“Measure me in metered lines”: Unreliable Narration and the Hermeneutics of Narrative Identity in Contemporary ‘Indie’ Song Lyrics

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Abstract

In the interest of exploring the hermeneutics of narrative identity in popular song lyrics, that is, the textual process by which a song's narrator imparts their story to the listener, this thesis examines a specific generic and temporal group of 'narrative' song lyrics against the branch of narrative theory relating to unreliable narration. Theories of unreliable narration have been selected as this study's key theoretical framework both because the area is central to contemporary literary studies (Nünning 2005: 2), and because, like song lyrics themselves, theories of unreliable narration problematize the notion of a unidirectional flow of meaning from the speaker/implied author to the reader/listener. Thoughtful, well-researched, highly literate (and often literary) lyrics are a central facet of the "indie music" genre's aesthetic. In this thesis I will therefore primarily focus on two of the indie music scene's most critically lauded lyricists, Colin Meloy of American indie-prog-rock band The Decemberists and John K. Samson of Canadian indie-folk-punk band The Weakerthans. Both Meloy and Samson's lyrics, I suggest, not only withstand such close critical scrutiny, but actually invite it. Demanding (and, arguably, enforcing) a new contract with the listener, Meloy and Samson's lyrics are representative of a larger shift in what an 'ideal' audience looks like in indie music, from casual listeners to an active (Schafer; Nancy), practiced, and critical audience. Engaging with a range of literary theoretical and musicological texts, the broad intentions of this project are to explore the formal complexities of first-person narration in contemporary indie song lyrics and to simultaneously diversify the potential scope for the application of theories of unreliable narration.

Résumé en français

“Measure me in metered lines”: Narration non-fiable et les herméneutes d’identité narrative dans les paroles de chansons ‘Indie’ contemporaines

Dans l’intérêt d’explorer les herméneutes d’identité narrative dans les paroles de chansons populaires, c’est-à-dire le procès textuel par lequel le narrateur d’une chanson partage leur histoire avec l’auditeur, cette thèse examine un groupe de paroles narratives d’une convention de genre et de temporalité particulière, à l’encontre de théorie établie concernant la narration non-fiable. Des théories de narration non-fiable ont été sélectionnées en tant que cadre théorique principal, car ce domaine est central aux études de littérature contemporaine (Nünning 2005 :2) et car, comme les paroles elles-mêmes, les théories de narration non-fiable rendent problématique l’idée de flux unidirectionnel du message transmis par l’orateur/l’auteur impliqué au lecteur/auditeur. Les paroles réfléchies, soutenues par de la recherche et littéraires sont primordiales à l’esthète du genre musical indie. Donc, cette thèse ce concentre principalement sur deux des auteurs lyriques les plus célébrés de la scène indie : Colin Meloy de The Decemberists, un groupe américain de musique indie-rock-prog et John K. Samson de The Weakerthans, un groupe canadien de musique indie-folk-punk. Je propose que Meloy et Samson font plus qu’endurer l’examen critique minutieux de leur paroles et vont jusqu’à l’inviter. En demandant (et possiblement en l’imposant) un nouveau contrat avec l’auditeur, les paroles de Meloy et Samson sont représentationnelles d’un mouvement par lequel les auditeurs de musique indie « idéaux » se transforment d’écouteurs décontractés en écouteurs actifs (Schafer; Nancy), pratiqués et critiques. Engageant dans une gamme de théorie littéraire et de textes de musicologie, les vastes intentions de ce projet sont l’exploration des complexités formelles des récits à la première personne dans les paroles de musique indie contemporaine et, également, de diversifier l’application des théories de narration non-fiable.

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> "Greet me with banners and balloons, and my hard drive smashed to pieces.
> Nothing left for me to save when I write my master's thesis."
> (John K. Samson, "When I Write My Master's Thesis")

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Introduction

"I don't know how to sing. I can barely play this thing[1]":
Reluctant Indie Rockstars Colin Meloy and John K. Samson

"My name is Leslie Anne Levine" is the opening line of the first song on *Castaways and Cutouts* (2002), the earliest full-length album released by the Portland, Oregon based indie-prog-rock band The Decemberists. The eponymous track is a first person narrative from the perspective of the ghost of a Victorian-era female infant haunting the "parapets" on which she spent the only three hours of her life ("born at nine and dead at noon"). "Leslie Anne Levine" is written and performed by Colin Meloy, The Decemberists' lead singer and lyricist, who sings in a recognizably adult male voice. I argue that this kind of self-reflexive, deliberate juxtaposition between the song's narrator and the singer's own vocal persona (aurally distinct gender, age, etc.) creates a tangible layer of creative insulation between the narrator and the singer that is not present in the majority of popular songs. This thesis will contend that the distinction between self-reflexively fictional plots narrated by fictional characters and the more common, personal-identification based listening process associated with the majority of popular songs is a vital formal difference, entailing several distinct meaning-making mechanisms on the parts of the lyricist, singer, and listener.

Although song lyrics are not synonymous with poetry, and certainly not with novels, critical approaches in literary studies can nonetheless be fruitfully adopted in their study. In the interest of exploring the hermeneutics of narrative identity in popular song lyrics, that is, the textual process by which a song's narrator imparts their story to the listener, I propose to examine a specific generic and temporal group of 'narrative' song lyrics against the branch of

[1] "The Reasons," The Weakerthans (*Reconstruction Site*)

narrative theory relating to unreliable narration. Theories of unreliable narration have been selected as this study's key theoretical framework both because the area is central to contemporary literary studies (Nünning 2005: 2), and because, like song lyrics themselves, theories of unreliable narration problematize the notion of a simple, unidirectional flow of meaning from the speaker/implied author to the reader/listener. This thesis similarly hopes to formally acknowledge the potential of both lyricists and listeners to participate in a co-creation of meaning of a greater complexity than is generally attributed to the song lyric form.

Since "song lyrics" are no more homogenous than "poetry" or "novels" as a generic classification, I will analyze a specific set of song lyrics that, I argue, not only withstand such close critical scrutiny, but actually invite it. Thoughtful, well-researched, highly literate (and often literary) lyrics are a central facet of the contemporary "indie music" genre's aesthetic, indie music becoming "ever more widely adopted as pop music for the 'thoughtful' person—the *sophisticated* boom-boom" (Abebe n.p.). In this thesis I will therefore primarily focus on two of the indie music scene's most critically lauded lyricists; Colin Meloy (as above), and John K. Samson of Canadian folk-punk band The Weakerthans. Using their songs as representative examples of a growing phenomenon, I intend to examine the ways in which Meloy and Samson's songs break from the process of meaning-making established by the bulk of contemporary popular music.

The vast majority of songs found on contemporary "Top 40" lists or radio stations rely heavily on the repetition of easily-parsed, affectively-charged language to establish loosely contrived situations and relationships, where any specific "You" and "I," that is, a "You" and "I" from the listener's own life, may be substituted for the unidentified speaker and second-person addressee in the song (Frith 1978). Meloy and Samson's songs almost uniformly interrupt this

process by the introduction of relatively complex plots, sometimes with multiple characters and spanning a number of years, narrators with names, professions, and distinctive personalities, and situations that are firmly grounded in realities that are unlikely to be confused with the listener's own (for example, Samson's "Plea From A Cat Named Virtute" is quite literally from the perspective of "a cat named Virtute").

Meloy and Samson's songs are also structurally distinct from many of the twentieth century's most familiar character-driven songs, such as The Beatles' "Hey Jude" (1968), The Rolling Stones' "Angie" (1973), or Dolly Parton's "Jolene" (1973). Each of these songs, though addressed to a distinctive, eponymous "You" figure, is voiced by an unidentified "I." Easily conflated with the lyricist (an amalgamation often supported by a biographical reading of the lyrics), the listener's interaction with the amorphous subjectivity of these songs' narrators is barely distinct from songs in which neither the "You" or "I" figure is identified by name. In Meloy and Samson's songs, both the "I" and "You" personae are carefully crafted characters, requiring equal interpretive attention on the part of the listener to unpack. The key to parsing plot and meaning in Meloy and Samson's songs is often found in correctly identifying the profession, gender, age, health, and political affiliations of the song's narrator, most of whom are less immediately declarative of their subjectivity than "Leslie Anne Levine." Many of both Meloy and Samson's songs operate more like self-reflexive character studies of the narrator than of action- or relationship-driven narratives.

Meloy and Samson have been selected as primary examples both because of their critical and (limited) commercial success as lyricists, and because they have numerous other literary credentials. In addition to being a Grammy-nominated lyricist, Meloy is a *New York Times* bestselling novelist, the first two volumes of his young adult epic adventure saga *Wildwood*

Chronicles receiving widespread critical acclaim and multiple literary awards for their "richly satisfying weave of fantasy and reality" (*New York Times Book Review*). Meloy, who has a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Montana, also wrote a memoir about American punk band The Replacement's 1984 album *Let It Be* as part of Bloomsbury Publishing's *33⅓* series. Samson, who has been termed "rock's poet laureate" (Gillmor), is the managing editor and co-founder of Arbeiter Ring Publishing, an independent publishing house in Winnipeg, Manitoba whose mandate has been the dissemination of "a dynamic combination of cultural, fiction, and non-fiction titles with an emphasis on progressive political analysis of contemporary issues" (*ARPbooks.com*) since 1996. Despite identifying as a "frustrated and failed poet" (Fiorentino), Samson's poetry has been published in several Canadian magazines including *Matrix Magazine*, *Geist*, *The Believer*, and *Post-Prairie: An Anthology of New Poetry*. In the past two years, Samson published his first book, *Lyrics & Poems, 1997-2012*, and served as Writer in Residence at the Universities of British Columbia and Manitoba.

Both Meloy and Samson have also adapted and made reference to famous works of literature in their songs. The Decemberists' fourth full-length album, *The Crane Wife*, for example, is structured around two song cycles; "The Island / Come and See," based on *The Tempest*, and "The Crane Wife 1, 2, & 3," modelled on a Japanese folk tale (NPR 2006). "Calamity Song" from The Decemberists' most recent full-length studio album, *The King is Dead*, makes frequent reference to David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest*. The first song on *Fallow,* The Weakerthans' first album, titled "Illustrated Bible Stories for Children," was originally named "Agonistes," the lyrics engaging with both the Biblical and Miltonic versions of the story of Samson. Each of The Weakerthans' albums, as well as several specific songs on

each album, is prefaced by one or two epigraphs in their liner notes, taken from a range of twentieth and twenty-first century poets, novelists, political or philosophical theorists, and obituaries. “Our Retired Explorer (Dines With Michel Foucault in Paris, 1961),” from The Weakerthans’ third album, *Reconstruction Site,* narrates a fictionalized, anthropomorphized battle between the modern and the postmodern, and references a “book by Derrida.”

Both Meloy and Samson have been consistently, specifically praised for their lyrical storytelling in rock and roll criticism. While they are two excellent representatives of the indie genre, however, Meloy and Samson’s lyrics (and music) are also very different from each other. Meloy revels in making archaic, self-consciously overblown language and traditional folk tropes feel decidedly contemporary. David Fricke, a senior editor at *Rolling Stone Magazine*, has said that Meloy “take[s] the storytelling in popular music to a level that is both enjoyable and a bit fantastical, but doesn’t violate the qualities of good storytelling...where Lou Reed was inspired by William Boroughs, Colin’s stories can be more like *[The] Canterbury Tales*” (quoted by Schweber n.p.). Where Meloy is verbose, and even occasionally epic, in the scale of his lyrics and music, Samson quietly gives voice to a cast of aestheticized “weak” characters that sing about their lives in small town Prairie Canada over punk music. Samson prizes the “precise and particular” (Epitaph) in his writing, packing an incredible amount of action, affect, and observations into concise lyrics. As novelist and professor of Creative Writing Steven Galloway has cogently observed, despite their brief framework, “any one of [Samson’s] songs contains as much humanity and emotional resonance as a whole novel” (Epitaph).

As suggested by Meloy and Samson both being considered indie musicians, indie music, despite having become a ubiquitous generic classification in the western music scene in the past decade, is by nature difficult to define. In his article “The Decade in Indie,” Nitsuh Abebe, indie

columnist for *Pitchfork Magazine*, suggests that "'indie' has always been a baggy, contingent word," and configures the genre as a "loose umbrella." In fact, rather than a specific genre, the idea of indie is perhaps more realistically just that – an *idea* – the notion that "anyone can start a band…you [don't] have to wait for a big record company to discover you" (Abebe "Twee" 1). As the idea that one can record and disseminate one's literal garage band music has spread, a paradoxical "stigma of popularity" has become one of the dominant traits of the indie genre. Faced with the massive proliferation of music that accompanies the ability of "kids, in their basements and bedrooms" (Abebe "Twee" 1) to produce and release their own tracks, Abebe suggests that, "More and more, we define ourselves – or pride ourselves, or at least 'express' ourselves – via our skills in picking interesting things out of [a] cloud of options" ("Decade").

In other words, for music to be 'cool' in the indie world, it must retain a cachet of obscurity and, perhaps, of intellectualism – in the past decade, those who play and listen to indie music have arguably discovered that they must no longer launch "a defense against being weird, but a defense against being trendy" (Abebe "Decade"). Somewhat counter-intuitively, then, for a band to be truly 'indie cool,' it must also be largely undiscovered. Much like the progenitors of the indie scene that decided early on to "devote themselves to everything unfashionable about the indie pop aesthetic" (Abebe "Twee" 2), indie music has become the soundtrack for the contemporary 'hipster' youth counter-culture rejection of everything that falls under the popular ("popular" here being synonymous with the always-pejorative "mainstream") definition of "cool."

Meloy and Samson both present themselves on stage and in their interviews as relatively low-status, self-deprecatingly 'uncool' figures, gently baffled by the amount of critical attention paid to their writing. Meloy referred to The Decemberists' 2009 album *The Hazards of Love*, for

example, which Spin Magazine termed "a hazardous bet that yields spectacular sparks" (Modell n.p.), as "kind of weird and not very interesting" (Robinson n.p.). Meloy has also played his song "Dracula's Daughter," which he repeatedly refers to as "the worst song I ever wrote...it's bad to the core, you know right away...makes one want to retire and become a college professor or something" ("Dracula's Daughter [Live]") at almost every live show in the past several years (*setlist.fm*). *Paste Magazine* asserted that The Weakerthans' breakout album *Reconstruction Site* would, "If such a prize existed...be the leading candidate for this year's Punk Pulitzer" (Whitman n.p.). Samson, however, with characteristic self-effacement, has said on several occasions that considers himself "a frustrated and failed poet" (Fiorentino) and "a thwarted fiction writer…anything longer than a two-and-a-half-minute pop song, and my mind and prose begin to wander. I include too much in what I'm trying to say about something" (Ali). Samson has also jokingly referred to his "utilitarian" musicianship in multiple interviews and live shows, always quick to shift praise for The Weakerthans' musical ingenuity to his bandmates. Both writers' reluctant minor stardom and continued disregard of musical trends has, in a typically paradoxical narrative of indie success, led to Meloy and Samson accruing cult-like followings in both the press and listening public.

Meloy and Samson's hesitance to embody anything resembling the stereotypical "rockstar" persona underscores the ethos of the decentered, non-self-orientated narratives that both lyricists pen. Songs written from the perspective of marginal, 'weak,' and even fantastical characters have very little in common with songs from the perspective of the high-status, self-aggrandizing speakers that have become the norm in contemporary pop music. Miley Cyrus' wildly popular summer 2013 single "We Can't Stop," for example, includes the following lines in its chorus: "We run things, things don't run we / Don't take nothing from nobody." Meloy and

Samson's narrators, by comparison, warble lines such as "I guess I'm something of a n'er-do-well, even though that's something I could never do well" ("Oceanside") and "I don't know how to sing. I can barely play this thing" ("The Reasons") respectively. The degree of sheer epistemological uncertainty in Meloy and Samson's lyrics sets them apart in tone from the majority of contemporary popular songs, especially since this precarity is usually voiced by characters that inadvertently expose their uncertainties in the course of their narration.

With the word directly in the name of his band, Samson's linked conceptions of "weakness" and uncertainty are central to his reluctance to write in a confessional lyrical mode. "Weakness" is the only unifying, overarching theme in Samson's lyrics that the listener *must* detect and codify in order to encounter his writing in a meaningful fashion. Whether or not it aligns with Samson's understanding of the term, listeners are called upon to formulate and apply a definition of "weakness" to their listening and interpretive experience. Listening to a band called "The Weakerthans" is a self-reflexive, linguistically politicized act – in other words, listening to a band that is by their very name "weaker-than" any noun that one chooses to place in a sentence with it is in some ways a "weak" act in and of itself. Samson's lyrics are not, however, *about* weakness, nor are they "weak" in terms of technique. Most of The Weakerthans' music would be difficult to term *generically* weak, verging more on punk rock than quiet folk.

"Weakness" must therefore, like many concepts in Samson's writing, be understood first and foremost as a political term, finding its origins in both philosophy and poetry. Either unattributed or coincidentally, Samson's formulation of weakness both critiques and converses with Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo's theory of "weak thought." Vattimo "affirms incompleteness in philosophy and embraces the principle that a plurality of views may be adopted with respect to any position" (Hart). Samson's far left-leaning personal politics echo this

principal of plurality, emphasizing the weakness of the single voice as compared to the collective. In his song "Pamphleteer," Samson tweaks a line of "Solidarity Forever," Ralph Chaplin's famous 1915 union anthem: "Sing, 'Oh what force on earth could be weaker than the feeble strength of one' like me remembering the way it could have been." Sure of only "a certain search for certainty" ("Letter of Resignation"), Samson's narrators constantly, fruitlessly seek to attain even a fraction of the self-assurance that is the hallmark of most speakers in contemporary popular songs.

