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THE ETHREAL ETCHED INTO THE EXISTENTIAL: AUERBACH AND
BENJAMIN'S LITERARY PHILOSOPHY AS DISPLAYED THEOLOGICALLY BY
TORI AMOS AND ILLOGIC

From Illogic's *Celestial Clockwork* Album
"1000 Whispers"

"If a picture's worth a thousand words I'll paint a thousand pictures
(4x)
If a picture's worth a thousand words I'll paint a thousand pictures
To symbolize the decibel levels bred of a thousand whispers
To mummify useless unknown poems spit a shower with gold glitter
Pressure increase unleash the catacomb splitters
And for some reason you wonder why your puzzle is a jigsaw
When you fail to decipher the Morse code to simply avoid the pitfalls
If need be I can get raw – just pocket the latex
But that's like asking why the man with no legs crawls to see the apex
Or why the young planet's seeds won't blossom into a garden
Parallel to your search for stardom where you leave breadcrumbs and jargon
That you can't even feel. So how's that for surface tension?
Every step shows you're a worthless henchman inching to meet your maker
I'd rather finger-paint than take a tainted pen and curse the paper
Voice box turns cauldron, saliva boils, then thoughts are vapor
If seeing foremost only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades
Then a thoroughbred's accuracy isn't the focal point of perfection..."¹

INTRODUCTION

The if-then statement of the prolific and masterful rapper Illogic, "If a picture's worth a thousand words, I'll paint a thousand pictures," is a bold one for a writer to make. In order to do this, the literary artist must break out of accepted patterns of linear thinking put in place by the history of Western thought, and fine-tuned by the Enlightenment. It involves a keen attention to detail, harnessing the faintest burst of bliss to the largest

¹ Illogic, "1000 Whispers," *Celestial Clockwork* [Sound Recording], (Columbus: Weightless Recordings, 2004).

monstrosity, and putting this into words that resonate with the reader and provide them special insight into the everyday not readily seen. Overall, such a form of writing requires that the author have a special connection with her or his reality, a connection that allows them to reach into the depths of their situation with words and relate, amidst the mastery of style and the like, the beautiful or harsh realities which are existence *just as they are*. It involves a willingness to grapple seriously with social, political, economic, and existential quandaries, for some have no desire to engage such forms of expression, which are aesthetic inroads into the true nature of things. It is a road less travelled, leaving many of those who dare to walk its treacherous paths scarred with poverty, obscurity, and danger. Yet, it is also beautiful, for the output of these artists serve as panoramic perspectives into social contexts that we struggle to see holistically because we are located in distinct pockets of them. I am grateful for such people.

Auerbach describes numerous characters in Western literature as engaged in an attempt to reclaim a virtue from the past and reenact it in the present occasion in which they find themselves. The transfiguration of Jesus is a demonstration of this, for the writer of this critical occurrence of his meeting with Moses and Elijah intended to indicate that Jesus was “cracking open” an essence that was displayed in the prophets’ lives, but not fully realized by them. Who are the writers in the present who “crack open” this ever-evolving concept of real, multilayered aesthetic representation uniquely intensified by Auerbach, and Benjamin? What if they have intensified it even more, thus making it even more unique and more revelatory? At the least, I would argue that these artists follow in the footsteps of such a rich literary tradition. My work in this paper will be to examine how singer-songwriter Tori Amos and underground legendary rapper

Illogic embody this “figura” of matter of fact analysis of reality, and cross reference their work with that of philologist Erich Auerbach and literary critic/philosopher Walter Benjamin and analyze how they promote and practice the same. Off we go to study.

AUERBACH’S HIGH STYLE, LOW STYLE AND ‘MIXED STYLE’

Auerbach, in his definition of “legend,” held that it detaches itself from its contemporary historical situation so that it does not confuse itself with the latter. It reveals an ever present motif in reality that shows up in any time period. In other words, the story is a “mimesis” of a virtue, vice, or something else of importance entrenched in existence, not just in one or a few particular instances of existence.² Auerbach’s critique of Homer’s renderings of Odysseus and other characters of the Greek tradition is that their meanings, while legendary, were surface level. One could find common strands in Homer’s work that run through human past and present, but still not be confronted with the “down and dirty” practicality of real life that he ascribes to the stories of the Biblical account. This is because legend to a great degree detaches itself from the history of the setting that it describes.³ While Homer writes largely to affirm the idealistic values of Greek culture and theology, the Eloist of the Abrahamic account grapples with the ideal or the sublime as it presents itself in reality. To put it differently, According to Auerbach’s analysis, while Homer creates a *fantasy* which *exempts* his characters from the mundane and romanticizes them by setting them in the context of the ruling class, the Biblical account *emphasizes* the *authentic*, messy context generally associated with the common classes.⁴ In light of these distinctions, Auerbach places most of his value on the

² Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 19.

³ *Ibid*, 19.

⁴ *Ibid*, 22.

“mixed style,” the style that comes after the high and low styles are ruptured, allowing for a representation of the common elements in means possibly considered classic by those with so-called “discriminating tastes.”⁵

Auerbach clearly identifies the two styles that Homer’s writings and the Biblical account display. He says,

“The two styles, in their opposition, represent two basic types: on the one hand, fully externalized description, uniform illumination, uninterrupted connection, free expression, all events in the foreground, displaying unmistakable meanings, few elements of historical development and of psychological perspective; on the other hand, certain parts brought into high relief, others left obscure, abruptness, suggestive influence of the unexpressed, ‘background’ quality, multiplicity of meanings and the need for interpretation, universal-historical claims, development of the concept of the *historically becoming* [italics added], and preoccupation with the problematic.”⁶

Admittedly, the artists that I have picked for this study fall on the side of Auerbach’s “on the other hand,” the side where the aesthetic representation encounters its situation and *becomes* it, with all of its background data, its universality, its variety of meanings, and its obscurity. But they are more accurately categorized under the “mixed style” due to the uncommon refined approach they take in dealing with the harsh and beautiful realities of the common masses. They could be described as “obscure,” yet it is not the sort of untouchable aristocratic obscurity in the form of “art for art’s sake,” as criticized by Auerbach in the high style. Rather, they recast and blur the reality they represent through sometimes complex symbolic uses of language the listener has to decode, and through this blurring provide insights unavailable by a simple step by step rendering of the events. In some instances, their works are so entrenched within the common facets of life that they just describe what lies before them with little or no attempt to make it allegorical,

⁵ Auerbach, 151.

