those names, recombined, could suggest. Our final epiphany concerning the identity of Richard Thompson comes in a similar, sibyl-like, magical form. There is a final coincidence to observe, in a literal and a religious sense. Hearing Thompson perform “The Great Valerio” in Union Chapel, we were on Holy Ground. We are now about to heter-skelter down.

If we play the same game with the name “Robert Graves” that we played with “Gravelet”, we find another too-hard-to-believe coincidence:

ROBERT GrAVES vs. GREAT ValERiO.

In other words, the name “Great Valerio” literally encapsulates both the light of divine inspiration which emanates from the muse – as reflected in the name of her devoted servant, Robert Graves – and the heroism that is performance art – as reflected in Blondin’s real name, Gravelet. The poet/musician is required to master performance if he is to balance on the knife-edge and convey the muse’s poetic truth to those – all of us – who stumble in the mire below. As Keith Waterhouse’s eponymous hero learned the hard way, there is no future in being a “brilliant scriptwriter” but a “rotten actor”.

The doubters amongst us might still fling garlic at the magician and fall back on statistical significance. Yes, there is considerable overlap between the names Graves, Gravelet and Great Valerio, but so what? What about the letters which are left over when you try to force-fit “Robert Graves” into the name of Thompson’s character. There are, indeed, some letters left over – B,R,S,A,L,I. Now, finally, we do what Robert Graves would have done with those letters and what Richard Thompson was perhaps inviting – maybe, challenging – us to do when he adopted Great Valerio as an alter ego in the first place. We look for the magic contained within them. We recombine them. We use them as a true poet would use them, to solve the ultimate riddle: who is “Richard Thompson”?

Simple – B LIAR’s the answer.

Throughout his long career, Richard Thompson has adapted myths – many acquired courtesy of Robert Graves, but others culled from a diversity of sources – and has incorporated them into songs that, on one level at least, deal with the relationship between the poet and his muse, from whom the artist derives his inspiration. Thompson's most audacious and, in a sense, revealing act was, however, to create his own latter-day myth, centred on the legendary high-wire artist, Gravelet, AKA Blondin. When he grafted poetic inspiration, ex Graves, onto performance art, ex Gravelet, Thompson in effect created the persona of the ultimate poet/performer – singer/songwriter – Valerio. But in so doing, Thompson – deliberately or inadvertently – cast himself in the role of the impotent dreamer, B(illy) Liar.

Billy Fisher, too, was an aspiring songwriter and one of his songs was performed by his friend Arthur Crabtree at a Saturday night hop at the Roxy:

*You seem to have changed with the moon,
Now my heart beats out of tune,
Can't get along without you.*

*I want to discover
If I'm to blame,
Because as a lover
You're not the same so tell me why.*

In the light of the connections we have identified between Thompson's work and Keith Waterhouse's novel, there are

some nice accidental ironies here. For one, the idea of the "moon" affecting the "tune" links neatly back to the Triple Goddess as muse. For another, if you cherry-pick words from Billy's bridge – "I ... a lover ... not the same" – you end up, in a seemingly inevitable coincidence, with "Valerio". And finally, when Arthur returns to the bandstand, having rowed with Billy over his cod-American rendition of "Can't Get Along Without You", he resumes his performance with the immortal Richard Thompson ditty, "Hokey Cokey". Not quite there, but near enough for blues! To state the obvious, "Can't Get Along Without You", as conceived, written and comprehended by Billy, is pretty awful. Like his fiancée Rita, Billy is ultimately incapable of finding a meaningful vocabulary of human kindness. For Billy, stumbling in the awful mire of Stradhoughton, the dream of walking out along the high wire stretching from Ambrosia to Tin Pan Alley was just that – a dream of a light he thought he saw. For Richard Thompson, in the course of his thirty-odd years as bone-man up and down the nation, the light has continued to shine brightly and, as I suggested earlier, under its illumination he has mysteriously and magically transmogrified, from Billy Liar to Billy Lyre.

The "Valerio" and "Billy Liar" alter egos have stood Richard Thompson in good stead for thirty years and have served as masks which he has held up against a world which remains obstinately indifferent to his massive talent. Along the way, other masks have been tried – at the outset, Crazy Man Michael, Dr Monk, the Human Fly and the Poor Ditching Boy; much later, the King of Bohemia, Julius and Sam Jones. But throughout his performing career, Thompson has returned at regular in-

tervals to the Valerio alter ego, as if, somehow, it carries some deeper meaning for him. In his most recent “dreaming back” he has adopted, in the sibylline revelations of “Hope You Like The New Me”, the persona of the mature poet, the craftsman, the “uninhabited” romantic ruin that “IS TO LET” or “T. S. Eliot”. The same song of course incorporates a testament to Blondin whose walk, “the one with purpose ... says there is no mountain I can’t climb.” The alter-ego of Valerio, derived from Blondin, has indeed fooled people “all of the time.” The Eliot persona may yet prove equally enduring, though hopefully somewhat less opaque.

There was a time when I feared Mock Tudor might prove to be Thompson’s “Little Gidding.” The latter was Eliot’s final “serious” poem. Thereafter, he wrote cerebral dramas that few would actually go out of their way to watch nowadays, and instead of writing another *Wasteland*, he inadvertently scripted *Cats*. In the second section of “Little Gidding” Eliot’s words, from the mouth of one of his alter egos, the “familiar compound ghost” of Yeats, convey an air of finality and world-weariness: “last year’s words belong to last year’s language/ And next year’s words await another voice.” At times when I listened to Mock Tudor in the weeks following its release, I detected the same ghost stalking the tracks. Initially, it felt like another of Richard’s little jokes at our expense – “I just laugh to myself and move off down the street”. But at times, a darker sub-text percolated its way to the surface. It’s actually there in the song titles – “Crawl Back (Under My Stone)”, “Dry My Tears And Move On”, “Walking The Long Miles Home”, “That’s All, Amen, Close The Door”. And it’s certainly there

in the final breathless lines to “Crawl Back” and their exhortation to “forget about me”. As if we could! At the time of writing “Little Gidding”, Eliot did still hold out the hope that “the end is where we start from”. All of us who have loved Richard Thompson’s music over the last thirty years must surely have prayed that Mock Tudor is where he would start from and that, *Cats* on the tour shirt notwithstanding, he still intended to find “another voice” in which to transform us fools once more into acrobats of love, disciples of the Great Valerio. To find that other voice required Richard to dig deep into an old kit bag.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SAM JONES'S OLD KIT BAG

He goes deeper and says more original things than most songwriters. I don't like to compare any songwriter to another but, you know, there's Randy Newman, and Paul Simon, and Dylan and I think Richard Thompson's working at least on that level. I've been in love with those ballads of Richard's since I first heard them. "Dimming Of The Day" is one of the most beautiful and the most heartbreaking songs which I've ever recorded ... He's funny and he's not self-involved and, you know, he loves his life as a dad. He's a beacon for people that are traversing the more "occupational hazard" part of rock'n'roll. Richard seems to have all the fun without all the dastardly results the rest of us have to live through. I don't see him hanging out at "the scene" too much when there's big parties with Don Henley. He's a grown up ... and he leads a very interesting path through this show business world, manoeuvring his ship independent of the slag heap that most of us are in.

Bonnie Raitt

I won't call him "the English Bob Dylan" because I might as well call Bob Dylan "the American Richard Thompson"

... Richard is driven from inside. He goes on writing songs, playing the guitar in front of people, and singing them his songs because he has no choice. He goes at it with a will!

Martin Carthy

We don't talk about it. He does that job but we never refer to it as "his job, his work." I never even say, "how's the music going honey?" or anything. And it's because we have that distance, because I respect [his privacy], because we don't have to live the music all the time – I think that's what's worked for twenty years ... Living with a creative guy, well, it has its positives and its negatives. It's not like living with John Denver! Now, of course, I hear little snippets around the house. I might hear something but I never even admit that I'm listening to that. I'd love to hear those "songs in progress." It would be great! I'd love to have a little microphone into what he hears. I don't know what he hears in there!

Nancy Covey

There was sooth-saying in all of those songs.

Linda Kenis

You write a song sometimes from a mood. You don't write a song necessarily thinking, "well, I should take a balanced view about this topic." You write a song in a fit of emotion. You do push it all the way. You do push it to the limit. But that doesn't mean that's where you live ... Music is spiritual stuff, you know. It's a very spiritual thing to play music at any level, I believe. It's very spiritual stuff. And we have a duty as musicians to explore that side of ourselves. It's a very important thing to do. We've got to look at ourselves and ask, "what are we doing as human beings?"

Richard Thompson

I've been over there. And it's a lovely, beautiful garden.

