



Safe as Milk

The Emasculation of All-Encompassing Utopianisms: Captain
Beefheart's Tradition

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I perceive I have not really understood any thing, not a
single object, and that no man ever can,
Nature here in sight of the sea taking advantage of me to dart
upon me and sting me,
Because I have dared to open my mouth to sing at all.

“As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life”, Walt Whitman

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An Unsuccessful Introduction

Well my cigarette died when I washed my face
Dropped some drops on an ashtray hit a wrong place
Woman at my blinds to see spiders spinning lines
It's a safe as milk, it's a safe as milk
I've never heard it put quite that way
"Safe as Milk" (I)¹, Captain Beefheart

I have always relished those odd moments when someone asks me what I am writing my thesis on. Since it is a dissertation in "American Literature" (two words which, by themselves, tend to summon a haze of eccentricity and indolence in the Portuguese mind), people obviously expect me to cosset their well-versed intelligence with the plangent household names, the Walt Whitmans and the T. S. Eliots that elicit from them those wonted sallies of recognition and lucidity which are generally followed by an emphatic nod and an assenting "Ah! That's very interesting!" The moment I throw Captain Beefheart's name on the table though, my interlocutor's face usually starts to twitch – an expression of intertwined derision and disgust, perhaps? – before it succumbs to a dismissive "uh-uh": the ominous preface to an inevitable change of topic.

These people are right, of course: the name of Van Vliet's alter-ego projects an image of the body which is comical and at the same time gritty and repellent enough to make us look the other way. Concurrently, this bulbous name seems to carry along with it an aura of mystery that threatens to unlock substantial secrets about the author's work if tapped the right

¹ All of Beefheart's poems employed throughout this essay were taken from *The Captain Beefheart Radar Station*, an online database dedicated to the author. I have included all the compositions, in their integral form, at the end of this dissertation and I have assigned each of them a roman numeral.

way. Therefore, an efficient manner to launch our incursion through Van Vliet's lyrical work and to start ferreting out its central themes would be to timorously acknowledge the elephant in the room and submit ourselves to the prominent question.

What is a Captain Beefheart?

According to the Captain's biographer, Mike Barnes, the character first showed up in a rock opera – *I Was a Teenage Maltshop* – which Frank Zappa, Van Vliet's lifelong friend and rival, was working on around 1963. It later reappeared on the title of another one of Zappa's projects, a sci-fi movie called *Captain Beefheart vs. The Grunt People*, which, like the former, was never released. Concerning the origin of the name, Barnes tells us that “Zappa has claimed that he named the film character with reference to one of Van Vliet's uncles, known as the Colonel. One of his habits was to use the toilet with the door open, especially if Van Vliet's girlfriend was likely to walk by, offering the information that his ‘whizzer’ . . . was built on such generous lines that it looked like a beef heart” (18).

By bawdily equating Beefheart with the male organ, Zappa immediately erects before our eyes an image of Van Vliet as a masculine steamroller, an unflagging seducer bound to make the other sex knuckle under his clout. It goes without saying that this is something that places him in rapport with an age-old blues tradition based on the elevation of masculine virility and the subjugation of the unruly paramour. Songs such as Bo Carter's “Let Me Put My Banana in Your Fruit Basket” or “Please Warm My Wiener” are comically self-explanatory, while others, like Skip James's “22-20”, which dramatizes the singer's dilemma over which would be the adequate “caliber” to employ on his unfaithful lover, lay bare the

algorithms of emasculation and vindicated violence which animate the men and the women in these songs.

Mike Barnes attests to this interpretation of the Beefheartian persona by explaining the meaning behind the name of Van Vliet's Magic band in the following terms: ". . . the meaning behind the 'magic' in the group's name was more indicative of Mojo-man hoodoo [magic that enhances virility] than mere party tricks" (28). I would say that he is right, up to a point. If it is true that the aggressiveness of masculine desire permeates most of Beefheart's work, one would also have to admit that, when it shows up, it always does so merely as one side of the coin. From the outset, Van Vliet's avatar has carried within itself the seed for its own implosion: Captain Beefheart is, concurrently, the epitome of masculine braggadocio and a cartoonish derision of the conventions it earnestly embraces.

Safe as Milk

The contention at the core of this dissertation will then be that the magic that beguiles us into the chaos of Beefheart's work is not so much connected to the violent imposition of an order, as to an incessant conflict between its assertion and its collapse. I chose to name this text after Beefheart's first album – *Safe as Milk* (1967) – precisely because it presents us, in a nutshell, with all the essential ingredients that we will need and because it is a phrase towards which we can always retrace our steps in case we get lost along the way.

Like Beefheart's name, "Safe as Milk" is a double-faceted expression. First, it evokes the idea of an order that is established by virtue of a masculine ejaculation. In the epigraph, that discharge ends up not hitting its desired target ("Dropped some drops on an ashtray hit

the wrong place”), thereby summoning the second meaning of “safe as milk”: the threat posed by nature (“spiders spinning lines”), which tries to destroy the lyrical I by enticing him into the realm of abject corporality. The latter’s astringency, as we shall minutely explain later in this work, harks back to the infantile repression of the mother’s body, whereby the subject is created as a separate entity from its creator and from all other fellow natural beings. So, in short, the title of this text acts at once as a reference to the repression of the milk of the mother and the milk of Mother Nature, as well as to an ejaculatory assertion of the order of the subject, which incessantly tries to protect its boundaries from the emasculative intrusion of the body.

From the onset, then, these two vectors of aggrandizement and emasculation are at play. Throughout Beefheart’s work, though, they appear under different, if somewhat interdependent, guises. The goal of this thesis will be to plumb each one of these types of unmanning and, by reading them within the contextual perimeters of music, literature and history, we will attempt to ascertain in what way do they manage to forge a different overview of such categories as otherness, gender and self-expression.

During the course of my research, I identified three different types of castration, each corresponding to a distinct utopia which is undermined in Beefheart’s poetry. It follows from this that the work which you now hold in hands ought to be split into the three separate sections which we will now attempt to digest and showcase:

In Chapter One, I will start by probing into the pancalistic and pantheistic ideas that Beefheart developed in his early poetry and will proceed to draw a parallel between the precepts that undergird these texts and the ones that informed the blues, their most consequential predecessor. We will then shift to the domain of synchronicity and try to describe the way in which many of Beefheart’s peers in music and literature embraced these

very same life-celebratory ideas and how the latter were eventually appropriated by the languages of social activism, converting themselves into an ambivalent instrument of oppression in the process. According to Beefheart, that same ambiguity of espousing oppression in the name of freedom was to be found at the core of the American multicultural utopia. We will come to the conclusion that this paradox betrays a more far-reaching symptom – the bankruptcy of teleological utopianism, motivated by its inaptitude to come to terms with the irreconcilable specificity of Other identities.

Chapter Two (second utopia, part one) will run along the same lines, departing from the assertion, underpinned by Julia Kristeva's theory on the "abject", that the language of the subject is self-encapsulating and forever separates it from the utopian languages of otherness – an idea which most blatantly clashes with the theories of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Charles Olson, both of whom saw the individual as a stand-in for the community and for the world. Beefheart comes to this conclusion by pitting the ancestral image of womanhood as the epitome of abjection against the fragile contours of the subject, which systematically try to reinforce themselves by repressing the threatening other. For the sake of cogency and in order to guarantee that the reader is furnished with the appropriate instruments to make the most of Beefheart's work, a significant part of this section will be dedicated to an analysis of the image of the repellant woman, with a particular emphasis on its representation during the *fin de siècle* and during the post-WW2 consensus, both periods having been marked by a reinvigorated obsession with the purity and the domesticity of women.

Chapter Three (second utopia, part two) will focus on a thorough examination of the way the abject is explored in Beefheart's work. We will sort his poems into three different categories: the ecological poems, the escapist poems and those that conflate these latter tendencies, thus offering us a middling path between two complementary utopias that

Beefheart emasculates: that of oneness with nature and that of total removal from the threat posed by nature.

Lastly, Chapter Four will take us before the utopia of the spontaneous artist as someone who is able to capture an objective image of the real. We will discuss the way in which Beefheart's work both embraces and rejects this set of ideas. The fact that Beefheart has often been depicted as a primitive artist tends to overshadow the latter facet of his oeuvre. Despite everything, in his lyrics the poet incessantly underlined the artificial character of many languages that were deemed to be both innate and natural, such as those that belong to race and gender.

A Journey into the Heart of the Beef

So, now that the main topics of the present text have been outlined and that a little bit more has been said about the themes that reside at the core of Beefheart's work, the time has come to ask ourselves another one of those meretricious questions: if he is a Captain, where is he taking us to after all?

I have always considered that the photograph on the back of *Trout Mask Replica's* sleeve (Fig. 1) is a most fitting reply to this question. In it we see Beefheart dressed as the Magic-man, brandishing his wand in the direction of the woods that surround him and the band at his side. The wand that I am referring to is, of course, the lamp that Van Vliet holds in his hand: a grotesque instrument, stripped down to its wire frame, which, not surprisingly, does not shed any sort of light on its surroundings. In a way we can read the whole drama as a compact metaphor for the poet's work. The Captain takes us on a trip into the disheveled

core of nature (the heart of the beef?), and if his original intention might have been to *introduce* himself in it, to spread some “light” on it and be at one with it, he is certainly as powerless as we are when we acknowledge the impotence of our language to encompass its totality and diversity. When confronted with the ineffability of the other, our language, like Beefheart’s wand, compels us to take note of its own skeleton – the basic structure which simultaneously brings us to life and forever keeps us apart from those other subjects onto which we project our own magic utopias.

I

“All You Need is Love, All You Need is Love, Love is All You Need.”

The Self-Defeating Paradox of Polyphonic Utopianism

‘That Archangel, now!’ Miriam continued. ‘How fair he looks, with his unruffled wings, with his unhacked sword, and clad in his bright armor, and that exquisitely fitting sky-blue tunic, cut in the late Paradisaical mode . . . But, is it thus that Virtue looks, the moment after its death-struggle with Evil? No, no! I could have told Guido better. A full third of the Archangel’s feathers should have been torn from his wings; the rest all ruffled, till they looked like Satan’s own!’ (184)

The Marble Faun, Nathaniel Hawthorne

The Beats and the Blues

Although there are many aspects which separate Beefheart from the *Zeitgeist* that provided nutriment to the work of many of his peers, one thing in which he agreed with most of them was the urgent need to celebrate life and, perhaps more importantly, to live it and enjoy it guiltlessly. These ideas had been at large for some time when Beefheart started to compose, and although we might recognize their influence in the development of the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-war protests, one could certainly trace them back to the ideological revolution carried out, in the aftermath of the Second World War, first in East Coast and then in West Coast, by the likes of Kenneth Rexroth (the pioneer behind the San Francisco Renaissance), Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. In her introduction to *The Beat Reader*, Ann Charters provides us with an important bit of contextual information about this so-called Beat Generation:

[The] shared experience for the Beat writers was historical and political, based on the tumultuous changes of their times: the historic events that began with America’s dropping the

atomic bomb on Japan to bring World War II to an end, and the political ramification of the ensuing Cold War and the wave of anti-Communist hysteria that followed in the United States in the late 1940s and the 1950s. (xvi-xvii)

Their time was one of prosperity and renewed optimism, the latter being somewhat exacerbated by the necessity to construct an inward and an outward image of impervious confidence in the superiority of the American way of life and the strict morality that walked in tandem with it.

Confronted by this atmosphere of timorous seclusion, and further motivated by an incumbent literary establishment underpinned by a blind devotion to a remote canonical past, the Beats counter-attacked with a new type of literature that extolled the present, the spontaneous individual, the body and its sensual pleasures and, among other things, life in general. This passage from *On the Road*, narrated by Sal Paradise, Kerouac's in-text vicar, can accurately illustrate the latter contention:

the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes "Awww!" (15)

For his part, Ginsberg proclaimed, in the footnote to his "Howl", that

The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy! The nose is
holy! The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy!
Everything is holy! everybody's holy! everywhere is holy! everyday
is an eternity! Everyman's an angel! (70-71)

In Beefheart's early poetry, this sort of ideas is not very hard to find. "Electricity" (II), a song from his first album, *Safe as Milk* (1967), corroborates the consonance between his texts and the life-affirming principles espoused by the Beats:

Singing from you to me
Thunderbolts caught easily

Shouts the truth peacefully
Electricity

High voltage man kisses night to bring the light to those who need to hide their
shadow deed
Go into bright find the light and know that friends don't mind just how you grow

Midnight cowboy stained in black reads dark roads without a map to free-seeking electricity

Beefheart starts by equating electricity with life's élan (a flux which "sings from you to me", connecting every living being) and then abruptly proceeds to correlate it to the commonplace sexual energy ("thunderbolts caught easily") which animates the characters in the poem. From this it follows that, for the poet, sex is as pristine as the life which propels it. Thus, the overcharged "high-voltage man" and the "midnight cowboy" who travels to "free-seeking electricity" obviously fulfill the same role: that of the unwavering stud that, because he is immersed in a murky world of forbidden pleasures (one of them "kisses night" and the other is a "stained in black"), becomes a redeeming symbol for the hedonistic life. By a sleight of hand, life's most sacred essence and filthy profanity become one and the same.

It goes without saying that the blurring of boundaries between the sacred and the profane was perhaps one of the most defining features of traditional African-American music. In "Tarotplane" (III), a song from 1967's *Mirror Man*, Beefheart makes plain to what extent his pantheistic worldview was rooted in that age-old repository:

Little girl, Little girl
Gonna take you for a ride in my Tarotplane
For a fly, for a fly
Baby Person told Elixir Sue
Listen to me baby
I'm gonna tell it to you
You ain't too old
Just what you been heard – just what you been told
Gonna need somebody on your bond
You gonna need some bodies on your bond
Just you bear this in mind
True friends is hard to find
You gonna need some bodies on your bond

The fact that most of the characters' names in this song point us in the direction of puerility ("Baby Person"), pathetic utopianism ("Elixir Sue") and mechanized consumerism ("Automatic Sam", "Prestcold Milly") is by no means coincidental. The heart of the song resides in Beefheart's libidinous announcement that he is taking his addressee – the "little girl" – for "a ride in [his] Tarotplane". The "Tarotplane" is a direct reference to Robert Johnson's secular and very bawdy "Terraplane Blues", which employs the image of a car as a subterfuge for various metaphors for sexual penetration. Thus being so, it is made very plain that the poem acts as a sort of initiation ritual to the pleasures of the sensuous life, which, like the Beats pointed out, were in opposition to the hermetic morality of mainstream society. But the poem also borrows some of its lines from religious songs. "You're gonna need somebody on your bond"², for instance, is taken straight out of Blind Willie Johnson's homonymous song, which was originally about the arrival of death and the salvation bestowed by Jesus

² All of the blues lyrics that we will employ throughout this essay can be found in Eric Sackheim's anthology *The Blue Line*.

Christ. Thus the subtle change that Beefheart introduces in Willie Johnson's line – turning the religious “somebody” into a very down-to-earth “some bodies” – elicits from us at least two possible readings.

One would be that Beefheart was trying to shatter the esoteric aura of the original song by implying that salvation was not a thing that was granted to us by a remote entity shrouded in a haze of moral purity, but something that we could achieve by ourselves. This interpretation would eventually lead us back to “Electricity” and make us take note of the fact that the life force that Beefheart presents to us in this song is eminently physical. Beefheart dissipated every sort of doubt about this issue by explaining, in an interview given to the *New Musical Express* in 1986, that “People believe the Bible and all that damp bedsheet crap but I'm not convinced. I think it was a real thoughtless hot night in the sheets that put me here. The world is pure biology and we're just deluding ourselves with all these spiritual notions” (Barnes 290).

By connecting the image of the body to a thoughtless state of mind, Beefheart carries us to the second possible interpretation of the above-mentioned line. Bodies are frail, after all, not just because they decay, like in Willie Johnson's death-bed hymn, but also because they are easily enticed by the promise of earthly self-fulfillment. This brings us to the second line that Beefheart borrows from the blues, this time from Son House's “Grinning in Your Face”. By telling us that “true friends are hard to find / don't mind people grinning in your face”, House implies that bodies, human bodies, are predictably self-centered, violent and indifferent to the predicament of others (they grin in one another's faces), but that is precisely why their doom inspires feelings of understanding and compassion.

The blues were stuffed with such lyrics that stoked the recognition and redemption of one's own frailty and guilt. In “Mean Mistreater Mama”, for instance, Leroy Carr sings:

“You’re a mean mistreater mama / And you don’t mean me no good / And I don’t blame you mama / I’d be the same way if I could”.

This was the sort of ideas that were being embraced by Beethoven in his poem. At this moment we are already aware that what started out as a ritual of sexual initiation has converted itself into a celebration of our attachment to other people, other sinners like us, and into a fatalistic glorification of sin itself.

The latter is in tune, of course, with the tenets of African-American music, a territory in which one always walks along a thin line dividing the devil’s music from the music of god. In an interview about his documentary *The Soul of a Man*, Martin Scorsese asks Wim Wenders, the director, what is the tension between gospel and the blues:

The tension between gospel and blues, or the gap between the sacred and the profane, is a sort of strange demarcation line that goes across the entire history of the blues. It’s a sort of border area when there’s some traffic going across in each direction. And a lot of bands who [sic] would play Saturday night, on Sunday morning are musicians at the church.

In the world of fragile employment and random violence in which blacks lived at beginning of the 20th Century, debauchery and fast living were vindicated. In his *The History of the Blues*, Francis Davis points out that

Murder was a fact of life, and though no statistics on black-on-black violence are available, there is reason to believe they were staggering. The unwritten law in the backwoods gambling dens in which the blues was performed was that you could kill anybody you pleased and the authorities would look the other way so long as your victim was a fellow Negro and not a good worker. (47)

The convergence between religion and dissipation was then warranted by the need for a compassionate viewpoint of their predicament which at the same time allowed them to go on living as boisterously as they could in the face of all the hardships. Davis digests the function of this communal rite very effectively when he contends that

[The] blues, like most subsequent forms of black music (arguably including rap) was a way of smiling through (or sneering at) adversity, a people's attempt to alchemize poison into medicine, all the deliverance hoped for or needed by the men and women who played it or merely danced and indulged their desires to its hypnotic accompaniment. (48)

And if it is true that many blues songs merely straddled the two poles of the sacred and the profane, other compositions were very blatant about their interconnectedness. In "Shave em' Dry", for example, Lucille Bogan tells her lover that his "dick stands up like a steeple" and that his "goddamn ass-hole stands up like a church door", but not before asking him to "grind her . . . till the bell do ring", thereby equating the sexual orgasm with religious celebration.

We can say that the latter idea was present from the start in Beefheart's song. After all, its title ("Tarotplane") consists in a pun which splices together the sweltering sexuality in Johnson's "Terraplane Blues" and the rapture connected to the inner voyage proffered by the Tarot.

According to Lee Buster, author of the introductory booklet to Lo Scarabeo's Tarot of Marseille, when we arrive to the last card in the deck, "The World", "we have freed ourselves from the tyranny of our own small desires (the Soul of Desire) and from the futility of exerting our will even as the wheel of events spins out of our control (the Soul of Will)" (6). One could claim that this is, therefore, a spiritual trip that has little to do with the petty and egotistical desires that blues performers sing about in their compositions. But we would be wrong if we did. Buster points out that the purpose of eschewing our self-centeredness is precisely to become one with The World, with "the spirit which permeates and connects all living beings" (9). When we get to the last stop in the Tarot, we feel "connected to others" and we see "other living beings as sacred" (9). In other words, by getting rid of the "I", we become aware of the "divine electricity" that links all living beings to one another and we are drawn towards them, their suffering and their desires. Thus, the libido of the blues converges

with the Tarot in a unisonant exaltation of life that Beefheart sets in motion by taking us “for a ride” in his Tarotplane.

Strictly Universal

So, after having travelled to the past for a little while in order to provide some information about Beefheart’s connection to the Beats and the blues, the time has finally come for us to land upon the 1960s. The attentive reader must have noticed the way in which the ideas we found during our analysis of “Tarotplane” resemble those we usually tend to relate to the hippie subculture in general, and to the consumption of LSD in particular. In his essay “The Flowering of the Hippie Movement”, John Robert Howard presents to us an outline of the philosophy surrounding this famous psychedelic drug:

LSD develops a certain sense of fusion with all living things. The tripper speaks of the ‘collapse of the ego’, by which he means a breakdown of the fears, anxieties, rationalizations and phobias which have kept him from relating to others in a human way. He also speaks of sensing the life process in leaves, in flowers, in the earth, in himself. This process links all things, makes all things one (49).