Meloy's reluctance to write from the authoritative, privileged position of the "lyric I" takes a more fantastical shape than Samson's quiet narratives of marginalization. Meloy's tongue-in-cheek juxtapositions of grand narrative tropes against low status narrators takes the form of everything from a revenge ballad from the perspective of a mariner encased in the "belly of a whale" ("The Mariner's Revenge Song") to an unconsciously pitiful plea for applause from an actor in "I Was Meant for the Stage." The Decemberists as a band are a testament to the fact that the indie genre now has much less to do with being an "inpedendent," that is, unsigned, artist, than it does with compliance to a quirky, laissez-faire aesthetic. With their unique, and occasionally bizarre, mix of instrumentation, Meloy's distinctive nasal singing voice, and the band's wryly deadpan live stage theatrics, The Decemberists have become a mainstay of hipster music fans looking for an alternative to alternative music, despite having signed to Capitol, a major label, in 2006. As Meloy has stated, the band has been careful to avoid "major-label sellout-itis" (Hogan n.p.). Meloy is a master of gently skeptical, nuanced irony, with even his most unrealistic narrators (ghosts, French lengionnaires, bagmen, magical forest Queens, etc.) feeling tangibly human in their seeming unawareness of their own 'tells.' In other words, while Meloy's characters often confidently assert brash certitude, they undercut their own status in

moments of unintentional unreliability. The more emphatically phrased and delivered the line, the more Meloy seems to be sharing an inside joke with the listener – one that flies entirely over the head of the narrator.

Marking a notable formal and generational shift, Meloy and Samson, like many of their millennial indie-folk-rock contemporaries, are writing songs in which the lyrics take precedence over the music in both volume and, generally, in complexity. Meloy and Samson rarely use lyrical repetition, Samson especially eschewing lyrical choruses, and dip heavily into the poet's toolbox of complex similes, metaphors, and wordplay. Rather than the vague "I" and "You" of standard confessional songs, Meloy and Samson's songs are both voiced by and addressed to characters that are generally identified either by name or by their non-musical professions (e.g. the eponymous bagman in The Decemberists' "The Bagman's Gambit" and the bus driver in The Weakerthans' "Civil Twilight"). I term these figures "characters" rather than the vague personae more commonly found in pop songs largely because, even when not named, these figures are not merely described in terms of their affects. The characters in Meloy and Samson's songs function as more than loosely anthropomorphized placeholders for affect and listener-identification. When a character *acts* rather than simply *feels,* a narrative begins to emerge. As explicated in Chapter One of this thesis, the distinction between action and affect will serve as my criteria for terming a song "narrative," which in turn qualifies the song's narrator for analysis using theories of unreliable narration.

The potential for a narrator to be "unreliable" has been widely accepted since Wayne C. Booth first proposed the term in his seminal *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), phrased succinctly in his oft-quoted line: "I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does

not" (158–9). Despite the widespread use of the phrase "unreliable narrator," in recent years there has been an increasing dissension in the scholarly ranks over who or what exactly constitutes an "unreliable narrator," and, especially, over the importance (and identity) of the "implied author." Two dominant critical schools have emerged out of the unreliable narration debate; scholars that have continued to participate in the Boothian rhetorical mode of analysis, which privileges comparative analyses between the implied author and the narrator (e.g. Phelan and Martin 1999), and those that have participated in what has been termed the constructivist or cognitive turn (Nünning 2005: 2), characterized by a disavowal of the centrality of the "implied author" and an emphasis on the importance of readers' response(s) (e.g. Rabinowitz 1977; Nünning 2005; Zerwick 2001).

Critics have further problematized the issue by interrogating the impact of readers' and (implied) authors' moral and literary epistemologies on terming a narrator "unreliable" (e.g. Riggan 1981), the potential for textual inconsistencies to alert readers to a narrator's unreliability (e.g. Culler 1975; Riggan 1981), and the differences between a factually inconsistent or fallible narrator and an untrustworthy narrator whose "commentary and interpretations do not accord with conventional notions of sound judgment" (Nünning 4) (e.g. Lanser 1981; Olson 2003). Several critics have developed typologies of unreliable narration, such as Phelan and Martin's six types of unreliability, including "underreporting and misreporting, underregarding and misregarding (or misevaluating), underreading and misreading" (1999) and Riggan's four characterizations of unreliable narrators; "pícaros, madmen, naïfs, and clowns," in his 1981 book of the same name. Theresa Heyd provides a particularly comprehensive and oft-cited "pragmatic" typology of unreliable narration based on determining the narrator's degree of *intentional* unreliability (2006; 2011) that will provide the basis of a theoretical framework for

this paper. Heyd's loosely tripartite typology of unreliable narration has been adopted here (with a few additions) because it embodies the most cogent synthesis of prior unreliable narration theories with persuasive new work on some sociolinguistic aspects of unreliable narration that I have thus far encountered.

A continually evolving line of criticism, the interrogation of unreliable narration has become a central branch of narrative inquiry in studies of the novel (Yacobi 1981: 113), and has begun to extend into the fields of poetry and film criticism (e.g. Currie 1995). Although rock and roll critics have identified unreliable narrators in the lyrics of artists ranging from Randy Newman (Hermes; Negus) to Morrissey (Lee) to Okkervil River (Deusner), none have explored the (literary) theoretical complexities of doing so. Critics like David Nicholls, Keith Negus, and Jean-Jacques Nattiez have been at the forefront of an expanding branch of musicology discussing the roles of authorship and narrativity in music (verbal and non-verbal). While these critics ably defend the usefulness of such analyses, the writers tend to be primarily musicologists rather than literary scholars. Offshoots of narrative theory, therefore, such as theories of unreliable narration, have thus far remained largely unexplored in a musical/lyrical context. Following Ansgar Nünning's observation that "since the generic scope of unreliable narration has as yet neither been properly defined nor even gauged, unreliability across different genres, media, and disciplines...deserves more attention than it has hitherto been given" (2005: 12), this thesis will therefore apply theories of unreliable narration to song lyrics with the joint intentions of fleshing out some of the formal permutations of the theory and gesturing towards a potential new mode of analysis for popular music scholars interested in lyrical narratives.

While, as I will display in the third chapter of this study, it is possible to evaluate unreliable narrators in song lyrics in much the same way one might evaluate an unreliable

narrator in a novel or poem, the song lyric form also makes possible several unique kinds of narrative unreliability. These unique narrative traits include the presence of a gendered singing voice, added musical affect, the perennial problem of an unidentified 'lyric I' and equally amorphous 'you' involved in the standard lyrical second-person address, and the characteristically strong empathy most listeners feel for the narrators of their favourite songs (often, as above, to the point of an imagined amalgamation on the part of the listener between themselves and the "I" or "You" in the song [Frith 1978]).

Breaking from standard pop song writing practices, Meloy and Samson's lyrics demand (and, arguably, enforce) a new contract with the listener, their 'ideal' audience shifting away from the casual listener. In other words, when a song's characters are active participants in a plot rather than simply vehicles for emotion, the listener is similarly forced into being an active participant in parsing the song's meaning (this theory expands upon Jean-Luc Nancy's description of the "active listener" [2007]). The vast majority of songs in the Decemberists' and Weakerthans' canons were not written for the radio (often flouting radio standards in terms of length), and Meloy's and Samson's singing voices are perhaps most flatteringly described as 'unique.' In order to access these songs on a meaningful, interpretive level, the listener must encounter the lyrics multiple times, thoughtfully consider them, and perhaps even do some research – a process similar to the attentive reader's interaction with a poem, but for the distinctly aural/musical setting of song lyrics. As evidenced by both lyricists' critical and popular cult-followings, an increasing number of listeners are more than willing to spend the time and mental energy required to parse meaning from Meloy and Samson's lyrics. Rather than discuss details about the lyricists' personal lives, for example, internet fora devoted to Meloy and

Samson often painstakingly reconstruct the historical, political, and literary references encoded in their songs (see entries on Meloy and Samson on SongMeanings.com and RapGenius.com).

For this project, both Meloy and Samson's relatively concise lyrical canons (six and five full-length albums, respectively) will serve as textual evidence, since threads of both narrativity and unreliable narration weave through both artists' oeuvres. The Decemberists' third studio album, *Picaresque* (2005), and The Weakerthans' fourth, *Reunion Tour* (2007), for example, both operate like collections of short stories voiced by diverse casts of characters. The dramatis personae on *Picaresque* embody, and occasionally defy, their titular definition as "roguish and dishonest" (OED), ranging from the wandering ghost of "Eli, the Barrow Boy" to the vengeful mariner speaking from within a "belly of a whale" in "The Mariner's Revenge Song." Samson gives voice to eleven separate fictional and fictionalized historical characters on *Reunion Tour*, including "Virtute the Cat," David Reimer (a man who became the focus of several doctors' "queer experiment" in the late twentieth century when he was raised as a girl instead of a boy), and two unnamed fictional narrators in the ekphrastic "Sun in an Empty Room" and "Night Windows," both based on Edward Hopper paintings. The Decemberists' *The Hazards of Love* (2009), is a full-length rock opera on which every male character is voiced by Meloy's distinctive nasal tones, while Samson's solo album *Provincial* (2012), is comprised of twelve site-specific, largely fictional tales told from the perspectives of characters living along four highways in Manitoba. Both lyricists are quintessential storytellers, evidenced equally in their music and their live stage banter, interviews, and additional literary pursuits.

This thesis will necessarily rely on close readings, in order to answer the question of how (unreliable) narration in song lyrics *works*. Considering only songs in which the characters *act* rather than simply *feel*, I will spend less time exhaustively interpreting and reproducing the

narratives of these songs, and more on examining how the narrator relays his or her story, and how their delivery (primarily textual, rather than in terms of vocal/musical performance) affects the listener's ability to parse character, plot, and affect. Identifying these song's speakers as fictional narrators rather than eliding them with the singer allows for the degree of removal necessary to then consider whether or not these narrators are "reliable." Although close readings will focus first and foremost on song lyrics as texts, music, performance, and reception are inextricable aspects of the form and must also be given due consideration. Questions of performance and musical accompaniment are key to identifying the unique ways narratives, reliable and otherwise, function in the song lyric form. To answer these questions, I will therefore occasionally draw from a mixture of rock and roll criticism and theories of musical performance and reception. Taken broadly, the intention of this project is to both explore the formal complexities of first-person narration in contemporary (indie) song lyrics, and simultaneously diversify the potential scope for the application of theories of unreliable narration.

Chapter One

"Can One Speak of Narrativity in [Popular] Music?":

(Multi-)Mediating Lyrical Narratives

i. "Your Song": Musical Authorship and Ownership

While the potential for speakers to be considered as narrators has been well established in similar studies of poetry, fiction, and film, can the "I" in a song ever be accurately termed a narrator? If so, can lyrical narrators be sufficiently well developed, and their usually brief narratives complex enough, to justify interrogating their narrative delivery against theories of unreliable narration? The first critical path, at least, has been lightly trodden, with critics most notably including Jean-Jacques Nattiez, David Nicholls, and Keith Negus beginning to explore the intersection(s) between music and narrativity. In his seminal 1990 article "Can One Speak of Narrativity in Music?," Nattiez focuses almost entirely on non-verbal music, and, somewhat dourly, concludes that one cannot, in fact, speak of narrativity in music. While he acknowledges the tendency on the part of the listener to ascribe a narrative to seemingly 'dramatic' pieces of music, Nattiez contends that a piece of music cannot in and of itself embody a narrative. Literary narratives are, in Nattiez's estimation, "invention, lying," therefore rendering music forever separate from narrativity because "music does not lie...it is not within the semiological possibilities of music to link a subject and a predicate" (244). Any narrative that a listener may detect in a piece of instrumental music is an "ontological illusion" (Nattiez 245) elicited by the 'suggestion' of narrative, rather than an independently existing narrative.

Nattiez's assertion that narrative in non-verbal music is an extra-musical, fancifully extrapolated construction on the part of the listener is in line with many of the prevailing

opinions of narratives (or the lack thereof) in popular songs. While a listener might extrapolate from a loosely contrived situation peopled by stock characters in a popular song to form a narrative, many would argue that narratives are not independently preexisting in the majority of pop songs. In his article "Narrative, Interpretation, and the Popular Song" (2012), Keith Negus notes the conspicuous absence of the popular song, which he terms "one of the most pervasive narrative forms that people encounter in their daily lives," in "the vast literature on narrative" (368). Instead of crediting the song lyric form with the ability to host narratives, many theorists, like Nattiez, would consider the detection of a lyrical narrative to be an "ontological illusion" on the part of the listener. The most common form of narrative overlay listeners participate in, most would intuitively agree, is the subtle manipulation of lyrics listeners stage in order to recast themselves and/or their loved ones as the song's personae. As observed by Negus in his earlier article "Authorship in Popular Song" (2011), "Interviews with songwriters, and scholarly studies, make it clear that songs are written and sung with an awareness that listeners often identify with the 'you' in phrases such as 'I love you' or 'you really got me' (she/he is singing to me)" (617).

The listening practice of exerting symbolic ownership over a song has, in fact, arguably come to be understood as one of popular music's main appeals, causing phrases such as "our song" to enter common parlance to the extent that they have become self-reflexive musical tropes. Taylor Swift and Matchbox Twenty, for example, both have songs titled "Our Song," in which they respectively play with the positive and negative emotions that can be attached to the symbolic shared ownership of a song. Swift's track (2007) revolves around the central conceit of the speaker and her significant other composing a metaphorical song out of elements of their life together, the speaker praying every night before she "said Amen, / Asking God if he could play it again." Matchbox Twenty's "Our Song" (2013) functions at an additional level of meta-

musicality, offering the song the speaker is currently singing up as a potential candidate for "our song": "I'm gonna set things right again / And I won't let 'em go wrong / This can be our song." In Bruno Mars' "When I Was Your Man" (2012), the speaker bemoans how listening experiences can change when there is a shift in the listener's circumstances: "Our song on the radio but it don't sound the same." The lyrical dedication of a song to a specific, yet (strategically?) unnamed, person has similarly become both a listening and lyrical composition standby, with songs like "Your Song" (Elton John, 1970), "A Song for You" (originally by Leon Russell [1971], rerecorded over fifty times by artists ranging from Ray Charles to Christina Aguilera), and Carly Simon's "You're So Vain" (1972 – "I bet you think this song is about you") explicitly stating the meta-musical relationship between the lyrical speaker and addressee that arguably exists in the majority of popular music texts.

ii. "The Mixed Tape": Affect and Authenticity

The notion that a song might act as an emotional proxy for the listener has been similarly adopted as a given in popular culture. The practice of presenting the object of one's affections with a mixed tape, or mixtape, is based upon the ever-popular notion that music is capable of expressing one's emotions far more eloquently than one would ever be able to do oneself. Geoffrey O'Brien, poet, essayist, and editor-in-chief of *Library of America*, has called the mixtape "the most widely practiced American art form" ("BurnLists" n.p.). Also having become a meta-trope in multiple songs since the practice of creating mixtapes gained popular traction in the early 1980s, the sense of personal ownership that one can feel for the songs one arranges on a mixtape with an agenda (especially a romantic agenda) is clearly expressed in millennial American rock band Jack's Mannequin's first single, "The Mixed Tape" (2005). The song's chorus blurs the line between the speaker's emotions, expressed through the words and music he

is currently singing, and his description of the content of the mixed tape he is making for a former lover:

> As I'm swimming through the stereo
>
> I'm writing you a symphony of sound...
>
> As I rearrange the songs again,
>
> This mix could burn a hole in anyone,
>
> But it was you I was thinking of.
>
> (Jack's Mannequin, "The Mixed Tape")

The speaker is configured as singing, writing, and arranging simultaneously, all with the purpose of "burning a hole" in his former lover. The song ends with a metaphorical amalgamation of the current song and the mixed tape, once again complicating notions of musical authorship: "this is my mixed tape for her. / It's like I wrote every note / with my own fingers" ("The Mixed Tape").

Popular American television musical comedy-drama *Glee*, among others of its kind, is based around the reliable structure of dramatic interactions punctuated by characters singing lyrically topical songs underscoring or elaborating upon these interactions. Unlike the musical theatre genre that the series in many ways resembles, the songs sung by characters on *Glee* in order to express their emotions (often to each other) are not written specifically for them, but are instead versions of popular songs selected for their lyrical appropriateness. Functioning therefore as a kind of metaphorical mixtape, with individual episodes' tracklists usually organized around a loose theme, the complicated relationships listeners enter into with song lyrics is quite literally dramatized. Characters repeatedly urge one another to sing affectively-appropriate songs instead of attempting to express emotions though their own words, privileging interpretation, whether it be on the part of the singer or the listener, over authorship.

Centrally to the fluidity allowed, and even expected, in listeners' interpretations of popular songs, is an equally amorphous definition of authorship. Though performance continues to be conflated with symbolic authorship in both casual fan discussions and the growing critical corpus on popular songs lyrics, the fact that many (perhaps even most) songs one hears on Top 40 radio stations are composed by teams of writers and producers rather than by an artistically isolated singer is also relatively common knowledge. In order for a pop song to feel "authentic" in terms of its affect, therefore, it would seem that the singer need only amply reflect the lyrics' emotions in their vocal delivery. Negus ("Authorship and Popular Song") emphasizes the centrality of the author figure in pop song criticism, whether it be scholarly or more casual. Negus aptly acknowledges that the concept of "authorship" in popular music, however, is a great deal more complicated than it is almost any other literary genre. Negus credits the ready availability of information about musicians' compositional practices (though broadcast media and the internet [607]) with keeping the author "a central figure both as creative originator and authority" (607) in the popular imagination, but notes that the identity of the *lyricist* usually has very little to do with what is commonly understood as the "author" in popular songs. In other words, to the majority of listeners, the identity of the composer and/or lyricist is less central to interpretation than the identity of the singer/performer.