Bonnie Raitt

The Old Kit Bag was finally released in Europe on the Cooking Vinyl label on 3rd February 2003. After a career largely spent resisting the conformist pressures of major record labels, collaboration with the eclectic, independent and independently-minded CV must have felt like a spiritual return home: "The music business has changed. I'm no longer on a major label so I made The Old Kit Bag as a self-funded album then licensed it [to Cooking Vinyl]. I should have started doing that years ago because it means you own your own re-

cordings." The three-and-a-half years between the release of Mock Tudor and that of its successor represented a busy and productive time for Thompson. Extensive solo touring, the launch of his web site in July 2002, the subsequent Internet release of the "live" Mock Tudor album, the 1000 Years Of Popular Music project and three separate "slots" at Cropredy 2002 all kept him in the eyes of the devoted. For him, the most pleasing form of recognition probably came in the form of an award for Bluegrass Song of the Year for "1952 Vincent Black Lightning" in 2002. Thompson would have relished the irony implicit in his exporting a vintage song about an antique British vehicular icon to the USA. Years earlier, Marc Ellington had commented on the Appalachian feel to Thompson's playing on his original cut on Rumor & Sigh, so there was a certain appropriateness to "1952 VBL" getting the full ethnic treatment at the hands of the Del McCoury Band. The latter's performance, on the Del & The Boys album, is great fun, and one could almost forgive McCoury his presumption in relocating the song from Boxhill to Knoxville. However, the up-tempo "swing" treatment robs the song of a certain necessary gravitas and just serves to remind the listener that, with the exception of a number of definitive treatments by Sandy and Linda, Thompson is usually the most effective interpreter of his own songs. Least welcome form of recognition for me certainly came in the form of an interview on BBC Radio in January 2003, conducted by Stuart Maconie in the absence of the regular presenter, Johnny Walker. In the face of some pretty inane questions from an interviewer who clearly knew little about Thompson's background and even less about his

music, Richard just about kept his temper and his dignity. The teatime crowd on Radio 2 almost certainly went away none the wiser and probably couldn't wait to get back to Kenny G. The balance was restored a few days after the release of *The Old Kit Bag* when BBC TV screened a laudable one-hour documentary on the life and work of Richard Thompson. The quotations at the start of this chapter are all taken from my transcript of that programme.

The Old Kit Bag – subtitled “Unguent, Fig Leaves & Tour-niquets For The Soul” – was extensively “trailed” in the media and on the net in the months leading up to its release and many of the songs on the album had benefited from “singing in” in concert performances throughout 2001/2. The track listing, when it finally appeared, therefore offered few surprises:

Chapter 1 – The Haunted Keepsake

1. Gethsemane
2. Jealous Words
3. I'll Tag Along
4. A Love You Can't Survive
5. One Door Opens
6. First Breath

Chapter 2 – The Pilgrim's Fancy

7. She Said It Was Destiny
8. I've Got No Right To Have It All
9. Pearly Jim
10. Word Unspoken, Sight Unseen

11. Outside Of The Inside
12. Happy Days And Auld Lang Syne

What was perhaps surprising was the “stripped down” feel to the album. The band comprised Richard Thompson, Danny Thompson and Michael Jerome and according to Richard “the idea was to keep it small. I did do a few overdubs – second guitar, dulcimer, single-finger keyboard parts, all the easy stuff – but other than that, everything was pretty much a live performance.” The album benefited from the understated production of John Chelew – recreating the mood of his earlier work with John Hiatt – and from stunning backing vocals from Judith Owen. Her slightly off-key, out-of-kilter contribution to “Word Unspoken, Sight Unseen” is a real highlight. Any concerns that Thompson might struggle to find “another voice” after the monumental *Mock Tudor* were duly allayed – on *Kit Bag* Eliot’s “fullfed beast” kicks shit out of the empty pail!

The title of the album is taken from the World War I song, “Pack Up Your Troubles In Your Old Kit Bag.” That song is filled with faux optimism and an exhortation to “smile, boys, that’s the style.” In the face of the horrors of trench warfare, the British infantryman was still expected to play the game and retain a crinkled upper lip. But from a modern perspective the song simply sounds macabre, like one of Richard’s little jokes:

*And if you're unburied, the likes of me will find you.
You're no good to worms, but you might become the finest glue.*

*We'll grind you up and spread you out as fertiliser, too.
Sam Jones, deliver them bones.*

Thompson's album is indeed an old kit bag full of troubles – twisted minds, lives gone wrong, failed relationships – and there is little overt cause for optimism, let alone mirth, in this rattle bag. The painting featured on the album sleeve depicts a “little boy blue” with twisted staff in one hand and an old bag slung over his shoulder. Despite his apparently sightless eyes, he seems to be walking confidently and purposefully down a winding road, away from his little red house on the hilltop. The downhill path ends abruptly, however, and his next stride will take him into the abyss. The image calls to mind “Man In Need” and like that song, *The Old Kit Bag* addresses the fundamental question – “who’s going to cure the heart of a man in need.” The album’s sub title refers to “Unguents, Fig Leaves & Tourniquets For The Soul” and for much of the album that’s what we seem to be getting – sticking plaster to patch up broken hearts, repair shattered lives and paper over the cracks in the cranium. But as ever with Thompson, appearances can be deceptive.

Gethsemane

The darkest, most malevolent opening to any Thompson album. As an exercise in grabbing the listener’s attention and establishing mood, tone and context for a whole album, only “When I Get To The Border” comes close. In the list of reso-

nant Thompsonian song titles, “Gethsemane” is right up there with “From Galway To Graceland” or “Beeswing.” Thompson talked to Pamela Winters about the personal context of the song:

It’s the story of a person, a relative of mine, who grew up in a very idyllic childhood – tremendous freedom, what you want for children, that sense of freedom, running through the woods, sailboats out on the river. That thing where as a kid you just disappear for the whole of a summer’s day and come back at evening and your parents know you’re OK. So he had a great childhood, but as he got older, life became more disappointing. Nothing quite lived up to that. And parental expectations – he could never live up to parental expectations. So life became harder, and he began to drink a lot, and he got really ill ... So it’s a boy’s song, about the responsibilities of maleness.

The song’s protagonist looks back on those “perfect end-less” childhood days when he had fire in his eyes and seemed to hold destiny in his own hands. Back then, the exhortation to “be something fine” seemed a realistic aspiration. But his memories are, in the context of the album, “haunted keepsakes.” Now, the parental encouragement to “be something fine” means as little as “smile, boys, smile.” The portents were there from the start: the headstones, crypts and tombs among which the boys played; the smoke and the noise of the city just down river; the “war-whoops and secret signs” that take on sinister connotations as the song progresses; and above all,

the name given to the setting of the childhood idyll, Gethsemane. The Garden of Gethsemane was the site of Christ's betrayal and arrest on His last night of freedom before His crucifixion. Tellingly, baptism for Thompson's character takes the form of having his head "flushed ... down in the latrines." He is "frozen in [his] sacrament." Like Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, he "never saw the enemy" until it was too late. Thompson's song proceeds to catalogue the misfortunes that subsequently befell the protagonist – facing the enmity of "staring, uncaring folk" back in the city's noise and smoke; enduring brutality during military service; encountering the betrayal of bosses. Now he faces the recognition that his own children are hell bent on self-destruction, having never enjoyed the "perfect world" that he recalls from his own childhood. Pains in his head presage "bad news" and we're reminded of the earlier reference in "Gethsemane" to "estuary smells coming up on the breeze", which in turn calls to mind the bleak depiction of the human condition in Thompson's "Bad News Is All The Wind Can Carry." You're also reminded of Thompson's comments on life in California:

I've always written about England really. As you write, you carry the landscape around with you. Because I'm not a "beach boy", somehow it doesn't sit right with me to use [California] as the landscape for whatever the drama is. So I have to take the characters and put them back into a landscape I understand.

In his Thames estuary landscape, the protagonist of "Gethsemane" now faces a living hell:

*Who sucked out the freedom, days without end
Under the weight of it all you must bend.*

Jealous Words

"Jealous Words" sees a superficial lightening of the load and a return to more familiar territory. This is the first of a series of songs on the album that portray failing relationships. In this case, "suspicion has ripped us apart" and the embittered paramour, Rosie Lee, unpacks her kit bag of wrongs, suffered and imagined, in order to justify excluding the speaker:

*How you cursed and you cried
As you locked me outside
You said I was bad from the start*

He, meanwhile, carries his own baggage in the form of "jealous words [that] won't lie still in my heart."

I'll Tag Along

The next track paints a humorous portrait of a gullible youth who tags along with a group of friends of a friend on a

wild night out. He pays the price, not only in “cash or plastic” but in frazzled brain cells and loss of face and stomach contents: “Might have to hurl when the Molotov bites ... I’ll be right back ... I’d kill for the loo.” On a more serious note, the youth’s fate recalls that of the character in the opening track:

*Being daring with the staring, uncaring folk
Who laugh with you, laugh at you, you’ll never get the joke*

He is also one of a catalogue of Thompson characters over the years whose pursuit of amnesia – “unguents” for his soul – ends badly.

A Love You Can’t Survive

The anti-hero of “A Love You Can’t Survive” is another character whose life was “derailed in [his] teens.” The image recalls an earlier Thompson reference to an imminent train wreck in “Dead Man’s Handle.” In “A Love You Can’t Survive”, the protagonist set sail for Africa as a peace volunteer and ended up in a Brazzaville prison, having killed a man in a street fight. He eventually sailed home with “a half-ton of charlie built into the bulkhead” and now lives on the proceeds in splendid isolation in his house on the mountain. Interviewed by Andy Kershaw on BBC Radio 3 in April 2003, Thompson said that the song was based on two true stories. The first was that of a school friend who went to Africa on VSO and “never came back.” The other story was that of “someone else

I knew who did the big drug run, got away with it and disappeared somewhere in America.” The song is tied into the fabric of the album by the protagonist’s preoccupation with the memory of his lost love – “the one face that won’t go away.” The references to the peace volunteers and the Lamb and the character’s statement that he is “King of the clouds and all I survey” also link this song to a complex strand of religious iconography running through the album. But there is a suggestion of a specific literary allusion that adds perspective and deeper resonance to the song and, indeed, to the whole album. Thompson’s reference to Brazzaville may be a specific allusion to William Boyd’s powerful 1990 novel, *Brazzaville Beach*. Boyd’s heroine, the fittingly named Hope Clearwater, lives alone on Brazzaville Beach, somewhere on the coast of post-colonial Africa. The novel recalls her recent experiences in Africa – which included being captured and imprisoned by a band of Congolese rebels - and her more distant past in England. She broods specifically on her troubled relationship with her now-dead husband, John, a manic-depressive mathematician who committed suicide following the breakdown of their marriage. For her, John is “a love you can’t survive.” She also ponders the three questions that she believes every human being seeks to answer:

*What can I know?
What ought I to do?
What may I hope for?*

Lest we think the allusion is accidental, we should note that shortly before John's suicide, he and Hope meet for a drink in "the Lamb and Flag in Chaldon Keynes."