Songs which drew on this sort of imagery proliferated during the sixties. The lyrics for “Natural Harmony”, a song from The Byrds’ 1968 album *The Notorious Byrd Brothers*, act as one among countless examples: “Feel so free, wider than me / Seems just like the day of birth / . . . / Going home, almost gone / Merging with a grain of sand”³.

Like we have seen, Beefheart initially lined up behind these principles, advocating the flight from the ego, the peaceful convergence with the throbbing flux of life, the whole nine yards. When we get to *Strictly Personal* (1968), his attitude towards these issues had turned

³ All of the lyrics from rock bands that we will employ throughout this essay can be found online at *LyricWiki*.

on a dime. Even the title of the album revealed that, inside, more humble ideas were at play. The universal truth no longer seemed to be within his reach. In fact, when that same all-embracing sense of finality makes its appearance in this album, it does so not as a wellspring of love, hope and optimism, but as an inane target for the poet's derision.

“Beatle Bones and Smokin’ Stones” (IV) is a parody of The Beatles’ classic hit “Strawberry Fields Forever”, a song which is unsurprisingly informed by the staple hippie dogmas we have been discussing thus far. At the kernel of Beefheart’s poem we find the idea that the hippies’ utopia was flawed from the start because it had been erected on top of a self-defeating contradiction. At the same time that they proclaimed their love for the other, they departed from the preconception that they were in possession of the ultimate truth and that it ought to be shared by everyone. Notice the ironic way in which Beefheart obsessively reiterates this latter precept of universality: “Red, blue, yellow sunset / Where I’ve set and you’ve set and I’ve loved and you’ve loved / What I saw and you saw”. Instead of a matrix of understanding and negotiation between plural identities, Beefheart suggests that what had been created was an army of grotesque⁴ “Cheshire cats” that moved about with a permanent smile on their faces, forever in awe of an illusory landscape of strawberry fields they tried to force upon others.

By his reckoning, these were “porcelain children” that saw “through white lights”. The reference to this color is by no means just a fleeting quip directed at this subculture’s claim to purity. Throughout Beefheart’s work, white invariably shows up as the correlative of oppression and of the establishment of a restrictive order. His repetition of the formula “The

⁴ Throughout this work, the word “grotesque” will be employed as a synonym for “self-deluded” and “pathetic”. Sherwood Anderson is one of the authors who define the term in said way. In the introductory chapter (“The Book of the Grotesque”) of his novel *Winesberg, Ohio*, Anderson points out that “[it] was the truths that made the people grotesques. . . . [The] moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood” (24), and later goes on to add that, because all the truths made by Man are beautiful, all the grotesques are “understandable and lovable” (24).

Dark – The Light – The Dark – The Day” further reinforces the idea that their doctrine was underpinned by a black and white conception of the world – an either-you-are-with-me-or-against-me viewpoint that made them as intolerant as the mainstream society they tried to challenge.

This point is reiterated in “Trust Us” (V), another song from the same album. The latter is blatantly a parody of George Harrison's “Within You, Without You”. From start to finish it mocks the condescending tone of the Beatles' guitarist towards those “who hide themselves behind a wall of illusion” and die without having glimpsed at the truth. At the outset of the song, the mock-psychedelic music in the background acts as an hypnotic gimmick that concurs with Beefheart in the act of brain-washing the listener, forcing him to inculcate a list of rules on love and freedom. Then the song explodes into melodramatic and pathetic pleading. Beefheart is now begging the audience to evade the tragic fate described by Harrison. He screams: “You got to trust us, before you turn to dust”. Mike Barnes clearly overlooked the sheer irony that permeates the song when he wrote: “The cornerstone of the album is Trust Us, an epic United Nations of Youth rallying cry, a wake-up call to get moving before you turn to dust” (58). Notice the utter redundancy at the pith of the argument that opens the following paragraph: “The lyrics promised love and trust, but ran counter to vacuous everyone-is-everybody-else hippie homilies. Van Vliet presented a list of conditions that had to be met. They are vague, perhaps, but proscriptive, nonetheless” (58).

The proscriptive character of the rhetoric of peace and love was an issue that came up most prominently during a famous quarrel between old friends Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov. In response to the latter's increasingly militant poetry, which inveighed against those who waged war in former Indochina, Duncan wrote her a letter in which he didactically encapsulated the paradox at the heart of her coercive utopia:

Do we believe in unilateral peace? Then surely it is we who must create it where we are. But the revolution, like Nixon, believes in inflicting peace on their own terms. I do not ask for a program of Peace; but I do protest the war waged under the banner of Peace, no matter who wages it (qtd. in Mlinko 4).

In the poet's perspective, Levertov's dichotomic view of war and peace ended up turning the words into synonyms – two facets of the same coin. After all, the main goal of the peace protesters was to impose their perspective upon the warmongers', and Duncan saw that as something equally squelching, since, for him, “[a]ll creation is from conflict” (qtd. in Mlinko 4): life implies the maintenance of plurality and contradiction.

“Dachau Blues” (VI) is one of Beefheart's few anti-war poems. But the fact that he was against the war (like Duncan was, we should add) did not prevent him from including in his text a similar idea to the one we have quoted above. He starts his text with a horrifying description of the two world wars which preceded the conflicts of his own era. The latter seem to be on the brink of igniting a third episode of mass destruction, and that appears to vindicate the reaction of his young contemporaries:

Sweet little children with doves on their shoulders
Their eyes rolled back in ecstasy cryin'
Please old man stop this misery
They're counting out the devil
With two fingers on their hands
Beggin' the Lord don't let the third one land
On World War Three

If we take into account what we have been discussing about the protesters' conceited purity, it is difficult not to read Beefheart's portrayal of them in this poem (“Sweet little children with doves on their shoulders”) in a humorous way, despite the seriousness of its subject matter. Much more ambiguous is the image of the protesters “counting out the devil /

With two fingers on their hands” but, again, if we go back to Duncan’s quotation, we can easily understand the idea Van Vliet was attempting to convey. With the former’s words in the back of the mind, notice how the self-assured V-sign (the “two fingers on their hands”) suddenly starts looking more like the horns from the devil they try to expel from their strawberry paradise. By now the “doves on their shoulders” are certainly gone, having been replaced by the cantankerous flames that come along with violent assertion. Like in Hawthorne’s extract cited at the beginning of this chapter, what Beefheart presents to us here is a depiction of kind-hearted intentions turning themselves inside out and being transformed into their own foil. The feathers of the archangels of peace end up becoming as “ruffled . . . as Satan’s own” (Hawthorne 184).

The latter was an idea that would later reemerge, under more or less the same garments, in “Floppy Boot Stomp” (VII), a song from 1978’s *Shiny Beast*. In his biography, Mike Barnes points out that this is a poem about “the archetypal confrontation between a farmer and the devil” (232). He goes on to add that “in this struggle between good and evil, the farmer emerges as the winner” (232). Once again Barnes appears to have turned a blind eye to the contradictory vectors that move about in the poem. The battle staged in this poem is indeed one between ancestral good and evil, but it does not unfold in the straightforward fashion Barnes describes.

We can begin by taking two particular lines into account, which will definitely point us in a direction we are already familiar with: “’n the sky turned white in the middle of the night / ‘n the big floppy boot stomped down into the ground”. Again the color white shows up as a symbol for the establishment of a restrictive order, whose circular perimeter is outlined by the farmer (“The farmer jumped in a circle ‘n flung his chalk right down”). The fact that, throughout Beefheart’s work, white acts as a *leitmotiv* for masculine assertion should not be of import to us for now, but it will not certainly harm us if we keep it on hold

until Chapter Two, where we will probe deeper into that particular type of symbolic imagery. For the moment, it shall suffice to say that this is again a poem about the ineptitude of categories such as Right and Wrong to capture the complexity of the real. The way we perceive the latter is always slanted by our own language and that makes our viewpoint seem “floppy”, since it never manages to provide us with a complete account of the world’s intricacies. If we assume that we are in the right, though, and that our interpretation of reality is the only one possible, we turn into someone as repellent as the farmer, who by the end of the poem appears to have been swallowed up by the same flames that he initially tried to put out. This is why *Shiny Beast*’s sleeve [Fig. 2] displays two devils, two oppressors instead of just one.

We should note that, during the sixties, Captain Beefheart was not the only popular artist to have highlighted the paradox at the heart of the good-evil dichotomy. In their famous song “Sympathy for the Devil” (from 1968’s *Beggars Banquet*), the Rolling Stones brought this ambiguity to the foreground when they had Mick Jagger sing: “Just as every cop is a criminal / And all the sinners saints / As heads is tails / Just call me Lucifer / Cause I’m in need of some restraint”.

More famously, perhaps, and more telling of the way the hippies’ rhetoric of Good could turn sour, Bob Dylan, an ex-role-model for this generation of protesters, had sung on “Maggie’s Farm” (from 1965’s *Bringing It All Back Home*):

Well, I try my best
To be just like I am
But everybody wants you
To be just like them
They sing while you slave and I just get bored
I ain’t gonna work on Maggie’s farm no more

In the past Dylan had also given voice to these songs of enslavement, but now he was through with it. In *No Direction Home*, Martin Scorsese's documentary on Dylan's life, the artist makes his viewpoint about these matters plain. In two short sentences he managed to encapsulate all the central ideas that we have explored in this section: "You got to realize you can kill somebody with kindness too. During the 60s, you were either for the war or against the war, you either supported King or you hated niggers".

The Upright Pole of Liberty

One could certainly argue that this tension between the community and the individual was by no means specific to the American 60s. According to Larzer Ziff, author of the introduction to Penguin's *Nature and Selected Essays*, this conflict was already a concern for Ralph Waldo Emerson when he started his intellectual career. Ziff contends that "the political actuality that stimulated Emerson's repeated insistence on self-reliant individualism was the American faith in majority rule. As many a European observer noted, in practice this resulted in a tyranny of public opinion" (20). He goes on to say that "Orthodox Protestantism was officially outraged by Emerson's ideas, but these ideas drew considerable strength from the protest tradition within *Protestantism*" (24). After all, "the Puritan migration to America . . . had been fueled by a belief in the vital presence of the spirit and a contempt for the forms of a ritualized church" (25).

So, in short, the struggle between the enlightened individual and the oppressive community that we are able to identify in Beefheart and Dylan's work was something that actually harked back to the foundation of America itself and to the antinomian dissent of

those who had projected the idea of a New World. If we keep the previous paragraph in the background, we can certainly identify a certain degree of circularity in the fact that in their opposition to mainstream society (itself a supposed bastion of freedom), hippies became themselves a symbol of oppression.

According to Sacvan Bercovitch, this apparently unavoidable circularity seems to be rooted in the image of America as a metaphor for dissent and, ultimately, in utopianism itself.

The following is an extract from *The Rites of Assent*:

All utopian visions express powerful feelings of social discontent; many are adopted by repressed or ascendant groups to challenge the status quo; and while some of them are thus incorporated into the ideology of a new social order, nonetheless, *as* utopian visions, even these remain a potential source of social unrest, a standing invitation to resistance and revolt. Every ideology, that is, breeds its own opposition, every culture its own counter-culture. The same ideals that at one point sustain the system may later become the basis of a new revolutionary consensus, one that invokes those ideals on behalf of an entirely different way of life, moral and material. (364)

In other words, American culture was constructed on top of a mechanism that contained within itself a space for incessant rebellion, the fulfillment of the utopian project remaining permanently in abeyance. When dissent issues forth, its subversive potential is immediately diffused and the new project acts as an injection of renewed pizzazz to the culture, making the communal utopia as vital and palpable as it had been from the start. New ideas are, then, automatically converted into a refurbished *status quo*. That is to say that the rhetoric of the culture acts on its own, always making sure that the individual, and its unfathomable specificity, takes no part in it.

Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a novel which perfectly illustrates these latter ideas. It pits McMurphy, a hedonistic cowboy figure who inspires the trust and the animus of his fellow madhouse inmates, against nurse Ratchet, an emasculating woman who, like her name suggests, appears as a mere part of an omnipresent machine that controls

people's bodies and minds. As the book progresses, we witness numerous rebellious actions on the part of the inmates that are fostered by McMurphy's stalwart leadership. But when we get to the end of the story, McMurphy is no longer in command of his image or his actions. The American utopia has overridden his entire agency and is now in the driver's seat, deciding in advance what the outcome of events will be. When, at the end of the book, he attacks the nurse and is submitted to a near-fatal shock treatment, he does so because, like F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*, he has become a larger than life figure, an embodiment of the American dream in the eyes of others.

Having this in mind, the ending of the novel becomes extremely ambiguous. Inspired by McMurphy's self-sacrifice, Chief Bromden, the novel's unreliable narrator, breaks free from the hospital and runs towards the highway. In his own words: "I ran across the grounds in the direction I remembered seeing the dog go, towards the highway" (280). What he does not tell us is that he had seen that same dog being hit by a car. We are informed that soon he will be in the presence of his long-lost Indian peers: "I'd like to see what they've been doing since the government tried to buy their right to be Indians" (280). But in effect his own right to be Indian had already been bought from him the moment he threw his weight around McMurphy and the adjoining haze of American freedom which had, from then on, been pulling the strings.

In the end, Bromden cannot embrace his own identity because, when you are part of a utopia, your role in it has been fixated in advance. If your society – or your subculture, for that matter – advocates freedom and love for the other, maybe the question you can ask yourself is: who defines these terms? After all, these are abstract words that can be made to mean what one wants them to mean. This is exactly the point that Beefheart tries to make in his poem "The Thousandth and Tenth Day of the Human Totem Pole" (VIII):

The pole was a horrible looking thing
With all of those eyes and ears
And waving hands for balance
There was no way to get a copter in close
So everyone was starving together
The man at the top had long given up
But didn't have nerve enough to climb down
At night the pole would talk to itself and the chatter wasn't too good
Obviously the pole didn't like itself, it wanted to walk!
It was the summer and it was hot
And balance wouldn't permit skinning to undergarments
It was an integrated pole, it was taking on an reddish brown cast
Exercise on the pole was isometric
Kind of a flex and then balance
Then the highest would roll together,
The ears wiggle, hands balance
There was a gurgling and googling heard
A tenth of the way up the pole
Approaching was a small child
With Statue of Liberty doll

Remember Blind Willie Johnson's line that Beefheart borrowed and rearranged for his "Tarotplane"? He had turned it into "you're gonna need some bodies on your bond", an invitation to recognize one's connection to other human beings and to become one with them. If "Totem Pole" was not a direct reference to that earlier poem of his, we can nevertheless read it as an ironic recantation of the ideas he had once upheld. Far from a paradisiacal bodily oneness, the image of integration that Beefheart paints here is one in which its elements celebrate the fact that "it hadn't rained or manured for over two hours". At the coda of the

text, the ominous “gurgling and googling” sound of someone’s urine meandering through other people’s bodies certainly puts an end to that transient atmosphere of grotesque comfort.

In this poem, it is not the “I” that becomes one with the other but precisely the other way around – disparate identities are forced to fit in one another in an attempt to make stable someone’s puerile and whimsical idea of “Liberty”, which shows up as a doll at the end, along with the architect behind this utopian monstrosity.

Michel Delville and Andrew Norris, authors of *Frank Zappa, Captain Beefheart and the Secret History of Maximalism*, had this to say about the poem: “A Tower of Babel made of flesh and bone, the human totem stands as a metaphor for a society defeated by its own aspirations to freedom and transcendence and relying too much on abstract and devalued ideals of autonomy and progress” (29).

Progress was exactly the category that Jean François Lyotard tried to put in perspective when he published his *Postmodern Condition* in 1979, only three years earlier than Beefheart’s last album, *Ice Cream for Crow*, from which the latter poem was taken. This was the philosopher that famously proclaimed the end of “grand narratives”, the utopian designs that forced individual identities to toe the line of communal development. In his essay “Defining the Postmodern” he wrote: “One can note a sort of decay in the confidence placed by the two last centuries in the idea of progress. This idea of progress as possible, probable or necessary was rooted in the certainty that the development of the arts, technology, knowledge and liberty would be profitable to mankind as a whole” (1613). Lyotard goes on to illustrate the oppressiveness of all-encompassing utopianisms by calling to mind the hideous crimes against humanity committed in the *gulags* and Nazi concentration camps in the name of progress.

Beefheart's "Dachau Blues" paid homage to the ones who had perished for the forceful implementation of the egotistical dream of a nation. At the same time, he threw hippies in with the oppressors. With this I do not imply, of course, that he thought the protestors and the activists were as violent or as ruthless as the Nazis. On the other hand, I do believe that he was trying to convey the idea that both utopias departed from the same flawed and arrogant premises and that both upheld a worldview whose ultimate fulfillment depended on the effacement of opposition.

For all of these reasons, I find it hard to understand how critics persist on equating Beefheart's work with the same principles of militant love and moral superiority that he had been trying to undermine all along. As we have seen above, Mike Barnes wrote that Beefheart bequeathed us a set of "proscriptions on love". Michel Delville and Andrew Norris contributed to the cogency of this perspective by stating that

From the relativizing perspective of post-modernism, Van Vliet's stance might seem quaint or merely stubborn in its attachment to the mystique of essence, the "It" which the Beat generation venerated, that indefinable something which connects one to life and separates one from the mass of people who don't have or haven't found "It" (23)

Throughout this chapter I tried to provide multifarious examples that aim to disprove the argument stated above. If "It" was on Beefheart's mind, it certainly walked in tandem with an image of arrogance and hypocrisy which was a far cry from acting as a token of a veritable connection to life and to other identities.

In Van Vliet's opinion, such a connection was, moreover, simply not possible. As we shall argue in the next section of this text, many of Beefheart's poems revolve around the idea that the "collapse of the ego", which would supposedly grant us access to the momentum of life, actually presupposes the irreversible destruction of the self. In this second part of our journey we will then strive to further reinforce the idea developed thus far, that the only

responsible stance we can assume towards the other is one of self-conscious humility. One that acknowledges the existence of irreducible identities that cannot be contained by our subjective language and our egotistical utopias. One that recognizes that our perception of other living beings and of the world in general is always “strictly personal”.

II

It's All about Sex

Abject Virgin-Whores and the Utopian Return to Nature

Tepper was curious to find more about the song [Bat Chain Puller]: “One time I asked him, ‘What’s that song about? What did you mean? Just give me some clues, where are you coming from?’ He said, ‘Man, all songs that I write are about the same thing.’ I said, ‘What?’ He said, ‘You know.’ I said, ‘What?’ He said, ‘Sex, Everything’s sex.’ I go, ‘Come on, man, it’s this thing that’s been dragged out of a lake with hooks and it’s got veins on it, you’re telling me that’s sex?’ He said, ‘It’s *all* about sex, man’ (qtd. in Barnes 230).

Captain Beefheart. The Biography, Mike Barnes

Abjection and the Imitation of Individuality

In the previous chapter, we asserted that one of Beefheart’s primordial goals was to achieve complete unity with the other. This was the perspective we encountered during our analysis of “Tarotplane”, from *Mirror Man* (1967). In *Strictly Personal* (1968), the following album, Beefheart seemed intent on persuading us that these latter ideas amounted, after all, to nothing more than another ridiculous utopia. But it was not just that he could not speak for the other, like hippies claimed they could. In his subsequent LPs, Van Vliet would contend that convergence with other identities would eventually imply his own death and so he ended up withdrawing from such projects. From *Trout Mask Replica* (1969) onwards, then, his albums became much more pessimistic and the former “one with nature” *leitmotif* turned into the intermittent “apart from nature”. The latter was no longer bucolic and inviting. It had turned into a symbol of otherness and death.

To understand why this is so, I suggest that we inaugurate this chapter with a close-reading of the “Untitled” (IX) poem on the sleeve of 1970’s *Lick My Decals Off, Baby*:

Noon bouncin’ ball of warm beside child
Deflating a vegelife puzzle
Ah braking ball of wings, legs, leaves, lives, beehives
Movies from each comb
Each pocket ‘n drones bouncin’ cones
Prisms that melt flesh and bones
Dust ‘n dark dusklite
None numb numerals
Noon ball warm beside the child
Earholes, eye holes, airholes
Dance, deflate, inflate meat rainbows
Flesh bonnets her hair woven
Toes kick dust away
Drops
Blue, yellow, red, green clocks
Her head pumps, stops, starts, plays, drops
Eyes roll
Rocks back ‘n forth
She played through the sun stuck out her tongue
Stood on each of three decals
She licked each one

The first thing you might have noticed about this poem is the way its depiction of nature stands as the polar opposite of the realm of “otherness and death” I had led you to expect. Instead, an atmosphere of peaceful sameness pervades the whole composition.