Negus cites a review in the *Los Angeles Times* of Rihanna's 2009 album *Rated R* in which the author praises the album as "a complex and fascinating portrait of a young woman's emotional process after enduring abuse...a portrait of lived experience" (Powers, qtd. Negus 619). *Rated R* was, in fact, composed for Rihanna by "a team of male writers" (Negus 619). Negus blames the review's elision of Rihanna with the affect she is expressing on the author's "Romantic belief in the expressivity of a singer able to channel authentic emotions into the

songs" (619). While this belief may well be romantic, I would hesitate to assign it a capital R "Romantic," which comes with connotations of a dated naiveté – in fact, I would contend that there is overwhelming evidence that the majority of the contemporary listening public shares in the sentiment. Reality singing television competitions like *American Idol, X Factor,* and *The Voice* repeatedly praise a singer's ability to convincingly emote in accordance with the content of the song they are singing. In the short packages aired just before each singer's performance, an effort is almost invariably made to connect the singer's personal life with the lyrical content of the song they are about to sing. If the viewer/listener has just watched a segment on the contestant's struggle to overcome childhood bullying, they will be hard pressed not to detect the lyrical relevance of competition standbys like Demi Lovato's "Skyscraper" (2011), with lyrics including "Go on and try to tear me down / I will be rising from the ground / Like a skyscraper." The practice of representing a contestant in terms of the adversities they have overcome is partially a bid for voters' sympathy, but, perhaps even more centrally, it is also a deliberate attempt to align the contestant with the ethos of the song they are singing – giving them the authority, if one will pardon the pun, to convincingly perform the lyrics of the song.

iii. "I Will Always Love You": Interpretation/ Performance as Ownership

The centrality of the performative aspects of popular music may at first seem self-evident, as may the practice of encouraging singers to connect aspects of their personal lives to the lyrics they are singing in order to convey a greater emotional authenticity. Considered against the background of a broader artistic spectrum, however, lyrical-content-based performativity takes on a greater theoretical complexity. When performing a song that one did not write oneself, a singer is first called upon to engage in a textual analysis similar to one an actor might undertake in preparation for a role. Bearing striking resemblance to the acting theory revolving

around the central task of defining objectives based on a character's situational awareness (see especially Robert Cohen's *Acting Power* and *Acting One*), the singer must have a solid understanding of the song's speaker's motivations in order to convincingly deliver their (lyrical) lines. Expanding upon this parallel, programs like *American Idol* could therefore be said to promote a kind of musical method acting, based loosely on Konstantin Stanislavski's theory of emotional recall (see Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares*). Paraphrased into musical terms, the use of emotional recall to promote verisimilitude in one's performance would entail recollecting moments from one's own life which inspired a similar set of emotions to those in the song, and using these lingering emotions to give the impression of genuine feeling.

One of the reasons that live music is such an enduringly popular performance medium is closely related to the ability of singers to convincingly emote these 'genuine feelings,' and thereby inspire reciprocal affect in the listener(s). In the very best concerts, there is the distinct sensation that everyone in the space, from the crowd, to the members of the band, to the proverbial sound guy, is engaging in a shared affective experience. The immediate intimacy that one can feel with someone that shares a similar taste in music likewise arguably has less to do with aesthetics than it does with the recognition of a shared affective, metaphysical experience. The singer is, of course, not entirely responsible for creating the affect(s) their song produces, the instrumental arrangement doing a great deal of the work in terms of guiding the audience's (linked) affective and physical responses to music (see Jeanette Bicknell's *Why Music Moves Us*). The singer could instead perhaps be termed an affective curator – audiences generally look toward the singer at a concert, watching them for direct physical (gestural), facial (emotive expressions), and vocal (timbre, tone, grain, volume, etc.) cues about how to feel during a given

song. I suggest that a singer delivering audible lyrics with emotion inconsistent to that implied by the song's speaker is, in fact, just as jarring as affectively discordant music and lyrics.[2]

Delivering vocal emotion consistent with the narrator's or implied author's emotions is additionally complicated when a singer is attempting to cover a preexisting, usually pre-recorded, song in a new or innovative way. While many singers might simply attempt to replicate the affect(s) of an original recording or performance, the singers that most successfully cover other artists' songs are those who present the song in such a way that reflects a newly nuanced reading of the song's lyrical content. Perhaps the most famous cover song of all time, for example, Whitney Houston's 1992 version of Dolly Parton's original 1974 hit "I Will Always Love You," is most notable not for its altered instrumentation, but for its newly dramatic, impassioned vocal delivery. The (bitter)sweetness of Parton's delivery has been historically overshadowed by Houston's visceral emotional intensity to the point that most people associate the song with Houston first, and with Parton as a very distant second, if at all. In recording what has become the definitive version of the song, the authorship of "I Will Always Love You" has, in the public imagination at least, shifted away from Parton and onto Houston.

The word "interpretation" has rarely been more apt than it is in the description of Houston's version of the song – Houston did not simply mime Parton's emotion, but instead offered a new reading, or a new interpretation, of the text of "I Will Always Love You." In Houston's reading, the speaker is experiencing the emotional upheaval the song describes with a great deal more immediacy. Parton's version is tinged with a kind of fond inevitability, making the now iconic opening lines of the song, "If I should stay, / I would only be in your way," feel like a much more mutually amicable parting of lovers that it does when rendered in Houston's

[2] The effects of deliberate juxtapositions between lyrical affect and vocal/musical delivery will be discussed in Chapter Four.

simultaneously plaintive and mildly accusatory, now legendary, acapella intro. It would appear that a greater number of listeners resonated with Houston's highly emotive, dramatic vocal delivery of Parton's original lyrics. Gesturing to the centrality of vocal interpretation (over and above literal authorship) in both the financial and affective marketability of a song, cover versions equal or surpass original recordings with a fair amount of regularity – Birdy's cover of Bon Iver's "Skinny Love," Leona Lewis' version of Snow Patrol's "Run," and Ben Fold's acoustic rendition of Dr. Dre's "Bitches Ain't Shit," for example, having overshadowed the original recordings in fame, if not financial success.

iv. "Cat's in the Cradle": Narrative Resolution

Does a singer, however, have to fully parse the *narrative* of a song in order to empathize sufficiently with the lyrics that they can convincingly express their affect to an audience? While it seems almost inevitable that there be some kind of emotion at play, are narrative elements always present in popular songs? Though they may be entirely unformed, loose situations, I would argue that the basic elements of narrative are present even in nonverbal music. Quoting Claude Lévi-Strauss, Nattiez writes: "It is inconceivable that there should be any musical work that does not start from a problem and tend towards its resolution" (115) – in other words, therefore, every song, no matter how apparently static in its narrative (or lack thereof), has an element of movement similar to that of classic narrative structure (from a problem towards a resolution). Nattiez emphasizes that he is referring to resolution "in a broader sense, consistent with its meaning in musical terminology" (115), which is broadly defined as a shift in a note or chord from dissonance to consonance. The musical terminological definition of "resolution," as elaborated by Roger Kamien, author of one of the most widely studied music theory texts (*Music: An Appreciation*, currently in its tenth edition), does little to distance the term from

narrative theory: “When a resolution is delayed or is accomplished in surprising ways – when the composer plays with our sense of expectation – a feeling of drama or suspense is created” (41). Like any other narrative medium, therefore, music relies on the unfolding of events over time to create a narrative.

That a song is generally only three or four minutes long simply condenses the moments between the establishment of a narrative conflict to the beginnings, at least, of its resolution. Harry Chapin’s massive 1974 hit “Cat’s in the Cradle,” for example, packs a narrative spanning at least twenty years into a 3:44 folk song – the narrator describes his son’s birth and childhood as a time in which his son idolized and emulated him, despite his perennial absence. When his son grows up and has a family of his own, the now-retired speaker concisely narrates a classic inversion of roles: “I said, ‘I'd like to see you if you don't mind’ / He said, ‘I’d love to, Dad, if I could find the time...it occurred to me / He’d grown up just like me” (Chapin). Brevity is similarly arguably no obstacle for establishing narratives in other literary forms – take, for example, the famous six-word flash fiction usually attributed to Ernest Hemingway: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn” (Gilead 119), or David Mamet’s collection of one- and two-page plays, compiled in *Goldberg Street* (1985), which he considers “some of the best work [he has] ever done” (Mamet vii). That relatively grand narratives are regularly being compressed into three- or four-minute songs amongst millennial indie lyricists, however, is especially made possible by the increasingly universal accessibility of recorded songs, online transcriptions of lyrics, biographical information, and the plethora of internet fan fora discussing lyrical narrative and meaning. Elliptically constructing narrative songs arguably presupposes the listener’s ability to parse and decode these narratives over the course of multiple listenings, once again privileging the practiced listener over the casual listener.

As Cohen observes in relation to acting, the root of every narrative situation, regardless of the length available for narrative development, is based in the idea of goal-oriented problem solving – characters "seek the information which will guide them in improving bad situations – and in maintaining or improving good ones" (*Acting Power* 35). In songs, both the lyrics and music arguably drive toward a kind of resolution, whether this resolution takes the form of the lyrical resolution of a problem, a resolution to maintain or improve an already ideal situation, or the resolution of a discordant musical structure, either into harmony or into silence. "Resolution," in this case, does not imply that all songs conclude with a neat and tidy, well-made dissolution of any and all narrative tension, but rather that, like all narratives, musical works "start from a problem and tend towards its resolution." In other words, songs do not have to internally achieve resolution in order for the listener to detect a movement *towards* resolution, even if that resolution is simply the audible denouement of the track fading out.

The vast majority of popular song texts are focused on the speaker's goal of improving his or her current situation, with the obvious exception of songs in the style of "Maybe I'm Amazed" (Paul McCartney, 1970), which are indirectly focused on maintaining what is described as an ideal situation or relationship. Other exceptions, most often found on contemporary Top 40 lists, are songs heavily preoccupied with the power, and accompanying ephemerality, of youth (One Direction's "Live While We're Young" [2012], Miley Cyrus' "We Can't Stop" [2013], etc.). These songs are often directive, usually demanding that the listener put their "hands in the air" in a variety of decreasingly creative lyrical dictums (Lorde, a precocious seventeen-year-old two-time Grammy winning popstar with the number one song in the country at the time of writing ["Royals"] astutely observes, "I'm kind of over getting told to throw my hands up in the air / So there" in her song "Team"). The more common "bad situation" songs

(covering the cloyingly familiar lyrical themes "you left me," "I made a mistake," "why don't you love me," etc.) are peopled with speakers yearning for guidance in their quest to improve their circumstances. The speaker in Elton John's "Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word" (1976), for example, repeatedly asks variations of his central question, "What have I got to do to make you love me?" The speaker in Coldplay's "Fix You" similarly describes a negative situation in the opening lines ("When you try your best and you don't succeed. / When you get what you want but not what you need"), and strives towards its resolution in the chorus: "Lights will guide you home...and I will try to fix you."

If there is hope for a resolution in the lyrical text, epiphanic moments (of varying degrees) usually occur within the song's chorus or bridge, with the verses establishing the nuances of the "situation" that needs either to be improved or maintained. Whether or not the problem presented solves itself within the song, however, does enough really *happen* in the average pop song to consider them miniature, but nonetheless fully-fledged, narratives? Expanding upon Nattiez's titular question ("Can One Speak of Narrativity in Music?"), David Nicholls queries the potential for the presence, and, more importantly, analytical possibilities, of narrativity within popular music texts in his 2007 article "Narrative Theory as an Analytical Tool in the Study of Popular Music Texts." Once again focusing on the restrictions inherent in popular music's brevity to constructing narratives, Nicholls begins by acknowledging the almost instinctive aversion most literary scholars have to the thought of terming the speaker in a popular song a "narrator." Using the term "narrator" implies the presence of narrativity, and, as Nicholls observes, narrativity is "a feature common to all activities involving the representation of events in time...[p]opular music, on the other hand, tends to manifest itself in three- to four-minute songs...which describe essentially static rather than kinetic cameos, vignettes, or states of mind"

(297). Though a brief narrative is, as established above, not necessarily synonymous with a static narrative, Nicholls is likely correct in his assertion that the majority of popular songs, regardless of length, have more in common with *tableaux vivants* than with a novel or short story.

v. Adding to Nicholls' Five-Part Typology of Narrativity

As Nicholls goes on to argue, however, not *all* popular song texts exist in (or of) a narrative void. Nicholls develops a five-part typology of "levels at which narrativity can operate in popular music texts" (301), acknowledging the proliferate variations that popular music texts can and do take in both form and content. Nicholls' typology runs the gamut from songs in which there is little to no narrative progression, existing instead as static cameos, to songs in which all of the media that comprise and surround a track (music, lyrics, album liner notes, and, I would add, video and biographical information) co-create narrative meaning (301)[3]. Although Nicholls fully acknowledges the potential for narrativity in music (for him, at least, one *can* speak of narrativity in popular music), his focus on five separate levels of narrative complexity results in a relatively brief description of each level. As Nicholls' treatment of lyrical narratives of greater complexity (levels four and five) feels especially rushed, an extended examination of how complex lyrical narratives are constructed out of the various media involved in contemporary popular music is long overdue.

Considered against Nicholls' scale, one would be hard pressed to find a song by Meloy or Samson did not score between a three to five in terms of narrative complexity – I argue, in fact, that the vast majority of both writers' songs would be best situated within the fifth category, in which "A complex narrative discourse is rendered through multiple media, including lyrics,

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[3] Paraphrasing Nicholls' other four levels of narrativity:
1. No story in the lyrics or music; static.
2. Lyrics have narrative elements, but their musical setting is neutral.
3. Lyrics have narrative elements, which are supported by their musical setting.
4. Both the lyrics and music have narrative elements, which occasionally work independently of each other (301).

music, prose, and art work" (301). Meloy and Samson achieve this complexity through fairly divergent methods, Meloy affixing musical, visual, and linguistic flourishes to every possible artistic surface surrounding his music, and Samson being uncommonly attentive to the literal and symbolic textuality of his lyrics. Partially as an extension of Nicholls' length-restricted writing on how complex, multi-media narratives in song lyrics work, but more centrally as a precursor to a discussion of unreliable narration in song lyrics (which I propose as a potential sixth level on Nicholls' scale), I will examine the formal elements of narrative construction in Meloy and Samson's song lyrics. Samson's densely allusive, almost obsessively concise stories of "small defeats" will receive the bulk of attention in the following chapter, while Meloy's more expansive (in every sense of the word) lyrics will be the locus for the Chapter Three's investigation of unreliable narration.

vi. "We Both Go Down Together": Meloy's Multi-Media Storytelling

Often considered to include some of the most theatrical instrumental and vocal arrangements in contemporary indie music, The Decemberists are currently comprised of five multi-instrumentalist members, with a revolving door of touring guests and collaborators. Influenced by everything from "late-'60s British folk acts like Fairport Convention and Pentangle and the early-'80s college rock grandeur of the Waterboys and R.E.M." (Decemberists Myspace Bio) to "shite about seafaring and foreign lands" (*MrHipster.com*), The Decemberists' music is often described as a variation on "a twisting and rewarding trip through musical genres" (Landenberger). In addition to Meloy's extraordinary adaptability on the six- and twelve-string guitar, and the rock band standbys of drums, piano, bass, and lead guitar, The Decemberists regularly employ instruments like the accordion, hurdy gurdy, mandolin, stand-up bass, harmonica, Hammond organ, and, as one enthusiastic college newspaper reported, "a massive

gong" (Berkovitz). Often engaging with historical musical tropes and genres, such as the sea shanty ("Shanty For The Arethusa," "The Mariner's Revenge Song," "From My Own True Love (Lost at Sea)," etc.), songs with militaristic overtones in both form and content (acting more often as critiques of military culture in this case, e.g. "Sixteen Military Wives," "The Legionnaire's Lament," "The Soldiering Life"), and English folk-song-inspired ditties and laments about star-crossed lovers in pastoral settings ("We Both Go Down Together," "Yankee Bayonet," "The Bachelor and the Bride," etc.), The Decemberists are widely recognized as one of the most musically fearless bands on the indie scene.

Visual artwork is also a particularly potent contributor to the narrative discourse of each of Meloy's songs. Meloy's wife and longtime collaborator, award-winning artist and illustrator Carson Ellis, has created the album artwork for every one of The Decemberists' albums, in addition to the majority of their merchandise, posters, and websites. Ellis' signature style blends folksy, Maurice Sendak-inspired, hand-drawn images that often focus on intricately interweaving plant-life with a dark, occasionally macabre sense of visual humour that seamlessly complements Meloy's lyrical style. Ellis' consistent work for and with The Decemberists has resulted in the band being associated with a highly distinctive visual aesthetic. An increasingly sought-after illustrator for children's books, Ellis brings her strong affinity for narrative artwork to bear on the art she creates for The Decemberists, often visually rendering easily-recognizable scenes from songs in the bands' album art – Ellis quite literally illustrates The Decemberists' lyrical narratives, providing the listener with a tangible, visual access point to the frequently fantastical worlds Meloy creates. Ellis also illustrates Meloy's *Wildwood Chronicles*, and has created the album artwork for every one of his solo *Colin Meloy Sings* series of EPs, thus affecting the image and branding of both The Decemberists as a band and Meloy as an individual artist.

The Decemberists additionally use video to great narrative effect, subverting popular music's norm of slick, frenetically jump-cutting singer/band-focused music videos which are often connected to the lyrical content of a song only tangentially. Every one of The Decemberists' music videos engage with and reflect on their song's lyrics in a thoughtful, sustained manner. Rather than attempt to recreate the narrative of the song, these music videos usually offer a parallel narrative that expands on or comments upon the song's themes. The video for "Calamity Song," for example, off The Decemberists' most recent full-length release, *The King Is Dead* (2011), is a visual homage to the Eschaton scene ("basically, a global thermonuclear crisis re-created on a tennis court" [Meloy, qtd. by Carlin n.p.) from David Foster Wallace's contemporary epic novel *Infinite Jest* (1996). Lovingly constructed under the direction of Michael Schur (*Parks and Recreation*), the video simultaneously links "Calamity Song" more closely as an intertext with *Infinite Jest,* and, for the listener/viewer unfamiliar with Foster Wallace's novel, lends a new significance to lyrics like "Had a dream: you and me and the war of the end times...we heaved relief as scores of innocents died" by staging a war waged by young teenagers on a tennis court. The video for "This Is Why We Fight," also from *The King Is Dead*, similarly depicts a *Lord of the Flies*-esque war waged by children in a dystopian landscape, though the "war" is much more literal in this case (the video ends with two miniature armies of poorly-armed adolescents about to engage in what appears to be a battle to the death). The Decemberists also held a competition for students to create a video for their single "The Rake's Song" from *The Hazards of Love*, with a pair of art students from Moscow winning with their sinister stop-motion tribute to the titular Rake's systematic murder of his children. The Decemberists additionally released a full-album-length video for their rock opera *The Hazards of Love*, titled *Here Come the Waves: The Hazards of Love Visualized*. Featuring the animation and

directorial work of four prominent filmmakers, the film is comprised of sometimes psychedelic, sometimes eerie, abstract representations of each filmmaker's affective response to the twists and turns of the album's narrative, rather than a sustained, unified attempt to visually retell the album's story arc. The Decemberists' non-literal videos once again presuppose an audience willing and able to do some interpretive work for themselves, rather than be spoon-fed narrative in a visual format.