One Door Opens

In "One Door Opens" we encounter another Thompson stereotype, the forsaken lover who shrugs his shoulders "as if it doesn't matter." The language of the song recalls that of "Don't Renege On Our Love":

*She may quit you, she may forsake you
Drift away like a phantom in a fever
Who walks in to your heart of solitude
Who walks into the den of the deceiver*

Vs.

*Now your eyes don't meet mine.
You've got a pulse like fever.
Do I take you for a lover
Or just a deceiver?*

We're left in no doubt as to what the speaker carries in his kit bag:

*When love breaks like a precious string of pearls
A thousand memories, they roll away and scatter*

First Breath

"First Breath" marks a welcome respite from the doom and gloom that permeate the first chapter of *The Old Kit Bag*. The context of a relationship on the brink of failure is expressed in familiar terms:

*The frost is cruel
And fades the sign
On that little place
That I call mine*

This is the language of "Missie How You Let Me Down." But unlike "Missie" – and, indeed, unlike most of the other Thompson songs on this theme – "First Breath" holds out the promise of a new beginning. It's implicit in the title, of course, but even more so in the image of the songbird:

*Inch by inch
Word by word
The lock is sprung
That caged the bird
Let's love
What's left
Last dance
First breath*

The image here is more akin to "Bird In God's Garden" than it is to "Killing Jar" or "Oh I Swear." In the first track on

the album, freedom was “sucked out” of the entrapped character. Here, we have the prospect of resuscitation.

She Said It Was Destiny

The opening song to Thompson’s second chapter – entitled “The Pilgrim’s Fancy” – is at first hearing a light-hearted, Lennon-and-McCartney-style take on the age-old theme, “our love was written in the stars.” But we have met many characters like this protagonist in the Thompson back-catalogue: “I’m not proud of my deceit ... To come so near and then retreat.” Familiar too is the imagery of entrapment and violence: “She’s thrown a net on me/ Razor wire geometry.” The idea that this razor dance was fated also relates back to the album’s opening track: “In your eyes there’s fire, in your hand destiny.”

I’ve Got No Right To Have It All

“I’ve Got No Right To Have It All” feels as if it was written for a Broadway stage musical in the forties, and foreshadows the preoccupation of the lovelorn lady in the album’s closing track with the old songs that bring comfort “To a heart that’s as empty as mine”:

*I wish you well
And darling keep in touch*

*And if he loves you
I hope he loves you as much
It’s just my fantasy
You leaving him for me
I’ve got no right to have it all*

Shades of “Until The Real Thing Comes Along.” However, the central image epitomises the existential dilemma of most of the characters who populate The Old Kit Bag and leaves the parentage of this song in little doubt:

*I’ll cling like a drowning man
To my driftwood piece of memory
And where’s the peace of mind
Among the debris left behind*

The language also recalls another great song on the theme of amnesia, “I Still Dream”:

*It was cruel of you to stand
At my door and take my hand.
Like a drowning man, I clung to my defenses.*

Pearly Jim

Metaphorically, “Pearly Jim” is in the business of selling life belts to drowning men and offering tourniquets for the

soul: “He’ll show you Paradise [or] at least some place quite nice.” However, Jim’s pearly gates protect his exclusive armed compound on “the balmy side of town” and the song leaves us in no doubt that his crusade to raise “alms for the poor” starts from the assumption that charity begins and ends at home. The song’s protagonist has put his life on the line and his property in hock to bankroll Jim, in order to save a conscience that “scream(s) between the chaos and the dream.” The phrase has a distinctly Eliotian ring: “Between the essence/ And the descent/ Falls the shadow.” The blandishments of Jim are seductive in a universe where there are few easy answers from politicians or psychotherapists:

*Chairman Mao’s got a whole lot of thoughts
And R D Laing’s got me tied up in knots*

Word Unspoken, Sight Unseen

The antidote to Pearly Jim’s empty words – “Alms for the poor/ Alms for the poor” – and superficial glitz – “He’s got a pearly suit/ For every new recruit/ You’ll feel so thrilled to bits” – is contained in the next song. In a world that is a “tainted place of slow and hidden pain” the one sure tourniquet for the soul comes in the form of a “Word Unspoken, Sight Unseen.” This calls to mind the “rumor and sigh of unimagined seas” but the song’s true antecedents lie firmly in the Koran. The message is plain. The old kit bag and all those haunted keepsakes must be jettisoned:

*All the past I shall erase
And never look again
On child’s memories ...
Take my trophies from the rack
The medals from my chest
The walls wash clean*

The answer to Hope’s question, “what ought I to do?” is “submit”, Islam. That is the true “Pilgrim’s Fancy”:

*So I come to you a shell
Make of me what you must
And I shall bend
What you need I cannot tell
But I shall sweep the dust
And patch and mend*

In the opening song on the album, the protagonist had faced enslavement and oppression – “Who sucked out the freedom ... Under the weight of it all you must bend.” Here, submission to the will of the Beloved is the key to liberation and enlightenment. From this recognition, we might revisit “First Breath” – “The lock is sprung/ That caged the bird.” In this context, “First Breath” has the same significance as “First Light.” We might also note the significance of the line drawing of a medal that sits next to the lyrics of “Word Unspoken” on the album sleeve. On the one hand this represents the paraphernalia – “the medals from my chest” – that the Lover

must relinquish. On the other hand, it represents a prize medallion:

Won't you give me an answer?

Why is your heart as hard towards the one who loves you best?

When the man with the answer

Has wakened you and warned you and called you to the test,

Wake up from your sleep that builds like clouds upon your eyes

And win back the life you had that's now a dream of lies.

*Turn your back on yourself and if you follow, you'll win the
lover's prize.*

This is a strange, this is a strange affair.

Outside Of The Inside

It is probably no coincidence that Thompson's most eloquent and affecting expression of belief in over twenty years should be sandwiched between the hypocrisies of "Pearly Jim" and the intransigence that follows. In the wake of the "Salman Rushdie affair", Thompson had striven manfully to defend the indefensible. In "Outside Of The Inside" he acknowledges the fine line that sits between belief and bigotry. In his introduction to the song in concert, Thompson has described it as a "Taliban's eye view of the world" and it is a fitting condemnation of a regime and a value system that inter alia could justify blowing up irreplaceable Buddhist statues in the name of God. The "message on the wind" that blows through "Outside Of The Inside" carries the same grim portents as the estuary

breezes that sent shivers down the spine in "Gethsemane." The line drawing of the apple on the album sleeve recalls the eating of the forbidden fruit in another Biblical garden and makes the ironic point that the apple itself was not "corrupt and rotten to the core." More literally, it recalls one of Isaac Newton's "small ideas for little boys."

Happy Days And Auld Lang Syne

"Happy Days And Auld Lang Syne" is a sister song to other Thompson "three AM phone calls" such as "Waltzing's For Dreamers." It forms a fitting finale to a great album and provides a suitable testament to many of the songs on the album:

And sometimes you never connect with a song

Till it's telling the way that you feel

Putting words to your story, all the pain and the glory

How can it be written so real

Unguent, fig leaves and tourniquets for the soul.

Throughout the nineties, Thompson's mainstream albums had in a sense reflected an increasing introspection and a preoccupation with issues of artistic identity and integrity and the fraught relationships between writer, performer and audience. The Old Kit Bag is in many ways a more outward-looking album than its immediate predecessors. Thompson is again scanning the big picture and, as he surveys the wasteland, he

detects similar symptoms to those diagnosed and treated in, say, *Amnesia* or any of the other great albums of the eighties. But like *Amnesia*, *Kit Bag* is very much a child of its time and recent political events cast a long shadow, as Richard suggested when I met him in July 2003:

The songs on *Mock Tudor* were written to a “topic.” *Kit Bag* is more a case of songs on all different themes. If there is any unity to it, it comes from writing songs at the same period, so there’s some kind of zeitgeist or something that’s overlying everything. I think writing since 9/11 has been interesting – I think there is a feeling of a tonal shift in the world and things are a little different. So I think there might be a reflection of that in the music.

He also pointed to the cohesiveness that derives from using a small core of world-class musicians – Thompson, Thompson, Jerome – throughout the album:

I think the other thing is that you get a “unity” from the recording process at times. That’s just an external thing, I suppose – you use the same musicians on the same songs and it does help things to hang together. It gives that illusion, anyway.

Like all of Thompson’s albums post *Bright Lights*, *The Old Kit Bag* is ultimately an affirmation of faith. There is only one final answer to the questions posed by Boyd’s *Hope Clearwater*, even if that answer is couched obliquely in a “Word

Unspoken, Sight Unseen.” But even in that magical, mystical song there is a hint of heresy, a serpent in the shrubbery. Tending house for the Beloved is the ultimate form of submission but another deity had much earlier demanded that a supplicant “sweep the dust”:

*You can be my broom boy,
Scrub me till I shine in the dark.
I’ll be your light till Doomsday.*

The writer’s journey may pass through Gethsemane, but it inevitably ends at Calvary, in the presence of a pale-faced lady who “said it was destiny.”

