

The Love Song

Echoes of Duende

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I wrote this essay after a failed love attempt. I had for a year or so been head over heels in love with a woman, and told myself stories about who she was to me, and who I hoped to be to her, but when I finally found the courage to tell her, our stories did not line up. Music has always been my most faithful weapon against life's greatest foes, anxiety and boredom. In this situation too, music was my refuge. To paraphrase Maya Angelou, I could crawl into the space between the notes and curl my back against the ache of heartbreak. By some winding path, this led me to Federico García Lorca's brilliant lecture "Juego y teoría del duende" and Nick Cave's equally brilliant lecture "The Secret Life of the Love Song." Those lectures taught me something about myself and what is inside me, about what I want and what I fear, and this essay is my absorption of those thoughts.

It happened to me a few months before my thirty-first birthday. The autumn had unfolded as most autumns before it, but at the same pace as the autumn leaves were falling from the trees, I too was becoming drained, as if each leaf carried away a piece of my strength. I suffered from nausea and dizziness; I had shortness of breath and was unable to concentrate. These are common symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning, but in my case the problem turned out to be much bigger, and far more serious, than just the lack of oxygen. I was in love and, as is well known, there is no well-known treatment for that.

This was the first time I suffered from this insufferable condition. It is said that those in love have been struck by an arrow from the bow of Cupid, though I would fiercely argue that a stone from David's sling is a far more fitting description of the experience. Whatever it was that had struck me, it was as if that something had gotten hold of my heart and kept my soul and my senses apart. It was all too strange and strong, and I was full of foolish song. Of course I stole these lines from Gene Pitney's *Something's Gotten Hold of My Heart* and Chet Baker's *I've Never Been In Love Before*, but I think they sum up pretty well both the sensational and confusing state I was in.

It is a little bit curious, these tendencies of ours to seek art in times of confusion and despair. For I guess most people do not spend a lot of time wondering or

pondering about art in the day to day trenches of their existence. But in those moments where life feels like an unnavigable maze and we are desperate to make sense of it all, then it is, as the American actor Ethan Hawke says, that art is no longer a luxury, it is actually sustenance. We need it.

In his brilliant lecture *Juego y teoría del duende*, the Andalusian poet Federico García Lorca attempts to shed some light on inexplicable allure that certain works of art holds over the human mind and body. “All the arts are capable of *duende*,” he says, that “mysterious force that everyone feels and no philosopher has explained.” The force that Lorca speaks of is the unconscious emotional reaction to artistic expressions, such as the sensation of frisson or the shedding of a tear, that which allows us to absorb art the same way a sponge absorbs water. We find it in everything that possesses true sadness, in all those things that have what the Romani flamenco singer Manuel Torre calls dark sounds. “Those dark sounds are the mystery,” says Lorca, they are “the roots that cling to the mire that we all know, that we all ignore, but from which comes the very substance of art.”

All love songs must contain duende. For the love song is a sad song. It can never be truly happy because it first has to embrace the potential for pain. Nick Cave makes this point in his wonderful lecture *The Secret Life of a Love Song*. Those songs that claim to speak of love without having in their lines as much as single sigh or an ache cannot be trusted, he says, “for just as goodness cannot be trusted unless it has breathed the same air as evil... so within the fabric of the Love Song, within its melody, its lyric, one must sense an acknowledgement of its capacity for suffering.”

In his lecture, Nick Cave praises Lou Reed’s melancholic masterpiece *Perfect Day* as a song deserving of the noble title of a Love Song. In near diary form, Reed goes through all the events that together make up a perfect day. He and his lover drink sangria in the park, feed animals in the zoo, go to the movies, and then they go home together. It is a day that resonates with anyone with a pulse, and for a verse and a half it appears as a nostalgic, and albeit a little sentimental, depiction of a lovely day. But this picture is torn away by the lines that are lurking darkly at the end of the second verse. “*You made me forget about myself*,” Lou nearly whispers; “*I thought I was someone else, someone good*.” It is a real lyrical gut-punch he delivers here, the great Lou Reed. Not only do these lines ache with failure and shame, but they also express the natural desire not only to be loved, but also to be lovable.

Of course Nick Cave himself has also devoted much of his own artistic life to this particular genre of songwriting. In his remarkable song *Into My Arms*, he

tells the story of a non-believer (“*I don’t believe in an interventionist God*”) who is so hopelessly lost that he has to turn to God to be able to express himself, for he does not know what else to do but to hope that there are some benevolent force that can bring him and his lover back together (“*And if He felt He had to direct you/ Then direct you into my arms*”). This is clearly logical nonsense, but as Nick Cave has said many times, the love song should echo love itself, and love is, after all, a form of madness. *Into My Arms* is a song about lost love and the unquenchable longing that it leaves in its wake, but there is a ray of light in the sadness, a few sparks of optimism in the last verse: “*But I believe in Love/ And I know that you do too/ And I believe in some kind of path/ That we can walk down, me and you.*”

It is impossible to speak of duende without mentioning Leonard Cohen. Indeed, one of his most celebrated love songs, *Hallelujah*, is largely about failed and painful relationships. The song makes references to the biblical stories of David and Bathsheba as well as Samson and Delilah and in so doing it becomes a song about both betraying and being betrayed in the name of love. But Cohen presents the idea that these failed and painful relationships are neither less true nor less holy than successful ones. Beauty, he says, exists in real emotions, regardless of whether it is “*a broken or a holy hallelujah.*” And this is also the way he chooses to end his song. In a song that largely depicts the agonies and unspeakable pains of love, Cohen finishes by saying that even though it all went wrong, he is willing to take the risk and go through it all again to give love another chance. And I think there is something infinitely beautiful about just that.

The American poet Robert Frost wrote, in a characteristically short essay titled *The Figure a Poem Makes*, that a poem “begins in delight and ends in wisdom.” I suspect that something of the same is true for music. When I look back at the songs that I have repeatedly sought out and listened to, songs that one might say have followed me or been my good companions, I would say that almost without exception it was the melody that captured me, but it is the lyrics that have kept me captive. These are songs that resonate with what Nick Cave superbly calls the “susurrations of sorrow” and the “tintinnabulation of grief.” We are all alone, we are all stumbling in the dark with our thoughts and our feelings and our emotions, but then you hear a song or you read a book or you see a painting, and you realize that you are not so alone in the dark after all. You realize, as the American author James Baldwin poignantly put it in an interview with *LIFE* magazine, that the things that tormented you the most are the very things that connect you with all the people who are alive, or who has ever lived. This is why art is important.

The love song, then, is a plant; not a flame. Like the dandelion seed disperses

with the wind, so too do the darks sounds of Manuel Torre float through our ears in search for fertile ground in our hearts, where they can sprout and break through our minds like the dandelion breaks through asphalt. Its roots is the inexplicable longing that dwells in us all, that which in Portuguese is called *saudade* and in Romanian is called *dor*, and the desire to be transported from the darkness and into the light, as if Orpheus descended into the underworld for us and never turned around. This is life for most of us. Everyone is sad. But that is okay. I am happy to be sad. I will stand tall with the trees and wait for the spring.