⁶ Ibid, 23.

yet the unsystematic description may cause it to seem as if it is, and may have its most illuminating effects when taken as if it is.

The difference between this opacity of the ‘mixed style’ used by Illogic and Tori Amos and the high style critiqued by Auerbach is that the high style is only intended for those native to its means of communication (e.g. aesthetic activities of the upper class like the Opera and Latin sermons when you don’t understand Latin), and is many times only understood by them. Because of this, it is detached from the larger populations and the socio-historical situation in which it is located, and cannot be the “mixed style” of Auerbach. However, with the ‘mixed style’ as practiced by the artists I will examine in this paper, the clues to deciphering their works are included in their words, thus opening up the work of art for access by various classes and those who may not even know or acknowledge class distinctions. Also, their content includes the highest to the lowest portions of existence, and transforms it into quality aesthetics without sacrificing the reality for technique or form, or vice versa. In this style, any talk of the sublime is not dirempted from the everyday as in the high style, but reaches into the everyday, and depends on mundane (as well as the austere) to reveal itself.⁷ The sublime (God, the divine, etc.) is recognized in existence only as existence acknowledges that it is a common piece of shit.⁸

In short, my question is Auerbach’s question, the question of how Illogic and Tori Amos represent reality seriously, problematically, and tragically.⁹ My hypothetical answer is that they do this by authentically “taking the bull by the horns,” and ingesting

⁷ Ibid, 22.

⁸ Slavoj Zizek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (New York: Verso, 2000), 49.

⁹ Ibid, 556.

reality, regurgitating an interpretation of their subjects that creates the potential to illuminate those embedded in the situations they describe to the point that they gain more useful ways to grasp them. These artists do not separate high and low, but consider all of life as drawing points for their creative processes. In other words, it is my contention that these artists' inclusion of the very human and mundane parts of the world into their artistry and considering the commonplace as worthy data for aesthetic representations is precisely the use of art embodied and forecasted for the future by Auerbach and Benjamin.

TORI AMOS

'BLOOD ROSES'

(Since Tori does not give many explanations of her songs, my exegesis is largely my own, along with the invaluable contributions of fans from lyric messageboards, which are listed)

[AUDIO VERSION](#)

Ahaha... Ahaha... Blood roses, blood roses, back on the street now.
Blood roses, blood roses back on the street now.
Can't forget the things you never said.
An on days like these starts me thinking.
When chickens get a taste of your meat girl.
When chickens get a taste of your meat, yes. Ahaha...

You gave him your blood and your warm little diamond.
He likes killing you after you're dead.
You think I'm a queer, I think you're a queer.
Said I think you're a queer, I think you're a queer.
I shaved every place where you been boy.
I said, I shaved every place where you been, yes. Ahaha...

God knows I know I've thrown away those graces...
God knows I know I've thrown away those graces...
God knows I know I've thrown away those graces...

The Belle of New Orleans tried to show me once how to Tango.
Wrapped around your feet, round and round like good little roses.

Ahaha... Blood roses, blood roses, back on the street now.
Blood roses, blood roses, back on the street now... now... now... now...
You've cut out the flute from throat of the loon.
And at least when you cry now, he can't even hear you.

When chickens get a taste of your meat girl,
C'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon,
Oh, when he sucks you deep, yes, sometimes you're nothing but meat...¹⁰

This chilling song from the abstract margins of American pop music is a topic of large debate among Tori Amos fans, as are many of her pieces. Composed in the late nineties, a period when her very work in other albums such as *Little Earthquakes* and *Under the Pink* paved the way for female artists to candidly deal with their sexuality, “Blood Roses” is a classic example of an in depth look into sexuality from the voice of a woman wounded by male chauvinisms. In the classic “figura” of Auerbach, I will grasp hold to the “text” of the song, and attempt to extrapolate the specifics of how Amos utilizes the “mixed style” in this particular song.

Something is to be said about the musical texture that serves as the backdrop of “Blood Roses.” Steeped in dark harpsichord notes and vocals ranging from soft and haunting to vociferous and agonizing, the atmosphere for the mutilation of the woman is set. Any sort of heroic persona is far removed from the main character of this tune, since she is the depository for all of its horrid attributes. The arrangement builds gently in intensity, and then moves to a hypnotizing bridge, and back to a more dynamic variation of the original melody, which finalizes the piece. The lyrics serve to complement the brooding venom intrinsic to the pain Amos describes through vivid opacity, and the emotionally wrenching qualities of the music. In the instrumental execution combined with style of the vocals, one is dragged into an alternate universe that is not alternate, but is just like our own. Tori only gives us different pairs of glasses through which to behold it. It is just like the sixth of Voltaire’s *Philosophical Letters*, where religion and business,

¹⁰ Tori Amos, “Blood Roses,” *Boys for Pele*, (New York :Atlantic Recordings, 1996).

two things that are many times seen on different levels, occupy the same place when we view them through Voltaire's perspective.¹¹

It would be helpful to get a working definition of the term (not the song) "Blood Roses" before moving on. Surrealist Salvador Dali has a painting in which he depicts a nude woman in an abandoned car park with bleeding roses surrounding her womb ([The Bleeding Roses, 1930](#)).¹² This explanation works almost perfectly with the content of the song, as will be evident as the examination moves toward a lyrical analysis. Other interpretations of the song suggest some sort of vampirism, looking specifically at lyrics that reference the sucking of blood and connect this to the fragility of the female sex organ and the loss of virginity in ways less than ideal.¹³ There are even suggestions (with evidence supposedly coming from Amos herself) that connect the number to the use of Voodoo on the male offender, and the title being a variation for Rose, a New Orleans prostitute found dead and mutilated.¹⁴ From the song itself and the interpretations of it that I have encountered, I will define "Blood Roses" as the female "will to power" to forge her own destiny displaced by patriarchy using the sexual act with a gender oppressive male as its conduit.