Reviews of *The Old Kit Bag* were generally favourable. David Sinclair, in a full-page review in the first edition of *Word* magazine, described the album as “carefully crafted and scrupulously executed as ever.” Another long-time fan, Nigel Williamson, writing in *Uncut* under the appropriate heading “Best of British” felt that compared to *Mock Tudor*, “the subject matter is more universal, but the imagery – both musical and lyrical – is still uniquely Albion, across a dozen exquisite songs.” His conclusion was that, even if *Kit Bag* didn’t quite reach the heights of *Bright Lights* or *Shoot Out The Lights*, it was still “good to have him back.” It may seem hard to disagree with any of that but the dinosaurs who cobble together *fRoots* consigned the album to a dismissive and cravenly anonymous review in their “And The Rest” pages: “Familiar tunes and twangerism, unimpassioned vocals, and mostly mainstream rock rather than rooted.” Do you laugh or do you stick your

fingers in your ears – or do you just cancel your subscription and spend the money you save on a limited edition of The Old Kit Bag? Ironically, Billy Connolly had already provided the rejoinder on BBC TV:

Richard Thompson made me listen differently. Who's this?! He's the guy who kicked folk music's ass and gave it that youth thing. He gave it a beautiful colour and a stage to stand on and be seen as a sexy thing. Whereas those fatsos with the corduroy were all giving it "Sovay, Sovay." Get out of here! That was then – this is NOW."

Plus ça change.

Given Thompson's decision to "go indie", it is perhaps surprising that The Old Kit Bag benefited from the kind of marketing push that so many of his earlier albums had failed to receive. Over the period March to August 2003, Thompson toured extensively to promote the album – Europe, UK, USA, then back to Europe and the UK, USA, Canada. He was ably assisted by Pete Zorn, the admirable Earl Harvin on drums, and Danny Thompson – who was taken ill and replaced for a period by Rory McFarlane. Quality merchandise – great kit bags! – was available at concerts and on the web and the album itself appeared in a number of "limited edition" variants and on vinyl. In interview, Richard placed this seemingly frenetic activity in a broader context:

There's a necessary cycle. In 1969, I think Fairport released three albums that year and were able to tour them suc-

cessively, because the cycle, the process of writing-recording-touring, was six months. It's now about two and a half years. So there's an inevitable pulse, you know, that throbs with a new band album – what you'd call a new high profile album - where you want the company to get behind it, and you want to promote it, and you want to tour it. And this is one of those years, you know – it's a big year for us, lots and lots of touring. And the good news is we're probably more able to balance the books on this tour than on any tour we've ever done. We've managed to get ourselves to a reasonable position, where what we do is really concert driven rather than record driven. It's been that way all along really, I suppose. We haven't been able to rely on radio or TV to get the word out there so it's mostly been word of mouth, you know, steady very loyal fans who keep coming back. So that's been a big help. The web site helps as well, but that's still a small number of people who pay attention to that kind of thing.

The new and increasingly effective Bees Web channel to market was further exploited with the Spring 2003 releases of a 1988 live band performance – More Guitar – and a 2002 performance of 1000 Thousand Years of Popular Music. The idea for the latter came ironically from Playboy magazine. In late 1999, they ignored Thompson's nominations for their "ten greatest songs of the millennium" feature. His response to the rebuff was a series of occasional concerts in which he put the record straight. He comments in his album sleeve notes:

The idea is that Popular Music comes in many forms, through many ages, and as older forms get superseded, sometimes the baby is thrown out with the bathwater – great ideas, tunes, rhythms, styles, get left in the dust of history, so let's have a look at what's back there, and see if it still does the trick.

And he amplified on this in interview, placing this particular form of “dreaming back” in a long, very English tradition:

I've always been a fan of history and the old dictum that those who don't know history are bound to repeat it! It teaches you a lot about the future. As you look backwards and go slowly through musical history, you see all the stuff that got left behind, the stuff that got jettisoned in the name of the next trend or the next process and you think, wow, there's actually some great ideas back there. So that's a real source of inspiration ... Someone said of English classical composers that they endlessly go back and reinterpret the landscape. Hence, Vaughan Williams' variations on Thomas Tallis, Arthur Bliss' on John Blow etc. A very deliberate sense of lineage, which foreign critics sometimes consider 'sentimental' – and sometimes it is ...

The resultant album is a joyous celebration of over eight hundred years of popular music. Even the fRoots mob would be hard pressed to complain at the Thompson take on “Sumer Is Icumen In.” And even my hitherto unconverted son had to acknowledge that Richard's versions of Prince or Britney or

Abba cast him in a totally different light: maybe if he could just do a Madonna number! But if proof were needed of Thompson's unparalleled competence, courage and conviction as a live performer nowadays, look no further than his duet with Judith Owen on “There Is Beauty ...” from *The Mikado*. Totally outrageous and totally outwith the common herd of singers of popular songs. I suggested to Richard that his work on 1000 Years seemed to have coloured *Kit Bag*, the songs on which are replete with musical allusions to earlier song forms:

You know, it's possible. I've listened to early music for a long time so that might not be a new thing. I've known Phil Pickett for ever and I've enjoyed his knowledge and picking his brains about music. He's a fascinating guy. I suppose I've always listened to all eras of music. But doing a project like 1000 Years, you do really get to go a bit deeper. When you actually learn the songs for performance, you do learn something more about them and their structure than when you're just humming along or listening in a passive way. So you could well be right.

More Guitar features excerpts from the November 1988 concert that had already contributed the definitive versions of “Can't Win” and “Crash The Party” that appear on *Watching The Dark*. Thompson's late eighties collaborations with Messrs Frith and Kaiser are much in evidence in this extended master class in guitar pyrotechnics. In a sense, the decision to release *More Guitar* simply confirmed what already seemed

apparent from the spring 2003 concert performances, which saw the welcome reappearance of Richard Thompson as Britain's finest ever rock guitarist. When I asked him if there had been a conscious decision to "crank the handle" in order to make a statement, Thompson said that he was unaware of any shift in emphasis or increase in intensity: "I thought I was balancing the set as on previous tours. It didn't seem 'guitar heavy' to me, but people have remarked as such and I am not ashamed!" But it was hard to escape the suspicion that, on some sub-conscious level, the lock had been sprung that caged the bird. Richard hinted as much: "I think it's a subtle thing, but there is a different feeling being on an independent. I really don't know how that translates musically, even on Kit Bag. I'm aware of a tighter budget, which forces a few decisions and, apart from that, there may be a more 'please yourself' attitude."

In a sense, my personal lock was also sprung earlier this year on a soggy Pancake Day afternoon in the foyer of the De Montford Hall in Leicester. My daughter had been sadly stricken by a crisis of conscience occasioned by impending A-Level examinations and had decided that she had to give that evening's Richard Thompson Band concert a miss. I was therefore returning her ticket to the Box Office when I bumped into Danny Thompson, who seemed only too happy to stop and chat. I was carrying a copy of the typescript of this book – minus this final chapter – against such a serendipitous eventuality. The Goddess smiled and, to cut a long story short, Danny agreed to pass the book on to his old mate Richard. And I honestly thought that was the end of that. I had no

doubt that Danny would pass on the draft but I really didn't expect anything to happen as a result. O ye of little faith! When I got back home at the weekend – having been knocked out by the show at Leicester, Newcastle and Warwick – I was amazed to find an e-mail from Richard Thompson. Suddenly, the years of spadework and guesswork seemed worthwhile:

Thank you for forwarding a copy of your book. I am of course honoured, not to mention embarrassed! I haven't had time to go through it in detail yet, but if it's useful I could give you some early impressions.

Yeats, Eliot, Graves – all grammar school curriculum, all taught with love and enthusiasm by an English Department that cared about that stuff – and having an Irish English teacher, especially Yeats.

On Eliot, I'm not unusually influenced in that respect – his style and method and tone being pivotal to the 20th century and without which it's hard to appear 'modern.'

The White Goddess, The Golden Bough – absolutely. These were required reading in the sixties.

"Valerio"/"Blondin" – absolutely. "Great Valerio" derived from "Graveoler" [sic] – yes.

"Uninhabited Man"/"Hollow Men" – yes (with a pinch of The Haunted Woman by David Lindsay thrown in).

Some of the anagrammatical stuff's a bit fanciful, but I wish you well with it.

If you need interview time ...

My initial elation at having got some of the big things "right" has been tempered subsequently by Richard Thompson's willingness – eagerness, maybe – to point out some of the things I got embarrassingly wrong. For example, I was way off beam with my bright idea about Bright Lights: "I've never tried watching the Wizard of Oz with IWTSTBLT as the soundtrack – maybe it works for any album if you're stoned enough. I bet anything by the Incredible String Band works!" I was also wrong – one of my favourite but sadly, most fanciful anagrams – on Billy Liar: "Perhaps it was in there unconsciously. It was certainly an important film at the time." Strangely, given the huge odds against there being two Lamb and Flag taverns in the same one-horse town, Richard confessed that William Boyd's Brazzaville Beach is one of the few books that he hasn't read! On the positive side, one of the things that at the time even I regarded as a wild punt did hit manage to hit the target: "I did read the Williams book [on Brady and Hindley], amongst a bunch of books on serial killing. So it's in there, though not exclusively."

