

Berlin-la-Morte

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A review of *The Next Day* by David Bowie

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The artwork of Bowie's 2002 album *Heathen* showed a black and white photo of three dusty old books on a shelf: Nietzsche's *Gay Science*, Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* and Einstein's *Theory of Relativity*, with Karl Marx removed from the masters of suspicion's unholy trinity, substituted by the more benign model of the mad scientist. It would have been quite something, to have Bowie embracing revolutionary social conscience, a drive which did not always translate well in pop music.

Immortalized and inescapably entombed at the *Victoria & Albert Museum*, having survived a heart attack while on tour in 2004 and considered 'retired' a long time ago, with this album Bowie shows that he is not willing to go gently into that good night. He says so himself in the title track: 'Here I am/ not quite dying/ My body left to rot in a hollow tree/ Its branches throwing shadows/ On the gallows for me'.

At its best, pop is effective alchemy: concept turned to sound, to air molecules, to a shiny and jagged *product*. It is fully digested, unlike 'conceptual art' which does not leave the cerebral womb of conception and remains forever an idea – unlike the Brechtian epic journalism of Lou Reed's *New York* (equally masterly but attuned to a different Muse). Unlike the melancholy and outrage of P. J. Harvey's *Let England Shake* which deals with war, Bowie's comment on 'training guns on these men in the sun' is largely escapist (*I rather be high*) though he does sing, to his credit 'Generals are full of shit'.

Bowie is Bloomsbury's sci-fi agent, sent to scan the future and contaminate its confused metaphysics with a paean to the mystery and lustre of appearances. An ancient game, to be sure, not limited to Mrs Woolf or Wilde's militant eccentricities but harking back to the Greeks: reaching the surface of things out of thorough-going exploration of the depths; becoming sublimely superficial out of profundity. If you stare long into the abyss, the abyss stares back at you, Nietzsche said. In Bowie's case, staring long into the abyss turned him into a fashion icon. Unlike Warhol's, and its dissemination into trivia, Bowie's art is worked through. Redeemed even, by surges of thoroughly un-cool sentiment and lyricism, by the heroic lust to survive 'til the next day, the melancholy of Berlin's involuntary memory (*Where are we now?*), by the hope that something will survive (*The Stars are out tonight*). This hope is human and it counterbalances what Bowie calls 'the heavy philosophical thing', something he mentioned in his conversation with William Burroughs in 1974 recorded by Rolling Stone.

The name Bowie just appealed to me when I was younger. I was into a kind of heavy philosophy thing when I was 16 years old, and I wanted a truism about cutting through the lies and all that.

Heathen had every single word crossed out, cancelled by a single straight line. Which is how Nāgārjuna's notion of 'emptiness' should be written, before one has the chance of turning emptiness into a 'thing'— heavy philosophy thing indeed.

Echoes of Burroughs haunt *The dirty boys* an outstanding track whose refrain's chords go up while the story gets down:

When the sun goes down / when the sun goes down and the die is cast/ when
the die is cast and you have no choice/ we will run with the dirty boys

There are so many echoes here –of Ray Davies's *Waterloo Sunset*, of Bowie's own *Rock'n'Roll Suicide*, of Scott Walker, as well as echoes within the album itself. An unsteady foot in the avant-garde, one firmly planted in the world of shiny trivia, working through post-neo-romanticism and lethal post-Thatcherism, with an eye to high-brow Nabokovian imagery and deliciously esoteric references (to the Belgian poet and novelist Georges Rodenbach, in *Dancing out in Space*). Rodenbach (1855-1898) might well be the unintentional inspiration for Bowie's own melancholy, moving tribute to Berlin, *Where are we now?* a song of vulnerable beauty which in its own way links to Rodenbach' equally haunting tribute of Bruges in his celebrated short novel *Bruges-la-Morte* (1892).

Musically too, this is an exciting, richly lyrical and satisfying album. For all his heavy philosophical thing, Bowie keeps breaking all too-humanly into longing and tuneful rage, into hope and despair, turning art, lived life and his gathered cut-outs of daily trivia into wonderful song.