Rolling Stone commented that the uses of the harpsichord in songs such as "Blood Roses" cast Amos between Hildegard von Bingen and Elton John sonically.¹⁵ This song certainly brings out the modern medieval leanings in the shadows of her former work. Such sounds as we find on this track are a logical progression in her process of musical

¹¹ Auerbach, 402-03.

¹² Auntie Laura [Pseud.], Online posting, 17 May, 2002, <http://www.atforumz.com/showthread.php?s=&threadid=132584&highlight=Blood+Roses>.

¹³ Kahr [Pseud.], Online posting, 17 May, 2002, <http://www.atforumz.com/showthread.php?s=&threadid=132584&highlight=Blood+Roses>.

¹⁴ Bendezodiazepine Dave [Pseud.], Online posting, 5 Mar., 2007, <http://www.songmeanings.net/songs/view/13533/>.

¹⁵ Evelyn McDonald, "Review of Tori Amos' *Boys For Pele*," *Rolling Stone*, 8 Feb 1996.

evolution. In “Blood Roses,” Tori stretches her “snapshots” of this unfortunate woman over these sounds of another time, these sounds of gothic medieval darkness, to convey the seriousness of her lyrical picture. She begins with the words, “Blood roses, blood roses, back on the street now.” This starting point reveals a departure from some sort of realm of comfort. The vocal tone and emotional color that Tori uses to let us know that this nameless woman is “back on the street” is a rather somber one, so we can deduce that the reason she is there is not a pleasant one. There is no introduction to this woman. We do not learn anything about her past, how she became entrapped within her present predicament, how to know if her present state is better than that which she left in terms of safety, stability, or anything of the like. We are simply thrust into the middle of her rugged reality, a place where the horridness of this woman’s story is not eased in on us by a brighter history. We are bombarded with her pain minus the pleasantries of an introduction, and must dive through this unpleasant voyage or politely skip to the next track (well, with this album, *Boys For Pele*, there is no surety that this will help). Tori provides a ray of artistic genius in the first lines, where her bluntness of the situation blurs it due to lack of background, but clarifies it by not losing the density of the demons in adhering to high and lofty correctness of artistry, which may not have the capacity to contain the topics she addresses.

Amos’ display of distress continues with, “can’t forget the things that you never said.” At this point, the fact that Tori is talking about a lover becomes evident. Those of us who have been involved in romantic relationships know all too well that one of the major charges made against us by our significant other is the inability or unwillingness to communicate. In some situations, this is not a malicious infraction, but merely indicates

one feeling uncomfortable with expressing deep emotions verbally (e.g. saying “I love you). But here, even three lines into the song, we know that the “things that were never said” imply something quite serious. To me, this line seems to deal with the seriousness of non verbal implications in two ways. First, it sounds like the significant other is not “spilling the beans” about any feelings that he may have for the woman. Because she does not know her has any feelings for her, she agonizes in a place of anxiety, for she has no place on which to focus either hope or fear.¹⁶ Second, Amos could be referring to the hidden ulterior, selfish motives of the woman’s lover. In her painting of this person, one can dispute on whether the lover has been unusually cruel to the woman knowingly or unknowingly, for the lack of information given by Amos on the lover begs the further exegesis of the listener to arrive at conclusions useful to them individually or collectively. It could also be actions, for actions are sometimes vacant of words, yet “speak louder” than them, as the saying goes. What we can affirm with *some* certainty is that whether this offense was intentional or automatic, it still has devastating consequences on the subject of this piece. Whatever it is that has not been spoken is a sort of recurring mental torment. This leads right into her next line, “And on days like these starts me thinking.”

“When chickens get a taste of your meat girl,” is a gut wrenching parable/metaphor. This is the content of the thought Tori alludes to in the previous stanza. Some suggest that this simply refers to the cowardice of a lover who exerts dominating power over a significant other.¹⁷ Others have suggested that it could be a reference to oral sex perhaps within or without homosexuality.¹⁸ This is especially interesting in light of the references

¹⁶ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 36.

¹⁷ Missme [Pseud], Online posting, 26 Mar. 2005, <http://www.songmeanings.net/songs/view/13533/>.

¹⁸ Painslut [Pseud], Online posting, 12 Oct. 2005, <http://www.songmeanings.net/songs/view/13533/>.

to the woman's suspicions that her toxic lover is "a queer." I would even add domestic abuse as a plausible reading of this line as well. All of the above interpretations I find valuable as possible renderings of this portion. In light of this line being what I feel is a skeleton key to an interesting understanding about this song and how it dynamically represents reality, I will leave further excavations of it until later.`

The next section of this mystically charged track starts with this, "You gave him your blood and your warm little diamond." With the subject matter established in the beginning, we can deduce that this line has some relation to an imbalanced sexual power dynamic between the woman and her lover, with the latter having the upper hand. The gender of the lover is introduced in this line, for that was not known before, but in considering of the theme of *Boys for Pele*, the album the song is taken from (an album that denounces male domination in several forms), its listeners would already know that the villain of Tori's "snapshots" was male. The "warm little diamond" of course refers to the woman's vagina, and the sacredness that comes with sharing that space with a significant other.¹⁹ To me, the "blood" mentioned in the line could be either a reference to domestic violence or the blood associated with the breaking of the hymen in the first act of intercourse, or both. I hold the intercourse option is the most useful for my reading, because the line implies the "blood" was willingly provided, not forcefully withdrawn, as in violence. The treachery and gore of the picture is shown in all its nastiness by Amos.

The previous line has a very possible historical link to the following one, "He likes killing you after you're dead." Connections have been made to the story of Abigail Williams and John Proctor, a story in which the already wedded Proctor frolicked with

¹⁹ Bunnynose [Pseud], Online posting, 17 May, 2005.
<http://www.atforumz.com/showthread.php?s=&threadid=132584&highlight=Blood+Roses>.