More importantly, Richard has talked openly about the diversity of enduring influences on his work, thereby shaping my reading list and hopefully inspiring any number of ground-breaking PhD theses in the years ahead:

- I don't think Eliot ever goes away. He's in the background of 20th century art and I'm not immune.
- Yeats said that he'd spent his whole life saying the same thing in many different ways. He had his own unique dilemmas and forms of dialogue – far more than most of us. Dylan only wrote about three songs. I might have managed one. Shakespeare's sonnets may be the ultimate example of saying the same thing with endless variety.
- At school we did Graves at different times. I think I Claudius in the Lower School and his poetry in the Middle and Upper Schools. I can't remember when we read The White Goddess. But that, and The Golden Bough were also popular books with the Eng. Lit. clique at school – the kids who enjoyed English Literature and discussed it and read further. World War I history and poetry were popular with us for a while; Egyptian history and mythology; the Beat Poets etc.
- My influences are probably more general [than you've suggested]. On Shoot Out The Lights, for example, there are a lot of other influences – Assault On Precinct 13, Ross McDonald, Rumi, Ibn Al-Farid. Nowhere on that album would I say a song was based clearly on something else. Life was happening to me at the time and I was reacting.
- [Joseph Conrad's] Heart Of Darkness and Lord Jim are key books for me, and bits do get regurgitated from time to time.
- I think I've borrowed a lot from Robert Browning. I don't really enjoy his poetry. But I use his way of telling a story, setting a scene, recreating history, jumping – cinematically

– into the middle of the narrative. And Dickens. He drew theatrical, larger than life characters and sometimes, in the short narrative space of a song, figures must make that kind of quick impact and be sketched economically. And Betje-man, George Grossmith, Coleridge, Carlyle, Lewis Grassic Gibbon, Robert Burns – they are all ‘local’ to me in some way. In addition, there’s a whole host of poets and authors, too many to list.

- Just one book for my desert island? Collected works of Rumi? Collected works of Ibn al-Arabi? May as well be improving myself among the coconuts!

I’d like to pick up on just three of the names tossed out by Richard – Conrad, Gibbon and Burns.

I could kick myself for having “missed” Joseph Conrad as a major direct influence on Thompson’s work. I assumed that the former sneaked into *Shoot Out The Lights* courtesy of Ford Coppola’s appropriation of *Heart Of Darkness* as the template for *Apocalypse Now*. Similarly, I assumed that allusions to Conrad in *Mock Tudor* came via Eliot. But on reflection, the echoes of Conrad’s work throughout Thompson’s writing career are pretty obvious. Compare the mind-set of the merchant Stein in *Lord Jim* with that of the character in “Beeswing”, who desires to “hold all the wildness” of the “rare thing” who is the subject of his obsession. Stein, for his part, is a butterfly collector, described as follows by the narrator Marlow:

I respected the intense, almost passionate, absorption with which he looked at the [mounted] butterfly, as though on the bronze sheen of these frail wings, in the white tracings, in the gorgeous markings, he could see other things, an image of something as perishable and defying destruction as these lifeless tissues displaying a splendour unmarred by death. [LJ 158]

Stein’s own words make the link even more obvious: “I captured this rare specimen myself one very fine morning. And I had a very big emotion. You don’t know what it is for a collector to capture such a rare specimen. You can’t know.” [LJ 159].

Consider Thompson’s use of the symbol of the river in, say, “The Poor Ditching Boy” or “Cooksferry Queen” or “Gethsemane” in the context of *Heart Of Darkness*. Conrad’s story is told by Marlow on a cruising yawl on the Thames near Gravesend. Marlow imagines the feelings of the commander of a Roman trireme on being forced to visit the heart of darkness that was London two thousand years ago:

Imagine him here – the very end of the earth, a sea the colour of lead, a sky the colour of smoke, a kind of ship about as rigid as a concertina – and going up this river with stores, or orders, or what you like. Sand-banks, marshes, forests, savages, - precious little to eat for a civilised man, nothing but Thames water to drink. No Falernian wine here, no going ashore. Here and there a military camp lost in a wilderness, like a needle in a bundle of hay – cold, fog, tempest,

disease, exile, and death – death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush. They must have been dying like flies here. [HOD 7/8].

Conrad's symbol is extended at the end of the novella where "the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky [and] seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness." [HOD 132].

Compare the power struggle between the protagonists in "Devonside" with that between the native girl, Jewel, and the eponymous hero of Lord Jim:

The land, the people, the forests were her accomplices, guarding him with vigilant accord, with an air of seclusion, of mystery, of invincible possession. There was no appeal, as it were; he was imprisoned within the very freedom of his power, and she, though ready to make a footstool of her head for his feet, guarded her conquest inflexibly – as though he were hard to keep. [LJ 214]

Or as a final specific example, consider the figures of Lord Jim and the Great Valerio. Conrad's hero lost his nerve in a crisis and literally jumped ship: "he had indeed jumped into an everlasting deep hole. He had tumbled from a height he could never scale again." [LJ 89]. Jim seeks atonement and redemption in trading stations around East Asia before settling in a remote part of Malaya. There, his integrity and courage earn him the title Tuan, "Lord" Jim, from the local natives. An error of judgement leads to the murder of his best friend,

Dain Waris, and Jim deliberately exposes himself to retribution at the hands of Waris's father and is shot dead. But before his second fall from grace, Jim is depicted as a heroic figure, above and apart from the common throng of mankind:

And there I was with him, high in the sunshine on the top of that historic hill of his. He dominated the forest, the secular gloom, the old mankind. He was like a figure set up on a pedestal, to represent in his persistent youth the power, and perhaps the virtues, of races that never grow old, that have emerged from the gloom. [LJ 201]

Marlow's description of his final distant sighting of Jim paints a similar picture:

He was white from head to foot, and remained persistently visible with the stronghold of the night at his back, the sea at his feet ... For me that white figure in the stillness of coast and sea seemed to stand at the heart of a vast enigma. The twilight was ebbing fast from the sky above his head, the strip of sand had already sunk under his feet, he himself appeared no bigger than a child – then only a speck, that seemed to catch all the light left in a darkened world. [LJ 253]

We would all be that great hero.

But the significance of Conrad as a pervasive influence on Thompson's work extends beyond such specific echoes or al-

lusions. David Daiches, in a seminal study of Conrad, Joyce, Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, makes a telling point:

Throughout all these novelists the question “How is love possible in a world of individuals imprisoned by their own private and unique consciousness?” is asked and probed in a great variety of ways. Loneliness is the great reality, love the great necessity: how can the two be brought together? ... One aspect of [Conrad’s] pessimism is the recurring implication that man’s fate is inevitably to be solitary and any attempt to break out of the prison of self into real communion with others is doomed to failure or dishonesty or corruption or unreality.

In dozens of songs over the years Richard Thompson has demonstrated similar pessimism – or perhaps “realism” is a better term – in his treatment of that central existential dilemma: “Loneliness is the great reality, love the great necessity.” Nowhere is the difficulty in reconciling the apparently irreconcilable captured more simply and starkly than in the following:

*Two lonely hearts in an ocean of loneliness
Two lonely hearts in a shipwreck of pain
We call to each other as we drown in the city
Oh why do we have to remain
The outcasts in love and the losers in gain?*

Robert Burns is another major influence on Thompson’s work that I flirted with and then discarded on the grounds that I could detect no direct allusions to Burns’ songs. Richard pointed out that the influence is more subtle and at the same time more far reaching. As I have shown earlier, his own songs are permeated by a narrow range of images that provide cohesion and cumulative impact across the whole body of his work. He likens this to the language of the Scottish ballads:

It works in the same way ballad language works. From a very early age I’ve read Scottish ballads – since I was a kid, since I was about ten – reading collections of Scottish ballads because they were in the house and I was bored! So I started to get into that stuff. There’s a way that that language works, where the images are like triggers and, you know, the guy’s on a milk white steed so you know he’s “OK.” Someone else is on a dapple-grey, so you know they’re not quite so “right.” Or the milk white breast. There’s a very specific ballad language that repeats and repeats and repeats with variations. But it’s both very colourful imagery and at the same time puts you right in there, regardless of who you are listening to the song or what class you come from. You can be illiterate and you can hear this song and it still gives you the immediate impact. It’s a bit like Homer who does it as well – in the Iliad especially – you get that thing that puts you right in there. It’s the most perfect image to describe that thing and everybody knows it. I think it’s a form of shorthand – it’s absolutely shorthand – because you haven’t got time for anything too elaborate normally. Perhaps if

you're Dylan, you might think you've got 16 verses to be more playful with the language. But if you're wearing your "pop music sensibility" hat then you might think, well, I've only got two verses or three verses to get it across. So I think it is a form of shorthand.

Unlike the case of Joseph Conrad or Robert Burns, I can excuse myself for having overlooked Lewis Grassie Gibbon on the simple grounds that I'd never heard of him until Thompson brought him to my attention. I'm sure that there are many great novelists out there of whom I've remained blissfully ignorant over the years but I doubt if any has the lyrical intensity or potency of Gibbon. That is what seems to have captured Richard's attention: "If you live south of Aberdeen, you'll have never heard of him! He's one of those guys, you know – the great Scottish authors that nobody's ever actually bothered to read. It's very dour stuff. And if you go to Aberdeen, you'll understand why it's dour. But the language in *Sunset Song* is beautiful."