Nicholls agrees with Nattiez's assertion that nonverbal music cannot in and of itself embody a narrative, but must instead be "created in response to, or – better – as a setting of, a literary text" (Nicholls 300) in order to be considered in terms of narrativity. Even if these standards were applied to popular music, Meloy's lyrics would pass with flying colours. Meloy is notorious for weaving frequently obscure historical and literary allusions into both his music and lyrics, with even the band's name coming from a reference to the failed 1825 Decembrist revolt against Imperialist Russia (*npr.com*). *The Tain* (2004), an eighteen-minute single track released on a self-titled EP, is based on the Irish epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge.* Two of the songs on the album *Her Majesty The Decemberists*, "Billy Liar" (named after Keith Waterhouse's 1959 novel *Billy Liar*), and "The Chimbley Sweep," make reference to Dylan Thomas' play *Under Milk Wood*. "Song For Myla Goldberg," also from *Her Majesty*, is clearly written in homage to the eponymous novelist; both title tracks from The Decemberists' 2006 album *The Crane Wife* are based upon a Japanese folk tale of the same name; "The Island" section of "The Island/Come And See" song cycle, also from *The Crane Wife*, references Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; as above, "Calamity Song" was inspired by David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* – and so on. Cataloging all of The Decemberists' literary references would be a project in and of itself – one,

in fact, that San Francisco blogger Bill Chapin has undertaken in his thus far twelve-part series, *The Annotated Decemberists*.

Strongly influenced by the British Folk Revival of the 1950s and '60s, which Meloy describes as "a scene in which it was anathema, initially anyway, to write your own songs" ("What Is This Thing?" 2), Meloy seems to revel in interweaving his complex wordplay with existing literary characters, tropes, and situations – both as an invitation to the listener to engage with the larger literary tradition surrounding his writing, and, it would seem, out of a sheer, simple love for language. Constituting a strong one-band bid for the validity of discussing narrativity in popular songs, The Decemberists' ingenuity is in making archaic, unfashionable, and fantastical stories and music 'cool' again. While "problems" in The Decemberists' songs might be the difficulty of affording to "buy my love a fine gown / Made of gold and silk Arabian thread" because one is, in fact, the ghost of a "Barrow Boy," Meloy's consistent formal adherence to classic narrative structures in almost every one of his songs has acquired for The Decemberists a large and loyal fan-base, that proudly tout their willingness and ability to empathize with characters of a staggering range of historical, fantastical, and social statures.

Chapter Two

"Yelling small stories and bad jokes and sorrows[4]":

Narrating the Weaker-than

i. "Our Retired Explorer": Rescuing the Human from "drowning in a sea of thesis"

While Meloy writes narratives that are self-consciously grand in terms of scope, characterization, and grandiloquence, Samson's approach to the grand narrative is, rather appropriately, a self-consciously weaker version. I argue that Samson's overarching lyrical project is the rehabilitation (or reconstruction) of 'weak,' marginalized stories, including those that have been lost in the retrospective transition from one historical period to another. One of the clearest instances of this kind of historical rehabilitation in Samson's writing is from the lead single off the aptly titled *Reconstruction Site*, "Our Retired Explorer (Dines With Michel Foucault in Paris, 1961)." The first-person dialogic song is in fact a fictionalized, anthropomorphized battle between the modern and the postmodern. The speaker in the song is a "retired explorer" who was a member of one of Ernest Shackleton's early twentieth-century expeditions to Antarctica, meant to symbolize, Samson says, "the last gasp of modernism" (Christensen). The retired explorer is bored and baffled by his encounter with Michel Foucault (who in this song becomes the 'face' of postmodernism), making multiple excuses to leave their rendezvous and pining for the stark simplicity of Antarctica. The song begins with the confused explorer attempting escape, saying: "Just one more drink and then I really should be on my way home. I'm not entirely sure what you're talking about. I've had a really nice time, but my dogs need to be fed." When this approach fails, the explorer, feeling inadequate in the face of

[4] "Sounds Familiar," The Weakerthans (*Fallow*)

Foucault's abstract intellectualism, tries to impress the philosopher with his more concrete experiences in Antarctica: "Oh, I could show you the way shadows colonize snow… as every longitude leads up to your frostbitten feet." The explorer's second attempt to dominate the conversation also clearly fails, as he interrupts himself with "Oh, you're very sweet, thank you for the flowers and the book by Derrida, but I must be getting back to dear Antarctica." The song concludes with the speaker making an impossible request of Foucault, which can indeed be read as the "last gasp of modernism": "Say, do you have a ship and a dozen able men that maybe you could lend me?"

While the impossibility of recovering the real or imagined simplicity of the past is an evident theme in the song, Samson's narrative does little to deconstruct the differences between the retired explorer and Michel Foucault. Instead, Samson constructs a hypothetical, almost fantastical framework in which two embodied moments of history meet, converse flirtatiously over dinner, entirely misunderstand each other, and separate amicably. For Samson, writing the song was a "way to think about philosophy, life, and the way people try and understand each other, and sometimes they can't, but it doesn't really matter" (Epitaph). Samson's engagement in the discussion surrounding the theoretical divide between the modern and postmodern is no less real for its form or its brevity – as rock columnist Josh Hartse cogently observes, "The best part…is that this eloquent defense of modernism, the grand narratives, is played out over the pop equivalent of modernism: the three-chord pop song" (Hartse). Manipulating both form and content, Samson locates the middle ground between modernism and postmodernism in the real – in the human:

> Okay, you can stare off into the middle distance and be a Modernist
> hero consumed by your own individuality, or you can play those little

> language games about the death of the idea of the individual until you drown in a sea of thesis, but I've actually met some people out there in the world, you know, other humans, and I care about them (Hartse).

Samson, in his famously "weak," reedy singing voice, gives voice to a cast of deceptively weak characters who together form a middle ground between the "Modernist hero" and the postmodern anti-Humanist "sea of thesis." Samson has the enviable ability of shifting from persona to persona with amazing clarity and precision, packing (usually) fictional characters' histories, emotions, relationships, and living situations into short rock songs with a stunning economy of language, and giving (new) life to an incredibly diverse cast of characters, ranging from high-school dropouts to Wall Street businessmen; bus drivers to "a cat named Virtute." Samson reconstructs some of the more aesthetically appealing aspects of modernism while keeping postmodernism firmly in view – the "grand narratives" and "Modernist hero[es] consumed by [their] own individuality" are transformed into simple, localized stories about non-heroic individuals and the communities that, in many ways, give them life.

ii. "Tournament of Hearts": Moving "beyond [the] grammar" of Specialized Languages

For Samson, the choice of song lyrics as a vehicle for the stories he tells is both aesthetic and political. Critics have often emphasized the formative influence of punk rock on The Weakerthans, Samson playing bass in "the perpetually agitated," "Vegananarchist" Canadian punk band Propagandhi prior to forming The Weakerthans in 1997 (Ali n.p.). Punk rock's privileging of the brief and incisive is mirrored by The Weakerthans' sparse instrumentation, rare release of new material, and Samson's economical lyrics. There is, Samson says, a (punk-aligned) political element in the choice of a small or brief framework to work within: "There's

something political about that…You have [only] this much time in which to speak to someone, so you should use it effectively" (Ali). While punk's political and musical influences are clear in The Weakerthans' music, there is a brash certitude to the punk aesthetic that is as far removed Samson's writing as it is possible to be, Samson being sure only of "a certain search for certainty" ("Letter of Resignation"). The politics behind Samson's choice of a brief artistic framework are therefore related not to punk's aestheticized arrogance, but to the "weakness" that pervades every aspect of his work. Having a small space in which to tell a story is a weaker starting position that having an infinite number of pages within which to expound. The valences of Samson's personal Marxist politics (Lloyd) are also present in both his choice of subject matter and rare release of carefully constructed, brief songs. With a strong belief in the strength and authority of the collective voice as opposed to the individual, Samson offers up his "small stories" ("Fallow") as moments of reconstruction and potential connectivity, both for the marginalized characters and communities he fictionally rehabilitates and for the listening public.

That Samson is able to say so much within the brief artistic framework of a pop song is a testament to his economical use of both directly descriptive and immediately connotative language. Samson has often termed himself a "regional writer" (Block), saying that he likes to "use uniquely regional phrases as a sort of short cut to building a sense of location" (Sorenson). Samson uses "religious language and its cadences" (e.g. "Benediction"), and the "specialized language that arose around Marxism and the theoretical Left" (Sorenson, e.g. "Relative Surplus Value") in a similar fashion, using "specialized languages" to elliptically construct place, time, and affect. In the tradition of W.H. Auden, one of Samson's favourite poets and a major influence on his writing (Fiorentino), Samson uses "specialized languages" because they "provide a new way of thinking about the world. They are useful" (Sorenson). Samson claims

that he "started to imitate Auden by using the vernaculars of politics and religion and love, which are natural and interesting to [him], to attempt to say something that moved beyond their grammar" (Fiorentino). In other words, Samson deftly constructs the familiar in order to *defamiliarize* the listener with language they are accustomed to, thereby weakening an individual's feeling of ownership over any part of language. Aligned with his Marxist, anti-capitalist politics, Samson seems to be suggesting that humans must *participate* in language, even in specialized languages, but any attempt to privatize language constitutes a fundamental misuse of the code.

Perhaps the best example of Samson's use of specialized language is in "Tournament of Hearts," the fourth song on *Reunion Tour* and, as of June 2011, Samson's favourite of his own lyrics (von Bannisseht), which operates as an extended, curling-based metaphor for a stagnating romantic relationship. An excellent example of Samson's lyrical praxis, in "Tournament of Hearts," Samson deconstructs the curling community's hegemonic use of "specialized" language surrounding the sport in order to reconstruct the universality of the local dialect. In other words, Samson deprivatizes 'curling language' not by attempting to take it away from the community that uses it most, but by making it available to a whole new sector of the English-speaking world: The Weakerthans' listening public. The song picks up several of the themes that run through Samson's work, including the difficulty of self-articulation, particularly for individuals who are externally termed "weaker than" their peers, and the immobilizing effects of silence. The Tournament of Hearts is a real event – an annual Canadian women's curling championship ("Scotties Tournament of Hearts") – and, as Stephen Carroll, lead guitarist of The Weakerthans and Samson's curling teammate, says, Samson "knows his way around a [curling] sheet" (Gillmor). Winnipeg is home to no less than twenty-one curling rinks (Maple Music), and

Samson thinks that "a lot of Prairie Canadians feel the same way about [curling]" (Gilmor), namely, they feel that they can recognize themselves in professional curlers. "[Curlers are] slightly overweight, sometimes more than slightly. They have real jobs. They're accountants, schoolteachers. They speak like me, they look like me" (Samson, as quoted by Gillmor). Curling terminology and lore therefore becomes a "specialized language" in this song, a quintessentially Canadian shortcut to empathy.

The speaker in "Tournament of Hearts," like all of Samson's most successful characterizations, is both immediately recognizable and sufficiently anomalous to hold the listener's attention. The appeal of a familiar setting and voice is pitted against the alien sensation of having full access to all of the sorrows and desires hidden behind a familiarly anonymous face. The time, place, situation, and character of the speaker are established within the first four lines of the song with Samson's customary economy of language:

> Now the lounge is full of farmers for the 7:30 draw. Teammates all left before they had to buy a round. When they pull the 50/50 and I've lost again, I'll go. Or maybe have one more brown one for the snowy road.

At the beginning of the song, the speaker is sitting alone, drinking beer "as it gets closer to last call" and imagining that "the senior bonspiel winners, circa 1963, are all staring, glaring, disapprovingly, from their frame in that old photograph, at me." The "senior bonspiel winners'" imagined disapproval seems concur with the speaker's popcorn, which "squeaks with a question – wonders why I'm not at home, where you wait beside a silent telephone and doodle circles within circles, all alone." The curling rink serves as the speaker's escape from the tension at home between himself and the "you," while the "you" left behind doodles diagrams of a curling sheet ("circles within circles") and waits for his return.

In the second verse of the song, the speaker deploys some detailed curling metaphors through the curved lens of a brown beer bottle:

> So Elvera brings my bottle, I hold it up and let it bend the figures of two rinks battling an extra end. And I'm peeling off the label as they peel a corner guard and dance down the sheet to the tune of "Hurry! Hurry hard!"

In other words (with some help from the Anchorage Curling Club's list of terminology), the speaker is watching the tie-breaker of a curling match, during which one team must send a stone down the ice at a sufficient pace to knock one of the other team's stones (that had previously been "guarding" the stone closest to the button, or target) out of play. As the stone travels down the ice, sweepers (the players with the broom-like implements) follow the command to "Hurry! Hurry hard!" by briskly sweeping the ice in the stone's path to smooth it out, thereby reducing friction and increasing the stone's speed. This rather complicated exposition serves as an apt, if elaborate, metaphor for the speaker's conundrum – the speaker feels like he is stuck in "an extra end," a drawn match, and that he is "always throwing hack-weight," or overshooting his intended mark. The metaphor, like the speaker himself, is simultaneously incredibly complicated and achingly familiar. The speaker can only articulate his inability to communicate with the addressee in the song in curling terminology; even though the time he spends drinking at the curling rink appears to be a major contributing factor to the metaphorical distance between the two characters.

Tying into Samson's preoccupation with the articulation of weakness (and the weakness of articulation), some of the only repeated lines in "Tournament of Hearts" are the questions that the speaker fruitlessly asks himself, wishing that he could shout out instead to the assembled generations of curlers at the rink. These questions, "Why? Why can't I draw right up to what I

want to say? Why can't I ever stop where I want to stay?" are once again metaphorically tied to curling. The speaker imagines himself as a stone that is incapable of "drawing" up to his intended target and *staying* there, thereby winning his metaphorical game and finding the words to express himself in place of a "championship banner." Instead, he is once again "always throwing hack-weight," a sentiment echoed by the lines "I roar right through our years. I drift right through our months. I slide right through our days." The speaker is overwhelmed by the passage of time, and his apparent inability to say or do anything to stop it, or even to intervene in its course. The only other repeated line in the song, sung a total of eleven times with minor variations on the order of the "never's" and "ever's" with each repetition, is "Right off! No, never never ever ever." Both "right off!" and "never!" are curling commands, instructing the sweepers to leave the stone entirely to its own devices, allowing it to take a naturally curving (or "curling") path down the ice. This line reaffirms the speaker's conception of himself as a both metaphorical curling stone and player, isolated by his inability to communicate. The speaker imagines himself as abandoned or betrayed by language – the obvious pun on right/write-off and his vacillation between "never" and "ever" suggests that he is both desperate to make himself heard (also evidenced by the line, "Have to stop myself from climbing on the table full of empties to yell, 'Why?'") and entirely skeptical about his ability to say anything worth hearing should he be given the chance to speak. He both wants to be left alone (or "written off") and to be accompanied all the way down the metaphorical sheet by sweepers easing his path for him ("right off!" is followed immediately by the seemingly paradoxical "no, never never ever ever").

The speaker in "Tournament of Hearts" is paralyzed into an outward silence as a result of his linked conceptions of the futility of language and the individual's ephemerality in the rush of history. Even when he speaks to himself, in the dramatic monologue that forms the song, he can

express himself only in terms of the stratified and familiar – which is, for this speaker, the sport of curling. The line, "All the championship banners going yellow on the wall add my name when it gets closer to last call," and the reference to the "senior bonspiel winners" suggest that the speaker feels himself surrounded and consumed by the images and language of the assembled "farmers" of the past and present. The speaker is, to quote another of Samson's songs, "leaning on [a] broken fence between past and present tense" ("Aside"). He is sufficiently overwhelmed by his own liminality and the weakness of his singular voice that this narrator's solution is to let time slip between his fingers without resistance, drinking beer after beer until last call, saying to himself with a sense of quiet defeat, "And I know you're our there waiting for an answer I can't give you." The speaker cannot communicate because he cannot lay claim to a moment in time in which to speak; as Samson writes in "The Reasons," "the time is never now, and we know who we should love, but we're never certain how." Irresistibly reminiscent of the quandary that the speaker faces in "Our Retired Explorer (Dines With Michel Foucault in Paris, 1961)," "Tournament of Hearts" is a personalized, localized, "weak" version of a failed dialogue between historical eras, with language once again failing to act as a valid mediator.

As above, when considering a hypothetical "sixth level" on Nicholls' typology of musical narrativity, one would be remiss, I believe, not to take into account the centrality of the author figure. Although one can absolutely have a meaningful interaction with Samson's lyrical texts without knowledge of Samson's biography, familiarity with facts about his life (such as his proclivity for curling), writing practices, and, especially in Samson's case, politics, can helpfully nuance one's reading/listening experience. That Samson calls Winnipeg, Manitoba his home, for example, a city often understood as geographically and financially "weaker-than" in the Canadian popular consciousness, is much more than a factoid. Winnipeg is the metaphorical

protagonist in many of his songs, and the choice to remain living there is, for Samson, fundamentally political, aligning with his politics of weakness (Livermore). Knowledge of Samson's Marxist leanings, his childhood in the Lutheran church (Schild), bibliophilia (Carey), and preoccupation with storytelling (Thomas) somewhat counter-intuitively allow the listener to access Samson's songs at levels that transcend the personal. In Samson's writing, the "precise and particular" (Epitaph) comes to metonymically constitute the universal. While the casual or first-time listener may not pick up on these themes, they form a strong conceptual backbone throughout Samson's work that renders it, if not as poetry, then as a more sustained intellectual and political engagement than the average rock musician's discography.

iii. "Left and Leaving": Locating Strength in the Collective Artistic Voice

Each of The Weakerthans' albums, as well as several specific songs on each album, is prefaced by one or two epigraphs in their liner notes. These brief quotations, taken from a range of twentieth and twenty-first century poetry, novels, political or philosophical theory, and obituaries, serve as tangible representations of Samson's artistic and intellectual engagement with a variety of literary modes. Some of Samson's choices for epigraphs are directly justified in the text of the lyric that they preface, the lyrics of "Left And Leaving" (from the 2000 album of the same name), for example, headed by three lines of an untitled poem from Catherine Hunter's 1997 collection *Latent Heat*. Hunter is a Winnipeg poet, and the only author to whom Samson refers more than once – in fact, he uses excerpts from her poetry as epigraphs on each of The Weakerthans' first three albums. Hunter's poetic influence on Samson is clear even in the brief lines he cites before "Left and Leaving:"

> and for a moment both of you believe
> you can hear the city breathing

you are both tired, you want to be done (Hunter, *Rush Hour*)

The first line of Samson's song is printed directly below: "My city's still breathing (but barely, it's true) through buildings gone missing like teeth." Samson has told the story behind the opening lines of the song in multiple interviews – restless upon his return from The Weakerthans' first tour, Samson went for a walk late at night in downtown Winnipeg. As he reached the edge of Exchange Park, a part of the city with "a huge amount of history, the place where the General Strike gathered in 1919" (*Geist*), he came upon a group of people "standing around watching" a historic hotel burn to the ground: "I kept trying to picture what the building had looked like. I couldn't. It suddenly struck me that I had never paid any attention to this building, but that I was profoundly sad that it was burning down" (*Geist*).