Williams, but renounced her doing the Salem Witch Trials.²⁰ Williams was significantly attached, but Proctor obviously was not. In this interpretation, the first “killing” was Proctor’s selfishness responsible for making the relationship toxic for Williams (which can be connected to Proctor’s male overprivilege, the nemesis of the song and this album), and the second was her physical death. Such a rendering makes sense when one adds the Barbadian slave girl Tituba in the mix, a practitioner of Voodoo persuaded by Williams to cast spells on Proctor using chicken blood.²¹ Tituba is also an important link to my own conclusion on “Blood Roses” as was the line concerning chickens, and at this point will be left unresolved.

“You think I’m a queer/I think you’re a queer” are the next two pieces to this puzzle into the representation of reality that is beginning to resemble a Poirot mystery. We have at this point found clues leading us to the semi conclusion that the subject’s encounter with patriarchy has left scars on emotional and sexual areas of her life. The value of this line hinges upon how the listener interprets the word “queer.” Is this in relation to those of LGBTQI orientation, as briefly mentioned earlier? Or does it point to another type of strangeness? On somewhat of a side note, it is important to realize that at this point, the tale expressly becomes autobiographical, for Tori sings the song here in the first person (“you think *I’m* a queer”). One interpretation suggests that “You think I’m a queer/I think you’re a queer” refers to the patriarchal mode of women as objects as normative, so her abusive/oppressive lover finds it odd that she longs to be free from the roles it puts her in.²² Conversely the line “I think you’re a queer” (which Amos repeats three times) could

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²¹ New Wave Witch [Pseud], Online posting, 11 Nov, 2004, <http://www.songmeanings.net/songs/view/13533/>.

²² Plath81 [Pseud], Online posting, 4 May, 2007, <http://www.songmeanings.net/songs/view/13533/>.

also possibly be illuminated if one considered allegations of Abigail Williams practicing witchcraft, tying the “queerness” with the countercultural status of practicing non-Christian ethereal rituals during the Witch Trials. While we cannot pinpoint the specific reference Tori makes in this instance, we can maintain with some clarity that she returns her lover’s accusation of “queerness” to him times three, thus combating the stigma that he tries to entrap her with. Whatever this “queerness” is that is hurled as an insult between both parties, it causes the other to see the other as an *other*, and not as a colleague. Because of this self-fragmentary alien encounter that she has with her lover, she “shaves every place...” that he has “touched” (in the Biblical 1st Century Greek sense of the word).

How Amos is able to draw open the past as a hot potato pierced in the middle by a knife and pinched at the sides is exemplified as she (in my view) says the two lines that provide the missing links to the erratic puzzle which is this patriarchal, abusive relationship. They are,

“The Belle of New Orleans, tried to show me once how to tango/Wrapped around your feet, round and round like good little roses”

This moment of “Blood Roses” seems to be the epitome of Benjamin’s Arcades Project, with Tori catapulting her dark and mystical word pictures here and there, intensifying as they are absorbed into her conceptual worldwind where they take their own distinctive (and cryptic) identity, revealing the complex and messy origins of ideas that are obscured when we look at them in their more completed state. As I searched for interpretations of who this “Belle of New Orleans” is/was and her function in the song, I found many. Among them, some suggest the earlier allegation that this song concerns a prostitute from New Orleans. This reading suggests that the Belle is simply another name for an

infamous New Orleans prostitute Rose, the alleged human datum of the song.²³ This person evidently lives on in the thoughts of countless people as Amos resurrects her, ascending into the heavens of our minds, possessing some sort of Gnostic wisdom for us to glean as we confirm and dispute her identity. The novels of Anne Rice, fictional stories set in New Orleans involving vampires, also are plausibly considered as possible clues to the Belle's identity. The references to the sucking of blood and spiritism that New Orleans is known for would coincide with this theory.²⁴ Some have even thought of her as referring to the aforementioned slave girl/voodoo practitioner Tituba.²⁵ This works because Amos sets this briefly appearing character up as the possessor of some virtue that can help her to overcome this binding patriarchy; the Belle has something that Amos desperately needs to regain her personhood. Moreover, the sense of this portion of the song is that the Belle embodies some characteristic or some essence (or possibly the very thing that must be chosen against) that Tori desperately needs if she is to reclaim her power as a woman.

While the aforementioned readings are helpful, they are incomplete. If the "Belle" was simply another name for the prostitute Rose, Amos would have betrayed her usual style of pulling a seemingly random character out of the sky and attaching a complex depth to her that is more concrete than it seems on the surface. This is possible, but unlikely based on my knowledge of Tori's work. She had to have brought her up for something more dynamic than this. Also, it could abstractly include Anne Rice's work with vampires, but it cannot end there. It can only be a means to an end because it only addresses the regional reference (New Orleans), but not the gender reference (the "Belle"). The

²³ Benzodiazepine Dave [Pseud], 05 Mar 2007, <http://www.songmeanings.net/songs/view/13533>.

²⁴ Kahr [Pseud], <http://www.atforumz.com/showthread.php?s=&threadid=132584&highlight=Blood+Roses>.

²⁵ NewWaveWitch [Pseud], <http://www.songmeanings.net/songs/view/13533>.

metaphor gets you to the right area, but it is not to be confused with the treasure. Finally, the closest step to the answer before the answer is Tituba, but even as close as this is, it still cannot complete the exegesis of “Blood Roses” alone. Tituba does promote the agency of Abigail Williams, but only experiences the injustice of Williams vicariously in encouraging her to place the curse on Proctor. I think that she finds the pain of patriarchy and its remedy in another figure that, connected with these interpretations, is the most intense, being in a sense Amos’ composite of them all. The total persona of the “Belle of New Orleans” is satisfied in the work of Alice Walker.