"Lewis Grassie Gibbon" was a pseudonym based on names taken from the author's mother's family. He was born James Leslie Mitchell on a small farm in rural Aberdeenshire on 13th February 1901. His family on both sides could be traced back to peasant stock for several generations. The final demise of a whole agrarian way of life in the Grampians in the early years of the 20th century provides the backdrop and one of the key themes for Gibbon's masterwork, *Sunset Song*. The latter belongs to a literary sub-genre that David Craig has termed "the novel of peasant crisis." Steinbeck's *The Grapes Of Wrath*

is probably the prime example of this species in which typically a class of independent small farmers is threatened by war, technology or the inexorable pressure of the profit motive. All these factors come into play in *Sunset Song*.

Gibbon himself spurned a job in farming at the age of 16. An alternative career in journalism was undermined by his increasing political activism and he enlisted in the Royal Army Service Corps in 1919 and spent the next 10 years in the armed services. He became a full-time writer in 1929 and in the following six years, up to his untimely death from peritonitis, wrote and published prolifically. His output encompassed non-fiction works on exploration, travel, politics and social history as well as romantic fantasies and science fiction novels. The "one-off" novel *Spartacus* (1933), which uses the story of a slave revolt in ancient Rome to test the nature of revolution in general, is a major achievement. But Gibbon found his authentic Scottish voice in the trilogy of novels – *Sunset Song* (1932), *Cloud Howe* (1933) and *Grey Granite* (1934) – that came to be known as *A Scots Quair*.

Something of the significance and importance of Gibbon's work to Richard Thompson – why it is "local" to him – can perhaps be seen if we consider the destruction of a traditional way of life that is a central theme of *Sunset Song*. If the "sun" in question is setting on a whole community wedded to life on the land, the specific "song" is "The Flowers Of The Forest," the Scottish song of sunset. The song has always had particular resonance for Thompson – it was a Fairport staple and was performed at Sandy Denny's funeral. Thompson has himself performed it occasionally in concert over the years. Gibbon's

heroine, Chris Guthrie, first hears the song as a child and writes a school essay on its significance. When asked to sing at her own wedding, this is the song she chooses to perform. It seems to her to be typical of the songs of Scotland:

[I]t came on Chris how strange was the sadness of Scotland's singing, made for the sadness of the land and sky in dark autumn evenings, the crying of men and women of the land who had seen their lives and loves sink away in the years, things wept for beside the sheep-buchts, remembered at night and in twilight. The gladness and kindness had passed, lived and forgotten, it was Scotland of the mist and rain that made the songs ... [SS165/6]

A lone piper also plays the lament at the service to commemorate a new memorial to the dead of World War I that marks the end of the novel. The accompanying sermon preached by Chris's new husband, Robert Colquhoun, gets to the heart of Gibbon's preoccupations:

With them we may say there died a thing older than themselves, these were the Last of the Peasants, the last of the Old Scots folk. A new generation comes up that will know them not, except as a memory in a song, they pass with the things that seemed good to them, with loves and desires that grow dim and alien in the days to be. It was the old Scotland that perished then, and we may believe that never again will the old speech and the old songs, the old curses and the old benedictions, rise but with alien effort to our

lips ... So lest we shame them, let us believe that the new oppressions and foolish greeds are no more than mists that pass. They died for a world that is past, these men, but they did not die for this that we seem to inherit. Beyond it and us there shines a greater hope and a newer world, undreamt when these four died. [SS 256]

Robert's father, a "poor old brute from Banff," had earlier preached a sermon that placed the decline of "old Scotland" in a much longer historical process:

[H]e told of the long dead beasts of the Scottish land in the times when jungle flowered its forests across the Howe and a red sun rose on the steaming earth that the feet of man had still to tread: and he pictured the dark, slow tribes that came drifting across the low lands of the northern seas, the great bear watched them come, and they hunted and fished and loved and died, God's children in the morn of time; and he brought the first voyagers sailing the sounding coasts, they brought the heathen idols of the great Stone Rings, the Golden Age was over and past and lust and cruelty trod the world. [SS 53]

The above extracts from the two sermons reflect Gibbon's adherence to the "diffusionist" philosophy, popular in the early 20th century, that saw civilisation in decline from some primitive Golden Age. This has enabled readers of Gibbon to impose on *Sunset Song* allegorical interpretations that equate Chris Guthrie with the land itself, and by extension with

Scotland as a nation. The first words of the main body of Gibbon's text invite the association:

Below and around where Chris Guthrie lay the June moors whispered and rustled and shook their cloaks, yellow with broom and powdered faintly with purple, that was the heather but not the full passion of its colour yet. And in the east against the cobalt blue of the sky lay the shimmer of the North Sea, that was by Bervie, and maybe the wind would veer there in an hour or so and you'd feel the change in the life and strum of the thing, bringing a streaming coolness out of the sea. [SS25]

And what does all this weird stuff - Golden Ages and the death of rural communities and tribes from the low lands and the first voyagers and the shimmer on the sea and earth mothers lying on hillsides - have to do with rock'n'roll music? Everything, if your name's Richard Thompson:

*She womanly lay, like the lay of the land, the land around
Wheely Down.
And every curve was a high, high hill to hang above the town.
From Holland they came to make their maps and they had
made her well,
For rivers danced all across the green, and the pinewood sweet
did smell.*

*As far as ever a man can see, it yields him more and more.
And every house, he washes it white and covers it all with straw,*

*Except for the fool who makes his home upon the flooded
ground.
And the still on the tide is a glass to the eyes that stare out of
Wheely Down.*

*All things must change within the earth, the moving and the
lame –
For the worms will rot the miller's wheel and the rats will eat
the grain.
And the armies of deliverance are run into the ground.
And the kestrel turns in the empty sky on high over Wheely
Down.*

"Wheely Down" is a slight song in the Thompson scheme of things and Lewis Grassic Gibbon, the splendours of Sunset Song notwithstanding, does not appear to have been one of the major long-term influences on Richard's work. But the example is instructive. We know that a real Wheely Down is "in" the song. We know that Yeats, a mega-influence, is "in" there somewhere. But how many general listeners to the song would have picked up on Lewis Grassic Gibbon, even if they had heard of him? One is reminded of Nancy's words: "I'd love to have a little microphone into what he hears. I don't know what he hears in there!"

Ultimately, it probably doesn't matter very much. At the same time as pointing me in many new directions, Richard Thompson has taken me to task for my tendency in earlier chapters to make his allusive method sound a little too cerebral and systematic:

I like to think I'm influenced by various things and people, but I've never consciously plagiarised anybody else. In fact, in "Hope You Like The New Me", I was referring partly to being ripped off myself, which annoys me a fair bit – although if they're satisfied with the droplets that spill over the side of my fountain, instead of finding their own fountain, it's not much skin off my back ... I don't ever remember sitting down and saying, I must devote my life to the Muse, or any such. I just followed the examples of the writers I admired and assumed this was how you wrote lyrics. In fact, as a general response to your questions, I'd say that most of what I do is instinctive, and it's only when I'm asked that I would ever reflect on method, subject matter or philosophy. I'd say that I work instinctively most of the time, with occasional pauses for reflection. Being a songwriter/performer means communication first and foremost. Any other 'layers' in the songs are a bonus.

On reflection, he's right, of course. I probably have placed too much emphasis on the "other layers" and placed insufficient stress on Thompson's oeuvre as a collection of great songs that are meant – designed and constructed – to be sung and to communicate strong emotion. He made the point in reply to a question about the surprising number of female covers of his songs:

First of all, I think there are more women than men who sing covers – maybe this is a cultural expectation. Secondly, I think starting with Linda, I tried to write songs for an

understated voice. The emotion is built into the song, so all you have to do is sing it. Michael Bolton or Celine would be unsuitable! Even Maria McKee, who I think is a great singer, was probably too emotive for "Has He Got A Friend For Me." So they should be easy songs to sing.

Richard went on to talk passionately about what the act of performing means to him:

It's the best thing. It's absolutely the best thing I do. It's that communication thing, I think, that's so rewarding. You find something "in here" and you show it "out there" – and people can get it and grab it and enjoy it. It's a huge thing. And it's a thing you have to do in song – in folk song, popular song, singer-songwriter genre, whatever you want to call it – you have to communicate. If you're Radiohead, perhaps you can be more enigmatic. Maybe you can waffle a bit more and you can "veil" things a bit more and people will be able to absorb the impact of what you do and the meaning can come later. But I think if you're alone on stage with a guitar you have to communicate there and then. And if you don't the audience will let you know – by their indifference.

My defence for having underplayed all of this, I guess, would be that I've felt compelled to read dozens of rock biographies in recent years to see how it should be done, and I've been consistently irritated and/or amused by the outlandish claims made on behalf of - some? many? most? - other song-

writers. I've come to call it the "heir to Baudelaire" syndrome. In Thompson's case, I was intent on demonstrating that his great songs do genuinely bear comparison with – and in many cases draw directly on – great literature, be that Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-Irish, Anglo-American or Arabic. Furthermore, the loose statement frequently applied to songwriters that their songs "work on a number of different levels" is, for once, totally valid in the case of Thompson's songs, as I have tried to demonstrate throughout this book. As we have seen, the Sufic equation of divine and human love and the ever-present shadow of the Goddess mean that with any Thompson "love song" we're never quite sure of the identity of the love object. When you add to that the fact that, again as we've seen repeatedly, the same love song can function as a political metaphor or metaphoric statement on the human condition, it becomes clear that we are dealing with songs of multi-layered complexity and multi-faceted meaning. But ultimately, as Richard has reminded me, any "other layers" are a bonus. I should have remembered the need for balance in my presentation: "Who will help the tightrope walker/ When he tumbles to the net?"