The reason for this is that we are experiencing nature through the eyes of a child whose perspective still has not been molded by the orderly language of the community. We know this because only at the end of the poem does she lick the “decals”, which in Beefheart’s pallet of symbols stand for the language of simplistic catalogues. When interviewed by Jeff Eymael from *Aloha* magazine about this subject, Van Vliet made this plain by saying that “[w]ith *Lick My Decals Off, Baby* I wanted to tell everyone that they must throw away those labels which divide people into categories, lick those decals away like a mother licking a baby to life” (qtd. in Barnes 136).

Thus being so, it can be said that it is because the child has “No numb numerals” (no prescribed categories) at her disposal that she does not aggregate the fragments of nature into the shapely forms of a taxonomic “vegeliflife puzzle”. Her supposedly unshackled viewpoint allows her to focus on every small detail of nature – to watch “Movies from each comb” and to notice the minutiae of “wings, legs, leaves, lives, beehives”, which end up becoming the minutiae of language itself, its unfathomable plurality and interconnectedness being underlined by the alliterations (in /l/ and /s/) and the various rhymes. Yet Beefheart manages to take even further his emphasis on the particular: the denizens of this minute landscape also seem to possess their own perspective of the world, hence experiencing time in a subjective fashion (“Blue, yellow, red, green clocks”).

But although immensely intricate, to her, nature is also a unified “ball”. On the face of all this inconclusiveness, the child seems perfectly at ease “Play[ing] through the sun” and bodies do not seem to bother her either, being described as “meat rainbows” (scalps are “flesh bonnets”).

It is implied, though, that this innocent sense of oneness with her surroundings will be disrupted once she finishes licking the “decals”. By doing so, one imagines that the girl ends

up repressing the natural plurality she had previously experienced and replacing it with sets of boxes and drawers. So it is precisely because it had been repressed that nature converts itself into a symbol of otherness and death. In order to go back to the childhood of “no numb numerals”, subjective clocks and “meat rainbows”, the identity forged by taxonomic rationality would have to be shattered.

In *The Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva describes a very similar structure to this one. In the process of repressing the language of sameness (that of the mother) and forging the language of the individual, that which is cast out becomes “abject”:

The abject confronts us . . . with our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling. (13)

Furthermore, Kristeva contends, like Beefheart does, that the language of the subject is informed by the language of the community. In the latter’s work, we had seen that that common language became the language of the subject by means of copying – one had to lick the “decals” and make the catalogues of reason one’s own. In Kristeva’s theory, although it does not assume a primordial role in the making of the individual, copying the language of the many (that of the father) is essential for the subject to circumvent the mother’s hold:

In such a close combat, the symbolic light that a third party, eventually the father, can contribute helps the future subject, the more so if it happens to be endowed with a robust supply of drive energy, in pursuing a reluctant struggle against what, having been the mother, will turn into an abject. Repelling, rejecting; repelling itself, rejecting itself. Ab-jecting.

In this struggle, which fashions the human being, the *mimesis*, by means of which he becomes homologous to another in order to become himself, is in short logically and chronologically secondary. Even before being *like*, “I” am not but do *separate, reject, ab-ject*. (13)

So, in short, the process of abjection is something one always goes through in order to

become an independent subject, thereby (re)establishing a network of meanings upon the world which allows us to interpret it according to our own perspective. Therefore, when the repressed abject returns, it does so under the guise of meaninglessness – a token of the existence of an otherness beyond ourselves that destroys our subjectivity if we decide to embrace it:

A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing either. A “something” that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture. (Kristeva 2)

The destruction of the subject is then precisely the theme of “Lick My Decals Off, Baby” (X), a companion poem to the “Untitled” we have close-read a moment ago. Let us proceed to make an analysis of it in order to uncover how Beefheart frames these matters in his *oeuvre*:

Rather than I wanna hold your hand
I wanna swallow you whole
n’ I wanna lick you everywhere it’s pink
n’ everywhere you think
Whole kit ‘n kaboodle ‘n the kitchen sink
Heaven’s sexy as hell
Life is integrated,
Goes together so well
‘n so on
Well I’m gonna go on ‘n do my washing
Well, now you may think I am crazy but I want you to
Lick my decals off baby
‘n I don’t want you to be lazy ‘cause it’s driving me crazy
‘n this song ain’t no sing-song

It's all about the birds 'n the bees
'n where it all went wrong
'n where it all belongs
'n the earth all go down on their knees
lookin' for a little ease
She stuck out her tongue 'n the fun begun
She stuck out her tongue 'n the fun begun
She stuck it out at me 'n I just thumbed my nose
'n went on washing my clothes

The first thing one should note is that here, and invariably throughout Beefheart's work, self-effacement walks alongside the subject of sex. According to Delville and Norris, "[f]or Beefheart, sex, violence and death are not merely agents of libidinal release but experiences which purport to transcend the boundaries of selfhood" (30). In other words, they are experiences which purport to take the subject away from him/herself and back to the boundless Other that has been "abjected" and that, in Beefheart's perspective, he/she was once at one with.

Because Van Vliet considers that "[l]ife is integrated", sex, in this poem, becomes a quest for the time before "it all went wrong", or, in other words, a time when he was integrated in life. The woman in the poem is, noticeably, the vicar for this golden age and that is why she is depicted as a symbol of "heaven". After all, she is the one who is about to "lick [his] decals off", thus taking away the burden of the self-enclosing language of the community. Thus being so, it is understandable that "[he] want[s] to swallow [her] whole", thereby retrieving for himself the wholeness he had lost after being kicked out of his pre-symbolic Eden or, in Kristeva's terms, after being kicked out of the womb by his own language.

. But if this woman is portrayed as a heavenly Eve, Beefheart tells us the latter is only one of her facets. She is also an unruly Lilith, and she is “sexy as hell”. It is because the poetic I knows that the removal of the “decals” would imply the death of his rational identity that he ends up pushing back the stygian woman and resumes “washing his clothes”, in other words washing his body (the infinitude of nature) from his linguistic garments, without which he would not be able to interpret the world and without which he would not ultimately exist.

From the above we conclude that because “the woman” – the most important figure in Beefheart’s bestiary – represents, simultaneously, the totality of meaning and its collapse (the destruction of the rational I), onto her is projected, correlatively, the ultimate masculine assertion and the final desired castration – in other words, assertion turned self-destructively on itself, an obliterating self-penetration. But such extremes are never reached, of course. As we shall see later on, throughout Beefheart’s work, what we have instead is an incessant and anti-climactic cat-and-mouse game in which the man (order) or the woman (chaos) is alternatively in power. At the end, we always reach an impasse like the one that closes the latter poem: the woman sticks her tongue out at him and he thumbs his nose.

Obviously, this circular chain of meaning was not exclusive to Beefheart’s poems. Sex was, literally, all over the place in popular music, betraying the teeming libido of one of its major sources – the blues. In *The History of the Blues*, Francis Davis says: “As in country music, the battle of the sexes is one of the most popular themes of the blues, the age-old rift being widened by the social and economic restrictions imposed on black men, who frequently see themselves as victims of symbolic castration” (85). In Robert Johnson’s “Dead Shrimp Blues”, a song self-evidently about emasculation, we understand that the latter is triggered by the unfaithfulness of the lover: “I got dead shrimps here, someone fishing in my pond . . . at the hole where I used to fish, baby, you’ve got me posted out”. This is, nonetheless, only the structural pattern of the blues at its crudest. Like Davis implies, this “unfaithfulness” of the

woman was merely a formal vessel that could be filled in with every sort of misfortune, including “social and economic” ones.

The demonic depiction of womanhood is, of course, as old as humanity itself. This is an idea that Beefheart tries to convey in “Sue Egypt” (XI) – a name but also an imperative. Here, emasculation (“Bring me my scissors”) is triggered by the confrontation with the woman’s hectoring and unruly body, namely with menstrual blood: “The moon was a / wisdomatic / pristocratic / vagabond / bad voogum / a pitcher of red-hot juice”. Notice how the freshly-coined words “wisdomatic” and “pristocratic” – “wisdom” and “pristine”, if one could hazard a guess, matched with the suffix *-cratic*, which, according to the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, means “government” – contribute to the cogency of our idea. Departing from them, one can say that, in Beefheart’s perspective, the power of women (over men) seems to be rooted in the “wisdom” of an ancestral consciousness that harks back to an age of primeval “pristineness”. “Vagabond”, the word that comes next, marks the point of view around which the sentence pivots – that of the masculine authority that pins women down with the stained label of lasciviousness. The “pristocracy” of women is then revealed as a mere masculine construction underpinned by an age-old fear of the emasculative vagabond woman. And because it is deemed to be the progeny of artificiality, “pristocracy” is then also employed ironically – power relations were not, after all, a fateful natural fact that dated back to the pristine beginnings of the human world. In order to find someone to blame for sexual stereotypes, then, one would have to sue “Sue Egypt” and the man-made matrix of meanings that she embodies.

It would not be difficult to prove that Beefheart was right about the moldy remoteness of sexual power relations: invectives against women proliferate in ancient texts, with Eve and Pandora probably as the most famous among the many who supposedly stoked man’s precipitation into mortality. Just for the sake of curiosity, notice how Horace’s depiction of a

witches' Sabbath, in one of his sermons, manages to equate women (and their bodily fluids) with repellent corporality and death:

They started digging in the earth with their fingernails and tearing at a young lamb with their bare teeth: *the blood flowed into the hole* [my italics], where they could call up the souls of the ancestors who would give them the answers they sought. . . . One called upon Hecate, the other upon ferocious Tisiphone: and you would have seen packs of wandering serpents and infernal dogs, and the reddening moon, hiding behind large sepulchers, so as not to witness these events. (qtd. in Eco 204)

And yet, if the demonization of women appears to be something rather timeless, two specific events in Beefheart's recent past, which we will explore in the section that follows, had certainly reinforced the masculine fear of the other sex: the domestication of women at the end of the 19th Century and after the Second World War.

Pandora's Volcano

So let us begin by addressing the changes that took place during the late 19th century which influenced the way women were seen and which injected new vitality into the image of the emasculating *femme fatale*. In his *People's History of the Word*, Chris Harman explains that

in the early days of the industrial revolution. . . [w]omen and children provided the cheapest and most adaptable labor for the spinning mills, and they were crammed in with no thought for the effect on their health or on the care of younger children. . . . By the 1850s, however, the more far-sighted capitalist began to fear that future reserves of labor power were being exhausted. . . . A succession of laws restricted the hours which children could work, banned the employment of women in industries that might damage their chances of successful pregnancy. . . . Aside from this, most of the stress was on improving the "moral stamina" of the working class – on a moral offensive against "improvidence", "dissoluteness", "drunkenness", and the "demoralization produced by...indiscriminate charity".

Dealing with these alleged defects involved campaigns by philanthropists, churches and parliamentarians which extolled the middle class ideal of the family – a stable, monogamous, nuclear family of working husband, loyal housewife and disciplined children. Only such a family, it was claimed, could lead to children growing up dutiful and obedient. The woman's place was in the home, in accordance with "human nature". Practices which might challenge the model family, however widespread in the past, were branded as "immoral" or "unnatural". So pre-marital and extra-marital sex, divorce, contraception and discussion of sexual hygiene and sexual enjoyment were all castigated in a new climate of official puritanism. (382-383)

For our purposes, it is important to underline that precisely because control and bodily repression had been so sternly enforced upon women, their image as emasculators acquired a renewed aura of terror.

However, some of the artists of the time were alert to the hypocrisy which resided at the heart of this new moral turn. They noticed that while women were being consecrated to seclusion, men went on with their unpunished promiscuous lives and used domestic life merely as a front. Men had put in motion a moral machine that was supposed to keep their women under control at the same time that they indulged in salacious pastimes.

In order to demonstrate why the whole thing was a fraud, *fin de siècle* artists laid bare the network of gender representations and tried to show us which were the formulas that impelled men's hypocritical desires. Precisely for this reason, a quick look into Alban Berg's *Lulu*, an opera which was particularly fascinated with the gap between the real woman and the imagined one, shall be profitable for our discussion of the role played by womanhood in Beefheart's poems.

Lulu opens with an animal-tamer addressing the audience and informing them they are about to be shown "The beasts I have in my menagerie / Tamed by the superior force of human power" (42). The last and the most precious beast of all is, of course, Lulu herself: "She as the root of all evil was created, / To snare us, to mislead us she was fated, / And to murder, with no clue left on the spot" (43). He then goes to add "My sweetest beast, please

don't be what you're not! / You have no right to seem a gentler creature, / Distorting what is true in woman's nature" (43). Throughout the opera, though, that truth in "woman's nature" does not seem to stick to Lulu's actions. Although many men certainly die because of her, Berg implies that it is their fault, not hers. Lulu says so herself when her husband, Dr. Schön, threatens to kill her for finding her in the company of other men:

Although for my sake a man may kill himself or kill others, my value still remains what it was. You know the reasons why you wanted to be my husband, and I know my reasons for hoping we should be married. You let your dearest friends be deceived by what you made me, yet you can't consider yourself caught in your own deception. (132)

This idea of self-deception is what interests us here, because it is the same one that Beethoven explores in his texts. You will recall that we pointed out, at the beginning of this chapter, that Beethoven's women are generally conceived as a stand-in for the ultimate meaning, the totality of languages which constitute the flow of life. Since one can never achieve this final meaning, the woman who represents it is seen as pure and unattainable. We can see this idea in action for instance in "Pachuco Cadaver" (XII), where the object of desire "drives a cartune around" (attesting to the cartoonish artificiality of what is projected upon her) and whose "Broma seltzer blue umbrella keeps her up off the ground". This idea of purity is further reiterated in the line in which Beethoven tells us that "Her eyes are so peaceful thinks it's heaven she been".

We have also said that what we are offered in lieu of this ultimate truth is an endless cycle in which man and woman fight each other for power. In other words, the woman Beethoven presents us is always a virgin and a whore at the same time. But it is precisely because she is unattainable that she must be a whore – forever sliding away from the establishment of the ultimate masculine order, forever an emasculator.

This is more or less what Karl Kraus has written about the illusion created by Lulu's suitors around the protagonist. In my opinion, Kraus overemphasizes the importance of "social respectability" in the way the men act: here I would replace this category for the "desire for propriety", the need for the imposition of an order. But even if he followed a different route, he arrives at the central idea that we have exposed above – that the masculine volition for assertion both presupposes holding on to the object of desire and keeping it on the loose:

The fleeting beauty of a tropical bird gives greater happiness than its permanent possession, when a cramped cage has spoiled its lovely plumage: but this is something no bird-catcher has yet admitted. A man may dream about having a free female companion; but reality will force her to belong to him as a wife or mistress, because his need for *social respectability* [my italics] will always take precedence over his dreams. Thus even a man who wishes to have a polyandrous wife wants her for himself. (104)

In the opera, it is Lulu's portrait (her unattainable image in the eyes of men) that commands the action, not Lulu herself. By the end of the story, the eponymous character has lost all her beauty and still she continues to lead even more characters to the grave. Moments before he himself drops dead, Alwa, one of the suitors, explains why:

With this picture before me, I feel my self-respect is recovered. I understand the fate which compels me. Who stands before those lips with their promise of pleasure, before those eyes as innocent as the eyes of children, before this white and rosy-ripening body, and still feels safe within his bourgeois code of rules, let such a man cast the first stone at us! (203)

Although this line could probably act as an irrefragable and redemptory assertion of permanent masculine incompleteness, the fact is that the opera ends in a radically different key. Masculinity gathers strength and it flings the final triumphal blow. At the end, Kraus says, Lulu "encounters the ultimate and quintessential avenger of the male sex – Jack the Ripper. . . . He is the most sadistic of all her tormentors, and his knife becomes a symbol: it takes from her the means by which she sinned against all of them" (106). As we previously discussed, Beefheart never would have allowed this tension to end in such a way, without a

balance. In *Lulu*, though, Jack the Ripper is victorious and thus the final masculine order is established.

But Jack the Ripper was to triumph once more a couple of decades later when he reappeared as Brigadier General Jack D. Ripper in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). At the start of the picture, we are informed that the General believes that the "bodily fluids" of American men are under attack by both communists and women. He eventually sets in motion a process which will culminate with an atomic bomb being dropped in Russia. This in turn triggers an automatic retaliatory device which closes the movie with an atomic orgasm that destructs the whole world. Well, maybe not the whole world: we know that at least a group of men will manage to survive the explosions and we know that they plan to repopulate the earth. How they intend to do it is the funniest part:

General "Buck" Turgidson: "Doctor, you mentioned the ratio of ten women to each man. Now, wouldn't that necessitate the abandonment of the so-called monogamous sexual relationship, I mean, as far as men were concerned?"

Dr. Strangelove: "Regrettably, yes. But it is, you know, a sacrifice required for the future of the human race. I hasten to add that since each man will be required to do prodigious... service along these lines, the women will have to be selected for their sexual characteristics which will have to be of a highly stimulating nature."

Again the masculine utopia of complete assertion had been fulfilled and again it had been fulfilled during a time when masculinity was at its most fragile. According to Michael Rogin, author of the essay "*Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood and Cold War*" *Movies*, this atmosphere of impending emasculation had its roots in a series of changes that had been going on since the Great Depression and which had culminated in a new process of female domestication during the post-war consensus:

As the Depression deprived men of confident public lives, women came to play more important, nurturing roles. Then the men went off to war. Encouraged to replace their men on the job, women were promised significant work, independence and sexual autonomy. Resurgent postwar domestic

ideology attacked mothers who abandoned their children to work; it also attacked female sexual aggression. Women were driven back to domestic subordination in response not only to their husbands' return from the war, but also to their newfound independence. (6)

In a similar fashion to what had happened at the end of the 19th Century, promiscuous women, because they revealed the fallibility of this system, became a particular obsession for the men of the time, along with communists and nuclear weapons. This was most blatantly showcased in many of the movies of the time, especially in the genres of *noir* and science-fiction.

Just to provide you with a quick example of how the image of repellent womanhood is explored in each of the latter, let us start by focusing our attention upon Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly*, a *noir* picture about *noir* pictures, particularly of interest to us because it self-consciously tries to cram in most of the conventions of the genre at the same time that it puts them into perspective, pretty much like *Lulu* did. The movie depicts Mike Hammer, the prototype of the virile man (like his name and his constant milk-drinking suggest), and his quest for "the great whatsit", an indefinable something that leads him through a path of incessant murder and masculine assertion. Like in *Lulu*, one of the characters, Dr. Soberin, explains why this apparently circular process manages to be so appealing: "There is something sad and melancholy about trips. I always hate to go away. But one has to find some new place or it would be impossible to be sad and melancholy again". In other words, one always needs an obstacle on one's path, but it has to be one which keeps endlessly receding, in order to keep us motivated to reach a place that is as inexistent as "the great whatsit".

To our surprise, at the end of the picture we find that this so-called "great whatsit" has a palpable correlative after all. It is the nuclear bomb, the ultimate assertion, a weapon of mass destruction and also, more important for us, a weapon of self-destruction. Most

conveniently, the one to blame for the opening of the box which contains the bomb is a woman. Aldrich was trying to reenact the moment of Pandora's curious disobedience, the mythical overtones of the scene made clear by Dr. Soberin's various classical and biblical references: "The head of Medusa. That's what's in the box, and who looks on her will be changed not into stone but into brimstone and ashes. But of course you wouldn't believe me, you'd have to see for yourself, wouldn't you?" Like many of Beefheart's texts, the movie ends with the male character's escape, refusing to be engulfed by his self-consuming desires.

Science-fiction was also very prolific in its output of pictures which revolve around the idea of women running wild. One which I find most useful for the contextual analysis of Beefheart's work is *Them!*, a movie which has an army of giant radioactive ants launch an attack on American families. Again, the suggestion of self-destruction connected to the atom bomb smolders in the background and, again, this latter threat is inextricable from the behavior of the female troublemakers. In this picture, the looming threat of emasculation is symbolically suggested by the way the ants' reproduction works. As Michael Rogin puts it, "male insects . . . fertilize the queen ants and die. . . . [A] single queen, fertilized by the male members of her court, can give birth to enough ants to destroy all humanity" (27). Thus, men are depicted not only as being powerless to stanch female depravity, but also as an insignificant (and interchangeable) part in the process of reproduction.