Samson configures the sudden, violent loss of the building as a metaphor for the lost histories of the city's faceless and nameless citizens; the people one might see every day without knowing anything about them. "There are stories and there are people in my life here that are like that building," says Samson. "I think it's the point of what [artists] do: to try to express those stories and to make the lives of those people relevant if we can" (*Geist*). "Left and Leaving," the seventh track on the album, is placed immediately before three songs that are clear attempts to rehabilitate "weak" figures that are lost or marginalized by history. "Elegy for Elisabet," immediately following "Left and Leaving," is a song about Samson's great-aunt who was partially deaf, and therefore "[one of] those figures that get lost in family histories" (Lloyd). "History to the Defeated," taking its name from the W.H. Auden poem that forms its epigraph, is an ode to a "Mechanic-school dropout" that "stands up in his derelict daydreams." "Exiles Among You," named after Canadian-Icelandic poet Kristjana Gunnars's 1996 collection *Exiles*

Among You (Lloyd), explores the lonely, wasted day of a young woman who has run away from home and cannot bring herself to reach out for help:

> She shoplifts some Christmas gifts, and a bracelet for herself, and considers phoning home. Has some quarters in her hand. But she sits down on the sidewalk and bites her bottom lip, and spends the afternoon willing traffic lights to change.

When Samson says that his "city's still breathing (but barely, it's true)," he is therefore metaphorically referring to all of the people in cities that are still breathing (but barely, it's true). Though their breaths may be "weak," their stories do not deserve to become "one more omission from a high school history book…whole lives…knifed and pushed aside" ("Letter of Resignation"). It is up to artists as a *group* to rehabilitate these "forgotten" lives, supporting each other in order to form a collective "strong" enough to support the memory of individuals that have no one else to remember them.

"My city's still breathing (but barely, it's true)" is likely Samson's single most famous lyric, even serving as the title for a symposium in Winnipeg in 2010, "My City's Still Breathing: A Symposium Exploring the Arts, Artists, and the City," at which both Samson and Hunter spoke. Although the symposium's website gives Samson full credit for the line, in an interview he was quick to share authorship: "The epigraph I used for that song is from local poet Catherine Hunter…so it is actually partly a Catherine Hunter line, too. I like that" (Carnevale). That Samson "likes" the linguistic and creative synthesis that is embodied in the name of the symposium is linked to his belief in the strength of a collective voice. In "Pamphleteer," Samson tweaks a line of "Solidarity Forever," Ralph Chaplin's famous 1915 union anthem: "Sing, 'Oh what force on earth could be weaker than the feeble strength of one' like me remembering the

way it could have been." Samson therefore partially uses epigraphs to substantiate his own voice – if there is nothing "weaker than the feeble strength of one," then two melded artistic voices are by default stronger than a singular voice. The substantiation of his voice, however, is undertaken not for the purpose of self-gain, but in order to resound with strength enough to carry generations of forgotten stories.

For Samson, the existence of narrative through-lines able to seemingly effortlessly resonate through space and time is a function of the way stories are all innately and necessarily connected to one another, just as language is comprised of multiple tangled webs of interconnecting sounds, signs, and connotations. Samson uses epigraphs with the intention of rendering these connections clearer to the reader. In fact, Samson seems to deploy epigraphs in place of a bibliography, partially as a tangible citation of the stories or phrases that he borrows and riffs on, and partially as a directive to the dedicated listener to explore the texts that he was influenced by at the time of writing. Samson is evidently passionate about the authors and texts that he makes reference to, often discussing their work in interviews – epigraphs are therefore a way to strengthen both his own work *and* the text(s) that he is drawing from.

iv. "Sounds Familiar": Audible Poetics

Samson's use of epigraphs substantiates the concrete materiality of his lyrics, which likely contributes to the established practice in rock and roll criticism of treating Samson's lyrics as poems. Samson's habitual arrangement of his lyrics as blocks of justified prose rather than poetic lines broken according to metre or rhyme, however, seems to actively discourage this practice. Susan Sorenson, author of the only existing published scholarly paper on Samson, somewhat dubiously "speculates" that Samson's presentation of lyrics as "blocks of prose, with no line breaks…is to reassure readers apprehensive about reading poetry" (133). This suggestion is

highly improbable for several reasons, the most evident of them being that Samson does not consider his lyrics to be poetry (Fiorentino), and therefore has no need to trick the "apprehensive" reader into readings them. Samson's arrangement of his songs into blocks of prose likely has more to do with his heavy use of enjambment – it is occasionally difficult to discern where sentences begin and end when listening to the recorded versions of his songs. Samson's lyrics can, in fact, take on new meanings when they are rendered textually, whether or not they are read as "poetry."

In "Sounds Familiar" (*Fallow*), for example, the written version of the following line reads: "armed with hammers, feathers, blunt knives: words to meet and to define and to…but you must know the same games we played in dirt, in dusty school yards" (ellipsis original). In the recorded version, the line is delivered thus: "armed with hammers, feathers, blunt knives, words to meet and to define and to…but you must know. The same games we played in dirt, in dusty school yards…" The difference between the written and sung versions changes the subject of that which "you must know" from the "games we played in dirt" to the more amorphous fifth item on the list of 'weapons' the speaker was "armed with": "words to meet and to define and to…" The final "but you must know" is left vocally and musically isolated and lingering, perhaps prompting listeners to recall the "small stories, and bad jokes, and sorrows" that populated their own childhoods. In "Psalm for the Elks Lodge Last Call" (*Reconstruction Site*), the final verse is transcribed as "Oh, protect our secret handshake, and once more, with feeling, let the toast to absent members push through the ceiling," whereas the recorded version of the song omits the "and," rendering the line "Oh, protect our secret handshake once more, with feeling. Let the toast to absent members push through the ceiling." In this case, the action that is to be undertaken somewhat proverbially "once more, with feeling" shifts from toasting absent members to

protecting the Lodge's secret handshake. In both recorded versions of the song "Cruise Night" (*City Route 85*, *Provincial)* the line "next to 'our' old El Camino with the racing stripes" simply sounds like "next to our old El Camino with the racing stripes." That the speaker and the "Dude" he addresses *fantasize* about owning the old El Camino (as evidenced by the quotation marks around "our"), rather than actually owning the car, entirely changes the tone of the song's first verse.

When confronted with the lyrics of a song one is very familiar with, even if they are presented as a block of text, it is difficult to separate the listening experience from the reading experience. While reading the text, one still "hears" the rhythm and rhyme in the line. A first-time reader encountering one of Samson's songs in a written format, however, may not detect any of the hallmarks of poetry. Published in 2012, the aptly titled *Lyrics & Poems, 1997-2012* is Samson's first literary compilation, though not by any means his first published piece of writing. While the title of Samson's collection implies a fundamental difference in category between "lyrics" and "poems," the act of compilation renders both forms into texts, written on the same pages and encased in the same binding. The reader's experience of Samson's lyrics and poems within the context of this book is therefore largely unvaried, his poems and lyrics not differing greatly from one another in tone, theme, or syntax. As a reader encountering Samson's book independently of his music, it would be very difficult to tell which are the lyrics and which are the poems. In this publication, for the first time, Samson has aligned the text of each piece on the left, rather than evenly justifying his lyrics, and, in several cases, he has broken up the text of a song into poetic lines, making some of his song lyrics look more like poems than ever before.

Samson has said that some of his songs "have begun as poems and have just been traced onto musical structures" (Livermore). One example of this process can be located in three of

Samson's songs that are quite clearly engaging with a poetic, textual tradition – three metrically perfect Shakespearean sonnets titled "(Manifest)," "(Hospital Vespers)," and "(Past Due)." Bracketing *Reconstruction Site*, the miniature sonnet cycle takes one of humanity's "weakest," most helpless experiences, watching a loved one die, and presents it in one of humanity's most enduring, strongly stratified poetic forms. Always presented as evenly justified blocks of prose in the past, in *Lyrics and Poems 1997-2012* the three sonnets are broken up into their traditional fourteen-line structure. That Samson had previously transcribed the sonnets as blocks of prose rather than as lines of poetry likely made it difficult for the reader to realize that the songs were actually sonnets – robbed of their fourteen line structure, sonnets look much the same as any other chunk of internally rhyming text. Until Samson's publication of *Lyrics and Poems, 1997-2012*, therefore, it was somewhat paradoxically only through listening that the audience could access these lyrics' self-conscious textuality.

v. Provincial: *Mapping 'Weak' Narratives*

Samson's first full length solo album, *Provincial* (2012), collects six songs previously released on two EPs, adds five brand new ones, and concludes with a duet previously released by Canadian indie musician Christine Fellows, Samson's wife and long-time collaborator. Significantly more research-based than any of The Weakerthans' albums, *Provincial* explores four Manitoban highways and the stories that haunt them. Originally intended to be a set of three EPs constituting a side project during some time off from The Weakerthans (CBC Radio 3), Samson decided to unite the EPs, and the three highways that they explored, into one interconnected roadmap of an album, adding a fourth highway to the final project. As Peter Goddard, music reviewer for *The Star*, observed, "Leave it to John K. Samson to turn a little holiday away from the Weakerthans into the solo-record equivalent of a master's thesis."

Samson's record label, Epitaph, describes *Provincial* as traveling "four routes woven into the prairie landscape of Manitoba…It finds familiar landmarks and forgotten ones; it mines the precise and particular." The choice to name the album *Provincial* logically follows Samson's previous two EPs, *City Route 85* and *Provincial Road 222*. In keeping with his "weaker-than" aesthetics, however, Samson is also engaging with the "weak" connotations of "provincial" as an adjective, meaning "unsophisticated or narrow-minded, esp. when considered as typical of such regions" (OED). The album is a collection of "provincial" people's stories, or what Epitaph calls "sonic portraits" of the people that have lived and do live "where the Atlantic and Pacific are the very same far-away" ("Longitudinal Centre"), or, as Samson puts it more colloquially, "If you want to escape Winnipeg, it's really far in either direction" (CBC Radio 3). While Samson's writing has always been preoccupied with Winnipeg and its surrounding areas, *Provincial* offers an extended, focused examination of the people and stories that inhabit the region. Despite being written in a variety of characters' voices, *Provincial* is a strikingly personal engagement with (and attempt to rehabilitate) the forgotten, abandoned, or marginalized ghosts that roam the roads of Manitoba. Ten years prior to writing *Provincial*, Samson was perhaps already invested in nurturing the project's seed, saying in an interview that,

> Winnipeg is a place that thinks life is elsewhere. The idea you get from the community here is that everything is happening somewhere else, and that nobody can actually do something here. …[It is] a really powerful political thing, to say that these people, these people's lives, have meaning, have as much validity as the people's lives in New York and Toronto and Los Angeles and Berlin and London (Livermore).

Provincial, then, is Samson's long-awaited, powerfully political, but no less "weak" intervention in the world's estimation of Manitoba, and in Manitoba's estimation of itself, standing in and standing up for small towns and 'small' stories everywhere.

While Samson's lyrics are routinely singled out as the most unique, virtuosic aspect of his music, it would be a critical oversight to ignore effects that the musical, visual, and performative aspects of his songs can have on his formal (re)construction of narrative(s). In accordance with Nicholls' fifth level of narrativity (a complex narrative rendered in multiple medias), *Provincial*'s album art maps the route its songs travel on Manitoban highways (Highway 1, City Route 85, Highway 23, and Provincial Road 222). The album's back cover hosts a track listing with a legend of symbols transcribed below, each symbol corresponding to one of the four major highways. The final song, "Taps Reversed," is marked with an "x," which represents, the legend tells us, the final destination of the album: "Home." *Provincial*'s cover art is a photograph of an open ledger book, with coloured lines scored across the ledger's existing grid forming a rough image of what the prairie provinces look like from above – a patchwork of brown, green, and blue. The divisions between various fields are clear, though they are differentiated only by colour and size. The rest of the ledger is left blank, scored faintly by red and blue ruled ink lines over white paper, evoking the massive expanse of the prairies in the winter, a time in which all visible differences are erased. The only lines that mark the prairies in the winter are roads, an image that ties in nicely with Samson's exploration of Manitoban highways. The cover resembles both a map and a collection of fingerprints, a fitting representation of Samson's collection of stories rooted entirely in the place in which they occur, a place Samson describes with his inclusion of an epigraph by poet Karen Solie, "Everything happens here, then nothing / for a long long time." In this case, "here" is definitively Manitoba,

starting with a driver lost near the Saskatchewan border, traveling east on "Highway 1 East" with a useless GPS: "some sarcastic satellite says I'm not anywhere." This album, then, starts in a literal and metaphorical "nowhere" – (Miriam Toews, Canadian novelist and friend of Samson's, calls Winnipeg "the coldest nowhere nothing mosquito-ridden barren bleak and desolate city in the world – the punchline of every joke about hellholes" (Geist)). *Provincial* represents an attempt to transform "nowhere" into a place that *is* "somewhere," forming a chorus of weak voices that are, taken together, "One With the Strength of Many."[5]

That the album cover is a photograph of a *book* recalls a central preoccupation of the album as a whole, continuing Samson's lyrical engagement with literary print culture. Following in The Weakerthans' fine tradition, *Provincial* contains a song in epistolary form ("Letter in Icelandic from the Ninette San"), and a song about provincial road signage ("Heart of the Continent," taking its name from Winnipeg's current slogan, follows up in musical form and content on The Weakerthans' "One Great City!," a song about Winnipeg's former slogan). "The Last And," written from the perspective of a heart-broken elementary school teacher addressing her formal lover, the married principal of her school, is centered on a punctuation-based metaphor. The repeated line "I was just your little ampersand" neatly encapsulates her realization that she was only ever a frivolous addition to her lover's life, and never a central pillar:

> When your voice springs from the intercom with announcements, and reminders, and a prayer, I remember how you made me feel: I was funny, I was thoughtful, I was rare. But like the jokes about my figure kids think that I don't understand, I know I'm just your little ampersand.

[5] Translated from a former Latin Winnipeg city motto, "Unum Cum Virtute Multorum," also serving as the inspiration for "A Plea from a Cat Named Virtute."

In this song, the figure of the ampersand becomes a trope for the speaker's awareness of her own weakness. Ampersands come "at the last conjunction, after every other 'and'" ("The Last And"), echoing the speaker's simultaneous sadness and acute embarrassment over her slow interpretation of the reality of her situation. Momentarily, she feels that she is "funny…thoughtful…rare," but, in actuality, she has only ever been an old-fashioned, rarely used afterthought at the end of a long list: a "little ampersand."

vi. "When I Write My Master's Thesis": The Collective Strength of Multi-Media Narratives

Reflecting Samson's interest in the effects that new medias are having on small-town life (*The Key*), *Provincial* contains several songs that interact with hypertext. One such song, "http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/rivertonrifle/ ," takes its name from the URL of an online petition (started by Samson) to have hockey player Reggie Leach inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame. Multiple reviews of *Provincial* cite the song's URL title as the first of its kind. "Stop Error" is a hymn-like, harmony-heavy description of the speaker's computer crashing whilst playing the video game "Call of Duty 4," causing him to "stare out at the road where cars and snowplows scroll by, a broken like of code from some embedded program that executes our town." The melody of the song is based on J.S. Bach's chorale "Oh Sacred Head Now Wounded," the familiar swelling harmonies juxtaposing harshly against Samson's reedy voice warbling lines like "My monitor is frozen" and "Make HTML tags…beyond the screens of death." In this song, Samson deliberately sets a "weak" character against an unequivocally "strong" melody, lending the character's frozen monitor – a moment of legitimate crisis for him – a degree of real dignity.

Perhaps the most compelling example of the unique interaction between character, text, and virtual reality that Samson stages on *Provincial*, however, occurs in its lead single, "When I

Write My Master's Thesis." Before performing the song live at 10th Perennial Harvest Moon Festival in Clearwater, Manitoba, a town of sixty-eight people, Samson introduced the song by saying that, "Near here, there's this old [tuberculosis] sanatorium at Ninette [another small town in Manitoba], and I've always been really interested in it…so I wrote this song from the perspective of someone who's really interested in the Ninette Sanatorium." Based "loosely" on the oft-covered (Elliot Smith, The Grateful Dead, The Band) Bob Dylan song titled "When I Paint My Masterpiece," the song details the struggles of a graduate student who is trying to write their "master's thesis in I guess History," but is "having some trouble finishing" (Samson). The graduate student eventually abandons his fruitless search in the "archives," and embarks on his own odyssey in the name of securing historical justice for the inmates of the Ninette Sanatorium.