Back on safer ground, I've asked Richard to talk about that central image of Valerio/Blondin and what it means to him and to his audience:

I saw the Blondin painting, probably while visiting relatives of Linda's or mine in Glasgow. We were there a lot in the early seventies ... Taking risks and crossing borders I know are recurring themes in my songs. I probably think of these as central life experiences. The songs are also memos

to me – not a bad idea if you have to sing them every night. To go to the edge, risk shedding a skin, jettison the old to grasp the new etc. I suppose I want to convey that to the audience too.

Pamela Winters had also explored this aspect of Thompson's work in an excellent article in *Paste* magazine in June 2003:

If there is an archetypal Richard Thompson character, it's a man who can't clear his throat to speak, who stands poised for a great leap, toes tightening, heart beating. [Thompson] makes his leaps in those rare extended electric solos, seldom captured on tape. His playing, whether acoustic or electric, is exploratory; you experience him listening to himself. When soloing, he travels the strings, setting up initially dissonant series of notes that resolve themselves, over and over, in unexpected ways. The tension builds, sexually, spiritually – a delicious, disturbing anticipation, ecstatic release, a peaceful return to earth with eyes yet on the sky ... To him, many of his songs are about taking risks. About longtime favorite "Wall Of Death," he says, "I suppose that song is a memo to self. It's a song to me – it's just to remind me how I should live, that I should take risks, that I should be on the edge. That I should be the guy who walks down the street muttering to himself, that that's OK."

I asked Richard to comment on his repeated suggestion that his songs are in some way "memos to self." He acknowledged this unusual "autobiographical" dimension: "It's not every

song that does that but some songs do. I don't even know if it's the intention at the time of writing but it might well be the reason you keep singing it. I think there's a realisation that it's written "at yourself" you know."

Back on the high wire, I was struck by Richard's inference that Gram Parsons, in a sense, might also be regarded as a Valerio-figure, a risk-taker:

Gram was a breaker-down of barriers, and therefore an inspiration to Fairport, who were trying to do a similar thing. We met him at the Rome Pop Festival in 1967, and in London, the same or the following year. Nice man – a Southern Gentleman. I enjoyed his music in the seventies but haven't listened to it since – somehow it seems dated.

The same inference came across in Richard's hierarchical positioning of those song writers whom he'd regard as his natural peers: "I think Dylan has a unique place because of his cultural impact. On a stratum below, there's Randy Newman, Leonard Cohen, Richard Farina, Neil Finn, John Lennon." But he didn't relate to my suggestion that Blondin's many "ascensions" might also symbolise the shape and tempo of a career spent walking from one secure, substantial platform, down a dangerous wire and back up to the next platform - say, from Full House to Bright Lights, to Shoot Out The Lights, to Rumor & Sigh, to Mock Tudor:

That hadn't occurred to me and I might not see it in those terms. I might see it in terms of songs rather than albums

because my focus and main occupation is playing what I think are the better songs live and nightly, culled from what I usually think of as uneven albums, in spite of my best plans and intentions.

That relationship with a live audience that lies at the heart of "The Great Valerio" is clearly a continuing preoccupation, as evinced by Richard's comments on set-lists:

It's a trade-off – personal choice of repertoire versus audience faves. Some songs are unsingable for various reasons – adolescent lyrics, dated themes, naff tunes. But the audience is a factor in any show and deserves some measure of history – they might, after all, have travelled with you for many years. Poets have a hard time being read and recognised. But songwriters have a fairly accessible audience right there who might sing along on the choruses and clap at the end. Signed eight-by-ten glossies are not unknown! Songwriters might long for honorary doctorates and the South Bank Show, but if they're smart, they'll be satisfied with popular approval and not write that rock opera or that novel!

The reference to hard times and recognition called to mind the "Poor Ditching Boy." Was "does he mind if he doesn't get paid" still a relevant question, at least on a metaphorical level? The response to that was Richard at his most sibylline: "The workman is worthy of his hire. But then, wouldn't we all do it anyway?" And what of the hard times endured at the hands

of a vengeful Muse in so many of Thompson's songs: "Well, it always seems there's a price to be paid. I must like challenging relationships! I think she's in the more upbeat love songs as well, but perhaps less clearly defined."

Elsewhere, he amplified Martin Carthy's telling point that Richard Thompson, as writer and performer, pays the price because he has no choice:

It's always like that. I think to do anything creatively and keep on doing it, you've got to be driven. And to do it for life, you've got to be driven all the time. Some people only write poetry, write songs, for a short period of their lives, perhaps when they're young – then they grow up! [Laughs]. I lose the drive daily. I get spells of months where I don't write anything good and I think, just give up for a week and see what happens. But also, as a writer and a performer, you're always going backwards and forwards between the two, and they're not necessarily the same. It's almost different hats, different mind-sets, different synapses that have to be fused. And sometimes, being on the road, you're using so much of your brain just to remember the set that you don't have any brain left for the creative part, for writing music.

He also made it clear that being driven to write and to perform, to spend thirty years as a bone man up and down the nation, carries with it other less obvious price tags:

It's the weird thing about being a songwriter as opposed to being a lot of other things. You know, as a painter you paint

a picture and somebody buys it and sticks it in a museum in New Zealand and then you might never see it again. It's gone and you move on and your old work becomes just a memory. If you're a songwriter, then you may have written a song thirty years ago but the audience might drive you to perform it forever. So you're in the position in an evening's performance where you're taking songs from 30 years ago, 25-20-15-10-5, one year, six months ago, you're taking this whole range of songs from all points in your so-called career and you're blending them all simultaneously. And that's a weird thing to do. That's a very strange thing to do. So you're constantly being reminded of your own past, of your youth, your naivety. There's things about the songs that might be embarrassing but you kind of get used to the embarrassment because you've sung it so many times. You just gloss over the inadequacies.

Richard also hinted at the ultimate price paid in terms of alone-ness:

You have to be on the edge of things. Yeats said it's a lonely and a sedentary occupation – especially the latter! [Laughs]. I think you are on the edge. I guess you're not in society somehow. You've got to flit in and out of society, but you're not 'of it'.

Shades here of Peter Sellers on the fringes of a party, "listening, listening to people talking." Shades also of Tennyson's maiden, immured like Yeats in a lonely tower, objectively mir-

roring reality in her tapestry but only at the high personal cost of distance, discontent and alienation. Shades above all of the Great Valerio, high up above the crowd, observing it, entertaining and energising it, but fundamentally not a part “of it.”

I didn't set out to write this book with the title *The Great Valerio* clearly in mind. But the more time I've spent listening to the songs of Richard Thompson and watching him perform them over the years, the more that this one extraordinary song has symbolised for me so much of what he has striven to communicate and come to represent as writer, guitarist and performer. As I mentioned in my Preface, my personal adult walk on the wire began thirty-six years ago when I left home to study small ideas for little boys at Hull University. The university librarian at the time was Philip Larkin – with Richard Thompson, arguably one of the two great authentic English voices of the second half of the twentieth century. By one of those nice historical coincidences, Larkin's final major work, *High Windows*, was published in 1974, within a matter of a few weeks from the release of Thompson's first real masterpiece, *I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight*. In the title-poem to this volume, Larkin voiced the conflicting attitudes to experience that characterised so much of his mature work – an immersion in the chaos of the here-and-now on the one hand and, on the other, a corresponding yearning to rise above all of that into the timeless realms of high art or spiritual fulfilment. That tension – what Seamus Heaney called “the reach and longing” – is embodied in the language of “High

Windows”, in the coarse vulgarity of the opening lines and in the rarefied “poetic” phrasing of the closing passage:

*When I see a couple of kids
And guess he's fucking her and she's
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,
I know this is paradise
Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives ...*

*Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.*

The same tension between, in Thompson's words, the “mire” and the “wire” lies at the heart of “*The Great Valerio*” and, indeed, represents Thompson's consistent, distinctive concern as a writer. His personal territory, if you like, is the “no man's land” between the mire and the wire. His enduring personal theme is the difficulty we all have in shaking off – in “refusing” – the chains that bind us in the mire and prevent us from escaping to the freedom that the wire represents. In the stark words of “*Oh, I Swear*”:

*Can't run in a dead-end street
No wings upon your feet
And all your dreams are shackled to the ground!*

Ultimately, we're all pilgrims struggling, largely in vain, to progress from gall-way to graceland.

But the image of Valerio also suggests, surely, Thompson's importance and greatness as a writer and the sense in which he, like Larkin and all the other great writers we have considered, not only encapsulates his time but also transcends it. Time stands still while the Great Valerio is walking the wire, even if our hearts still turn like the seasons.

Richard Thompson's whole career has in a sense represented an artistic pilgrimage, and he knew what that implied from the outset:

*The way is up along the road,
The air is growing thin ...
And now I see I'm all alone
But that's the only way to be.*

He said early on in his career that what he wanted to listen to didn't exist, so he had to go out on his own and create it. When I asked him if he had achieved that to his own satisfaction, he still talked in terms that suggested walking wires and testing boundaries:

I think I did. I'm quite satisfied with that generally. I can still do better, but I think I'm bridging the gap ... The best thing is, for me, in the area that I mine, it seems endless. It's very rich and I can't see the end of it. I'm fascinated by the possibilities. I just think of all the ways that songwriting

- that popular music, folk music, whatever you want to call it - can become richer and better.