In the book *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Alice Walker deals with the African traditional practice of female circumcision, and how it shows up as a cultural mismatch and source of difficulty when the main character migrates to the United States. This novel, which is actually a series of short monologues of a woman who has undergone female circumcision and her family, has a segment in which the “Belle of New Orleans” makes a grand entry. Tashi (or Evelyn, her English name), the wife, was introduced to an American woman from New Orleans named Amy through Reye, Tashi’s gynecologist. Amy was circumcised by her mother because of her constant masturbation as a child.²⁶ Amy had a son, who she claimed was a whole human in contrast with what she felt was her fragmented personage, therefore, she placed her own unfulfilled dreams and aspirations on him, forcing him to be a dancer. The overwhelming feeling of bearing his mother’s identity as well as his own drove Josh, the son, to committing suicide.²⁷ Tashi had a different concept of America. She thought that the African patriarchy that swung extra sharp double edge swords at her humanity in its sexual fullness were outlawed

²⁶ Alice Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 185.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 184.

weapons in “the land of the free.” Amy’s account of the same thing happening in the United States was evidence (to Tashi maybe inconclusive, maybe too much truth for her to handle) that things weren’t different here either. This was so devastating to her that she tuned Amy out, and at the end of her short recounting of her horrid sexual past, she stormed out of the room.²⁸ Reye, aware of her patient’s “bloody” sexual childhood foundation, finds an elderly woman from a land foreign to her own with a similar experience, and has her to talk to Tashi in hopes of just the discussion bringing about some sort of solace in Tashi. Instead, Tashi rejects the decades of experience that Amy freely gives to her. This connects back with the Amos lyric that started it all for us. “The Belle of New Orleans tried to show me once how to tango.” The key word here is “tried.” Try is all that this temporal angel of light can manage to do for Tashi since she casts her away harshly like the most ancient and vile of demonic spirits. In my reading of the song, Amos elaborately reveals/conceals her own rejection of liberating voices to free her from her male dominated hell on earth in the cryptic line concerning “the Belle of New Orleans.” The most illuminating thing that the background of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* sheds on “Blood Roses” is that a patriarchal invasion upon the sexuality of womanhood, along with the pain wrought in women by its male subjugation, can also include a cancerous denial, rendering the woman helpless to fight against the void she does not fully believe even exists.²⁹

“Blood Roses” steps outside of the issue of sexual abuse of women, which can be seen to be a chronological flow of events in real life, and addresses it anachronistically in various orders with the past, present, and potential future of women who have suffered

²⁸ Ibid, 187-188.

²⁹ Ibid, 188.

these injustices. In other words, reality is presented as it is, leaving the listener to find one or several solutions to the presented problem. Such styles of writing do not resolve a damn thing. Resolution is not the job of a literary work, but the job of focused human effort after the problem is ‘broken into’ via the text (in this case).

In Auerbach’s discussion of Montaigne, he asserts that Montaigne’s method is “experimental,” seeming to adhere to no specific form. But since his subject is himself in his ever fluidness (as Amos’ subject is herself), the only way that he can accurately describe this continuously evolving subject is to accurately chronicle all the changes it undergoes.³⁰ What Tori achieves in *Blood Roses* is a representation of reality that blurs the lines between art and life. Because this is the case, even in Tori’s abstractness, her work is able to strike a chord in the most concrete of thinkers. Her abstractness is synonymous with an inner core of human experience (in this case, women’s experience). In “*Blood Roses*,” we have not art *imitating* life, but art *as* life at its best. It is here where Tori in a sense pieces the sublime (which I would define as the human demand placed on the self by an exposition of the pain suffered *by* the other, and the responsibility *to* the other similar to Levinas) together by using the alarm that comes from representing reality for what it actually is to jolt her audience into uncomfortable dissatisfaction with the present world, thus placing us on an uncomfortable hot seat. A seat so hot that our asses are singed to the point that we jump from our place of spectator right into centerstage as star actors in a clash with the state of being that is the sin of male domination, the spirits of boys that need to be sacrificed to Pele perpetually.

ILLOGIC

I Wish He Would Make Me

³⁰ Auerbach, 288, 292.

AUDIO VERSION

Carpe Diem the philosophy I've come to embrace
On a trek to find myself with God and plead my case
I no longer want to straddle the fence of the agnostic
Due to my success within my flesh I've become a hostage
My light doesn't shine anymore the dimmer switch has darkened the filament
I was the sun now I'm a star in the skies of ignorance
My hearts become hate trapped within this frozen puddle
Now dispensing souls reflections soaked in subtle hypocrisy
I've disgraced my own name because I'm living life logically
Consistent with the secular realm an illogistic dichotomy
I haven't lost faith but I misplaced my spirituality
Hope an ocean is created whole relation to float in reality
Cause now I'm trapped in the storms eye
These heavy rains I can't handle
Need to become a lighthouse instead of a flickering candle
I need to rededicate my life don't know if I'm ready
I know I have to make a choice but I wish he would make me
I strayed from the path pre-destined for me
I'm ill now but walking right I'd be an iller emcee
I know I can overcome this rut cause God put it in me
But I have to find it stop walking this earthly road blinded
Every word reads God-given this is my theory
I'm in a place now that doesn't compare to where I could be
I know I can overcome this rut cause God put it in me
But I have to find it and stop walking this earthly road blinded

Due to my reflection I've lost love cause God was an afterthought
Showed me the one prepared for me she was snatched from my heart
I understand the mirror of pain gave a nice view
Revealing what I had to do to be reshaped and made anew
This is hard cause for a while I wouldn't look in God's direction
Pissed cause I had this life of disappointment and rejection
But I come to realize that when I fell in this rut
God was tearing my down so he could built me back up
See I've been known to rock a crowd with an anointing like no other
And be a prime example for my friends and my brothers
Now I need the strength to take this step from this shadow
Giving my silhouette features as my teacher points the arrow
I was told sin's wide and righteousness is narrow
I must prepare for it just to be guiding my way through the sea
I know I need to rededicate my life don't know if I'm ready
I know I have to make a choice but I wish he would make me

I'm locked in this cage and only I have the key
I'm trying to pick the lock without surrendering completely
I know I can overcome this rut cause God put it in me
But I have to find it stop walking this earthly road blinded
I tired of having my eyes covered I'm trying to see
The Promised Land over the mountain waiting for me
I know I can overcome this rut cause God put it in me
But I have to find it and stop walking this earthly road blinded

I have to find it and stop walking this earthly road blinded

I have to find it and stop walking this earthly road blinded
I have to find it and stop walking this earthly road blinded
God I wish he would make me

*Sing Praise Sample*³¹

Illogic is an amazing writer/poet/rapper. It is an honor to consider his work in a theological context, a realm where his work has not to my knowledge been analyzed, possibly due to the fact that he does not make his affiliations with any particular faith tradition explicit (in contrast to Amos, for her blatant pronouncements against Christianity have interestingly gained her a Christian theological audience in the positive). Illogic is known to be one of the most talented writers in the independent hip-hop scene worldwide, with everything ranging from battle raps, social commentary, science fiction, science, philosophy, and theology. This song is important for us to consider not merely because Illogic is dealing with the subject of divinity and uses God language. It is important because he locates the question of the ultimate within the heart of his own existential situation. In the “mixed style” of Auerbach, Illogic seems to grant a very high level of importance to what he feels is a reciprocal, not dualistic, connection between the divine and reality. “...the sublime, tragic, and problematic take shape precisely in the domestic and commonplace...”³² In other words, the language of the ultimate is the culture in which it is embedded.