Rather than attempting to "weaken" Dylan, Samson is once again borrowing strength from an established, perhaps even "classic" songwriter. Unlike Bach's influence on Samson's "Stop Error," however, Dylan's song is arguably "weak" to begin with, using a fanciful extended metaphor to describe the weariness (and increasing "weakness") of the song's speaker. Samson's narrator, however, remains the weaker of the two, his weakness stemming from within himself rather than from outside sources. Though the Epitaph website describes "Master's Thesis" as a moment of "jukebox serendipity – Bob Dylan's 'When I Paint My Masterpiece,' sailing out from the corner of a Yukon dive-bar," it quickly becomes clear that Samson is interacting with Dylan's song in a sustained manner, each section mirroring Dylan's already tongue-in-cheek lyrics. However, Samson is not merely mimicking Dylan, nor is he riding on the coattails of Dylan's extended lyrical joke. Instead, he transplants the ill-fated and perhaps naïve aspirations of Dylan's character onto a video-game-playing, familiar contemporary counterpart, who somehow manages to be all the more tragic for his twenty-first century normalcy.

The song's epigraph is from the first lines of Dylan's "When I Paint My Masterpiece": "Oh the streets of Rome are filled with rubble. / Ancient footprints are everywhere." The opening lines of Samson's song offer, perhaps not unexpectedly, a weaker, even ironic version of Dylan's words: "Oh the streets of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* fill with smoke." *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is a violent narrative video game fittingly based on a character's journey along several fictional highways enroute to his hometown, in search of justice for his murdered mother. Both Dylan and Samson's characters narrate their troubles within the same linguistic framework. Dylan's painter says: "I've got me a date with Botticelli's niece / She promised that she'd be right there with me / When I paint my masterpiece." Samson's grad student is a more spectral figure, sitting home alone, playing video games and refusing to answer the door, while "the loneliness increases. She said she'd come back home when I write my master's thesis." Samson hardly shies away from casting his character in the ghostly half-light of an unresponsive photograph or screen, countering Dylan's painter's "Oh, the hours I've spent inside the Coliseum / Dodging lions and wastin' time" with "Oh the hours I spent in the archives wearing cotton gloves, shuffling photos from the Ninette Sanatorium Halloween parties. Emaciated ghost hiding in those curtain's creases, I'll let you haunt the world when I write my master's thesis." Samson's speaker, in these lines, seems to configure his thesis as a way to emancipate the lost stories of the patients in the Ninette Sanatorium – that he never finishes his project further contributes to his weakness.

The bridge in both songs is only two lines long – in Dylan's case, the obviously facetious "Sailin' round the world in a dirty gondola / Oh, to be back in the land of Coca-Cola!" operates as half-hearted nostalgia for the public, corporate face of his nation, while Samson's "No more marking first year papers. No more citing sources" is a simultaneously smaller and more

desperate wish for deliverance from the character's current state. Each character eventually leaves the place that they have been speaking from, the Spanish Steps in Rome and a living room in Manitoba, respectively. Dylan's painter flies out of Rome and lands "in Brussels / On a plane ride so bumpy that I almost cried," while Samson's grad student really does cry, and not only because of the bumps: "So I left home, cried the bumpy ride to Highway 23 and started west." The songs end with a radical reimagining of each character's life in the event that they complete their respective masterpieces. Dylan's character chooses to describe the present moment in language that leaves little doubt of his distaste for it ("Newspapermen eating candy / Had to be held down by big police"), leading him to repeat his perhaps unattainable, and somewhat vague, affirmation that "Someday, everything is gonna be diff'rent / When I paint my masterpiece."

The ending of Samson's song at first appears to be the more positive of the two. The grad student leaves his stagnant home, drives west on Highway 23 (toward the historic site of the Ninette Sanatorium) and imagines that,

> They'll be there to say that I don't need to take their stupid test, greet
> me with banners and balloons, and my hard drive smashed to pieces.
> Nothing left for me to save when I write my master's thesis. It's all
> going to change when I write my master's thesis.

Samson's character, however, despite his power-chord driven, upbeat musical accompaniment, once again proves to be an unexpectedly tragic figure. The notion of one's life drastically changing in the face of painting a "masterpiece" is so far-fetched for the average person that it must pass into the realm of metaphor to be understood. Writing a master's thesis, however, is not entirely out of the question – thousands of people have written and continue to write (and finish!) their master's theses. Samson's narrator's dream is heart-wrenchingly *possible*, making it all the

more tragic when he cannot seem to fulfill it. Abandoning his video games and archives, he drives down a Manitoban highway toward the historic Ninette Sanatorium in search of an authentic, unmediated experience, expecting to be greeted with "banners and balloons." There is a final moment of quiet tragedy in this song, however, that may take some research on the part of the listener to unearth, but is an underlying dark tone in Samson's meticulously researched lyric: the site of the Ninette Sanatorium, which officially closed in 1972 (Trivett), has been transformed into an RV park. The double meaning of the line "Emaciated ghost hiding in those curtain's creases, I'll let you haunt the world when I write my master's thesis" is revealed only in the context of the song as a whole. The emaciated ghost is not only the thin man draped in a sheet with eyes cut out, as pictured in a black and white archival photograph from *Ninette Sanatorium Memories* in *Provincial's* liner notes, but also serves as a metaphor for what Samson's increasingly spectral character is becoming. Bereft of any and all concrete ties to his research, Samson's grad student will likely retreat back into the virtual reality of the video game he is playing at the beginning of the song, isolated and entrapped by a history he was unable to (re)create.

Immediately following "When I Write My Master's Thesis," "Letter in Icelandic from the Ninette San" is both a sequel and a prequel to "Thesis," constituting the missing puzzle piece in the woeful MA student's unresolved thesis. In an interview with CBC Radio 3, Samson described "Letter in Icelandic from the Ninette San" as

> A piece of research, a letter…sitting in the drawer, untranslated…I think of it as something that's like the key to [the previous song's protagonist's] research that he's just ignored and it's just sitting there and it will never be read.

The “Letter” is a yet another instance of a “weak” moment in history being lost. Even an MA student with a fascination for the “‘San” in which the dying speaker spends his last days is ultimately unable to “let [the tuberculosis patient] haunt the world when [he] write[s his] master’s thesis.” In these two songs, text therefore has the effect of simultaneously silencing two disparate moments in time: the Icelandic tuberculosis patient’s letter to his brother will never be read by a wider audience, and, as a result, the MA student will never finish his thesis. “It’s all going to change when I write my master’s thesis,” the ever-hopeful, if ever-misguided student sings in the final line of his song. “Sell the boat to Arnason, and then go. Stand up straight in the place you’re longing for, and don’t write to me anymore,” the dying patient urges his brother. This kind of cross-historical, linguistic, and emotional missed connection that is so often present in Samson’s work has rarely been as simply and poignantly posed as it is in these two very different songs. The letter itself, Samson says, “comes from Riverton [Manitoba], and goes through the desk in Winnipeg, and then down to Ninette where it was written. So it kind of brings the past and present and all the roads together” (Lawrence). Not for the first time in Samson’s lyrics, it is art, specifically song lyrics, that allows two historical moments to come into hypothetical conversation with each other. Though the MA student may never find the “Letter in Icelandic from the Ninette San,” we the listeners *do* – and, what is more, we will remember the student, the dying man, and the incredible gap between them that could have been breached with the translation of a single letter.

Chapter Three

"My Mother Was A Chinese Trapeze Artist":

Typologies of Unreliable Narration

i. "A 'penny spectacular' approach": Formal Unreliability

From the five-piece band's first appearance in 2001 with a self-released EP titled *5 Songs* that had a six song track-list, The Decemberists have been playing with the idea of narrative unreliability in both form and content. The Decemberists' official biography, for example, appearing on their website for the first several years the band was together (it has subsequently been replaced by individual biographies of the band's members), is a bizarre, meandering, entirely fictional account of how The Decemberists first met in a Turkish Bath House. The five members of the band are variously described as "waifish and non-plussed...lay[ing] supine by the railroad tracks" (Chris Funk), possessed of an accordion and "the aplomb only an immigrant Hungarian could muster" (Jenny Conlee), two eavesdropping "young military dignitaries...appropriately lathered" (Rachel Blumberg and Nate Query), and "the poor, bespectacled Colin Meloy," who works at the kiosk where the other four band members "return[ed] their soiled undergarments." From their first (fictional) meeting, the band was aware how unlikely a combination of people and instruments they were, "But it was too late: an indelible bond had been soldered in that moment of recognition."

Meloy is clearly cognizant that the content of his songs, though often rooted in history and literature, is anything but entirely factually accurate: "I think the songs themselves are kind of like a 'penny spectacular' approach to history. I definitely pick out the more exotic bits and tend to be drawn to the more sensationalistic elements" (qtd. Armstrong). Meloy likens his

approach to crafting narratives in songs to a writer composing "a short story or a chapter in novel" (Armstrong), but notes the additional "delicacy" of "using characters...in pop songs" (qtd. Roll n.p.): "you don't want to be too overt...[or] literal," Meloy says, "because then it comes across as being somewhat schticky" (Roll). Since songs rely on poetic elements ("syntax...alliteration...consonance" [Roll]) to form their narrative building blocks to a far greater extent than prose fiction does, the lyricist must constantly walk the line between poetics and narrative clarity:

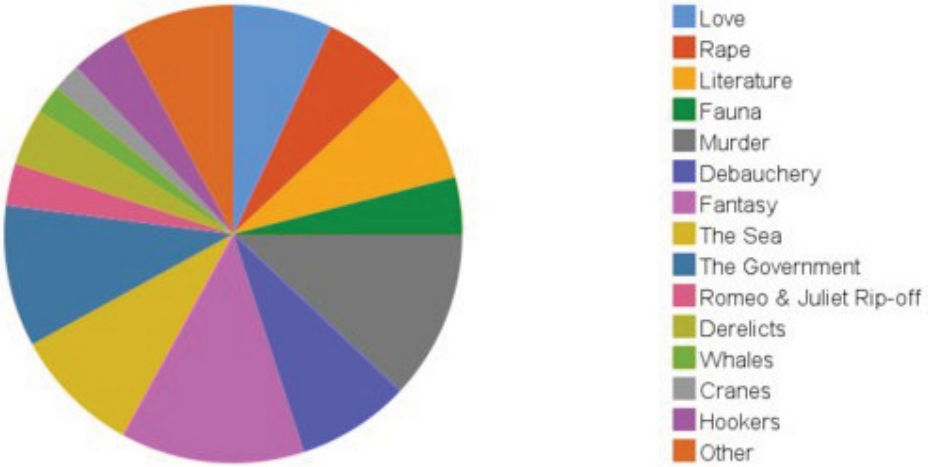
> You want the narrative to be there, and you want a fleshed-out character to be there, but you don't want to spell it out in really dry sentences or dry verses like you would in a novel – especially not in the style that I'm most interested in, which is really elaborate and fanciful and playful (Meloy, qtd. Roll).

"Elaborate and fanciful and playful" is an excellent description of Meloy's lyrical aesthetic: formally and linguistically elaborate (some would certainly say needlessly elaborate), fanciful in terms of narrative content, and almost always playful, even (perhaps especially), when its content is the darkest.

That Meloy's songs can be described as 'narrative' has been well established in rock and roll criticism, in interviews with Meloy, and, somewhat self-reflexively, in the text of The Decemberists' lyrics, "Red Right Ankle" (2003), for example, beginning all three of its verses with the line, "This is the story of..." Rock and roll critics appear to have come to a tacit agreement to view The Decemberists as the charmingly eccentric uncles of all contemporary indie bands that tend towards the baroque, a staff writer on *Cracked.com,* for example, indulgently terming The Decemberists' *The Hazards of Love* "a goddamn rock opera." As part of

the same *Cracked* article, the writer(s) created a fondly tongue-in-cheek (but admittedly accurate) pie-graph of narrative themes in The Decemberists' songs:

Typical Decemberists Songs



(Cracked.com)

With several common themes of unreliable narration featuring heavily in The Decemberists' lyrical canon (love, murder, fantasy, revenge, etc.), it is hardly surprising that many of Meloy's narrators can be accurately described as 'unreliable.' Fond of rakish and picaresque characters (e.g. "The Rake's Song," "The Bachelor and the Bride," *Picaresque*), and employing an often baroque approach to narrating settings and relationships (e.g. "Odalisque," "Los Angeles I'm Yours," "O Valencia!," *Her Majesty The Decemberists*), Meloy's "playful" writing style allows him to embody a multitude of eccentric, bizarre, and utterly unreliable narrative personae without compromising The Decemberists' essential authenticity as a band. When unreliable narration becomes one's hallmark, in fact, a departure from the distinctive narrative mode to, for example, biography-based confessional lyricism, would somewhat paradoxically feel more unreliable to fans. The practiced listener treads carefully when entering the strange world that The Decemberists have created with their music, lyrics, visual art, and videos, always on the lookout for tricks – the willingness and ability to parse the complicated,

darkly humorous jokes and asides that are embedded everywhere has in fact become a requirement for all 'true' fans of the band. Realizing, for example that The Decemberists' 2009 tour, titled "A Short Fazed Hovel," is an anagram for *The Hazards of Love*, or decoding the pun on "frigid air" / "Frigidaire" in the first line of "The Legionnaire's Lament" is de rigueur for dedicated fans, who by and large consider themselves an intellectual, musically discerning, and irony-savvy group.

Focusing mainly on the complicated subjectivities Meloy creates in his songs, I will now interrogate the ways in which song lyrics can embody three loose types of narrative unreliability based on Theresa Heyd's typology. Moving through each of the three kinds of unreliability, I will also make brief reference to a variety of contemporary indie songs that work in similar ways, to gesture to the broader application of this phenomenon. Each of the following sections will begin with a formal theoretical discussion, and then move into detailed, applied examples based in close readings.

ii. "I am a writer, writer of fictions[6]": Intentional Unreliability

The first of the three types of unreliable narrators to be examined is characterized as *intentionally* unreliable, a quietly deceptive (Heyd 227), self-aware, "untrustworthy" (Olson) liar that is "aware of the facts he is omitting, and even more importantly...aware of the high relevance of the omitted information" (Heyd 228). These narrators, "while probably not the most common type...[can] be regarded as the most extreme case of pragmatic deviation in narratives" (Heyd 228), because they deliberately mislead their audience by "underreporting and[/or] misreporting" (Phelan and Martin). Heyd emphasizes the moral reprehensibility of these narrators, and indeed the example she cites is of the murderous first-person narrator of Agatha

[6] "The Engine Driver," The Decemberists, (*Picaresque*)

Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (Heyd 227-8), who deliberately withholds the fact that *he* has murdered Roger Ackroyd until the final pages of the novel.

The musical equivalent of the murder mystery, the murder ballad, is an enduringly popular and incredibly versatile form. While not all narrators in murder ballads are unreliable in the sense of intentionally deceiving the listener, *Murder Ballads* (1996), Australian/British alternative band Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds' most commercially successful album to date, features several such untrustworthy characters. "Where the Wild Roses Grow," a duet with Kylie Minogue, is a first person account of the character Eliza Day's murder at the hands of her lover, narrated alternately by the ghost of Eliza and her killer. The killer, voiced by Nick Cave, never explicitly admits to murdering Eliza, referencing her death only obliquely in his final verse, with the lines "On the last day.../ I kissed her goodbye, said, 'all beauty must die' / And lent down and planted a rose between her teeth." It is the ghostly Eliza who confirms the details of her murder, singing, "And the last thing I heard was a muttered word / As he knelt above me with a rock in his fist." Although clearly a much shorter, less detailed narrative, the killer narrator's deliberate underreporting and withholding of information renders him untrustworthy in a similar manner as Christie's narrator.

Though Heyd categorizes deliberately unreliable narrators' untrustworthiness as "morally unacceptable" because it "breaches a social taboo" (228), they need not be tricksy murderers to qualify as intentionally unreliable. The most prevalent type of deliberately untrustworthy narrators in Meloy's lyrics are those that use fiction to write themselves self-consciously false new identities in order to temporarily escape their less appealing realities. The first of Meloy's lyrics to be discussed, from *5 Songs*, is also arguably one of his most personal, a rarity for a songwriter that is interested "in writing in a more narrative fashion rather than more obtuse or

abstract pastiches of pop" (Meloy, qtd. Moss 56). In the aftermath of a "super intense, three-day river trip...[that was] one big fight" with his extended family, Meloy decided to write a song "basically completely re-creating the family in this really fantastical setting, using myself as this sort of sad anti-hero" (Meloy, qtd. Nelson n.p.). Meloy was characteristically convinced that the resulting song, "My Mother Was a Chinese Trapeze Artist," was "too bizarre to ever appeal to anyone" (Nelson).

Even without knowing the biographical context for this song, it would be clear that "Trapeze" is a fantastical, tongue-in-cheek tale in which linkages between events and family members are made primarily because the narrator enjoys the sound of the words next to each other (in the title alone, the satisfying internal rhyme of "Chinese" and "trapeze" is just slightly too convenient). Meloy's stately, somber performance of this decidedly untrustworthy narrator's story further emphasizes the sense that the narrator is playing with his audience, experimenting with how far he can stretch their credulity before they catch on. Beginning with his parents' meeting in "pre-war Paris...At a fête in Aix-en-Provence" where they "toasted to Edith Piaf / And the fall of the Reich," the narrator seems to wantonly jump between time periods, his abandoned baby sister being rescued by "a communist / Who'd deserted his ranks / To follow his dream / To start up a punk rock band in South Carolina" and the newborn narrator himself being "bet...away / To a blind brigadier in a game / Of high stakes canasta." The narrator, despite becoming a successful sailor, ends his song with the wistful "But sometimes I long to be landlocked / And to work in a bakery" and a series of mournful melodic choral "ooh's" that underscore the surreal nature of the tale he has just spun.

The narrator of "The Engine Driver" (*Picaresque*) also tries on several different identities in his song, stating "I'm an engine driver," "I'm a country linesman," and "I'm a moneylender"

at the beginning of each of the song's three verses. It quickly becomes apparent that the narrator is attempting to inhabit self-consciously fictional personae in order to escape the hold a former lover still has over him. In the chorus, the narrator makes another "I am a..." assertion of identity, but this one, to all appearances, is authentic:

> I am a writer, writer of fictions
>
> I am the heart that you call home
>
> And I've written pages upon pages
>
> Trying to rid you from my bones

The narrator's claim of being a "writer of fictions" appears to be reliable because his statement is "in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms)" (Booth 158) – in other words, the narrator *is,* in fact, a "writer of fictions" – his song is almost entirely comprised of his attempts to write the personal fictions of being an engine driver, country linesman, and moneylender, into alternative realities for himself. With each verse and chorus being interspersed with the twice-repeated line "And if you don't love me let me go," the narrator seems clear in his project of writing personal histories convincing enough to substitute for his lovelorn narrative reality. The song's presence on an album named *Picaresque* also alerts the listener that the narrator is likely to be "roguish and dishonest" (OED), even without his deliberate schizoid assertions of four separate identities in a song that is only just over four minutes long.