Before we proceed in our historical contextualization, it is time to pause for a little while and go back to Beefheart's above-mentioned "Pachuco Cadaver". About this poem, we had previously underlined the way Beefheart equates the woman in it with unattainable virginity. Despite everything, she is in fact Van Vliet's only atomic woman (she "[g]ot her wheel out of uh B-29 bomber") and, in rapport with what we have been saying, the latter betrays both her promiscuity and its contiguous aura of impending death. Like Lulu, she leads her suitors to an early grave, something that the title of the song should have made clear from

the outset. Like the Pandora in *Kiss Me Deadly* (again notice the ominous title), to claim her would be masochistically self-destructive (“If I smiled I’d crack m’ chin”). Finally, like the mutant ants in *Them!*, she is a symbol of the ugliness and grittiness of nature (“Yellow jackets ‘n red debbles buzzing ‘round her hair hive hole”) which we can never embrace.

One should note that science-fiction elements also walked hand in hand with the unruliness of women in yet another poem, “The Blimp” (XIII):

All the people stir
‘n the girls knees tremble
‘n run ‘n wave their hands
‘n run their hands over the blimp the blimp
Daughter don’t yuh dare
Oh momma who cares
It’s the blimp it’s the blimp

It clearly went back to the imagery of the fifties, with its flying saucers and invading aliens, to vindicate the idea that disobedient women seemed to act in spite of themselves, as if on remote-control from unfathomable extraneous forces. If in the movies from the post-war these forces usually came from the Kremlin, the “mother-ship” that commands the women in this song is certainly not a reference to Mother Russia. More likely, though, Beefheart is pointing us in the direction of Mother Earth. In tune with this idea are the lines that open the poem: “Master master / This is recorded thru a flies ear / ‘n you have t’have uh fly’s eye ‘t see it”. This corroborates what we have repeated countless times thus far: that only a fly can see through a fly’s eye. Thus, the incestuous convergence with the safety granted by Mother Nature’s abject milk remains, once more, out of reach.

We should not overlook the fact that while the beguiling mother-ship acts here,

possibly, as a reference to the post-war fear of the corruption of mothers, Beefheart's emphasis in this poem is more on the reaction of young girls. During the sixties, daughters were indeed following the footsteps of their self-confident mothers, trying to take the struggle for the independence and the rights of women one step further. In *A People's History of the United States*, Howard Zinn gives us a snapshot of the boldness of American feminists in their measures against age-old stereotypes:

Times were indeed changing. Around 1967, women in the various movements – civil rights, Students for a Democratic Society, antiwar groups – began meeting as women, and in early 1968, at a women's anti-war meeting in Washington, hundreds of women carrying torches paraded to the Arlington National Cemetery and staged "The Burial of Traditional Womanhood."

In the fall of 1968, a group called Radical Women attracted national attention when they protested the selection of Miss America, which they called, "an image that oppresses women." They all threw bras, girdles, curlers, false eyelashes, wigs and other things they called "women's garbage" into a Freedom Trash Can. A sheep was crowned Miss America. More important, people were beginning to speak of "Women's Liberation."

Some of the New York Radical Women shortly afterward formed WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell), and its members, dressed as witches, appeared suddenly on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. (507)

So, it was not just that women were protesting their "promiscuous" right to choose their sexual partner, like Janis Joplin did, for instance, in her "Turtle Blues" ("I don't mean no one man, no good / I just treats them like I wants to / . . . / Not the kind of woman to make your life the bed of ease"). Women were now calling people's attention to the way their body had been repressed for ages, being seen not as an organism but as a sort of plastic dummy that ought to be covered up with all sorts of garments and accoutrements. Zinn's reference to WITCHes probably led you back to Horace's sermon I mentioned a while ago, when we talked about menstruation as one of the quintessential threats to a masculine order underpinned by sterilized whiteness. But a woman's period, for instance, was now something that could be publicly and shamelessly debated, as Zinn points out: "For the first time, the sheer biological uniqueness of women was openly discussed. . . . It was liberating to talk

frankly about what had for long been secret, hidden, cause for shame and embarrassment: menstruation, masturbation, menopause, abortion, lesbianism” (511).

With all this information in the background, we can certainly understand where Beefheart’s imagery is going to in order to gather the necessary strength to adequately punch us in the face. For centuries, the discourses of masculinity had succeeded in throttling the threat posed by women as the agents of emasculation and as the harbingers of carrion corporality. Beefheart understood very well how the buffers and levers of repression worked. He knew that, having been kept for so long under the ground, the inevitable confrontation with the woman’s body could do no less than to shatter the sperm crust over which the orderly world of men had been erected, with the incomparable might of an atomic vaginal discharge.

And so I most appropriately close this chapter with the last part of Emily Dickinson’s poem “A Still – Volcano – Life”, whose title depicts the latter mentioned crescendo which culminates with the orgasmic comeback of abjected life:

The Solemn – Torrid – Symbol

The lips that never lie –

Whose hissing Corals part – and shut –

And Cities – ooze away –

III

It's All about Sex

Ecology, Escapology and the Middling Ground

“I think that this planet is as bright as Ceres. But I think it is the other side of the fence, the grass is greener element that is ruining this paradise” (qtd. in Barnes 166).

Captain Beefheart. The Biography, Mike Barnes

Revising and Dividing

In the previous chapter I have tried to explain the way Beefheart's idealistic project to embrace the natural world was replaced by the insight that nature is forever apart from the subject, which has to repress the former in order to maintain the boundaries of his/her identity. We saw how Beefheart self-consciously equated the abjected nature and its threatening character to the figure of “the woman” and we debated the latter's quality as an age-old scapegoat and as a historically inscribed stereotype brought to life by an orderly but fragile masculine discourse.

In the present chapter, my intention is to probe deeper into Captain Beefheart's approach to the abject. The former's reaction to the latter is not always the same in every poem, and for this reason his work displays a rich variety that we cannot overlook if our intention is to construct a thorough and comprehensive analysis of his work. Therefore, I suggest that we strategically and tentatively divide his poems into three different categories: 1) those in which he depicts and criticizes the violent repression of nature; 2) the escapist poems, in which he evades the abject by enveloping himself in hermetic fictions; and finally

3) the ones in which he conflates these latter perspectives, forging a third path and thus circumventing their redundant character when conceived in a correlative fashion, a model that sees the poet putting himself in the hands of delirious dreams after he unsuccessfully attempts to embrace the lethal nature he wants to protect.

Let us then begin by addressing the first group of poems, which focus their attention upon the imposition of an order over the threat posed by nature and consequently attack the arrogance of humans in relation to other living beings. These are, in a nutshell, Captain Beefheart's ecological poems.

The Monster in the Garden

Repression of the abject has been a common subject in this text so far and, as we have seen in the previous chapter, it is a theme that walks in tandem with the defusion of the threat posed by women. When it comes to that age-old nuisance, blues lyrics are particularly prominent in their lurid employment of hands-on virile solutions. Charley Patton's "Down the Dirt Road Blues" certainly stages one of the most violent examples that one can find of the latter:

I'm going away to a world unknown
I'm going away to a world unknown
I'm worried now
But I won't be worried long
My rider got something, she's tryin' a keep it hid
Lord, I got somethin' to find that somethin' with
I feel like choppin', chips flyin' everywhere

I feel like choppin', chips flyin' everywhere

In Beefheart's poetry though, the woman is never a victim of violence. Instead, the ecstatic aggressiveness that we find in Patton's song is siphoned off to various portrayals of the repression of nature, with Beefheart usually employing this structural frame as a subterfuge to rant against pollution, animal cruelty, deforestation and human loftiness in general. "Bat Chain Puller" (XIV) is a particularly prominent example of this poetic procedure:

Bat chain

Puller

Bat chain puller

Puller, puller

A chain with yellow lights

That glistens like oil beads

On its slick smooth trunk

That trails behind on tracks, and thumps

A wing hangs limp, and retreats

Bat chain puller

Puller puller

Bulbs shoot from its snoot

And vanish into darkness

It whistles like a root snatched from dry earth

Sodbustin' rakes with grey dust claws

Announces its coming in the morning

This train with grey tubes

That houses people's very thoughts and belongings

Bat chain puller

Puller puller

This train with grey tubes that houses people's thoughts

Their very remains and belongings

A grey cloth patch

Caught with four threads

In the hollow wind of its stacks

Ripples felt fades and grey sparks clacks

Lunging the cushioned thickets

Pumpkins span the hills

With orange crayola patches

Green inflated trees

Balloon up into marshmallow soot

That walks away in forty circles

Caught in grey blisters

With twinkling lights and green sashes

Pulled by rubber dolphins with gold yawning mouths

That blister and break in agony

In souls of rust

They kill gold sawdust into dust

Bat chain puller

Puller puller

You probably remember that the former chapter began with an epigraph which was centered upon this song. Like Beefheart's interlocutor, you probably came to the conclusion that sex is nowhere to be found. But then again, let us try to read between the lines and see

what we can uncover.

To begin with, one can certainly claim that the key element of the poem is the image of the train. The latter is something that obviously smacks of the blues, making its appearance in countless songs as a symbol of hope in a better future. Since the abolishment of slavery, the employment situation of African-Americans had never been stable, and the progressive substitution of manpower by machinery made it even less so. Consequently, migrations were constant, and the train started to occupy a very special place in the imagination of black people. It goes without saying that they projected onto the places of destination multifarious images of happiness and success. In *The History of the Blues*, Francis Davis points out that “the Great Migration [to the northern states and especially to Illinois] is frequently assumed to have been a byproduct of Northern industrialization, and of black perception of the North as the symbolic equivalent of the promised land spoken of in the book of Exodus” (48). Nevertheless, when later the number of available jobs started to grow thin, an inversion took place. The North itself was now being conceived as an old land of oppression and the South they had left in the first place became the New Canaan.

But again, what does this have to do with sex? In blues lyrics, the train appears clearly as a phallic symbol, along with other means of transport, of course, may it be cars, airplanes, or, as in Blind Lemon Jefferson’s “Rabbit Foot Blues”, even submarines. From this it follows that when blues players say that they will “ride the blinds”, what they are in fact implying is that they are going to “ride” their women. But here too the image of the woman acts merely as a formal receptacle. If their presence in songs is many times a metaphor for disease or death, as we have seen, the contrary is also true – onto her are projected the images of happiness that, as we have seen, were connected to the theme of travelling. This frame of thought is by no means foreign to us. We have encountered it, for instance, when we discussed *Dr. Strangelove*, which ends with a multiplicity of explosions that, once and for all,

subdue the unruly women to the power of men and establish a much longed-for sexual paradise. But the way this pattern appears in the blues is particularly relevant for our interpretation of “Bat Chain Puller”, not least because Beefheart’s song appears to be a revamp of Howlin’ Wolf’s most famous song, “Smokestack Lightnin’”. This is the first stanza of Wolf’s song:

Ah, oh, smokestack lightning
Shinin’, just like gold
Why don’t ya hear me cryin’?

In it we find the various elements that Beefheart refashions for his own text. In the first place, there is the gold – the land of utopia at the end of the tracks –, which is what drives the train in both songs forward. Then, there is the “cryin’”, which obviously appears as the correlative of the “gold”. Wolf cries because his woman left him for another man and that is what vindicates this migration to a different land, where he expects to find that same woman waiting to be taken for a ride in his train. So the poem starts with the idea of a lack. Something is missing from Wolf’s life and he has to get it back. Thus, in Beefheart’s poem, Wolf’s homologous is the eponymous bat, whose “wing hangs limp and retreats”. This lame bat is then a symbol for the emasculated man, who appears in the poem this one time and then “retreats”, ashamed of his own imperfection, thus giving the violence and destruction which spurt throughout the text a faceless aura of inevitability.

If in Wolf’s poem the feeling of incompleteness was to be solved by subjugating the woman and claiming the gold, “Bat Chain Puller” replaces the female scapegoat for nature as a whole at the same time that it turns the imagined penetration of the gilded woman into a very literal rape of the land. The train’s whistle, which supposedly echoed the lonely man’s cry, now sounds like “a root snatched from dry earth”. Suddenly one feels that the very

smoke expelled by the train's phallic smokestack has ceased to be merely a moral stand-in for sin and has transformed into very palpable ejaculations of pollution.

In an interview he gave *Creem* magazine's Andrew Weiner, Beefheart had ironically said: "I think that this planet is as bright as Ceres. But I think it is the other side of the fence, the grass is greener element that is ruining this paradise" (qtd. in Barnes 166). "Bat Chain Puller" was in tune with this idea: at the same time that the land is being destroyed, a golden landscape starts to show its artificial face. Beefheart describes the way "Pumpkins span the hills / With orange crayola patches" and goes on to spot "Green inflated trees", "twinkling lights" and "green sashes". A grotesque Garden of Eden appears to be trying to elevate its gaudy colors above the repellent corporality of the wilderness and the pitch-black paternal soot that nourishes its own genesis.

What Beefheart seems to be addressing here is no longer just the projection of the image of the New Canaan onto the land of destination that we had encountered before. By my reckoning, the sort of imagery that "Bat Chain Puller" flirts with, deliberately or not, is one linked to the age-old tradition of the pastoral.

In his book about the ubiquity of the pastoral in American mythology, *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx explains to us what the contours of this convention are by referring back to Virgil's *Eclogues*:

[T]he shepherd . . . seeks a resolution between the opposed worlds of nature and art . . . The good place is a lovely green hollow. To arrive at this haven it is necessary to move away from Rome in the direction of nature. But the centrifugal motion stops far short of unimproved, raw nature. . . . This ideal pasture has two vulnerable borders: one separates it from Rome, the other from the encroaching marshland. . . . Living in an oasis of rural pleasure, [the shepherd] enjoys the best of both worlds – the sophisticated order of art and the simple spontaneity of nature. (22)

Notice how this is exactly what we have been saying about Beefheart's poem. It

depicts a vampiric train which sucks the lifeblood out of the land and siphons it off to an oneiric landscape which conjugates both nature and artifice (recall the “Green inflated trees”) and keeps them both at bay at the same time. After all, this is a train that simultaneously represses people’s “thoughts” (culture) and bodily “remains” (nature) with the intent of bringing to life an ultimate masculine order, which forever stabilizes meaning.

But, as we had previously contended, permanent masculine assertion never manages to triumph in Beefheart’s work. It is easy to see how this bucolic landscape is already falling apart at the seams at the same time that it is taking its first steps. Its “Green inflated trees” “Balloon up into marshmallow soot”, its “Ripple felt fades” and the rubber dolphins that pull the train show their “gold yawning mouths”, symbolic of the ideal’s lazy thoughtlessness, “That blister and break in agony”.

Moreover, if the poem began with the bat hiding away from view, enveloping the scene in a fatalistic fog, the artificiality and fragility of the underlying fiction is by now starting to show. Beefheart depicts it as a “patch / Caught with four threads / In the hollow wind of its stacks”. But he goes even further. Apart from being hollow, this fiction is also a burden. After all, this train is pulling a chain, and the poem makes sure we do not forget about this by making the title of the song an intermittent refrain.

Therefore, at the same time that Beefheart criticizes the impact of this fiction upon the natural world it is supposed to repress, the poet redeems, to a certain extent, those who believe in it by depicting the latter as part of an ancestral heritage. This suggests a different reading of the fact that the train “houses people’s thoughts / Their very remains and belongings”. The train is then chained to a past that constantly compels it to move forward into the past, into a lost epoch of impenetrable peace and natural harmony.

Leo Marx closes his book with the idea that the American authors he brings together

under the category of the “pastoral design” all recognize the destructive, the fictional and the ancestral facets of the pastoral utopia, and yet feel powerless in the face of what they recognize as an endless culture-fueled circularity. Because of their paradigmatic quality, Marx quotes the final paragraphs of Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgasmic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter – tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further . . . and one fine morning –

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (172)

When the novel comes to an end, the reader is already aware of the discrepancy between the anti-heroic Jay Gatz and *The Great Gatsby* that Nick Carraway constructs by means of his unreliable narration. So, when this passage appears in the book, it is utterly charged with irony, from the part of the author. Unlike his narrator, Fitzgerald recognizes the grotesqueness in the continuous glorification of utopianism. But, like Marx points out, irony is the best escape route he can offer. He then goes on to make his argument more general: “The ending of *The Great Gatsby* reminds us that American writers seldom, if ever, have designed satisfactory resolutions for their pastoral fables” (364).

Irony is obviously something which permeates Beefheart’s “Bat Chain Puller”, but the song ends in a different key: “Pulled by rubber dolphins with gold yawning mouths / That blister and break in agony / In souls of rust / They kill gold sawdust into dust”. The last line of the poem is then a far cry from Fitzgerald’s ironical standpoint. What Beefheart is trying to imply is that this pastoral dream of ours might just be on the brink of destroying nature once and for all, with the latter threatening to pull us bat-like humans along with it.

In lieu of a detached portrayal of an ongoing mass-deception, this poem ends with an image of impending mass-annihilation, thus shattering the impasse at the core of the pastoral design and injecting it with a sense of urgency that it had been lacking.

One should add that this idea of imminent cataclysm is by no means exclusive to “Bat Chain Puller”. It is subjected to a more transparent treatment in poems like “Petrified Forest” (XV) or “The Smithsonian Institute Blues” (XVI). For the moment let us focus our attention upon the first of these:

Human Bark

Beautyless hide from beauty

Bow your eyes ‘n heads to the duty of the dead’s

Suck the ground

Breathe life into the dead dinosaurs

Let the past demons rear up ‘n belch fire in the air now

The rug’s wearing out that we walk on

Soon it will fray ‘n we’ll drop

Dead into yesterday

Must be breathing pay for those who breathe in ‘n don’t

Breathe out

There’d be no gain, brothers, if no one would play

‘n for your games count me n’ all that can see,

Breathe in ‘n out hungry today ‘n eat hearty tomorrow

Or eat away ‘n be eaten some day

No seed shall sow in salt water

If the dinosaur cries with blood in his eyes

If the dinosaur cries with blood in his eyes

‘n eats our babies for our lies

Belches fire in our skies

Maybe I’ll die but he’ll be rumbling through

Your petrified forest

In this much more straightforward poem, we get a clearer picture of nature taking its

revenge on arrogant bat chain pullers. As in the previous song, Beefheart informs us that what motivates human violence against nature is not only greed and stinginess (“those who breed in ‘n don’t / Breathe out”) but also a volition to “hide from beauty”, or, in other words, a desire to repress corporality, to repress the fact that we are also part of nature (hence the “Human bark” hybrid that opens the poem). By steering clear of our own bodies and asserting a debilitating order upon the natural world (“Suck[ing] the ground”), we “Breathe life into the dead dinosaurs”. These dinosaurs act as a mere reflection of our violent selves and our claims to supremacy in the animal kingdom.

In his “In Memoriam A. H. H.”, Lord Tennyson had pondered whether “Man, [Nature’s] last work, who seemed so fair” could suddenly “Be blown about the desert dust, / Or sealed within the iron hills?” The metaphor he then employs is useful for our purposes:

No more? A monster then, a dream,
A discord. Dragons of the prime,
That tare each other in their slime,
Were mellow music matched with him.

Tennyson is implying that humankind fosters a “dream” of superiority and detachment from nature but, in the end, all its civilizational might is as vulnerable to effacement as omnipotent dinosaurs (“dragons of the prime”) had once been. He adds to this the idea that although humans abject animals as “others”, they are probably more beastly monstrous than primal dinosaurs ever were, thus turning the precepts of progress on their head.

The notion of human fragility was probably what Beefheart also had in mind when he wrote that “The rug’s wearing out that we walk on / Soon it will fray ‘n we’ll drop / dead into yesterday”. In accordance with this idea, his abovementioned poem “The Smithsonian

Institute Blues” portrays the archeological investigations that had been going on at the La Brea tar pits with a sense of tragic irony – humans were enhancing their omniscience by retrieving fossils of animals from an ancient past, but one day they themselves could be the fossils.

As regards Tennyson’s idea of human bestiality, the image of “demons . . . belch[ing] fire in the air of now” should suffice to convince us that Beefheart also thought that humans were more violent than dinosaurs had been. After all, vomiting fire is surely not one of the features that have been attributed to the old reptiles. Instead, the roots of this image were to be found in the popular culture of his youth. In 1954, Ishiro Honda had directed the first of a series of movies that revolved around Godzilla, which was to become the fire belching dinosaur par excellence.

“Petrified Forest” is a song from the album *Lick My Decals Off, Baby*, in which it comes alongside another composition which mentions Japan. Although it is an instrumental piece, we can tell from the title of “Japan is a Dishpan” that Beefheart appeared to be interested in the late history of the country. The best we can do is to hazard a guess that both songs refer back to the same cluster of issues, probably the impact of the atom bomb in Japanese society, the occupation by the US and the nuclear tests that ensued, all of which could overflow various dishpans with the black water of America’s repressed recent past.