In “I Wish He Would Make Me,” Illogic presents his own struggle with faith and reason, which is definitely not any struggle that he bears alone. This song hosts the classic battle between the attempt to maintain the essence of faith claims amidst Western societies that privilege reason and technology over bare appeals to the sublime/what one considers divine, to conjure James. I don’t think that a “bare” approach to the sublime is

³¹ Illogic, “I Wish He Would Make Me.”

³² Auerbach, 22.

helpful anyway, and Illogic in the end does not try to do this. But, like Tori Amos, he represents the reality just as it is. One walks out of this thick, pensive atmosphere of this song with a “both and” sense of consciousness about the divine/human relation. The life of God is like Kierkegaard’s “knight of faith,” the epitome of absurdity and meaning, but Illogic says blatantly that his reason prevents him from doing this easily. If only God (the song seems to allude to a Christian God in light of the symbols he uses to describe divinity) would make Illogic live illogically. This is the key of the song.

The song begins with what sounds like a dark classical piano sample over a simple drum programming sequence with a sharp, piercing snare and a dull kick. Thus mood of the track is pensive and thoughtful. Blueprint, the instrumentalist responsible for the melodic portion of the song, has already set the stage for Illogic’s monologue of optimistic despair on divinity. He starts with the lines “Carpe Diem, the philosophy I’ve come to embrace/On a trek to find myself with God and plead my case/I no longer want to straddle the fence of the agnostic/Due to my success with flesh I’ve become a hostage.” There is so much to unpack in these four lines. It is here where he begins to posit his assumption that the sublime is planted within reality. This reconciliation Illogic attempts to discover between himself and God happens not in some pocket aside from the real world, but in that real world itself. It is not a prayer in the sense of conversation with the divine/ultimate, for he speaks of God in the third person. Rather, it is a dialogue between himself and his sea of listeners, a dialogue that can only happen “on the ground.” But it is a dialogue that God is invited to participate in not by express invitation, but by default, similar to Benjamin’s assertion that language is itself the ultimate

mystery.³³ When these four lines are expanded and stretched over Book VI of Augustine's *Confessions*, they almost match. As Augustine professed an awareness of the divine disseminated through Christianity,³⁴ but did not make the leap to faithful absurdity, being trapped in "...a state of indecision,"³⁵ so Illogic is trapped in a similar tug of war between what makes sense and what fulfills beyond the futility of reason. This "agnosticism" Illogic talks about is his own Manichaeism, because whatever this seizing the day is specifically, apparently all his one-sided reason has grasped is straws, with its various philosophies causing him to "straddle the fence." For him, there is an irrational belief in faith that he has transubstantiated into the empirically explainable. But, at the same time, he implies the difficulty in living in the real world with this belief that is in many ways illogical. He is not able to achieve either the faith or reason conclusion his words imply that he would long for. On the contrary, by trying to escape the tension between faith and reason by picking reason over faith, he tries to throw away what cannot be thrown away, and must make the same choice between these two again. Opting for faith over reason and vice versa are circular decisions that take us on the merry go rounds of the most vicious of horror films, sending us into a chase of a truth that continues to scare us to the core of our being because this one truth does not exist. These four lines set the stage perfectly for this tension between the sacred and the secular as represented and referred to in terms of faith and reason that he fleshes out, combines, and sharply distinguishes in the ensuing lines.

³³ Margarete Kohlenbach, *Walter Benjamin: Self Reference and Religiosity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 43-44.

³⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 95-96.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 104.

The next important points made in this musical melancholy are in the following lines, “My light doesn't shine anymore, the dimmer switch has darkened the filament/I was the sun, now I'm a star in the skies of ignorance/...I've disgraced my name because I'm living life logically/Consistent with the secular realm, an illogistic dichotomy.” What illogic alludes to here is the difference between the acknowledgement of and the operation within ultimate reality while navigating culture (his former state), and the process of transforming and/or eliminating ideas of ultimate reality into cultural symbols through logic (his present state). While the song could seem to imply a prodigal son story of Illogic returning back to his “childlike faith,” I sense that it is more than that. He does not say this, but he seems to want to move not back to where he came from, but toward the middle realm where both faith and reason converge. What Illogic is going through is a problem of “language” as articulated by Walter Benjamin. He has played with the transaction of communication between humanity and the sublime to the point that he has tried to “teach” the sublime human language. He proves the assertion of Benjamin in the essay “On Language Such as On the Language of Man” that in process of “naming” central to human language, communication has the potential of being forced *without* as opposed to *within*.³⁶ In other words, there is an ultimate becoming that Illogic previously subscribed to that encapsulated his mode of being in the world. At his present state, his analysis of this becoming from *outside* it as opposed to a consciousness of his existence *within* it, has strangled the life out of it. His communicating *about* it as opposed to communicating *within* it as he had done before has made him “...consistent with the secular realm, and illogistic dichotomy.” What needs to happen is the maintaining of the

³⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmond Jephcott, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 316-317.

messiness of the “Word (*logos*, “language”) was God” juxtaposed with the (believed and accepted by many) remoteness of God from creation, this worldliness yet otherworldliness, a problem that Illogic has tried with little success to solve, but an existential position that Benjamin is satisfied to simply present just as it is.³⁷

To continue our analysis, there are more gems that Illogic drops for us toward the middle to end of the second stanza that tie into the sublime “breaking into” the mundane. They are,