But when I asked for a final pithy comment on what Valerio really "means" to him in order to enable me to finish this book with something really punchy and insightful, Richard gave me one of those disarming laughs and fixed me with an eye, as ever steady on the target: "Why don't you just end it with three dots - like a thriller writer - dot, dot, dot? You never know - maybe tonight Valerio's parachute will fail to open!" Needless to say, that night's performance at the Lowry in Salford was entirely what one has come to expect from the finest guitarist, the finest songwriter and, yes, the finest performer on the planet. Richard Thompson's foot was yet again sure upon the rope ...

APPENDICES

DISCOGRAPHY

The launch of the official website – richardthompson-music.com – in 2002 renders a conventional discography appendix obsolete. I'll therefore use this as an opportunity for a flagrant piece of self-indulgence. Two lists follow. The first includes all Thompson's mainstream studio albums in the order in which I would rank them. You can argue that other albums, on which Thompson was a dominant influence and presence, should also be included, but the albums below represent the solid corpus of his work as writer and studio performer. No one will agree with this list for very long – indeed, my own ranking will have changed by tomorrow morning:

1. Mock Tudor
2. I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight
3. Shoot Out The Lights
4. Rumor & Sigh
5. The Old Kit Bag
6. Pour Down Like Silver
7. You? Me? Us?
8. Hand Of Kindness
9. Amnesia
10. Across A Crowded Room

11. Daring Adventures
12. Hokey Pokey
13. Henry The Human Fly
14. Mirror Blue
15. Sunnyvista
16. First Light

The second list includes my current view of Thompson's Top 50 songs. Needless to say, my ideas had changed before I'd finished typing it. I can't imagine life without any one of these songs, but to stretch myself, I have ranked the Top 20:

1. Beeswing
2. 1952 Vincent Black Lightning
3. When I Get To The Border
4. Dimming Of The Day
5. Al Bowlly's In Heaven
6. From Galway To Graceland
7. Can't Win
8. King Of Bohemia
9. Cooksferry Queen
10. The Great Valerio

11. Word Unspoken, Sight Unseen
12. Poor Will And The Jolly Hangman
13. Devonside
14. Wall Of Death
15. A Heart Needs A Home
16. Missie How You Let Me Down
17. Crazy Man Michael
18. The Calvary Cross
19. Shoot Out The Lights
20. Don't Sit On My Jimmy Shands

- Crash The Party
- Bathsheba Smiles
- Walking On A Wire
- Crawl Back (Under My Stone)
- Man In Need
- She Said It Was Destiny
- Hard On Me
- Hope You Like The New Me
- Gethsemane
- Oh I Swear
- Jennie
- Meet On The Ledge
- How Will I Ever Be Simple Again
- Genesis Hall
- Turning Of The Tide
- Doctor Of Physick
- I Still Dream
- Now Be Thankful

- Hide It Away
- The Poor Ditching Boy
- The Ghost Of You Walks
- I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight
- She Cut Off Her Long Silken Hair
- Night Comes In
- Cold Kisses
- Traces Of My Love
- Sibella
- I Feel So Good
- God Loves A Drunk
- Keep Your Distance

As the great man said, it's a desperate game we play!

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Most books about rock artists don't include extensive bibliographies but I decided this one would be different. There are few books specifically "about" Richard Thompson – Strange Affair and a privately printed book by Clinton Heylin that I haven't been able to get hold of are the only two I'm aware of. So I've ended up reading hundreds of books that I thought just might cast some light. Indeed, a lot of what I've got out of writing this book derives from all the other books I've been prompted to read or in many cases re-read after too long an absence. What follows is a pretty full list of what I've scoured in search of inspiration. The only major omission is a clutch of other rock biographies and studies that I didn't find particularly edifying. The ones I've included I did actually find helpful and/or enjoyable and I wouldn't hesitate to recommend them. A short list of books "bracketed" in my text is followed by a long list grouped in broad categories. Dates given are those of the editions I consulted, not necessarily the dates of original publication. Enjoy!

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[ANW]	Wilson, A. N.	The Victorians
[BL]	Waterhouse, Keith	Billy Liar
[CH]	Heylin, Clinton	No More Sad Refrains: The Life And Times Of Sandy Denny
[EIM]	Bracewell, Michael	England Is Mine: Pop Life In Albion From Wilde To Goldie
[GIG]	Fort, Tom	The Grass Is Greener: Our Love Affair With The Lawn
[Guv] [HOD]	Hinton/Wall Conrad, Joseph	Ashley Hutchings: The Guv'nor & The Rise Of Folkrock Heart Of Darkness
[JP]	Paxman, Jeremy	The English: Portrait Of A People
[JvM]	Barber, Benjamin R	Jihad vs McWorld
[KJ]	Graves, Robert	King Jesus
[LJ] [MOTL]	Conrad, Joseph Humphries, Patrick	Lord Jim Meet On The Ledge: Fairport Convention The Classic Years
[PA]	Ackroyd, Peter	Albion: The Origins Of The English Imagination

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[RTP]	Tressell, Robert	The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists
[SF] [SS]	Frith, Simon Gibbon, Lewis Grassic	Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music Sunset Song
[SV]	Rushdie, Salman	The Satanic Verses
[TMS]	Elrington, H.	The Manor School
[WCC]	Chittick, William C.	Sufism: A Short Introduction
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Backstreet Slide, The	PolyGram International Inc
Bank Vault In Heaven	Beeswing Music
Bathsheba Smiles	Bug Music Ltd
Beeswing	Beeswing Music
Begging Bowl	Gregsongs Ltd
Blind Step Away, A	Beeswing Music
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Burns Supper	Beeswing Music

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Decameron	Warlock Music Ltd
Dimming Of The Day	Island Music Ltd
Doctor Of Physick	Warlock Music Ltd
Don't Renege On Our Love	PolyGram International Inc
Don't Sit On My Jimmy Shands	Beeswing Music
Don't Tempt Me	Beeswing Music
Down Where The Drunkards Roll	Warlock Music Ltd
Drifting Through The Days	Beeswing Music
Drowned Dog, Black Night	Beeswing Music
Easy There, Steady Now	Beeswing Music
First Breath	Bug Music Ltd
For The Sake Of Mary	Beeswing Music
From Galway To Graceland	Beeswing Music
Genesis Hall	Warlock Music Ltd
Gethsemane	Bug Music Ltd
Ghost Of You Walks, The	Beeswing Music
God Loves A Drunk	Beeswing Music
Great Valerio, The	Warlock Music Ltd
Happy Days And Auld Lang Syne	Bug Music Ltd
Hard On Me	Bug Music Ltd

TITLE	PUBLISHED BY
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Hope You Like The New Me	Bug Music Ltd
How I Wanted To	PolyGram International Inc
How Many Times Do You Have To Fall?	Beeswing Music
I Can't Wake Up To Save My Life	Beeswing Music
If It Feels Good You Know It Can't Be Wrong	Warlock Music Ltd
If (Stomp)	Warlock Music Ltd
I'll Regret It All In The Morning	Island Music Ltd
I Misunderstood	Beeswing Music
I Still Dream	Beeswing Music
It's Alright Ma, It's Only Witchcraft	Warlock Music Ltd
I've Got No Right To Have It All	Bug Music Ltd
Jealous Words	Bug Music Ltd
Jerusalem On The Jukebox	Beeswing Music
Journeyman's Grace, The	Warlock Music Ltd
Just The Motion	PolyGram International Inc
Killing Jar	Gregsongs Ltd
King Of Bohemia	Beeswing Music
Last Shift	Beeswing Music
Layla	PolyGram International Inc
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Mascara Tears	Beeswing Music
Meet On The Ledge	Warlock Music Ltd

TITLE	PUBLISHED BY
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New St George, The	Warlock Music Ltd
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Mike Andrews (UK): “I understand you gave *The Great Valerio* your blessing by reading the draft and talking to the author, but despite the project being an admirable and obvious labour of love, there were a lot of assumptions in there that were way off track it seems to me. Whilst I am convinced many of your songs are deliberately written to work on different levels (an assumption of mine, I know), I am intrigued by analogies made in the book, many of which are simply too deep for me. Do you agree that many of your fans look too deeply into your lyrics, and if so, did the detail of *The Great Valerio* surprise you?”

RT: “Not really. I think Dave Smith’s basic premise is correct - my use of symbols and mythology is influenced by Graves, Yeats and Eliot. I would argue that this is not unusual; this was the diet we were fed by enthusiastic English teachers on A Level courses in the 60s; if I had gone on to study English at university, perhaps the influences would have broadened. It might be worth looking at the lyrics of my old classmate Michael Quartermain at some point, to see if he does the same thing - he wrote a number of songs with Stomu Yamashta. Some of Dave’s suggestions of cryptic references aren’t too far off, either; on a line like “I find myself strangely true” I would be turning the four letters of true around in my head as something of a game, and would be happy to find ‘uter’ in there, but that’s what happens to your brain after years of *The Times* Crossword. I think people should take lyrics as they find them, go into them as much as they feel necessary, or ignore them and just listen to the bass line”

On the RT Discussionlist Scott N. Miller reacted: “Hey, this is a seminal event in the RT world: the first book devoted to OH’s exemplary and inimitable songwriting. It’s long past due, just considering how many volumes are devoted to the study of, say, Dylan’s songs. A quick skim of “*The Great Valerio*” reveals enough material to inspire hundreds, if not thousands, of posts on this list. The last chapter, with its detailed comments by RT on his work and inspirations, is absolutely essential reading. Dave Smith knows that RT is the greatest, and has devoted years to making the case for the essential value of OH’s work. For this, Dave Smith deserves much thanks---his is clearly a labor of love”