In his essay “Godzilla and the Japanese Nightmare: When ‘Them!’ is U.S.”, Chon Noriega tells us that “[in] Godzilla films, it is the United States that exists as Other” (64), thus corroborating our idea that, among other things, the creature stood for America’s atomic assertion towards Japan. To put it simply, then, it was a monster that evoked monstrous events, thereby acting as substantial proof that “Dragons of the prime . . . were mellow music matched with” the human capacity for destruction.

In lieu of rampant arrogance, Beefheart promoted humility and solidarity among living beings (breathing in but also breathing out) as the only way to avoid the sort of mass-destruction evoked by the dinosaur. Advices like these, which he constantly gives to us in most of his “ecological poems”, may sometimes seem a bit perfunctory.

In *Trout Mask Replica*'s “Ant Man Bee” (XVII), for instance, he ironically depicts a battle between anthropomorphic ants for a paradisiacal lump of sugar (the combat takes place in the Garden of Eden itself, thus reinforcing our previous idea of the Beefheartian bucolic garden as a synonym for violence). According to the poet, the ideal alternative to this egotistical conflict would be to adopt an altruistic and communal standpoint, like the one that we are able to find in nature: “Now the bee takes his honey then he sets the flower free / But in God's garden only / Man 'n the ants / They won't set each other be”.

As you can see, these ideas were somewhat vague, especially if you compare them to what other poets were promoting around the same time. In 1969, the year *Trout Mask Replica* was released, Gary Snyder had published a long ecological manifesto he entitled “Four Changes”, in which he outlined a multifaceted project for a future society. Among other things, he advocated recycling in lieu of mass consumption; fostered a DIY ethos (in “Axe Handles”, for instance, we see Snyder teaching his son how to assemble an axe) and the idea of a complete and independent human being; supported abortion, adoption, group and polyandrous marriage in order to stanch an untenable birthrate; and promoted the idea that regions ought to be demarcated in rapport with their own natural borders. Furthermore, Snyder made his self-constructed house, Kitkitdizze, into a sort of shibboleth for the proactive green-minded society he envisioned. In an article about Snyder for the *New Yorker*, Dana Goodyear writes that

[u]sing Kitkitdizze as a prototype he encouraged others to inhabit more fully the places they live – settle down, get to know the neighbors (including, in his conception, the plants and the

animals), join the school board and the watershed council, and defend the local resources and way of life. Place, he writes, should be defined by natural indicators, like rivers and the fauna and flora they support. (7)

So, compared to this sheer diversity of practical and specific ideas, Beefheart's hazy exhortations seem weightless and meek. But then again one should not forget that, like we have contended in the first chapter, he was not very fond of utopian projects, with proscriptions that one had to follow in order to get to the truth. His terse advices are aimed at each individual listener and set out to make him/her think about things without binding him/her to a formally circumscribed and strictly impersonal blueprint for the future.

But his ecological maxims have been the target of criticism for yet another reason. Michel Delville and Andrew Norris point out that, in Van Vliet's texts, nature is never depicted as violent and selfish and that the ferocious traits of animals appear in his lyrics merely as a metaphor for human aggressiveness. This is what they have to say about "Wild Life" (XVIII), a song in which Beefheart tries to convince a group of bears into letting him and his wife move from the primal city to their peaceful cave:

It is touching and perhaps typical of Van Vliet's lyrical environmentalism that he should imagine his mountain bears to be open to verbal persuasion. This is the wilderness at least twice removed, filtered through Kipling and Walt Disney, and rendered even more benign by Van Vliet's consistent refusal to speak about predation (even in *The Jungle Book* there was a villainous tiger and a sick snake). Reading his texts and interviews, one would think that there was no such thing as a carnivore . . . The savage traits of animals survive only in metaphorical form, transferred to human beings . . . (79)

I agree with them, up to a point. After all, we have seen that, in his work, nature is only threatening because it has been repressed and made abject. Otherwise, it would still be depicted as "meat rainbows" and "flesh bonnets". But there is at least one poem that runs counter to this otherwise ubiquitous attempt to beautify nature and its various inhabitants. We shall employ this composition, "Making Love to a Vampire with a Monkey on my Knee" (XIX), moreover as a bridge between this section and the next one, in which we will go

through the “escapist poems”. Here is an extract from the text in question:

Making love to a vampire with a monkey on my knee
The pond shined dry like a ladies compact
Lilies leaped like flat green hearts with white hearts
Squirting yellow pollen cocks
Ferns fan like cool spades – fossils – away from rocks
Bees echoed dark carbon hums that dashed in nothing
Gnats fucked my ears ‘n nostrils
Hit my brain like hones ‘n numbed t’ nothing
Wings stuck on liquid bones
Making love to a vampire with a monkey on my knee

Obviously, we will have to start by acknowledging that we are now back in our familiar territory of abject womanhood. The vampire he is making love to is, then, the emasculating woman, the same, that is, whose ominously withered image is reflected upon the dry pond. So, from the outset we understand that what we are about to be shown is not the “real nature” but nature seen from the perspective of a man about to be unmanned. But although it is slanted and molded by the poetic I’s fear, the sort of imagery used in this poem to portray the abject is rather unusual in Beefheart’s work. We had been frequently confronted with the physicality of nature thus far, but never to this degree of grittiness. By depicting the reproduction of plants in those terms, though, Beefheart is no longer just transposing human’s unfeeling self-centeredness onto nature. It is no longer the idea that “we repress them but we are worse than them” that we had found in “Petrified Forest”. What he is admitting here is, precisely, that we, natural creatures, are all the same. Hence his reference to “white hearts” when he describes the “cock squirting” lilies. As we have tirelessly reiterated, the color white in Beefheartian poetry is always connected to the same thing: masculine assertion. These flowers are not just part of a picture of harmony and altruistic communalism

like the ones from “Ant Man Bee”. They are, egotistically but understandably, fighting (notice the phallic depiction of ferns as “cool spades”) for survival.

Moreover, if we had previously asserted that, according to Beefheart, the destruction of subject and the convergence with the plural languages of reality constituted the door to ultimate fulfillment, this poem claims otherwise. After all, to say that “Bees echoed dark carbon hums that dashed in nothing” is not much different from contending that these supposedly pure languages of nature are just as arbitrary and artificial as our own. Because this is so, not even death and oneness with the other could grant him a stabilized meaning of reality. Attaining the latter would imply even more radical measures.

By the end of the text, his nihilistic conception of nature colludes with the abject in order to elicit from Beefheart what is certainly the darkest line in his entire work: “God, please, fuck my mind for good”. He begs for meaning and implores God to rape him with the scepter of total order. He begs God to make everything safe as milk, to bring upon him the eternal whiteness of inner death. So, when the last line in the poem comes, we know that the meaning of those timeless polar opposites has been permuted. The dash makes the final word fall like the stout hammer of Judgment Day: “Death be damned – Life“.

Spotless Smiles and Yellow Brick Roads

In the previous section of this text, we analyzed the poems in which Beefheart assumes a proactive stance against the repression of nature and the corollary destruction of the environment. But these compositions represent only one of the sides of the coin, because, for every poem in which Beefheart rants against the maltreatment of animals and plants, another could be presented in which he tries to run away or immerse himself in a dream. And,

as we have often seen, for Beefheart, dreams presuppose that same erasure of nature and complexity he criticizes in the “ecological poems”.

Let us begin with a self-evident one, “Clear Spot” (XX), which flaunts the desire for repression on its very title. The first stanza will suffice for us to get a grasp of the whole picture:

I have to run so far to find a clear spot
Sun’s all hottin’ and a rottin’ hot
Swamp’s all rotten ‘n stinkin’
Vegetation’s hot
Sleepin’ in a bayou on an old rotten cot

Can’t find my kind of folks havin’ fun
I have to run run run run
Run to find a clear spot

This text is a good place to start because it blatantly presents to us the two key elements of the “escapist poems”. One: the subject affirms his intention to run away to a clear (white?) spot, where he can be at ease and have fun with his “folks”; and two: it is implied that no matter how far he runs, the abject will keep encroaching in the order he delimitates. There will always be spots on his clear spot.

Not so, Beefheart would say. Like we have seen in “Making Love to a Vampire”, there was a way out of this endless circularity: one had to become brain-dead. I would claim that that was the underlying theme behind one of his most famous compositions,

“Frownland” (XXI), although critics⁵ have tended to interpret it as an earnest promotion of “one-with-nature” ideals. Here it is, so that you can make your own judgment:

My smile is stuck
I cannot go back to your Frownland
My spirit’s made up of the ocean
And the sky ‘n the sun ‘n the moon
‘n all my eyes can see
I cannot go back to your land of gloom
Where black jagged shadows
Remind me of the coming of your doom
I want my own land
Take my hand and come with me
It’s not too late for you
It’s not too late for me
To find my homeland
Where a man can stand by another man
Without an ego flying
With no man lying
‘n no one dying by an earthly hand
Let the devils burn and the beggar learn
‘n the little girls that live in those old worlds
Take my kind hand
My smile is stuck
I cannot go back to your Frownland
I cannot go back to your Frownland

The first line in the poem probably made you think of the “Cheshire cats” that we

⁵ For instance, Michel Delville and Andrew Norris have written that “the narrator of ‘Frownland’ asserts his feeling of oneness with the natural world. . . . He aspires to a place ‘where a man can stand by another man / Without an ego flyin’: With no man lyin’. . .’ Many of Van Vliet’s poetic personae seem to strive for such unalienated setting which allows for disinterested cooperation, human solidarity and self-determination” (28).

talked about in the previous chapter, when we were discussing the oppressiveness of the hippies' ideology. In "Frownland", this image performs a similar role: it is the symbol of an orderly fiction that the poetic I has imposed upon himself. From then on, his life has been one of irreversible bliss, and that is why he "cannot go back to [our] Frownland". His is a one man utopia – it is "[his] own land". By now, we already know by heart what this kind of utopias imply: the annihilation of all opposition ("Let the devils burn and the beggar learn") and the subjugation of women ("n the little girls that live in those old worlds / Take my kind hand"), two things which are generally one and the same.

"Yellow Brick Road" (XXII) also follows this line of reasoning and is probably even more blatant than "Frownland" in its portrayal of voluntary mental shutdown:

Around the corner the wind blew back
Follow the yellow brick road
It ended up in black on black
I was taught the gift of love
Smiling children painted joy
Sunshine bright, girl and boy
Bag of tricks and candy sticks
Peppermint kite for my toy
Yellow brick, black on black
Keep on walking and don't look back

I walked along happy and then came back
I follow the yellow brick road
Lost and found I saw you down
On the bound, off the bound
Taught against the love
Yellow brick road, took my load
Sunshine girl sunshine girl

Come to my abode
1-2-3-4-5 miles long
Oh I can't ever go wrong
Clouds were gray yesterday
Down on my shoulder, it's time to play
Yellow brick, black on black
Keep on walking and don't look back

I follow the yellow brick road
I follow the yellow brick road
I follow the yellow brick road

The text opens with the poetic persona's confrontation with the threat of nature ("a wind blew back"), and so fear is what motivates him to "follow the yellow brick road". In the next line, though, this previous fiction proves that it is still permeable to the interference of the real. The constantly repeated "black on black" acts as a reminder that the gilded road is merely an illusion – it hides away the complexity of the world, but the latter lingers around unnoticed, like unexpected fine print at the bottom of an appeasing document. "Black on Black" can also be read as a reference to the way this fictional road was constructed: it wants us to see it as a golden layer on top of another of inferior quality, but it ends up being just as unreliable as the previous one. Thus, one could interpret "Black on Black" as a mere synonym either of "Fiction on Fiction" or of "Violence on Violence" (notice his ironic disdain towards those who were "taught against *the* [my italics] love" – "the love" he pathetically tries to impose on himself as a stable truth).

But what matters to us here is that not even the knowledge that the yellow brick road is an utterly fictional and fragile idea is enough to convince the poet to abandon his intended route. The song closes with a grotesque and obsessive repetition of "I follow the Yellow

Brick Road”, which should constitute sufficient evidence that the poetic subject is no longer in power, his agency having been overridden by the vegetative utopia.

This idea brings us to the last poem that we will go through in this section. A vegetative poem par excellence (probably Beefheart’s most bucolic musical composition), it nevertheless succeeds in ambivalently conflating his promotion of utopian escapism and his love for life, with all the vulnerabilities the latter entails. This is “Harry Irene” (XXIII):

Harry Irene were a couple that lived in the green
Harry Irene were a couple that ran a canteen
Ran a canteen
Ran a canteen
Two people Harry and Irene like you’ve never seen
The floor was made of oak, the door was smoky gray
Their tuna sandwiches would turn the dark into day
They sold wine like turpentine to painters
They took to social life like props to aviators
Harry Irene were a couple that ran a canteen
Harry Irene were a couple that lived in the green
Ran a canteen
Ran a canteen took Harry for all of his green and Irene
Harry was left holding an empty canteen
And by the way folks, it was Dusty not Harry
What does this mean?
What’s the meaning of this?
Poor Harry, I guess.

What strikes us immediately about this poem is that, unlike “Frownland” and “Yellow Brick Road”, it is not narrated by the grotesque figure itself. Consequently, Beefheart

provides us with a detached perspective on the formula that underpins these poems. The ingredients are the usual: a faithful woman (notice how the ironic title of the song makes the lovers indivisible) and a pastoral apparatus that represses nature, thus turning “night into day”. By stating that “Ran a canteen took Harry for all of his green and Irene”, Beefheart also corroborates our idea that the characters are swallowed by the fiction they themselves erect. This was the blues’ pact with the devil turned on its head. Harry may be “left holding an empty canteen” at the end, but the wine that he ingested was surely not Dionysus’s ecstatic beverage. Harry’s pact does not grant him access to the pleasures of the flesh. It rather transports him from the plane of corporality into a heavenly region with turpentine diluted “smoky grey” doors.

But apart from the detached depiction of the dreamer as a downhearted alcoholic with an “empty canteen”, all of this is not new to us. The novelty arrives in the last line of the composition, “Poor Harry, I guess”, which acts both as a redemptory and a critical gesture. Because he is not immersed in his own character, Beefheart grants us access to his own ambivalent thoughts in relation to palliative utopianisms. He identifies with Harry and pities him because he understands his need to surround himself behind a fortified wall that can protect him against the encroaching abject. At the same time, “Poor Harry” also stands for “poor fool”. Beefheart was implying that this quixotic quest for the green world always entails a loss of connection with the paradise which is right before our eyes, waiting to be “seized”.

The ambivalence that this last word leaves up in the air (a cocktail of pleasure and impending violence) ought to take us full circle back to Beefheart’s all-embracing ambitions. “Seizing” (enjoying) the earthy paradise of nature implied, after all, giving oneself away to it in order to conquer (“seize”) its unfathomable plurality. But this, as we have said countless times, was not an option for Beefheart – he would rather live in dreams of yellow brick roads

and Cheshire cats than have to undergo self-destruction. And yet I would argue that his work offers us a third possible path, which we will proceed to describe – one towards which both ecology and escapology converge.

Old Art at Play

We will launch this last section with the perusal of a poem that can act as stand-in for the group of texts in which Beefheart tries to embrace the abject, ends up recoiling from it, but does not take refuge in an impermeable dream. “Old Fart at Play” (XXIV) shall assist us with this concluding task:

Pappy with the Khaki sweatband
Bowed goat potbellied barnyard that only he noticed
The old fart was smart
The old gold cloth madonna
Dancin’ t’ the fiddle ‘n saw
He ran down behind the knoll
‘n slipped on his wooden fishhead
The mouth worked and snapped all the bees back to the bungalow

You surely remember the image of the golden garden that triggered a torrent of repression in “Bat Chain Puller”. Then we had seen that, in Howlin’ Wolf’s “Smokestack Lightnin’”, this gilded projection was connected to a woman, who stood for the ultimate fulfillment of desire that one would find at the bottom of the line. In Alban Berg’s *Lulu*, this final feminine meaning was personified in the figure of the title character, a “whore”, forever untamable, and for that reason, also a virgin.

Notice the way all of these symbolic layers seem, in the stanza quoted above, to underpin the Old Fart's vision of "the old gold cloth madonna / dancin' t' the fiddle and saw". Clearly a correlative of Pappy's sudden recognition of the existence of a repressed material world (whose repression turns him into a "Bowed goat"), the madonna appears as a symbol of the successful conquest of the world of abjection. Unlike what happens in "Bat Chain Puller", though, this conquest does not presuppose a repression of the natural threat. Rather the opposite: it implies from the Old Fart a submission to the destructive abject. In other words, in order to be granted admission in the domain of otherness, the Old Fart has to slip on the wooden fish-head, thus activating a self-destructive process:

Momma was flatten'n lard
With her red enamel rolling pin
When the fishhead broke the window
Rubber eye erect and precisely detailed
Airholes from which breath should come
Is now closely fit
With the chatter of the old fart inside

When we first meet Momma, the second character in this poem, she appears as a vicar for repression. She is pressing down corporality (the repellent lard) with her "red enamel rolling pin", clearly a phallic instrument at the service of the same masculine order that retains her within the sphere of domesticity.

But then the abject breaks the window of this fragile fictional world and introduces the threat of otherness. The Old Fart is now in power of the multifarious natural languages and his virile clout over them is revealed to us through the image of the "Rubber eye erect and precisely detailed". Total objectivity has been attained. The "Old fart" thus unites with the "old fart inside", a stand-in for all the living beings which share the same ubiquitous

“electricity”. Notice how this convergence with the other is reflected upon Momma herself. Previously a commendable housekeeper, she has now turned into a hybrid monster, pretty much like every other Beefheartian *femme fatale*: “Momma licked ‘er lips like a cat / Pecked the ground like a rooster / Pivoted like a duck”.

This transfiguration of the woman is, of course, accompanied by the infliction of pain upon the Old Fart, who now seems to be on the brink of asphyxiating to death, thanks to the corrosive “chatter of the old fart inside”. Thus the character immediately starts to pay the price for the visual consummation (“rubber eye erect”) of this impossible marriage.

But, by the end of the poem, stability is once again reestablished:

The old fart smelled this thru his important breather holes
Cleverly he dialed from within from the outside we observed
That the nose of the wooden mask
Where the holes had just been a moment ago
Was now smooth amazingly blended camouflaged in
With the very intricate rainbow trout replica

The old fart inside was now breathin’ freely
From his perfume bottle atomizer air bulb invention

His excited eyes from within the dark interior glazed
Watered in appreciation of his thoughtful preparation

The Old Fart has succeeded in taming the abject: the “intricate rainbow trout” is still in his possession, but it has now become a “replica”, an artificial and orderly packaging of the unbearable complexity of the real. In *The Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva describes a very similar process – sublimation – whereby the abject is kept under control, thus becoming endurable and enjoyable:

*Sublimation . . . is nothing else than the possibility of naming the pre-nominal, the pre-objectal, which are in fact only a trans-nominal, a trans-objectal. In the symptom, the object permeates me, I become object. Through sublimation, I keep it under control. The object is edged with the sublime. . . . The ‘sublime’ object dissolves in the raptures of a bottomless memory. It is such a memory, which, from stopping point to stopping point, remembrance to remembrance, love to love, transfers that object to *the refulgent point of the dazzlement in which I stray in order to be* [my italics]. As soon as I perceive it, as soon as I name it, the sublime triggers – it has always already triggered – a spree of perceptions and words that expands memory boundlessly. I then forget the point of departure and find myself removed to a secondary universe, set off from the one where ‘I’ am – delight and loss. *Not at all short of words but always with and through words* [my italics]. (12)*

Kristeva emphasizes that the sublime allows the subject to get a taste of the intricacy of the object through his/her own language (“always with and through words”), thus making sure that the subject does not stray beyond “the refulgent point of the dazzlement” where he would no longer be him/herself. That is also what the Old Fart’s “perfume bottle atomizer air bulb invention” has succeeded in doing in Beefheart’s poem – instead of throwing the character into the object (to a point of no return), it has brought the object into the realm of subjectivity, thus making it possible for the mask to blend with the Old Fart’s face (“ . . . the nose of the wooden mask / . . . / was now smooth amazingly blended camouflaged in”). In other words, by remaining within the orderly domain of the artificial – of art, for that matter – the Old Fart has had access to knowledge, although partial, and has lived to tell the story.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche similarly claims that art can act as a mediator between the maintenance of subjective language and the self-destructive truth. In “Making Love to a Vampire”, Beefheart had looked into the horror of nature and was repelled by the idea that not even oneness with the other would grant him an ultimate meaning, because the languages of plants and animals were as artificial as the ones employed by humans. Nietzsche, on the other hand, asserted, in his work, that the vital function of the chorus in Greek tragedy was precisely to force the members of its audience out of their own subjectivities in order to *exult* in the eternal suffering of the primal Oneness. Meaninglessness and incompleteness were unavoidable and so one ought to celebrate them with Dionysian

fervor, rather than shy away from them. Nevertheless, Nietzsche was in accordance with Beefheart when he claimed that direct contact with the truth would kill the enlightened individual. So, in art, an Apollonian surrogate of the truth was to be found:

[The] chorus was a consolation to the Hellene, thoughtful and uniquely susceptible as he was to the tenderest and deepest suffering, whose piercing gaze has seen to the core of the terrible destruction of world history and nature's cruelty, and who runs the risk of longing for a Buddha-like denial of the will. He is saved by art, and through art, life has saved him for itself. (39)

Nevertheless, whereas Nietzsche seemed to relish the advantages granted by this in-between position, the ending of "Old Fart at Play" could not be more ironic and self-ridiculing: "His excited eyes from within the dark interior glazed / watered in appreciation of his thoughtful preparation". Although Beefheart recognized that one could not go beyond the limits of the subject, his tone is definitely not one of triumph.