One of the clearest examples of a deliberately unreliable narrator in Meloy's work is found in "The Perfect Crime #2" (*The Crane Wife,* 2006) and "The Perfect Crime #1" (*The Crane Wife* Outtake, electronic release, 2006). In both songs, the narrator boasts extravagantly about the "the perfect crime" that he has planned, especially in the triumphant, horn-

accompanied "PC #1," in which he asserts "You got to get it so you can't put a pin through your alibi" and "I got a mock-up of the lockup / Where they stock up on their pocket change" with wild linguistic abandon. By the conclusion of "PC #1," however, it becomes clear that the narrator's perfect crime has turned out to be rather less perfect than anticipated: "We hit a snag when we tripped the alarm / Because the dock side spics had been tipped off in time...I will do time / For this perfect crime." "PC #2," appearing independently of its prequel on *The Crane Wife*, is significantly musically darker and almost self-reflexively criminally repetitive in its chorus of "It was the perfect, perfect, perfect, perfect, perfect, perfect, perfect, perfect crime." The narrator clearly hopes to lend an epic overtone to his tale in his first lines, "Sing, muse, of the passion of the pistol / Sing, muse, of the warning by the whistle." The narrator's perfect crime having already failed, he obsessively recounts the details of the night's events, blaming everything from "the bagman's quaking...fingers" to the "Two words...spoke on the tap-wire / The agents' ploy finds a sure-fire backfire" for the disintegration of his "bullet-proof plan" ("PC #1"). Without access to "PC #1," however, reading defeat in the narrator's account of "PC #2" takes a subtlety greater than most listeners possess after being subjected to the numbing litany of "It was the perfect, perfect, perfect, perfect....crime" multiple times (Meloy pronounces the word "perfect" over eighty times in the recorded version of "PC #2," and occasionally defiantly repeats it even *more* frequently in live performances). The impression the casual listener takes away from "PC #2" is, therefore, that the narrator's crime actually *was* "the perfect crime" – which is arguably exactly the effect the seasoned criminal was trying to elicit.

iii. "The work of an errant heel[7]": Self-Deceiving Narrators

The "most 'life-like' narrative technique" (Heyd 231) in the gamut of unreliable narration, so-called "situationally-motivated," "fallible" (Olson 2003) narrators are either the

[7] "The Sporting Life," The Decemberists (*Picaresque*)

victims of misperception or engaged in acts of linguistic self-preservation. Betrayed through "euphemisms, half-truths, [and] memory gaps" (Heyd 228), these narrators are generally attempting to "suppress" (Heyd 229) the truth rather than intentionally or unintentionally fabricate untruths. This kind of narration often results in what Zerwick has called the "unintentional self-incrimination of the personalized narrator" (156) as self-deceiving, white-lying embellishers that, were they in a position to defend themselves, would likely take offense to being termed "unreliable." Self-deceiving narrators are the kind of narrators that have most prompted critics to emphasize the centrality of readers recognizing and decoding of "semantic infelicities" (Fludernik 353, see also Riggan 1981) to the positive identification unreliable narrators. Multiple, perhaps even *most* songs fall under this category, as almost all songs about dissolving relationships in which the narrator asserts something along the lines of "this is all your fault" are likely at least partially stretching the truth. There is a very fine line between unreliability and a flair for the dramatic in storytelling with this type of narrator.

The narrator in Samson's "Relative Surplus Value" (2007) for example, is revealed to be potentially unreliable only at the conclusion of his song, when the listener realizes that the entirety of the song's narrative has been addressed to the narrator's former lover over the telephone. Details of the narrator's story, in which he describes being unceremoniously fired by the CEO of his company whilst on a business trip to the city in which his former lover lives, take on new resonances when the intended narrative audience is identified. That the narrator is trying to convince his former lover to come pick him up suggests a careful marshaling and delivery of facts intended to evoke sympathy, lines such as "You won't be laughing when you hear how this one ends" becoming especially relevant in this new context. Ending with the somewhat pitiful, "I know we haven't talked in a while, but can you come get me?," both the song's narrative and

narrator have a particularly life-like quality to them despite the seemingly throwaway deployment of erudite similes like "the pause felt like an extra year of high school." Unreliable as these "self-deceiving" narrators may be, therefore, it is difficult to find fault with their accounts of events as, factual inconsistencies and all, they appear so authentically *human* – tweaking a story in order to appear in a better light, even if it is only a minor alteration of the order in which one relays events, is a nearly universal foible.

One of the most awkwardly charming narrators in Meloy's oeuvre is from "The Sporting Life," the fourth track on The Decemberists' album *Picaresque*. Describing his unidentified sports team's crushing loss in their final match of the season, "The Sporting Life's" narrator attempts to subtly minimize his own role in his team's defeat. Beginning with the lines, "I fell on the playing field / The work of an errant heel," the narrator implies both that his fall had a catastrophic effect on the team's chances of victory and that it was entirely the fault of a malicious player on the other team. The speaker continually vacillates between his own perspective, prone on the playing field, and that of the often hostile spectators, who, at best, "condescend and fix on [him] a frown." The spectators all appear to undergo startling transformations upon the narrator's fall. The narrator's father "had had such hopes / For a son who would take the ropes / And fulfill all his old athletic aspirations / But apparently now there's some complications," while his girlfriend is now "arm in arm / With the captain of the other team," and his coach is "looking down / ...disappointment in his knitted brow / 'I should've known' / He thinks again / 'I never should have put him in.'" Clearly an unwilling participant in "the sporting life," the narrator had been pleased to have "known no humiliation / In front of [his] friends and close relations" prior to his fall. Judging by the narrator's use of the word "humiliation" and the specifically recriminatory attitudes of the spectators (which would seem

misdirected if the fall was entirely orchestrated by a player on the other team), however, the narrator of "The Sporting Life" arguably misreports the details of his tumble. The disproportionate shame (rather than anger) that he exhibits in the lines "while I am lying here / Trying to fight the tears / I'll prove to the crowd that I come out stronger / Though I think I might lie here a little longer" also support the idea that the "errant heel" the narrator describes was, in fact, his own.

Another career-focused narrator primarily interested in "face-saving" (Heyd 230) is the narrator of "I Was Meant For The Stage," the penultimate song on *Her Majesty The Decemberists*. Addressed equally to his directly disapproving parents and, as the song progresses, an imagined semi-adoring public, the narrator becomes increasingly expansive in his claims of having a divinely ordained calling to the stage. Though he is "certain" that he is "meant for the stage" from the very first verse, the narrator initially employs a slightly apologetic, ironic tone, as in the lines, "Mother, please, be proud. / Father, be forgiving. / Even though you told me / 'Son, you'll never make a living.'" In the first chorus, the narrator begins to unconsciously drastically overstate his case, a hallmark of unreliable narration, by asserting that, "as the spotlights fade away, / And you're escorted through the foyer, / You will resume your callow ways, / But I was meant for the stage." Already having unwittingly distanced his audience by insulting their "callow ways," the narrator seals his fate of being universally disliked (an actor's nightmare) by resignedly announcing: "The heavens at my birth / Intended me for stardom, / Rays of light shone down on me / And all my sins were pardoned." Though the actor-narrator bravely contends that he was "meant" for all aspects of his profession, both "applause" and "derision," there is a strong sense that a bad review, implying perhaps that he was *not* meant for the stage, would cripple this narrator's fragile sense of self-worth. Meloy's melancholy, stately

delivery of the narrator's excessively hubristic assertions of stardom belie the actor's self-deception, weakening the authoritative ethos of the character by creating an audible distance between the narrator and the implied author.

One of two songs in The Decemberists' lyrical canon that detail the narrator's relationship with a female spy, "The Bagman's Gambit" (*Picaresque* – see also "Valerie Plame" from *Always the Bridesmaid: Volume 1*) spins a tale of subterfuge and forbidden love rivaling any John le Carré novel. Complex in both form and content, "The Bagman's Gambit" makes use of several tropes common to texts with an unreliable narrator, including a frame text, a narrator who admits to having lied in the past (and whose very profession relies on subterfuge), and rhetorical appeals to the narrative audience to condone the narrator's tale. The song begins in the present, with the narrator seeing a news-clip of a thus far unidentified "you" "in some anonymous room," having "shot a plainclothes cop on the ten o'clock" whilst "on the lam from the law." Astonished by his own recognition ("it couldn't be you"), the narrator begins to recount his former acquaintance with the captured woman, and, with a stunning economy of language, gives the listener an immediate sense of the nature and scope of their relationship:

> And I recall that fall, I was working for the government
> And in a bathroom stall off the National Mall
> How we kissed so sweetly
> How could I refuse a favor or two?
> For a tryst in the greenery, I gave you documents and microfilm, too

The narrator goes on to detail his complicity in rescuing his lover from being unmasked: "Purloined in Petrograd / They were suspicious of where your loyalties lay / So I paid off a bureaucrat / To convince your captors there to secret you away." With so many voluntary

infractions against the truth in so few lines, listeners already have reason to suspect the veracity of the bagman's supposed role in the tale he is spinning. Though he represents his affair as an all-encompassing love that overcame the odds, the bagman's language betrays his present, more removed view of the liaison as, at its base, a transaction. A bagman is defined as "One who collects or administers the collection of money obtained by racketeering and other dishonest means" (OED), so a mixture of business and fraud would appear to be this narrator's neutral mode. Having unconsciously sown the seeds of his own unreliability, "the bagman's gambit" itself attains a new degree of complexity. Since a gambit necessarily involves a sacrificial element for the purpose of longtime gain, the listener is left wondering what the bagman in this song actually sacrificed, and what he gained in return. If he saw their relationship as a transaction, what does the bagman receive in return for keeping his lover's identity safe in the long run? The possibility remains at the song's conclusion that the bagman may have been complicit in his former lover's capture, rather than instrumental in her release, as he would have the listener believe.

Accidentally giving up the narrative game through minor inconsistencies, excessive bravado, and accidentally self-sabotaging their ethos as storytellers, unintentionally unreliable narrators are usually guilty of pride rather than deviousness. Not, in general, the most intelligent of narrative personae, unintentionally unreliable narrators are also the easiest to 'forgive' for their white lies, their transparent attempts at attaching a false grandeur to their stories immediately evocative of what is perhaps one of the most common human fallacies: a fragile ego.

iv. "Expect that you think that I should be haunted[8]": Dispositionally Unreliable Narrators

The most obviously unreliable, narrators that deviate from "fundamental cognitive and intellectual norms" (Heyd 231) as a result of their "naiveté, lack of education, or even mental illness" (Heyd 231) abound in both novels and song lyrics, perhaps because writing from the perspective of a deviant character poses a unique challenge. "Dispositionally unreliable" is a term borrowed from Olson (2003: 102), who cites "ingrained behavioral traits or some current self-interest" (102) as the root of these narrators' unreliability. Similarly, Nünning describes this kind of untrustworthy narration as stemming from the reader's awareness of a discord between the narrator's "commentary and interpretations" and "conventional notions of sound judgments" (2005: 4). Nünning also observes that many critics' definitions of unreliability focus on the perception of an ethical or "moral distance between the norms of the implied or real author and those articulated by the narrator" (2005: 4). Encompassing two of Riggan's four types of unreliable narrators, madmen and naïfs, the dispositionally unreliable narrator may or may not be aware that "narratees may have doubts about his mental status" (Heyd 231).

Song lyrics featuring narrators that are "divergent" in any (or several) of the ways described above simply abound in the indie genre, most likely because so many indie lyricists have abandoned the personally confessional mode. First person accounts from the perspective of impenitent murderers are especially prevalent. "The Gardener" (*Shallow Grave*, 2008), by a Swedish indie singer-songwriter with the somewhat misleading stage name The Tallest Man On Earth, spins a story of a jealous serial-killer burying his victims in his luxuriant garden "so I could stay the tallest man in your eyes, babe." The eponymous gardener hints at his unreliability from the first lines of his song, singing "I sense a runner in the garden / Though my judgment's known to fail / Once built a steamboat in a meadow / 'Cause I'd forgotten how to sail."

[8] "The Rake's Song," The Decemberists (*The Hazards of Love*)

The tragically transparent self-aggrandizing narrator in American alternative indie band The National's "All the Wine" (*Alligator*, 2005) offers a list of quasi-metaphors proclaiming his own excellence, and concludes in his choruses that "all the wine is all for me." Painfully tongue-in-cheek, especially when considered against lyricist Matt Berninger's almost uniformly melancholic lyrical oeuvre (more typical song titles/subjects include "Sorrow," "Terrible Love," "Afraid of Everyone," and "Humiliation"), lines like "I'm put together beautifully...A wingspan unbelievable / I'm a festival, I'm a parade...So sorry but the motorcade will have to go around me this time, / 'cause God is on my side" are imbued with a dark, brooding undertone of willful self-deception that appears almost manic in its fervency. In order for one of Berniger's almost uniformly morose narrators to sing such lines, in other words, which represent a massive "distance between the norms of the implied or real author and those articulated by the narrator" (Nünning 2005: 4), the narrator must have almost certainly lost touch with reality.

John Darnielle, lyricist for American lo-fi/alternative indie mainstays The Mountain Goats, is perhaps best known for his eccentric characterizations developed over lengthy song-cycles. "No Children" (*Tallahassee,* 2002), part of a song-cycle about a dysfunctional couple that Darnielle has termed the "The Alpha Series" (*TheMountainGoats.net*), is narrated by one particularly bitter member of the couple. The song concludes with the following emphatically delivered lines:

> I hope when you think of me years down the line,
> You can't find one good thing to say
> And I'd hope that if I found the strength to walk out
> You'd stay the hell out of my way
> I am drowning, there is no sign of land

You are coming down with me, hand in unlovable hand

And I hope you die. I hope we both die.

Delivered in an impassioned, near-shouted deluge of bitter emotion, the narrator's viciously tenacious, unwelcome remaining love for his wife seeps through his angry lines, leaving the listener with the impression that the narrator does not hate his wife nearly as much as he hates himself for still loving her. Lines like "I hope that our few remaining friends / Give up on trying to save us / I hope we come up with a fail-safe plot / To piss off the dumb few that forgave us" and "I hope I cut myself shaving tomorrow / I hope it bleeds all day long" also foster an awareness in the listener of a discord between the narrator's "commentary and interpretations" and "conventional notions of sound judgments" (Nünning 2005: 4). The cumulative result of the narrator's unconscious self-portrait is one of a frenetically disjointed subjectivity, fighting equally for and against the maintenance of his deeply troubled marriage.

Nünning's primary textual example of an unreliable narrator is from Ian McEwan's short story "Dead As They Come" (1978), in which the narrator falls in love with a woman who, the reader eventually discovers, is actually a store mannequin "which he decides to buy and to call Helen" (Nünning 2005: 9). The song "Funny Little Frog" (*The Life Pursuit,* 2006) by alternative indie band Belle & Sebastian tells almost the same story: the narrator addresses a non-responsive female "you" throughout, enumerating the ways he loves her with lines such as "You're my picture on the wall / You're my vision in the hall / You're the one I'm talking to / When I get in from my work." It is not until the end of the song that the listener discovers that the narrator is actually in love with a celebrity, who likely has no idea that he exists: "You are the cover of my magazine / You're my fashion tip, a living museum / I'd pay to visit you on rainy Sundays / I'll maybe tell you all about it someday." Finally, and perhaps the least threatening of all of these

dispositionally unreliable narrators, is the woebegone narrator of The Weakerthans' song "Bigfoot!" (*Reunion Tour*), who truly believes that he has seen Bigfoot on a frozen lake in rural Northern Manitoba. Though excruciatingly aware that others do not believe him, the narrator remains certain of his story: "I'll go through it all again, and watch their doubtful smiles begin. But the visions that I see believe in me." The song concludes with the narrator seeking refuge with the "visions" that he sees because, he warbles, "I don't want to talk about it anymore."

While dispositionally unreliable narrators are thus a relatively common lyrical trope, there are few songwriters that appear to revel in the form to the same extent as Meloy. "A Cautionary Song" (*Castaways and Cutouts*), for example, like Belle & Sebastian's "Funny Little Frog," contains a subtle twist ending, one of the hallmarks of unreliable narration (Wilson: 2006). Although "A Cautionary Song" establishes the identity of the narrator's audience, a seemingly ungrateful child, within its first lines, the speaker never explicitly divulges his own identity. The narrator instead gives a suspiciously detailed account of where the child's mother "goes when everybody else is soundly sleeping." The place turns out to be the "harbour," where she waits for several sailors to "row her out to packets where the sailor's sorry racket calls for maidenhead." The child's mother is passed from ship to ship "'Til at last she's satisfied the lot of the marina's teeming minions / In their opinions." At the end of her ordeal, the sailors "tell her not to say a thing to cousin, kindred, kith, or kin or she'll end up dead / And they throw her thirty dollars and return her to the harbour" which is, the narrator informs the likely horrified child, "how you're fed."

The speaker, with a last, slightly sick twist of the narrative knife, leaves the child with this piece of "cautionary" advice: "So be kind to your mother, though she may seem an awful bother, / And the next time she tries to feed you collard greens, / Remember what she does when

you're asleep." Assuming that there is some veracity to the narrator's story and he is not merely attempting to permanently terrify the child to whom he is addressing his tale, the narrator appears to give away his own identity (and arguably his complicity in the woman's horrifying fate) in the line "And they tell her not to say a thing to cousin, kindred, kith, or kin or she'll end up dead." The narrator has already told us that the child's mother goes to the harbour "when everybody else is soundly sleeping," and a woman who has just been essentially gang-raped by "the lot of the marina's teeming minions" whilst gagged ("to keep her sorry tongue from any speaking, or screaming") and tied up ("her ankles clasped, her arms so rudely pinioned") is highly unlikely to discount the seriousness of the sailors' death threat should she tell anyone what had transpired. The only logical conclusion is that the narrator was present for the entirety of the events he describes. The "they" that the narrator consistently refers to in reference to "the marina's teeming minions," therefore, would more accurately be replaced with "we." That the narrator chooses to relay this harrowing tale to the woman's child further emphasizes his moral turpitude, rendering him an entirely untrustworthy narrator.