See I've been known to rock a crowd with an anointing like no other
And be a prime example for my friends and my brothers
Now I need the strength to take this step from this shadow
Giving my silhouette features as my teacher points the arrow
I was told sin's wide and righteousness is narrow
I must prepare for it just to be guiding my way through the sea
I know I need to rededicate my life don't know if I'm ready
I know I have to make a choice but I wish he would make me

There are several key points in the song, but for me, this one conveys the aim of the song the most. The transaction between the “real” world and the ethereal world is shown in terms of his distinct delineation yet unification between these realms. He says, “...I've been known to rock a crowd with an anointing like no other/And be a prime example for my friends and my brothers.” Once again, the “illogistic dichotomy” appears, for he expresses the tension between the sublime's hold on him and the need for the “normal,” logical way of life as the central problem the song attempts to address. Illogic uses the imagery of “anointing” to draw attention to the connection that he has to the divine, “that

³⁷ Kohlenbach, 58.

which no greater can be conceived,” while being a pragmatist and directing that “anointing” not towards himself, but to the outside world. What we have here is a reversal of feudal literature, which, as pointed out by Auerbach, leads away from real life into legend. Illogic, as does the Jahwist in the story of the fall, goes from the legendary (the concept of divine ‘anointing’) into the actual flesh and blood world (Illogic as a “figura” for those in his sphere of influence to follow).³⁸

Ambiguity ends the stanza and the song. The last two lines of the passage are very similar to those at the end of the track, and convey virtually the same thought. Illogic says that he needs to realign himself with what he considers divine, but he’s not quite ready to relinquish his grasp on doing things his own way. He is aware of the need to embrace this Kierkegaardian absurdity of faith, but values the level to which he has elevated his own logic and reason. In other words, the blissful yet stormy marriage of faith and reason is a bit much for him to deal with, yet he experiences an endless void until this happens. However, the song does not show him making a decision either one way or the other. Therefore, Illogic leaves us in a place that Benjamin would leave us. He isn’t solving the problem/dichotomy of the God’s immutability/relationality. What he asserts is that the absolute subject (God) with all of the contradictions and haziness that accompany it, is immediately disclosed through reflection, with this song being the reflection on it.³⁹ Illogic says he wish God would make him do what he claims he knows he should do. Why doesn’t God? This and other questions are not answered, but “I Wish He Would Make Me” simply reconfirms the messiness of the divine/mundane relationship. Illogic’s refusal to state his decision is his saving grace, for it forces us to

³⁸ Auerbach, 138.

³⁹ Kohlenbach, 87-88.

stick ourselves into the thick of this ageless controversy and find our own partial solutions. This is a problem that is never solved, only coped with.

THE INCARNATION OF THE “FIGURA” OF THE “MESSIANIC” IN TORI AMOS AND ILLOGIC

Just as Illogic leaves us between what is commonly understood as religion and the secular, so Benjamin’s work as a philologist, Marxist, and observer of art, does the same. Benjamin finds himself in an interesting place in that he never wants to relinquish the need for religion, yet he protests it in its organized forms. Therefore, he searches for the ultimate in everything.⁴⁰ In the work of both writers, the groundwork for the solving of the existential dilemmas that they represent and display are laid. Religion in its high and lofty forms has tried to solve the same problems, but to no avail. When religion is guarded from the authentic picture of reality, it has no means of engaging the life that suffers there for the benefit of either itself or the outside world. Both Illogic and Tori Amos engage just this reality, see it for what it is, and give us an aesthetic picture that shows us the main substance of what goes on there as a whole. It is a messianic “breaking in” to show how the seemingly disjointed pieces have a sort of harmony, and the grasp of this provides a potential lens through which one can navigate this Earthworld that appears to be estranged from any sort of plan or purpose.

Auerbach’s expounding on “figura” also fits in here as well. In the article “Figura,” he charts this historical trajectory of the term beginning with the definition of it as “plastic form.”⁴¹ In other words, it is the reflection or replica of the authentic. There is a certain fluidity that comes with “figura” that represents the actual and the model, a fluidity that

⁴⁰ Ibid, xii

⁴¹ Auerbach, ‘Figura’, 11.

cannot be described with words such as “form” and image.⁴² Lucretius’ use of “figura” is one that defines the word as “atoms,” or the individualized tiny bits of stuff with their own characteristics that make up existence upon their collaboration.⁴³ Ovid’s use of the word in my opinion is key to how “figura” is an integral part of both the work of Tori Amos and Illogic as considered in this paper. For Ovid, figura as “copy” “...is mobile, changeable, multiform, and deceptive.”⁴⁴ This is exactly what it is. Just as Ovid highlighted the many “figuras” of the gods, the “shapes” that they took on,⁴⁵ I identify the works of Tori Amos and Illogic covered here as “shapes” of the sublime that interpret reality through means which partially reveal and partially disguise it. These works reveal enough for us to reconsider our practice and being in the world, but conceal enough that we are left with a profound sense of mystery as to the nature of existence itself and are left to wonder from where does this “breaking into” that these works bring about come from. If we actually could grasp hold to the actual form that “figura” is an accident of, the enterprise of existence would cease to be meaningful. It is in the quest for this very form and the perpetual failure to reach our goal that the universe in general and humanity in particular finds its sustenance. We will never reach the form that Tori and Illogic somewhat vaguely postulate and never arrive at even theoretically in their songs, but the trek toward subsequent stages of “figura” that are closer to what we envision as a just final destination where we are more humanely human than the last. The point of this artwork is to tweak and add to “figura” so that it progressively becomes a clearer mirror of the form.

⁴² Ibid, 16.

⁴³ Ibid, 17.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 23.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 22.

Similar to the religious position of Kant and Benjamin's mentor in philosophy and literature, Gustav Wyneken, we must live *as if* the form alluded to by Illogic and Tori Amos actually exists.⁴⁶ There may be no such thing as God or the form in existence, but to assume that there is generates a responsibility in humanity to attempt to move toward what it thinks this God or form is. Tori and Illogic do this, and it could be said briefly that this possibly virtual form they move toward is respectively the full acceptance of the humanity of womanhood and expert navigation of the gulf between the sacred and the secular.