Like other artists from his time, he was coming to terms with the fact that the longed-for convergence with the other did not seem to be possible. As we have seen in chapter one, he had recognized how well-intentioned all-encompassing utopianisms turned into arrogant oppressiveness, precisely because they tried to extend their languages to territories where they no longer had a say. They claimed to speak *for* the other but were merely speaking for themselves. Yet the novelty that this poem presents to us is that, although he spoke for no one but himself and knew that no other alternative was possible, Beefheart never entirely eschewed his desire to embrace the world and its various languages. Hence the feeling of disappointment that hovers over the coda of "Old Fart at Play".

It is that same idea that we encounter in "Steal Softly Thru Snow" (XXV). In this poem Beefheart tells us that he is aware of the eternal gap which sets him apart from the other (notice how this idea also pops up on the cover of *Doc at the Radar Station*, which I included

on the front page of this dissertation). But this awareness is not something that makes him feel more responsible. And if it does, then this responsibility weighs him down:

The black paper between a mirror breaks my heart that I can't go
The swan their feathers don't grow
They're spun
They live two hundred years of love
They're one
Breaks my heart to see them cross the sun

Still this poem presents to us an idea we had not encountered thus far. What Beefheart is telling us here is not just that his language prevents him from merging with his true self – the whole of nature –, but also that this language also prevents him from being “one”, that is, from being natural and spontaneous like a swan.

As we shall see in the next chapter, spontaneity – being oneself – was a powerful idea during Beefheart's time. Constituting themselves as the polar opposites of the consumerist middle-class, post-war artists had tried to eschew every vestige of artifice from their art, paradoxical as that may be. As we have seen in chapter one, these artists celebrated the prolixity of life. They celebrated movement, the body and natural sexual desires. Jackson Pollock, we are told, painted in a violently virile way, and his action-paintings appear before our eyes as orgasmic explosions of paint. In his “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose”, Jack Kerouac had exhorted his followers to “write excitedly, swiftly, with writing-or-typing-cramps, in accordance (as from center to periphery) with the laws of orgasm . . . *Come* from within, out – to relaxed and said” (58) . About his style of painting, Beefheart himself had said: “I'm trying to turn myself inside-out on the canvas” (qtd. in Barnes 315). Self-expressive art was, then, a projection of the individual onto the page or the canvas. It was a self-ejaculatory art.

Sex was indeed everywhere. It was *all* about sex. But as we shall see in the last chapter of this dissertation, Beefheart was also not very comfortable with this third facet of the masculine utopia. Although he wanted, like the others, to be himself, he was soon to find out that our self has always already been more or less chosen for us in advance. Like he himself admitted, “all tongues are connected We all drink from the same pond” (qtd. in Barnes 144). So, in the end, although sex was certainly everywhere, and sexual archetypes condition the way we interpret and construct our inner and outer worlds, something even more ubiquitous had always been lurking in the background. In the end, as in the beginning, it was *all* about language.

IV

The Power of Nature within, the Proof of the Language without Self-Expression, Sex and the Performance of Spontaneity

[Adore, a little white boy, performing a blues song] His singing voice was deep and rough and he used the broken groan of the blues singer quite expertly. He moved his body only a little, against rather than in time with the music. The gestures he made with his hands were extremely suggestive. . . He seemed to know what the words meant, or at least his body and his voice seemed to know. When he came to the final chorus, his buttocks writhed and his voice carried a top-heavy load of sexual pain.

The Day of the Locust, Nathanael West

Saying and Being Said

In an interview with Aldon Nielsen about her book *Radical Artifice*, Marjorie Perloff points out that, with his focus on natural speech and spontaneity, William Wordsworth had ignited a fuse that was to become central within the tradition of Anglo-American poetry and which remained at its core well into the twentieth century. In the “Observations Prefixed to Lyrical Ballads”, the poet had written that “The principal object, then, proposed in this Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as possible in a selection of language really used by men” (2). For his part, Ezra Pound insisted, more than two centuries afterwards, that poets should “compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome” (3). The aim was to speak in a language which was common to all people, regardless of the personal aspects which inevitably divided them.

According to Perloff, this current of thought eventually underwent a transformation after the Second World War. Poets still wanted to speak in a natural way but now the

catchphrase was “my speech” not “common speech”. Charles Olson’s famous manifesto, “Projective Verse”, is somewhat paradigmatic of this change, with its insistence on the idea of the text as a projection of the poet’s body and on the notion that the poem was a “script to its [own] vocalization” (618). That is to say that, “For the first time”, Olson tells us, “[the poet] can . . . record the listening he has done to his own speech and . . . indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his own work” (618). In other words, the text and the poet’s breath were one and the same thing. As Perloff points out, the universalist ambitions of the “common language” had been abandoned, and now the emphasis was put on the individual, his/her own body and his/her own perspective of the world.

Nevertheless, this idea clashes with something that Olson says in his text. If it is true that he tells us that we cannot leave our own selves and bodies, it is also true that that volition to stay within the contours of the subject was still rooted in a quest for the whole:

It comes to this: the use of a man, by himself and thus by others, lies in how he conceives his relation to nature, that force to which he owes his somewhat small existence. If he sprawl, he shall find little to sing but himself, and shall sing, nature has such paradoxical ways, by way of artificial forms outside himself. But if he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share. And by an inverse law his shapes will make their own way. It is in this sense that projective art, which is the artist’s act in the larger field of objects, leads to dimensions larger than the man.⁶ (620)

In short, because language (the “artificial forms outside himself”) forces us to stay within ourselves, we have to withdraw to our “true selves within” in order to get out into the open, into the plural languages of nature.

⁶ This idea seems to be very similar to the one developed by Ralph Waldo Emerson in “Nature”. In the latter essay, the author points out that “every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact” (49) and that “[m]an is placed in the center of beings – and neither can man be understood without these natural objects nor can they be understood without man” (50). Although Olson does not seem to think that the universe revolves around humankind, he nevertheless contends, like Emerson does, that humans and nature share the same underlying structures.

Gary Snyder's poem "Without" is one in which these ideas are put into practice in a very self-explanatory way:

the silence
of nature
within.

the power within.
the power

without.

the path is whatever passes – no
end in itself.

the end is
grace – ease –

healing,
not saving.

singing
the proof

the proof of the power within.

The poem opens precisely within the natural self – “the power within” – and then goes on to correlate it to the “the power / without”, making clear that the individual and the rest of the world are one and the same. For its part, this “power without” is followed by the idea that

“the path is whatever passes – no / end in itself”, which at once makes two things clear. First, that personal identities are always self-sufficient – they are an end in themselves. And second, that there is not a single interpretation of the world. The “no”, placed after the clangorous silence ushered in by the dash, appears as a reminder that the truth is “*not* this, *not* that”, always “not”, always something else. The truth is, furthermore, movement and change, or, in other words, “the end is” – the silence at the end of the line emphasizing the idea that things are always *in process*, something that is in tune with the Buddhist concept of “Sunyata”, whereby everything in the world is always a form in motion (a formless form). The poem then comes to an end with the idea that one has to “heal”, rather than “save”, which is the same as saying that one cannot impose one’s own truth over others (thus “saving them”, according to our own parameters). Instead one should try to come to terms with these other identities and their specificities and, if we can, persuade them (instead of forcing them) to adopt a different, more selfless perspective. That being said, the poet goes into a song in which he extols all the different identities outside of himself that are proof of the “power within”.

In the two previous chapters we had seen how, in Beefheart’s poetry, this kind of peaceful stance in relation to the other was conceived as something impossible to achieve. We had seen how the poet had projected a utopian childhood in which we were one with nature and we were shown how that lost childhood remained forever beyond our reach. The decals, which Olson calls the “artificial forms outside [of oneself]”, were to blame for this. But then again, it is through those decals that we become independent subjects. As Julia Kristeva points out, mimesis – the process through which one makes the artificial models of culture one’s own – is the process through which one “becomes homologous to another in order to become [oneself]” (13). In short, by Beefheart’s reckoning, our “true selves” may

once have resided in proximity with nature, but they were no longer retrievable. Instead, the “nature within” was only as natural as the cultural pond that we all drink from.

But that is not to say that he completely scrapped the idea of a “true self within”. In fact, his whole persona was underpinned by claims to spontaneity and untamable imagination. According to Mike Barnes, “He compared his spontaneous method of through-composition to ‘going to the bathroom’ and after his creative movement he was averse to looking too closely at what he had produced” (75). He stood “away from rehearsals, preferring instead to opt for maximum spontaneity” (93). In a French radio interview, when Patrice Blanc-Franquart asked him whether he had been influenced by the blues and free jazz, he replied: “No. I am myself an artist too, you see... I’ll tell you once again: I have i-ma-gi-na-ti-on... it isn’t polluted” (qtd. in Barnes 164).

Barnes suggests that this promotion of himself as a creative genius and his denial of all influences may have had to do with a necessity to advertise his work as independent and different from the sources which may have influenced him. One way or another, he also left us some interviews that run counter to the aura of spontaneity that enveloped his public self. In the BBC documentary *The Artist Formerly Known as Captain Beefheart*, he said “Would Stravinsky allow a note not to be played perfectly?”, alluding, according to Bill Harkleroad, one of the guitarists of the Magic band, “to the fact that he knew where every note was in place and that he had intended it beforehand” (qtd. in Barnes 77). In an interview with John Rodgers about his painting, he said: “It’s very difficult to discuss in words what you do with a brush. . . . Usually you sound like a naïve artist, which is not what I am. Everything I do is on purpose” (qtd. in Barnes 317).

Despite everything, my claim would be that, as always, the best way to understand his stance towards the issue of spontaneity is to read and analyze his poems. In them, we find an

utter rejection of originality, at least in two different ways, which we will proceed to examine separately. First, we will look into the compositions in which he puts the innate character of sexual identities in perspective. Second, we will peruse those poems in which he employs the pastiche in order to ridicule the idea of sincere self-expression, which usually walks in tandem with African-American music.

Let us then jump into the last part of our journey, this time keeping away from the land of beef and abject hearts, and instead following the Captain into the drama of nature within.

Deep Down in your Art, You Know You're a Man

When the art of self-expression started gaining momentum in America in the mid-20th Century, it frequently presented itself as fast, violent and virile. As we have seen in the previous chapters, there were reasons for this: a conservative academic establishment (the New Critics) stanching creativity; women had become more independent during the Depression and the Second World War; consumerism and the middle-class consensus repressed bodily desires and so did the Cold War paranoia which saw a communist threat to morality lurking from every corner.

So, as we have mentioned earlier, for Kerouac, writing spontaneously presupposed coming onto the page. Before him, Olson, in what amounted to pretty much the same thing, talked about poetry as an “energy discharge”, a projection of the subject. He admonished potential writers against employing “slow things, similes . . . adjectives, or such, that we are bored by” because “[a]ny slackness takes off attention, that crucial thing, from the job in hand, from the *push* of the line under hand at the moment” (616).

In a parallel fashion, Jackson Pollock, probably the most prominent Abstract Expressionist, was being depicted by critics as the new hope of national art. According to Serge Guilbaut, author of *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, his violent paintings were turning into a symbol of patriotic heroism, because only they appeared to be fit to raise American aesthetics above the effeminacy of Parisian art, while at the same time showcasing a strong image of American individualism that could defend the nation from exterior (communist) threats:

Independence of Paris became the crucial factor. Success had spoiled Parisian art. The Parisian avant-garde was paralyzed by the applause it received and lulled to sleep by the steady drone of praise from a blasé public. It had gone soft from too much pleasure. Like an overripe fruit it needed only the slightest breeze to be dislodged and fall back to earth. Seen in this way, Parisian art seemed effeminate and altogether unsuited to confront the violent dangers in store for Western culture. Virile New York art came to the rescue. The fashionable shows that were commonplace in Europe did not exist in the United States. Paris was a dream machine. Compared with the decadence of Paris, Pollock's sincerity became a symbol of regeneration, just as David's paintings had once, by its simplicity and coarseness, seemed to personify the rising bourgeoisie against the corrupt monarchy. Pollock, with his brutality, revealed the truth and cast artifice aside. (170)

The emergence of Pop Art, during the late 50s, placed the central premises of Abstract Expressionism under scrutiny, especially its emphasis on spontaneous self-expression and virility. In *A Taste for Pop: Pop Art, Gender and Consumer Culture*, Cécile Whiting points out that Roy Lichtenstein was the painter who most successfully ridiculed the Abstract Expressionists' claim to sincere masculine expression by rendering their trademark gesture impersonal, artificial and replicable:

In the criticism on Abstract Expressionism, the gestural stroke of paint indexed the transformative power and personal vision of the individual artist, and in Pollock's case most obviously 'embodied' male presence as aggressive and tragic.

No Pop-art canvas repudiated gesture as a sign of authentic masculinity more decisively than Lichtenstein's series of 'drip' paintings from 1965. These canvases depicted the enormous dripping Abstract Expressionist brushstrokes rendered, with obvious irony, in Lichtenstein's comic-book technique of Ben Day dots and crisp impersonal lines. . . . The direction and curve of each of the brushstrokes may at first suggest the thrust and the movement of a painter's hand, and the splatters forming off the edge of the two white swatches in the foreground might similarly testify to the

spontaneity of the pain application. Yet this impression of a spontaneous burst of energy is undercut by the firm, consistent, black outlines of the brushstrokes, the clean surface of the canvas, and the mechanical blue Ben Day dots of the background. (125)

In tune with these ideas and also important for our purposes are Lichtenstein's painterly reproductions of comic-book images, which, according to Whiting, "not only codify the gender roles in comic books, but also draw attention to these roles as figured representations; that is, they highlight the manner in which gender differences are rhetorically constructed" (102).

So, in short, what Lichtenstein was doing, along with some of his Pop cohorts, was demonstrating how identities and, in this particular case, gender identities, are performative. Far from being innate or natural, these are roles that one imitates and learns how to dramatize. In Beefheart's terminology, they are, in the end, decals – the linguistic models that one appropriates in order to create one's self and that one keeps reinforcing as one repeatedly acts them out. We can see how he put this idea into practice for instance in "You Know You're a Man" (XXVI), a song from *Shiny Beast*:

Ah you know you're a man
Yeah, she makes you understand
Yeah, you know you're a man
Yeah, you know you're a girl about the same time
About the same time I know I'm a man,
You know you're a girl
Ah, we're starting to
Deep down in yr heart your heart you know you're a girl
When I know I'm a man

If Olson had claimed, in his manifesto, that poems ought to be seen as scores for the breath, by means of which the reader summoned to his/her presence the author's "true selves

within”, what Beefheart is describing in this text turns that idea on its head. “You Know You’re a Man” makes plain that the spontaneous body is always already acting in accordance with a score which precedes it. Although the characters claim they know “deep down in their hearts” that they are male and female, the process obsessively described throughout the whole poem proves to us that their genuine identities are far from springing out of their heart. Instead, the man only *becomes* a man as soon as he successfully acts out his role, which probably implies the usual ingredients of virility, penetration and subjugation. Only then does the woman know the place where she belongs in the play.

On interview, especially around the time when he made *The Spotlight Kid* (his album of “songs for women”), Beefheart used to rant against the debasement of women. In a circular directed to his label Warner Bros/Reprise, he had written:

I think it’s important that there be some men who appreciate women for what they are: women. Not as some kind of extension of man. There’s been a big ecological imbalance for years, what with women taking the back seat to men for so long. Their influence on life has been mutated, and, because of it, the men have been getting into wars and screwing things up. (qtd. in Barnes 172)

Although he appears to be implying that, if women had been brought to the foreground, wars would not have happened, because they are “peaceful”, whilst men are “aggressive”, his lyrics surely make clear that he knew these identities were purely artificial.

In fact, one of the stereotypes that he made sure he dispelled was that of the devilish unruly woman, most familiar to us, throughout this dissertation, as the symbol of the abject. He did that, for instance, in “Dirty Blue Gene” (XXVII):

The shiny beast of thought
If you got ears
You gotta listen
Old woman sweat

Young girls glisten
The extract you thought
Is the extract you got

Pop in a thought
Ex-extract
D'you hear me?

Beefheart opens the poem with the idea that there is not an objective truth to the world. Instead, what we see is influenced by the language which mediates our access to the real, hence “The extract you thought / Is the extract you got”. These linguistic structures which inform our perspective are, moreover, something which does not belong to us, an “ex-extract”, something that we know because we have heard it somewhere. After all, “If you got ears / You gotta listen”. But this chain of representations, this “shiny beast of thought”, goes far back in time. For instance, the “young girls” only glisten, i.e. are attractive as objects of desire, because the “old woman” who toiled as a slave to male repression (had to sweat) has passed onto her predecessors the ideal image of what a woman ought to be. This interrelation between the “sweat” and the glitter tells us, furthermore, something about the song’s title. One understands that what Beefheart is implying when he talks about a “dirty blue gene” is that the image of the woman both as an object of desire (dressed in blue jeans) and as a cursed emasculator (harbinger of the dirt of the abject and of the desire for assertion of the blues) is transmitted across generations as if it were something natural, part of one’s genes. This is, then, what the woman in the poem realizes at the end, when she “spills the ink down the sink”. She may be “genetically mean”, but she is not “bad”, not a “devil”.

So, if we started out this text by saying that Captain Beefheart, the name, was intended as a derisive take on gender stereotypes, we now see how this idea was also present

in his lyrics. The erected and bodily repellent beef heart may pop up, but when it does, it has already been demarcated and contained, like in Lichtenstein's paintings, within the replicable sphere of the artificial.

These ideas somewhat salvage his work from facile interpretations that try to pin it down as the expression of a natural genius, an untamable force of nature which utterly did away with artificial conventions. But then again, these interpretations which I labeled simplistic had a point in what they asserted. After all, here was an artist who promoted himself as a grown-up child and, most importantly, who sang like a raucous monster, even more violent and animalistic than the Howlin' Wolf who had inspired him. But it goes without saying that trying to sound natural by imitating someone else is extremely paradoxical, to say the least. And the perversity of the process did not end there. The fact that African-Americans were incessantly being imitated by white men that wanted to sound "raw" or "instinctive" was a problem in itself. But then, of course, Beefheart knew very well what he was doing.

Replicating the Trout

Ever since the post-war artistic revival that we have described above started emphasizing spontaneity and self-expression as meaningful and true (unlike the artificial morality of the middle-class), blacks and other so-called "primitive cultures" began to be drawn to the center of attention. For instance, the writers from the Beat Generation worshiped jazz improvisers like Thelonious Monk and Charlie Parker. In *On the Road*, when Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty reach Mexico City at the end of the novel, it is as if they had

arrived in the paradise of sincerity: “This was the great and final wild uninhibited Fellahin-childlike city that we knew we would find at the end of the road” (42).

During the 60s, nevertheless, the epitome of honesty started to reside in the figure of the country blues player, mostly because many of the old rural performers, like Skip James and Son House, had been rediscovered by folklorists. Blues artists were seen, as Francis Davis points out, as “representative[s] of an agrarian population still in touch with nature, unburdened by the weight of intellectualism, and ‘uncontaminated’ by the pox of mass culture – mankind’s sentimentalized former self, a pre-industrialized American Adam” (169).