If the narrator of "A Cautionary Song" only knew what kind of long-term consequences can arise from children being made aware of violations against their mothers' honour, he likely would have held his tongue. The narrator of "The Mariner's Revenge Song" (*Picaresque*) was just one such child, who, at the time of his narration, has spent at least the last fifteen years of his life preparing to exact vicious revenge on the perpetrator of his mother's downfall. Melville's *Moby Dick*, Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and the Biblical story of Jonah and the Whale are all clear intertexts for "The Mariner's Revenge Song," which, at 8:46, constitutes The Decemberists' longest single-song narrative. The song begins with the narrator and another "mariner," their "ships' sole survivors," literally inside the "belly of a whale." Since, the narrator

observes with an early pun, they "have some time to kill," the narrator begins to recount a tale clearly intended to strike the fear of God in the other mariner. "You may not remember me, / I was a child of three, / And you, a lad of eighteen," the narrator sings, "But I remember you, / And I will relate to you / How our histories interweave." The addressee, now the captain of a ship, ostensibly took advantage of the narrator's recently widowed mother ("Her sheets still warm with him") when the narrator was a child, and then disappeared, leaving behind his "gambling arrears" and rendering the narrator's mother "a poor consumptive wretch." When "the magistrate / Reclaimed [their] small estate," the narrator's mother "lost her mind" and died shortly thereafter. As she died, however, she whispered the words that would become the deadly refrain driving the narrator to ceaseless "thought[s] of revenge": "Find him, bind him / Tie him to a pole and break / His fingers to splinters / Drag him to a hole until he / Wakes up naked / Clawing at the ceiling of his grave." The breathless female singer's whispery soprano delivery of these lines enhances their ghastly nursery-rhyme quality.

Having tracked the "rake and roustabout" for multiple years and spending "twenty months at sea," the narrator finally had the captain's ship "in [his] sight" when "came this rumbling from beneath /...And before [them] grew / The angry jaws / Of a giant whale." Reminding the listener of the song's original cetaceous frame, the narrator gleefully prepares to exact his revenge:

> Don't know how I survived, the crew all was chewed alive
>
> I must have slipped between his teeth
>
> But, oh, what providence, what divine intelligence
>
> That you should survive as well as me.

While the vast majority of listeners would likely identify the "Mariner's Revenge" as pyrrhic, there is a certain satisfaction to the song's conclusion, which is comprised of a lengthy, increasingly up-tempo accordion rendition of the narrator's mother's bone-chilling, Clytemnestra-esque song of vengeance. The narrator of "The Mariner's Revenge Song," while clearly operating far outside "conventional notions of sound judgments" (Nünning 2005: 4), appears to be entirely unaware that his actions deviate from "fundamental cognitive and intellectual norms" (Heyd 231). Whether or not the narrator's intended audience believes his tale (the Mariner acknowledges "you may not remember me") is of little import to him – now that he has his prey confined to the belly of a whale, he is assured of both a captive audience and a minimal chase when he finally (presumably) kills the man.

The eponymous Rake in "The Rake's Song," unlike the Mariner in "The Mariner's Revenge Song," is entirely aware of the way his actions must come across to others, but is dismissive of their reservations. Part of a full-length rock opera titled *The Hazards of Love* (2009) composed from a list Meloy compiled of common tropes in traditional British folk music (Meloy "What Is This Thing?" 4), "The Rake's Song" establishes the Rake as the token arch-villain of the rock opera's narrative. Having been "married in the summer of [his] twenty-first year," the Rake reports how he was temporarily "No more a rake and no more a bachelor" – "I was wedded and it whetted my thirst," until, the Rake regretfully intones, his wife's "womb started spilling out babies / Only then did I reckon my curse." When his wife "mercifully" dies whilst giving birth to their fourth child, "ugly Myfanwy," who also "died on delivery," the Rake briefly ponders what one is to do "when one is a widower / Shamefully saddled with three little pests." He quickly arrives at his solution: the Rake kills all three of his children, poisoning and drowning his daughters, and, since his son Isaiah fights back, "burn[ing] his body for incurring

[his] wrath." Unique among Meloy's first person narrators, the Rake acknowledges both the fact that he *is* a narrator and that others might find his actions reprehensible: "And that's how I came, your humble narrator, / To be living so easy and free. / Expect you think that I should be haunted, / But it never really bothers me." Meloy is quick to observe that he does not "advocate the murder of children," saying, "I happen to know it's true that people are tickled by that stuff, or else I probably would have been crucified long ago" (qtd. Heyman n.p.) Perhaps the maddest of Meloy's madmen, or at least the most sadistic, "The Rake's Song" is a tale as harrowing as any psychological horror film, not the least due to the Rake's apparent nonchalance for his crimes.

In summary, I argue that, regardless of brevity, narrators in song lyrics are just as capable of being considered 'unreliable narrators' as their counterparts in prose fiction, poetry, and film. Though the relatively short duration of most popular songs does not allow for a slow, nuanced narrative development, lyricists are nonetheless creating narrators that are not only defined characters, but also play linguistic tricks on the listener. That I was easily able to find close lyrical analogues for the prose examples various theorists have presented for each of the three categories above is a testament to the increasingly widespread use of unreliable narration in indie song lyrics. Unreliable narration in song lyrics should therefore surely be included in the "generic scope" (Nünning 2005:12) of unreliable narration criticism, potentially comprising a hypothetical sixth level on Nicholl's five-part typology of narrativity in verbal music (of interest to musicologists), and expanding the critical landscape of narrative theory (of interest to literary scholars studying narrative theory, poetics, genre, etc.).

Chapter Four

"My Name is Leslie Anne Levine[9]":

Vocal and Musical Unreliability

i. "I Am a God": Genre and Brevity

While various songs have thus far been observed as containing unreliable narrators of a comparable complexity (in relation to available length) as unreliable narrators in novels, short stories, and films, songs also have several unique capabilities for producing and regulating unreliable narration. The most obvious difference between contemporary song lyrics and poetry, namely the former's musical and performative aspects, is also what lends an additional level of complexity to the creation and interpretation of lyrical narratives. Both the formal and performative modes of address in song lyrics, for example, diverge fairly dramatically from prose fiction. While some novels employ a frame narrative, in which the narrator's "narrative audience" (see Rabinowitz 1977) is identified, most novelistic narrators do not employ a second-person address throughout. Songs, on the other hand, are usually framed as such, the identity of the "you" to whom the song is being addressed forming a central component to a listener's interpretation (Negus "Authorship" 617). Song lyrics are also, of course, performed, with the singer's intonations and emotive delivery vastly affecting the listener's interpretation of character, plot, and affective valences (as discussed in Chapter One).

Though discerning whether a narrator is giving a credible, realistic portrait of him- or herself in relation to other characters in a text is often a useful preliminary indicator of the narrator's (un)reliability, musical genre conventions sometimes dictate wild divergences from 'reality.' Some of the genre conventions of rap music, for example, might in another context

[9] "Leslie Anne Levine," The Decemberists (*Castaways and Cutouts*)

connote narrative unreliability. The convention of boasting of one's sexual, financial, and physical superiority in deliberately ludicrous terms, with an emphasis on clever, word-playing similes and metaphors (e.g. "I just talked to Jesus / He said, 'What up, Yeezus?'...I know he the most high / But I am a close high" from Kanye West's "I Am a God" [*Yeezus*]), would in another genre lead the listener to suspect the narrator of mental imbalance (see my discussion of The National's "All the Wine" in Chapter Three (III.iv) for rather concrete proof of this genre-reliant interpretive bias). The adoption of one or more alter-egos within a song, another convention in rap music (Eminem and Nicki Minaj, for example, are particularly notorious for their respective alter egos "Slim Shady" and "Roman"/ "Female Weezy"/ "Nicki Lewinski") is also likely to be read as a sign of an unreliable, scattered, schizoid narrative identity in almost any other genre (as in my discussion of The Decemberists' "The Engine Driver" in Chapter Three [III.ii]).

Songs by generally genre-compliant artists that unexpectedly break with the narrative, topical, or musical norms of their musical ilk can also be read as unreliable. Artists that attempt to release "crossover" albums, transitioning from one genre to another, are often criticized in similar terms used to describe unreliable narrators, the artist's initial 'authority' to write or perform within another genre considered tenuous at best by critics and the listening public alike. Miley Cyrus is once again an excellent example of this phenomenon, her transition from America's country-pop Sweetheart to someone that has inspired radio talk show host Dr. Laura Schlessinger to suggest that "any parent who takes their kid to a Cyrus concert should lose custody of their children" (Hilton Hater) is reflected, or more likely caused by, her seemingly sudden crossover from country-pop to "dirty south hip-hop" (Cyrus, qtd. Alexander). Cyrus' altered public image, including her newly edgy haircut to barely-there clothing, is certainly jarring following her previous tenure as a Disney starlet, but it was Cyrus' assertion that her new

look and sound were adopted because she "just want[s] something that feels black" (Cyrus, qtd. *ThatGrapeJuice.com*) that incited a riotous response from the press and public alike. Cyrus, it has been asserted, does not have the authority to take on a "black" voice or image, because she occupies the multiply privileged position of being both Caucasian and the daughter of Billy Ray Cyrus, a wealthy country star in his own right (Plank). Cyrus' attempt to forcibly alter her own ethos, on an artistic, visual, and even racial scale, has resulted in a massive loss of credibility (in terms of genuine believability, if not financial success) for the young star, which arguably introduces an element of unreliability into Cyrus' self-reflexive narrative of celebrity.

The relatively brief structure of most songs also changes the conditions for detecting unreliability – while one throwaway line in a novel may be forgotten a page later, a single line can entirely change the meaning of a song. The narrator of "My Shepherd" (*Together,* 2010), for example, by Canadian indie band The New Pornographers, would appear to be reliable but for her line in the song's chorus, "If I'm honest, you come to mind, / but baby I'm not." The spectral narrator in Canadian alternative indie band Mother Mother's song "Ghosting" (*O My Heart*, 2008), configures his hauntings of the addressee as acts of devotion, which, but for the final lines of the bridge, the listener might assume are being both noticed and appreciated: "I won't make noises in your stairs / I will be kind and I'll be sweet / If you stop staring straight through me." The narrator of The Mountain Goats' emotionally wrenching track "You or Your Memory" (*The Sunset Tree*, 2006), describes his seemingly unremarkable process of checking into a "bargain priced room" at a motel, walking to the corner store, and switching off the lights for the night. It is only in the chorus' evocative list of his "supplies" that the narrator's suicidal intentions are revealed: "St. Joseph's baby aspirin, / Bartles and Jaymes, / and you, or your memory."

ii. "Leslie Anne Levine": Vocal Unreliability

Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of unreliable narrators in song lyrics is that, unlike in a written poem, short story, or novel, their narratives are sung aloud by a usually audibly distinguishable gendered voice. As discussed in Chapter One, the ability to convincingly emote lyrics is prized in singers, and is often central to fostering both narrative clarity and empathy amongst listeners. When a singer's voice clearly does not align with the age, gender, or affect of the song's narrator, however, an entirely different listening experience is enacted. The first song on The Decemberists' freshman album *Castaways and Cutouts* begins, for example, with Meloy's distinctly adult masculine voice singing the lines "My name is Leslie Anne Levine / My mother birthed me down a dry ravine / My mother birthed me far too soon / Born at nine and dead at noon." Samson similarly plays with both gender and narrative realism in two songs from the perspective of a female house cat named Virtute, often employing catlike images to enact her narrative ("Why don't you ever want to play? I'm tired of this piece of string. You sleep as much as I do now, and you don't eat much of anything" ["Plea"]). Since, as above, Booth's original, seminal definition of an unreliable narrator is a narrator that does not speak for or act in "accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms)" (158–9)," does the presence of an *audible gap* between the "norms" of the narrator (e.g. a ghostly female infant or a house cat) and the author (e.g. a middle aged male musician) render these kinds of songs unreliable?

In much the same vein as the British Folk Revival of the 1950's and 60's, which Meloy describes as "a scene in which it was anathema, initially anyway, to write your own songs" ("What Is This Thing?" 2), I argue that Meloy and Samson ignore conventional markers of popular musical authenticity (confessional authorship, affective ventriloquism) in favor of

textual authenticity. In other words, though Meloy and Samson might not *audibly* resemble the characters they are voicing, both lyricists go out of their way to inhabit the metaphorical, textual voices of their narrators. Whether the listener thinks that Meloy's singing voice sounds anything like a hallucinating French legionnaire in "The Legionnaire's Lament" (*Castaways and Cutouts*), for example, is far less central to having a meaningful interaction with the song than paying close attention to the dense, punning wordplay, and admiring the seamless inclusion of historical sound-bytes. The Decemberists' and Weakerthans' music, therefore, which includes the musicality of Meloy and Samson's voices, is a vehicle for their songs' lyrics, rather than the conventional inverse of this relationship.

iii. "Maxwell's Silver Hammer": Musical Unreliability

Though listeners may forgive vocal inconsistencies, even allowing Meloy to play all of the male characters in *The Hazards of Love* with little to no tonal differentiation in his highly distinctive voice as he switches between playing William, the hero, and the villainous Rake, can the same be said for musical inconsistencies? Clear discrepancies between a song's musical and lyrical affect can feel grating, and yet there are a number of commercially successful songs that feature just such a juxtaposition, including "The Rake's Song," the music of which has perhaps been best described as 'fist-pumping' in fan comments on various internet fora. "Maxwell's Silver Hammer," an upbeat jingle from The Beatles' *Abbey Road* (1969), is about a man who brutally murders multiple people with his silver hammer. Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi" (*Ladies of the Canyon,* 1970) is similarly upbeat in its original version, despite spinning a tale of retrospective regret in the face of environmental degradation and lost love, encapsulated in the now iconic lines "Don't it always seem to go / That you don't know what you've got / 'Till it's gone." In The Clash's "Train in Vain" (*London Calling,* 1979), the recently crossed-in-love

narrator seemingly happily sings, “Did you stand by me? / No, not at all” over peppy, synth-laden guitars.

The massive success of these songs, unfettered by their musical and lyrical discrepancies, indicates listeners’ willingness to either overlook or even embrace textual and musical disparities, as long as both elements are independently strong. Effectively forcing the audience to listen more closely in order to parse narrative and affect, musical and lyrical discrepancies can be used to great effect, both for their continued novelty and the interpretive challenge they pose to the dedicated listener. In some cases, in fact, as in “The Rake’s Song,” upbeat music combined with incredibly dark subject matter can give an additionally maniacal air to the narrator, which further emphasizes their unreliability.

Conclusion

"None of the Above":

Musical and Theoretical Genre(s)

Having first come to the conclusion that one certainly *can* speak of narrativity in contemporary indie music, and that the music actually invites such critical engagement from its listeners, I then broadly stated the case for including (indie) song lyrics in the "generic scope" (Nünning 2005:12) of unreliable narration criticism. After a theoretical discussion of the ways in which narrativity can and does exist in contemporary verbal music, I then undertook a series of close readings of John K. Samson's densely allusive, painstakingly crafted lyrics to illustrate some of the ways in which narrative(s) can be created in highly literate (and literary) song lyrics. A literary-theory based examination of the ways in which indie song lyrics can host and embody unreliable narrators and narratives as evidenced by Colin Meloy's elaborate, sometimes fantastical, gleefully verbose lyrics followed. Finally, in a necessarily brief discussion of what I have termed vocal and musical unreliability, I began to explore the additional formal and generic complexities of popular-song-based narratives.

There are, of course, several related questions about unreliable narration in song lyrics that go beyond the scope of this thesis. As above, an expanded exploration of unreliability as specific to various musical genres could be an especially fruitful line of inquiry. An analysis of narrative ethos as connected to the ubiquitous "swaggy," braggadocio-filled narrators that have evolved through the oral-tradition roots of contemporary rap music (Quinn), for example, could yield entirely different results than this study. The contrast in narrative ethos and intentionality between the speaker in a rap song, which is generally a figure that constantly, deliberately, and drastically overstates their case, and the willfully low-status, "weak" characters that usually

narrate indie songs, is a vital formal and generic difference in and of itself. Parameters for establishing the presence of narrativity in rap songs would similarly have to be taken into account before considering the role of unreliable narration within the genre.

Country music, which has historically been one of the most narrative-based verbal-music genres, would also have some divergent criteria for establishing a narrator's unreliability. In the introduction to his book *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*, for example, Richard A. Peterson recounts how nine "leading country record producers were interviewed in 1953" about which factors they considered when "selecting new talent." By far the most common response was "Authenticity, authenticity and originality" (Peterson 3). When authenticity is so highly prized, can country lyricists ever truly attain the level of removal necessary to create a narrative persona separate from themselves? Is inauthenticity, in country music, synonymous with unreliability? Do country song narrators, in fact, have to appear to be one and the same with their lyricist's identity – or with their singer's identity – in order to be considered "authentic"? If so, what is the extent to which one must read biography into country singers' songs, even when the singer is not also the songwriter?

Questions like these situate this interdisciplinary thesis, and any topically similar offshoots, in a new circle on a metaphorical liberal arts venn diagram, with narrative theory, genre studies, poetics, comparative literature, and musicology overlapping to create a new dedicated space for the study of song lyrics that is as free from existing generic and critical biases as possible. In other words, instead of regarding song lyrics as either a (usually) 'weaker' version of written poetry, or as another layer of harmony in music (in which linguistic content is largely irrelevant), I have attempted to consider song lyrics as their *own* form – strongly influenced by and interrelated to poetry and music, as this thesis is informed by studies of the

same – but nonetheless deserving of their own subset of intellectual space. In setting out to explore how unreliable narration problematizes the notion of a simple, unidirectional flow of meaning from the speaker/implied author to the reader/listener, I have attempted to equally expose the potential for both lyricists and listeners to participate in a co-creation of meaning of a greater complexity than is generally attributed to the song lyric form.

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