To this end, I argue that both of these artists are "messianic" in the Benjaminian sense of the word. In both the work of Amos and Illogic as considered here, the "figura" of the "messianic" incarnates itself in these precious, "sacred" songs, and reveals oracles by collecting through language the all of their specific contexts and locating them in a focal point called the CD, where those oblivious to their interconnectedness because they live in them can see these links clearly now that they are somewhat outside of them in observing this audio format and encounter it as a "figura" of what it really is (you can only see your face through a reflection, you cannot actually see yourself). It is like the second person of the trinity, yet in this instance it is the second person of the trinity who *incarnates* as opposed to being her who *is incarnated*.

Benjamin's view of "language" is jammed packed with a lot of substance and ideas, and by its very composition is central to his idea of the "messianic." For Benjamin, language is all-encompassing communication. There is nothing that exists outside of language, for even the nonverbal creatures partake in language, and the verbal communicates beyond that which it conveys through words, which are only one type of

⁴⁶ Kohlenbach, 62.

language.⁴⁷ In essence, language is the very fabric of existence. In language, or the process of communication, we live, move, and exist. Benjamin, as much as possible and in a sense, broadens language to “expression.” He says, “And expression, by its whole innermost nature, is certainly to be understood only as language...”⁴⁸ Benjamin highlights the blurriness of the divide between the “mental entity” conveyed in language and language itself, stating that the word “logos” is a prime example of this paradox.⁴⁹ Tori Amos and Illogic’s use of language in the form of the written and spoken word makes it easy to confuse that which is communicated with communication itself, for the revolutions they implement in their work could be said to be the very utopia that they potentially postulate. Therefore, the quest for us may very well be not to change our present reality in light of the revelations of art, but to step into the work of art itself and live it. This is the unattainable journey, the quest to catch the wind and store it in a bottle as an heirloom.

What I am alluding to in this is a return to the period before the mythical fall, when, according to Benjamin, language only referred to itself. When language as any form of communication ceases to do this, it causes an internal rupture. This split occurs because in doing so it destroys the unspeakable network of existence and establishes selves and others, in turn creating the situation for competition as opposed to collegueship among them. In other words, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden symbolizes the gaining of a knowledge that, according to Benjamin, is “nameless,” and dirempts the “creative word of God” from the “...Adamite language-mind that stands between

⁴⁷ Benjamin, 314.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 315.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 315.

them.”⁵⁰ To attempt to make this even more clearer, the “judgment” that emerges from separating existence into either “good” or “evil” poles creates an illusionary gulf between everything that is, forcing us to accept some things and reject others, as opposed to being immersed within the whole of the universe beyond distinctions. This being in the universe without the discrimination aforementioned is second nature before the fall, but is lost after. Both Tori Amos and Illogic, in their respective artistic and existential considerations, provide roadmaps that provide a faint yet significant means of tracing our way back to the paradise of the unity of the “language-mind” and the “creative word of God.” Benjamin says that each more complex attempt at language works toward its final clarity, when everything comes together in a unity of comprehension.⁵¹ I think the rapper Common’s album title *One Day it All Makes Sense* sums up the sentiments of both Benjamin and the artist that I have considered here.

It is at this point that the notion of the “messianic” knocks at our conceptual door, entering even if we chose to try to prevent its revolutionary strand from contaminating us with the virus of change that is intrinsic to it. Benjamin, in “Theologico-Political Fragment” defines the “messianic” as a historical moment within history that consummates all of history.⁵² The “messianic,” as do the artists we have encountered in this paper, start from a post Fall state, meaning that their work reflects the existential separation between selves and others, the misaddressing of language to something other than itself, and serve as lenses to see into the consciousness of the interconnectedness of these separate parts from the side of the still separate. In the “messianic,” there is a consummation of all of history, and the mystery into all of history is unlocked. In other

⁵⁰ Ibid, 327.

⁵¹ Ibid, 332.

⁵² Ibid, 312.

words, the “messianic” makes sense of the disjointedness of reality,⁵³ providing a means of grasping the inner workings of its context in such a way that the game of life is mastered in that region, providing one follows the blueprint of the “messianic.”

The “messianic” is a realm that Benjamin says cannot be passed off as a historical political fulfillment, but is religious in its very nature.⁵⁴ The “messianic” is not a physical state of the Hegelian goal of progress, one that culminates in a physical understanding of reality that reduces Absolute Spirit to the sum of history.⁵⁵ For Benjamin, while he does not deny the temporal position of the atemporal “messianic” (for this very irony is its power to function), he still keeps the “messianic” out of the reach of the harnessing powers of humanity. The closest that we can come to having some sort of control over the “messianic” is to have no control over it at all. We have to look at it through Messiahs, those who provide significant revelation into a potential unified meaning of their context, but even themselves are not what they reveal. They are channels of the art of the divine, that which we cannot name its origin or destination, if any.

Tori Amos and Illogic are Messiahs who weave revelation through their honest consummation of their particular contexts. But there is more. The way they characterize what they consummate is what makes them “messianic.” As “figuras” of the “messianic,” they are able to “redeem” and “complete” creation, joining it back to itself in its offering of a *form* of this reconciliation and fulfillment. They themselves do not do any redemption at all, but they provide a “figura” that resembles a greater collegueship

⁵³ This is not necessarily a universal sense in my reading, and I may run counter to Benjamin in this assertion, who seems to actually want to say that the ‘messianic’ includes history in its entirety. I speak of a subjective sense that varies with the society in which it finds itself, and where ‘all’ history denotes specifically the whole of the context which births the ‘messianic’ impulse.

⁵⁴ Benjamin, 312.

⁵⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 493.

between selves and others than the previous that reveals something ultimate to us. They, like Brecht's poem on Lao Tzu on the power of the delicate in contrast to that of the rigid, do not attempt to control language, but allow it to have its way with their pens and tongues, speaking without speaking the consciousness of our interconnectedness as second nature. Our view of the world is changed into that of the "messianic" through their work.⁵⁶ Language, similar to or synonymous with the sublime, pushes itself through the Messiahs of art such as Tori Amos and Illogic, and become transubstantiated in the "messianic."

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⁵⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 69-70.

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