Davis’s book, although it is called *The History of the Blues* and it perfectly performs that same advertised role, reads more like a thorough attempt to debunk the image of the blues player as a force of nature and as the spokesman for an idealized rural people. One of the arguments he provides us is that, although these black musicians carried with them the myths and traditions of their culture, they were nonetheless technically proficient in a way that made them stand out within their community: “The early bluesmen probably didn’t think of themselves as artists, but evidently did think of themselves as musicians. . . . [They] wouldn’t have taken kindly to the implication that any black field hand with a guitar could have sung their songs” (3). Many times these songs were not even entirely African-American in origin, because black players frequently played alongside white performers in medicine shows and minstrels, thus picking up from them elements they would include in their own songs, and vice-versa. In fact, the very idea of the “blues player” – someone likely to be from the South, playing his self-accompanied songs about personal suffering and desire – had been, to some extent, invented by recording companies during the late 1920s. By that time, they no longer had the financial resources to record the big bands that the “roaring twenties” had made popular and so they found in the Mississippi Delta their mine of gold. Since the Delta was close to Memphis and the latter was connected via train to Chicago, the hub of the

recording industry, they could easily and cheaply hire self-accompanied singer-guitarists to travel to the north and pour some of their unbearable pain onto record.

But again the idea that the blues was all about the self-expression of pain was, according to Davis, somewhat simplistic. Although the blues were indeed rooted in the expression of suffering, there was a strong redemptory twist to it. That meant that, as we have contended in chapter one, most of the times, albeit the presence of pain, blues were all about celebrating life and all its imperfections. They were all about “entertainment” (Davis 54).

This means that when blacks were appropriated by their hippie audiences from the 60s as sincere protest singers, the latter were, once again, imposing their interpretation of the world onto “other” identities. But most performers had no trouble adapting to these circumstances. After all, as Davis points out, these were singers that had always given their audiences what they wanted to hear, not what they wanted to express. Initially they had been songsters, with a repertoire that spanned various musical genres, whether black or white. Then they had to compete with the jukebox and so they themselves became walking music-machines. And now they were protest singers, at least in the eyes of the college students that revered them.

Davis gives us an example of how this sort of relationship with the audience worked by explaining that Leadbelly, for instance, who had no interest in politics, had written, in the late 1930s, a pair of political compositions in order to appease his public’s desire to hear sincere songs about suffering and oppression:

What researchers such as Lomax called ‘folk music’ was a new marketplace commodity in the late 1930s, a midcult consumer rage. As it would be in the sixties (by which time it had metabolized into ‘folk’, a peppy, coffeehouse generic without race, ethnicity or flavor), folk music was perceived by many of its devotees to be ‘people’s’ music – which is to say, an outlet for social protest. Though said to be nearly apolitical in his private life, Leadbelly met this demand for social relevance with original songs like ‘Bourgeois Blues’ and ‘The Scottsboro Boys’ the former pretty much self-explanatory, the later about the nine young black vagrants falsely accused of raping two white women in Alabama in 1931. I know that

this makes Leadbelly seem like an opportunist, but he was merely doing what songsters had always done – sizing up his audience and giving them whatever he figured they wanted. Aside from which, these political numbers occasioned some of Leadbelly’s most expressive singing and guitar playing. (170)

Thus, what Davis is implying is that, many times, the blues revolved around a performance of expressiveness, a dramatization of heartfelt sorrow. And if in this case the audience was white, certainly the same applied to the black public. It was all about what the people listening expected from the performer to perform.

It was precisely this artificiality of emotion that Beefheart explored in some of his songs. In spite of aping Howlin’ Wolf’s voice for his own purposes (namely to strengthen our confrontation with the abjection of our animality), he knew that it was just a singing style. This was an awareness that he showed when he approached the conventions of soul music in his own work.

In “Call on Me” (XXVIII), for instance, he digressively begs his woman to go visit him. The lyrics are almost inanely repetitive, dwelling on the same formula of “Call on me whenever you are lonely and blue / In my house whenever you need me to / Call on me” for the entire duration of the song. At the end the composition explodes into ecstatic pain. He howls: “Don’t you know I’m down on my knees baby baby please”. At the same time that the track reaches this climax of emotion, though, an extract from The Crystals’ over-the-top song “Then He Kissed Me” is heard in the background. It is as if Beefheart is giving us a wink and letting us know that there is a model of emotion lurking behind this sincere song that they were trying to imitate.

Another example of the way he undermines the idea of spontaneous expression of emotion can be spotted in “Too Much Time” (XXIX):

I got too much time, too much time
I got too much time to be without love

In my life I've got a deep devotion
Wide as the sky and deep as the ocean
Every war that's waged makes me cry
Every bird that goes by gets me high

Sometimes when I'm late and I'm a little bit hungry
I heat up some old stale beans
Open up a can of sardines
Eat crackers and dream
Of someone to cook for me

Beefheart starts by setting the tone and creating a chain of expectations. He cornily advertises himself as a brittle and emotionally unstable man, deeply heart-broken with war and euphoric with nature. But then, by the third stanza, the tone radically changes, although he proceeds to repeat the refrain with the same emotional intensity.

Mike Barnes clearly did not get the joke: "The sentiments are simple, even banal by his standards, but sung with such genuine feeling that they fit perfectly. All except for a bizarre, spoken middle-eight where he becomes dewy-eyed, longing for some decent cooking, but having to settling for the unappetizing bachelor fare of stale beans, sardines and crackers" (173). By introducing bathetic references to the mundane, Beefheart manages to disrupt the atmosphere of sincerity created by the staple images of lofty emotion and to bring to the fore the discrepancy between what he was supposed to be saying (the conventions of the genre, which he then continues to reiterate by singing along to them) and what is really going on in the song. Paradoxically, though, this abrupt interference of the humdrum triggers

an undercurrent of everydayness that, from then on, walks alongside the pastiche and ends up making the song more realistic.

But one cannot ignore that gender conventions are also being highlighted. When he unexpectedly descends from the haughtiness of altruism to the most banal of egotisms, Beefheart is underlining the way that many of these songs promise abstract ideals like love or happiness but are in fact underpinned by a childish, whimsical and self-centered masculine desire, which he also attempts to ridicule, and whose artificiality and commonplaceness he attempts to emphasize.

So, in this song, both themes we have been dealing with in this chapter unite in order to corroborate our contention that Captain Beefheart was, from the start, both a corporal and a cartoonish figure, at the same time making us focus on the abject and the repellent and on the artificial and the performative. But I suggest we conclude this last section of the present text by making this ambivalence even more blatant to the reader.

Consider the cover of Beefheart's *Trout Mask Replica* (Fig. 3). We know that the image of Van Vliet covering up his face with the head of a fish is probably a reference to "Old Fart at Play", which we have previously analyzed. But, for a moment, let us go back and replay what happens when the Old Fart dons the mask:

He ran down behind the knoll
'n slipped on his wooden fishhead
The mouth worked and snapped all the bees back to the bungalow

We had said that the trout mask worked as an entrance into the world of the body and of repellent nature: the realm of the abject beef heart, which purports to destroy the subject. At the same time, though, in these three lines quoted above, we understand that the threat had been defused right from the start. This is, after all, only the *mask* of nature, not nature itself.

Notice how everything falls into place, how the bees are driven back to their stable linguistic compartments. In short, in a similar way to what Lichtenstein was doing with Pollock's paintings, Beefheart is telling us that spontaneity and the confrontation with the other can themselves be peacefully reproduced and that the destruction of the subject can itself be orderly staged.

So, when we reach the end of "Old Fart" and the character tames the abject with his "air bulb invention", he becomes twice removed from nature – because of the limits of his own self and also because the trout mask, the proof of his spontaneity, had all along been only a mask.

This is the same ambivalence that we encounter on the cover of the album. Beefheart waves us a friendly hello, as if signaling that the threat posed by the abject has been completely stanchd. The "air bulb invention" sits on the top of his high hat, attesting to his success in throttling the natural threat, and he holds the fish head with his hand, making sure that we perfectly understand how the sincerity of his oneness with nature is nothing more than an act.

And yet his peaceful and welcoming hello is ironic enough if we consider that he is inviting us into a world that we have yet to tame for ourselves. Now that we know what a Captain Beefheart is, we already know what we will find inside. We will be confronted by the abject, and all of its repugnant, unfathomable and interpenetrating languages, in a land where human and trout fuse and become a pre-subjective hybrid whole. We behold it, avoid it and just when we were about to get away, we are struck by the "shiny beast of thought", by the image of a man holding a mask – a trout mask –, and we are sucked back into the Captain's sincere heart and forced to admit the power of language, within and without.

Conclusion

White Milk, Black Milk

A deviser of territories, languages, works, the *deject*, never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines – for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject – constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh. (8)

The Powers of Horror, Julia Kristeva

We can read a third meaning in *Trout Mask Replica*'s cover. It is a stop sign for us, the Captain telling us that we have reached the end of our journey. We have travelled far and we have emasculated three different utopias in the process, although, in truth, they end up converging into a sole oppressive whole – the idea that unity with the other is possible by getting rid of the ego and embracing our natural selves.

And yet, one question remains unanswered. Beefheart made clear that the other lies permanently beyond our reach, beyond the boundaries of subjectivity. But, as we have seen in “Steal Softy Thru Snow”, this degree of awareness was something that filled him with sorrow, not with the loftiness that comes with superior knowledge. In short, he never entirely eschewed his desire to embrace the other living beings that shared the same “electricity” he did, even though he knew that such goal was inherently tragic. So, in the end, how was this tension between skepticism and quixotic self-expansion resolved?

Like we have always done throughout this text, I suggest that we go to his poetry and see what it has to say about this issue. The poem I propose is called “Sheriff of Hong Kong” (XXX):

She always shows up when I'm up

But she never shows up when I'm down
But she's under arrest
'cause I might guess
The Sheriff of Hong Kong
Then she goes up in a flash
I bite the end of her sash
And I'm long gone
To Hong Kong Kong

We have seen this pattern countless times before, right? The unruly and egotistical woman, ever present only when “he’s up”, always on the run from the sheriff that wants to arrest her to his masculine order. But he never gives up: he follows her to Hong Kong, or, in other words, to the world of abjection. There he finds the expected languages of otherness and it is all Chinese to him (he incessantly repeats words in Mandarin), all incomprehensible when seen through his eyes. Apparently, the woman has won again. But this is not always the way it ends; sometimes he is also in power, and that is why the title of sheriff of Hong Kong keeps changing hands: “Now I’m the Sheriff of Hong Kong / Now she’s the Sheriff of Hong Kong”. So, power appears to be distributed in a circular way. When, by the end of the poem, Beefheart attributes a color to each of them, white to the man and black to the woman, we understand that what he seems to be describing is the symbol of Yin and Yang. By doing so, he turns this cat-and-mouse chase into something eternal, an eternal conflict between man and woman, between order and disorder, between the subject and the abject.

Kristeva’s quotation I chose for the epigraph starts to resonate by now. In it she describes the struggle with the abject precisely in these terms. Sometimes one gains ground, but it always encroaches and we are back where we started off.

In Beefheart's hands this is, in the end, a process that presupposes the rejection of the all-embracing utopias of his time but which refuses to accept the defeatist skepticism that threatens to efface them completely. It is a process that simultaneously recognizes the ineffability of the other and refrains from abandoning the subject's desire for centripetal expansion. A process, that is, which is constantly enacted in an in-between space between the white milk of order and the black milk of one's natural mother. A space where one is never safe as milk.

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Figures



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

Poems

Safe as Milk (I)

Well my cigarette died when I washed my face
Dropped some drops in an ashtray hit a wrong place
Woman at my blinds to see spiders spinning lines
Its a safe as milk it's a safe as milk
I never heard it put quite that way
The shape I'm in is a gone a way
They called a day they called a day
Yesterday's paper headlines approach rain gutter teasing rusty cat sneezing
Soppin wet hammer dusty and wheezing
Lusty alley whining trashcan blues
Children running after rainbows stocking poor
Gracious ladies nylon hanging on to line
Jumping onto leg looking mighty fine

Sorrows lollipop lands stick-broken on a dark carnival ground
Pop up toaster cracklin
Aluminium rhythm and sound
Ev'ry day pencil lazy and sharp
The icebox inside looking like a harp
E-lectric bulb been out for years
Freezer fumes feed the gas tears
Cheese in the corner with a mile long beard
Bacon blue bread dog eared (repeat twice)

I may be hungry but I sure ain't weird

Electricity (II)

Singin through you to me
Thunderbolts caught easily
Shouts the truth peacefully
Electricity

High voltage man kisses night to bring the light to those who need to hide their shadow deed
Go into bright find the light and know that friends don't mind just how you grow

Midnight cowboy stained in black reads dark roads without a map
To free-seeking electricity (repeat) (Repeat both lines)

Lighthouse beacon straight ahead straight ahead across black seas to bring
Seeking electricity

High voltage man kisses night to bring the light to those who need to hide their shadow-deed
hide their shadow-deed (repeat)
Seek electricity.....

Tarotplane (III)

Baby person told Elixir Sue
Listen to me baby
I'm gonna tell it to you
Gonna need somebody on your bond
You gonna need some bodies on your bond
Just you bear this in mind
True friends is hard to find
You gonna need some bodies on your bond

Gonna need somebody on your bond
You gonna need some bodies on your bond
Just you bear this in mind
True friends is hard to find
You gonna need some bodies on your bond
I say bear this in mind
I say bear this in mind
Just you bear this in mind
True friends is hard to find
You gonna need some bodies on your bond

Ya done put mice in the radiator
Razors in the clay
Well, they keeps us working all night
Don't give us no pay
Don't give us no pay

Automatic Sam told Everready Betty told Prestcold Milly
With the long...
Automatic Sam told Everready Betty told Prestcold Milly
With the long black wavy mane
With the long black...
With the long black wavy mane

Little girl, Little girl
Gonna take you for a ride in my Tarotplane
I wanta take you for a ride in my Tarotplane
For a fly, for a fly

Baby person told Elixir Sue
Oh, listen to me baby
I'm gonna tell it to you
You ain't too old
Oh, you ain't too old
Just what you been heard - just what you been told
You gonna need somebody on your bond
You gonna need some bodies on your bond
Just you bear this in mind
True friends is hard to find
You gonna need some bodies on your bond

Baby person told Elixir Sue
Listen to me baby
Mice in the razors, clay in the heaters
Mice in the razors, clay in the heaters

You gonna need somebody on your bond
You gonna need some bodies on your bond
Just you bear this in mind
True friends is hard to find
You gonna need some bodies on your bond

Automatic Sam told Everready Betty told Prestcold Milly
With the long black wavey mane
Oh listen little girl don't you understand?
Oh, you ain't too old
No you ain't too old
Well you ain't too lold
As long as you can boogie you ain't too old
Little girl, little girl
Little girl, little girl
Gonna take you for a ride in my Tarotplane
Gonna take you for a ride in my Tarotplane
You goin' flyin'
You goin' flyin'

Come on little girl
Gonna take you for a ride in my Tarotplane
Come on little girl
Gonna take you for a ride in my Tarotplane
Come on little girl
Gonna take you for a ride in my Tarotplane
In my Tarotplane
In my Tarotplane

In my Tarotplane
In my Tarotplane
In my Tarotplane

You gonna need somebody on your bond
You gonna need some bodies on your bond
Just you bear this in mind
True friends is hard to find
You gonna need some bodies on your bond

Beatle Bones and Smokin' Stones (IV)

Beatle bones and smokin' Stones
The dry sands fall
The strawberry mouth; strawberry moth; strawberry caterpillar
Strawberry butterfly; strawberry fields
The winged eel slither on the heels of today's children
Strawberry feels forever

Yeah, roosters, ol' glass roosters, stick to your race
In a drag-queen, live-wood farmhouse
Tractors are clawin'; the folks are crawlin'
Trees in a row climbing a coach and I blow rich
Red, blue, yellow sunset
Where I set and you set; and I've loved and you've loved
And I've seen and you've seen

Salt Man has just made his mark - and crumbled
The dark - the light - the dark - the day
Porcelain children see through white lights
Soft-cracker bats, Cheshire cats named
The Dark - the Light - the Dark - the Day

Blue veins through gray-felt tomorrows
Cellular sail-boat - ye ole feathered kind
Blow it into a pond swayin' in circles
Red, blue, yellow sunset.
Where I've set and you've set; and I've loved and you've loved
What I saw and you saw
Strawberry feels forever

Trust Us (V)

The path is the mask of love a way a way
The flow is the task above today there is no other way (repeat)
You gotta trust us when you need a friend

To find us you gotta look within
You gotta trust us (repeat) before you turn to dust (repeat)
You gotta see before you see you gotta be before be

(we love you)
You gotta touch without take
You gotta hear without fear
You gotta feel to reveal
You gotta touch without take
Such is is and uh ain't is ain't (repeat)

We're for you love you with you love you just a few

We love you we tell you true we love you
The path is youth let the dying die
The path is life yeah; let the lying lie
Let the dying die let the lying lie
(trust trust trust)

Dachau Blues (VI)

Dachau blues those poor Jews
Dachau blues those poor Jews
Dachau blues, Dachau blues those poor Jews
Still cryin' 'bout the burnin' back in World War Two's
One mad man six million lose
Down in Dachau blues, down in Dachau blues
The world can't forget that misery
'n the young ones now beggin' the old ones please
t' stop bein' madmen
'fore they have t' tell their children
'bout the burnin's back in World War Three's
War One was balls 'n powder 'n blood 'n snow
War Two rained death 'n showers 'n skeletons
Dancin' 'n screamin' 'n dyin' in the ovens
Cough 'n smoke 'n dyin' by the dozens
Down in Dachau blues
Down in Dachau blues
Sweet little children with doves on their shoulders
Their eyes rolled back in ecstasy cryin'
Please old man stop this misery
They're countin' out the devil
With two fingers on their hands
Beggin' the Lord don't let the third one land
On World War Three
On World War Three

Floppy Boot Stomp (VII)

The floppy boot stomped down into the ground
The farmer screamed 'n blew the sky off the mountains
Eye sockets looked down on the chestbone mountains
'n the sun dropped down, 'n the moon ran off,
His heels 'n elbows pale as chalk
'n all the comets collided 'n blew t' dust
For fear they'd be seen.
'n the sky turned white in the middle of the night
'n the sky turned white in the middle of the night
'n the big floppy boot stomped down into the ground
'n the red violin took the bow
to do the hoodoo hoe-down
'n the red violin took the bow
for to do the hoodoo hoe-down
The farmer jumped in ah circle 'n flung his chalk right down
Do-si-do the devil sho' showed 'n he broke of his horns
'n fiddled him down the road
through the fork
'n the farmer's floppy boot stomped down
Red tail squirmin' and the hot leg kicked
'n the fire leaped 'n licked
And when the boot came up, the fire went out
And hell was just an ice cube melting off on the ground.
And the bold caught down for to do the hoodoo hoedown
And the bold caught down for to do the hoodoo, the devil hoedown
To the fork, huddlin' in a hollow, standin' at the crossroads
With that bunged-up bandaged broken bum that fell in the wrong circle
He had a sole red tail – once went red, now was pale
Fe Fi Fo Fum he was summoned up from hell
Booted down a spell
By a square-dancin' farmer
By a square-dancin' farmer, *well*
That old bum was sticking out his thumb
When the farmer drew up, said
"Listen son", and the horse compared his hooves.
"If you fall into my circle again I'll tan your red hide
And dance you on your tail, and pitch you from now to now
Pitch you from now to now."
And the hotlick kicked, and the fire leaped an' licked
And the hotlick kicked and the fire just leaped an' licked
And the hotlick kickin' an' the fire jus' leapin' an' lickin'
And the fire leaped and licked.

The Thousandth and Tenth Day of the Human Totem Pole (VIII)

The thousandth and tenth day of the human totem pole.
The morning was distemper grey,
Of the thousandth and tenth day of the human totem pole.
The man at the bottom was smiling.
He had just finished his breakfast smiling.
It hadn't rained or manured for over two hours.
The man at the top was starving.
The pole was a horrible looking thing
With all of those eyes and ears
And waving hands for balance.
There was no way to get a copter in close
So everybody was starving together.
The man at the top had long ago given up
But didn't have nerve enough to climb down.
At night the pole would talk to itself and the chatter wasn't too good.
Obviously the pole didn't like itself, it wanted to walk!
It was the summer and it was hot
And balance wouldn't permit skinning to undergarments.
It was an integrated pole, it was taking on an reddish brown cast.
Exercise on the pole was isometric,
Kind of a flex and then balance
Then the highest would roll together,
The ears wiggle, hands balance.
There was a gurgling and googling heard
A tenth of the way up the pole.
Approaching was a small child
With Statue of Liberty doll.

Untitled (IX)

Noon bouncin' ball of warm beside child
Deflating ah vegelife puzzle
Ah braking ball of wings, legs, leaves, lives, behives
Movies from each comb
Each pocket 'n drones bouncin' cones
Prisms that melt flesh 'n bones
Dust 'n dark dusklite
None numb numerals
Noon ball warm beside the child
Earholes, eye holes, airholes
Dance, deflate, inflate meat rainbows
Flesh bonnets her hair woven
Toes kick dust away

Drops
Blue, yellow, red, green clocks
Her heart pumps, stops, starts, plays, drops
Eyes roll
Rocks back 'n forth
She played through the sun stuck out her tongue
Stood on each of three decals
She licked each one

Lick My Decals Off, Baby (X)

Rather than I want to hold your hand,
I wanna swallow you whole
'n I wanna lick you everywhere it's pink
'n everywhere you think
Whole kit 'n kaboodle 'n the kitchen sink
Heaven's sexy as hell
Life is integrated,
Goes together so well
'n so on
Well, I'm gonna go on 'n do my washing
Well, now you may think I'm crazy but I want you to
Lick my decals off baby
'n I don't want you to be lazy
'cause it's drivin' me crazy
'n this song ain't no sing-song
It's all about the birds 'n the bees
'n where it went all wrong
'n where it all belongs
'n the earth all go down on their knees
lookin' for ah little ease
She stuck out her toungue 'n the fun begun
She stuck out her toungue 'n the fun begun
She stuck it out at me, 'n I just thumbed my nose
'n went on washing my clothes

Sue Egypt (XI)

Chills quick you
Voices pick you

Crows hex you
[You love some?] post-'em avion
Wizard Kiss and all be gone
Scenes
Dreams
Boats to forever
Boated ether
Creep to ether feather
Sue Egypt
Sue Egypt
Boing pong
hocus pocus avion
I think of all those people that ride on my bones
I think of all of those people that ride on my bones
That nobody hears
That nobody sees that nobody knows
Sue Egypt
Sue Egypt
I think of all
I think of all
I think of all those people who ride on my bones
That nobody sees, that nobody dares
That nobody hears, that nobody cares
I think of the dust that collects on the chairs
and under her eyes
and through her eyes
and out her body
and in her body
and in her ha[ir/fa]ce
Big smoke fingers wave
Come here Come hear
"Bring me my scissors"
and those are waters [?]
The moon was a
wisdomatic
pristocratic
vagabond
Bad vuggum
a pitcher of red-hot juice
a picture of red garnet juice
Chills quick you
Voices pick you
Crows hex you
[Elects-some postem?] avion
Wizard Kiss and All Be Gone
Scenes
Dreams
Boats to forever
Boated ether
Creep the ether feather

Sue Egypt
Sue Egypt

Pachuco Cadaver (XII)

When she wears her bolero then she begin t' dance
All the pachucos start withold'n hands
When she drives her Chevy Sissy's don't dare t' glance
Yellow jackets 'n red debbles buzzin' round 'er hair hive ho
She wears her past like uh present
Take her fancy in the past
Her sedan skims along the floorboard
Her two pipes hummin' carbon cum
Got her wheel out of uh B-29 Bomber brodey knob amber
Spanish fringe 'n talcum tazzles FOREVER AMBER
She looks like an old squaw indian
she's 99 she won't go down
Avocado green 'n alfalfa yellow adorn her t' the ground
Tatooes 'n tarnished utenzles uh snow white bag full o' tunes
Drives uh cartune around
Broma' seltzer blue umbrella keeps her up off the ground
Round red sombreros wrap 'er high tap horsey shoes
When she unfolds her umbrella pachucos got the blues
Her lovin' makes me so happy
If I smiled I'd crack m' chin
Her eyes are so peaceful thinks it's heaven she been
Her skin is as smooth as the daisies
In the center where the sun shines in
Smiles as sweet as honey
Her teeth as clean as the combs where the bees go in
When she walks flowers surround her
Let their nectar come in to the air around her
She loves her love sticks out like stars
Her lovin' sticks out like stars

The Blimp (XIII)

Master master
This is recorded thru uh flies ear
'n you have t' have uh flies eye t' see it
It's the thing that's gonna make Captain Beefheart
And his magic band fat

Frank it's the big hit
It's the blimp
It's the blimp Frank
It's the blimp

When I see you floatin' down the gutter
I'll give you uh bottle uh wine
Put me on the white hook
Back in the fat rack
Shad rack ee shack
The sumptin' hoop the sumptin' hoop
The blimp the blimp
The crazy hoops the crazy hoops
They're camp they're camp
Tits tits the blimp the blimp
The mother ship the mother ship
The brothers hid under their hood
From the blimp the blimp
Children stop yer nursin' unless yer renderin' fun
The mother ship the mother ship
The mother ship's the one
The blimp the blimp
The tapes uh trip it's uh trailin' tail
It's traipse'n along behind the blimp the blimp
The nose has uh crimp
The nose is the blimp the blimp
It blows the air the snoot isn't fair
Look up in the sky there's uh dirigible there
The crazy hoops whir
You can see them just as they were
All the people stir
'n the girls knees trembles
'n run 'n wave their hands
'n run their hands over the blimp the blimp
Daughter don't yuh dare
Oh momma who cares
It's the blimp it's the blimp

Bat Chain Puller (XIV)

Bat chain
Puller
Bat chain puller
Puller, puller

A chain with yellow lights
That glistens like oil beads
On its slick smooth trunk
That trails behind on tracks, and thumps
A wing hangs limp and retreats

Bat chain puller
Puller puller

Bulbs shoot from its snoot
And vanish into darkness
It whistles like a root snatched from dry earth
Sodbustin' rakes with grey dust claws
Announces its coming in the morning
This train with grey tubes
That houses people's very thoughts and belongings.

Bat chain puller
Puller puller

This train with grey tubes that houses people's thoughts,
Their very remains and belongings.
A grey cloth patch
Caught with four threads
In the hollow wind of its stacks
Ripples felt fades and grey sparks clacks,
Lunging the cushioned thicket.
Pumpkins span the hills
With orange crayola patches.
Green inflated trees
Balloon up into marshmallow soot
That walks away in forty circles,
Caught in grey blisters
With twinkling lights and green sashes
Uuh
Pulled by rubber dolphins with gold yawning mouths
That blister and break in agony
In souls of rust
They kill gold sawdust into dust.

Bat chain puller,
Puller puller.

Petrified Forest (XV)

Human Bark
Beautyless hide from beauty
Bow your eyes 'n heads to the duty of the dead's
Suck the ground
Breathe life into the dead dinosaurs
Let the past demons rear up 'n belch fire in the air of now
The rug's wearing out that we walk on
Sonn it will fray 'n we'll drop
Dead into yesterday
Must the breathing pay for those who breathe in 'n don't
Breathe out
There'd be no gain, brothers, if no one would play
'n for your games count me n' all that can see,
Breathe in 'n out hungry today 'n eat hearty tomorrow
Or eat away 'n be eaten some day
No seed shall sow in salt water
If the dinosaur cries with blood in his eyes
In the dinosaur cries with blood in his eyes
'n eats our babies for our lies
Belches fire in our skies
Maybe I'll die but he'll be rumbling through
Your petrified forest

The Smithsonian Institute Blues (XVI)

Come on down t' the big dig
Come on down t' the big dig
Come on t' the big dig
Singin' the Smithsonian Institute blues
Singin' the Smithsonian Institute blues
The way it's goin' La Brea tar pits
I know you just can't lose
The new dinosaur is walkin' in the old one's shoes
Come on down t' the big dig
Can't get around the big dig
This may be premature but if I'm wrong
You can just say it's the first time I was happy t' be confused
Singin' the Smithsonian Institute blues
All you new dinosaurs
Now it's up t' you t' choose

It sure looks funny for a new dinosaur
T' be in an old dinosaur's shoes
Dina Shore's shoes
Dinosaur shoes
C'mon down to the big dig
You can't get around the big dig
C'mon to the big dig
Ya can't get around the big dig
Singin' the Smithsonian Institute blues

Ant Man Bee (XVII)

White ants runnin'
Black ants crawlin'
Yella ants dreamin'
Brown ants longin'
All those people longin' to be free
Uhuru ant man bee uhuru ant man bee
All the ants in God's garden they can't get along
War still runnin' on
It's that one lump uh sugar
That they won't leave each other 'lone
Why do yuh have t' do this
You've got t' let us free
Why do yuh have t' do this
You've got t' set us free
Why do yuh have t' do this
You've got t' set us free
Why do yuh have t' do this
You've got t' set us free
Uhuru ant man bee uhuru ant man bee
Now the bee takes his honey then he sets the flower free
But in God's garden only
Man 'n the ants
They won't set each other be

Wild Life (XVIII)

Wild life along with my wife
I'm goin' up on the mountain fo' the rest uh m' life
'fore they take m' life
'fore they take m' wild life
'fore they take m' wife
They got m' mother 'n father
'n run down all my kin
Folks I know I'm next
Wild life along with m' wife
I'm goin' up on the mountain fo' the rest uh m' life
'fore they take m' wild life
'fore they take m' wife? wife?
'fore they take m' wife
Wild life wild life wild life
Wild life wild life wild life
I'm goin' up on the mountain along with m' wife
Find me uh cave 'n talk them bears
In t' takin' me in
Wild life along with m' wife
Wild life
It's uh man's best friend
Wild life along with m' wife
I'm goin' up on the mountain fo' the rest uh m' life
'fore they take m' life
'fore they take m' wild life
'fore they take m' wife?
'fore they take m' wife
Wild life wild life
Wild life wild life
I'm goin' up on the mountain
Find me uh cave 'n talk the bears
In t' takin' me in
Wild life is uh mans best friend
Wild life
Wild life

Making Love to a Vampire with a Monkey on my Knee (XIX)

Making love to a vampire with a monkey on my knee
The pond shined dry like a ladies compact

Lilies leaped like flat green hearts with white hearts
Squirting yellow pollen...cocks...
Ferns ran like cool spades.. fossils. ..away from rocks
Bees echoed dark carbon hums that dashed in nothing
Gnats fucked my ears 'n nostrils
Hit my brain like hones 'n numbed t' nothing
Wings stuck on liquid bones
Making love to a vampire with a monkey on my knee
The moon poured hollow down my milky leg
Splashed still 'n moved
The wind peed down the willows 'n pricked the needle vine
The monkey moved a fur shadow... its soot tail curled in twos
Its lips smiled needles.. its eyes rolled loose
Her throat broke open... glistened in the dew
Red berries dangled like a dream of rubies too
Snot muscles ran down her ivory chin 'n tooth within
A locket... a pin held fast to then, my love, my pocket deep within
'N senses dangled the chain that clasped me to her then
The messenger spoke the wind that blows between our time
I sensed you then 'n whispers spin 'n flow in silver dust
Around the pointed pin
Sent to nothing
God, please fuck my mind for good
Making love to a vampire with a monkey on my knee
Oh fuck that thing.. .fuck that poem...eyes crawl out with maggots
White cloth bones pile up light thrown blades
Rags 'n skull.. scoops soil cracks.. .drain screams.. please
Take my hand 'n join me... too soon its clutches gleams
Making love to a vampire with a monkey on my knee
Death be damned... life

Clear Spot (XX)

I have to run so far to find a clear spot
Sun's all hottin' and a rottin' hot
Swamp's all rotten 'n stinkin' uhh
Vegetation's hot
Sleepin' in a bayou on a old rotten cot
Can't find my kind of folks havin' fun
I have to run run run run
Run to find a clear spot
Can't shadow down, the sun big brown
Mosquitos 'n moccasins steppin' all around
'fraid I'm gonna get hit
Sun's all hottin' and a rottin' hot
Vegetation's hot

Sleepin' in a bayou on a old rotten cot
Can't find my kind of folks havin' fun
Got to run run run run
Run to find a clear spot
Can't shadow down, the sun big brown
Mosquitos 'n moccasins steppin' all around
'fraid I'm gonna get hit
'fraid I'm gonna get hit
I have to run so far to find a clear spot

Frownland (XXI)

My smile is stuck
I cannot go back to your Frownland
My spirit's made up of the ocean
And the sky 'n' the sun 'n' the moon
'n' all my eyes can see
I cannot go back to your land of gloom
Where black jagged shadows
Remind me of the coming of your doom
I want my own land
Take my hand and come with me
It's not too late for you
It's not too late for me
To find my homeland
Where a man can stand by another man
Without an ego flying
With no man lying
'n' no one dying by an earthly hand
Let the devils burn and the beggar learn
'n' the little girls that live in those old worlds
Take my kind hand
My smile is stuck
I cannot go back to your Frownland
I cannot go back to your Frownland

Yellow Brick Road (XXII)

Around the corner the wind blew back follow the yellow brick road
It ended up in black on black

I was taught the gift of love
Smiling children painted joy sunshine bright girl and boy
bag of tricks and candy sticks peppermint kite for my toy
Yellow brick black on black
Keep on walking and don't look back

I walked along happy and then came back
I follow the yellow brick road
Lost and found I saw you down on the bound off the bound
Taught against the love yellow brick road took my load
Sunshine girl sunshine girl come to my abode 1-2-3-4-5 miles long
Oh I can't ever (so) go wrong
Clouds were gray yesterday down on my shoulder it's time to play
Yellow brick black on black
Keep on walking and don't look back

(repeat 1st verse)
I follow the yellow brick road.....

Harry Irene (XXIII)

Harry Irene were a couple that lived in the green
Harry Irene were a couple that ran a canteen
Ran a canteen
Ran a canteen
Two people Harry and Irene like you never seen
The floor was made of oak, the door was smokey gray
Their tuna sandwiches would turn the dark into day
They sold wine like turpentine to painters
They took to social life like props to aviators
Harry Irene were a couple that ran a canteen
Harry Irene were a couple that lived in the green
Ran a canteen
Ran a canteen took Harry for all of his green and Irene
Harry was left holding an empty canteen
And by the way folks, it was Dusty not Harry
What does this mean?
What does this mean?
What's the meaning of this?
Poor Harry, I guess

Old Fart at Play (XXIV)

Pappy with the Khaki sweatband
Bowed goat potbellied barnyard that only he noticed
The old fart was smart
The old gold cloth madonna
Dancin' t' the fiddle 'n saw
He ran down behind the knoll
'n slipped on his wooden fishhead
The mouth worked 'n snapped all the bees
Back t' the bungalow

Momma was flatten'n lard
With her red enamel rollin' pin
When the fishhead broke the window
Rubber eye erect 'n precisely detailed
Airholes from which breath should come
Is now closely fit
With the chatter of the old fart inside

An assortment of observations took place
Momma licked 'er lips like uh cat
Pecked the ground like uh rooster
Pivoted like uh duck
Her stockings down caught dust 'n doughballs
She cracked 'er mouth glaze caught one eyelash
Rubbed 'er hands on 'er gorgeous gingham
Her hand grasped sticky metal intricate latchwork
Open t' the room uh smell cold mixed with bologna
Rubber bands crumpled wax paper bonnets
Fat goose legs 'n special jellies
Ignited by the warmth of the room
The old fart smelled this thru his important breather holes
Cleverly he dialed from within from the outside we observed
That the nose of the wooden mask
Where the holes had just been uh moment ago
Was now smooth amazingly blended camouflaged in
With the very intricate rainbow trout replica

The old fart inside was now breathin' freely
From his perfume bottle atomizer air bulb invention

His excited eyes from within the dark interior glazed;
watered in appreciation of his thoughtful preparation.

Steal Softly Thru Snow (XXV)

The black paper between a mirror breaks my heart
The moon frayed thru dark velvet lightly apart
Steal softly thru sunshine
Steal softly thru snow
The wild goose flies from winter
Breaks my heart that I can't go
Energy flies thru a field
'n the sun softly melts a nothing wheel
Steal softly thru sunshine
Steal softly thru snow
The black paper between a mirror breaks my heart that I can't go
The swan their feathers don't grow
They're spun
They live two hundred years of love
They're one
Breaks my heart to see them cross the sun
Grain grows rainbows up straw hill
Breaks my heart to see the highway cross the hill
Man lived a million years 'n still he kills
The black paper between a mirror
Breaks my heart that I can't go
Steal softly thru sunshine
Steal softly thru snow

You Know You're a Man (XXVI)

Ah you know you're a man
Yeah, she makes you understand
Yeah, you know you're a man
Yeah, you know you're a girl about the same time
About the same time I know I'm a man,
You know you're a girl
Ah, we're starting to...
Deep down in yr heart you know you're a girl
When I know I'm a man

Way down deep in yr heart
Way down deep in my heart
I got a glow
Way down deep in my heart, yer hear me?
Yeah, you hear me cryin' out to you
We're already in love

When we're starting to glow
We've got a glow startin'
Deep down in yr heart
Lovin' by you

Aah! You know you're a man
Yeah she makes you know you're a man
You know you're a girl about the same time
Uh huh I know uh yeah
You know you're a man
Don't she make you understand?
You Know You're A Man

Dirty Blue Gene (XXVII)

The shiny beast of thought
If you got ears
You gotta listen
Old woman sweat
Young girls glisten
The extract you thought
is the extract you got

Pop in a thought
Ex-extract
D'you hear me?

Hope these are hard[?] drops
Grooves you away
Drop by drop
Light by bright
Night by light
There ain't no good
'n' there ain't no blame
Not hip
Ain't no aim
You make the fault
You cause the blame
Devil the same
Pop in a thought
Ex-extract
Shiny beast of thought
You hang up
Now you're caught
If you got ears
You gotta listen

Old woman sweat
Young girls glisten
There's more than what you thought
Pop in a thought
The shiny beast of thought

Stand there bubblin' like an open cola in the sun
Back is achin'
Work is never done
She's swinging a sponge on the end of a string
Right on the brink
She spills the ink down the sink
She's not bad
She's just genetically mean
She's not bad
She's just genetically mean
Don't you wish you never met her? [x3]
Dirty Blue Gene

She's swinging a sponge on the end of a string
Don't you wish you never met her? [x4]
She's not bad
She's just genetically mean
(fuck)
Dirty Blue Gene
Dirty [x3]
Dirty Blue Gene
She's
Not
Bad

Call on Me (XXVIII)

Call on me whenever you're lonely and blue
In my house whenever you need me to call on you
At any time baby that you need love
And a little of that understanding too
Feel free love to call on me love cause I'm gonna call on you
I'll be there most any time of day call on me
To see you baby in the same old loving way call on me
If in the night you call and I'm away
Leave a little note baby and I'll be there when you say
call on me
I'm so lonely love when you're way call on me
And if I should ever call on you I want you to call on me always
I hope your love will always be so true

You call on me babe and I'm gonna call on you (repeat)
Call on me babe call on me girl
Don't you know I'm down on my knees baby baby please
Call on me oven on baby.....

Too Much Time (XXIX)

[Chorus:] I got too much time, too much time
I got too much time to be without love

In my life I've got a deep devotion
Wide as the sky and deep as the ocean
Every war that's waged makes me cry
Every bird that goes by gets me high

[Spoken: Sometimes when it's late and I'm a little bit hungry I heat
up some old stale beans, open up a can of sardines, eat crackers and
dreams of somebody to cook for me.]

[Repeat chorus, verse and chorus]

Sheriff of Hong Kong (XXX)

She always shows up when I'm up
But she never shows up when I'm down
But she's under arrest
'cause I might guess
The Sheriff of Hong Kong
Then she goes up in a flash
I bite the end of her sash
Then I'm long gone
To Hong Kong Kong

She never makes a taste mistake
She's the Sheriff of Hong Kong
Now I'm the Sheriff of Hong Kong
Now she's the Sheriff of Hong Kong
Long gone gone
To Hong Kong Kong

Whoa I'm long gone
To Hong Kong Kong

Long gone gone
To Hong Kong Kong
Ad hu
And uh zing hu
I don't know who I am
Do you?
Ohhh ahhh oooh

There's a string and bat dangle
Black and white bat and cat panda
And uh
She's the Sheriff of Hong Kong
And uh
Ad hu
And uh zing hu
I don't know who I am
Do youuuu?

Now she's the Sheriff of Hong Kong gone
I bite the end of her sash
And she's off in a flash
And we're long gone gone
To Hong Kong Kong

There's a string and bat dangle
Black and white bat and cat panda
And uh
She's the Sheriff of Hong Kong and uh
Ad hu
And uh zing hu
Whoa-ohhhh ohhh ohhh

wai ni sha yeh
wai ni sha yeh
she say
ohhh - ohh

Ad hu
Zing hu
wai ni sha yeh
wai ni sha yeh
ohhh
Ad hu
Zing hu
She's the Sheriff of Hong Kong
Zo hu
Zing hu
Aah ohhh
Aaaah oh