A Psychoanalytic Translation of the Australian Film *The Proposition*

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INTRODUCTION

A shootout opens *The Proposition* (Nick Cave, 2005), where bushranger outlaw Charlie Burns (Guy Pearce), and his slow younger brother Mikey (Richard Wilson), are captured by a Captain Morris Stanley (Ray Winstone) who makes them a fateful *proposition*: Charlie has until Christmas to kill his older brother Arthur (Danny Huston), leader of the notorious Burns gang they used to ride with, or else his younger brother will hang by the neck. But if Charlie completes this mission, Stanley also promises to expunge them of their crimes in the eyes of the law. Such is the dilemma that will haunt the runaway outlaw Charlie Burns henceforth.

Lacan's analysis of Creon's decree in Sophocles' *Antigone* can come to mind apropos of Stanley's proposition. For as Lacan remarks in *Seminar VII*, upon surveying the history of ethical discourse, "Is there anyone who doesn't evoke *Antigone* whenever there is a question of a law that causes conflict in us even though it is acknowledged by the community to be a just law?"[i] And King Creon's decree also concerned a brother who is no ordinary brother, for he was as brother of Antigone, the daughter of Oedipus, a criminal brother, just like their father who was also a kind of "brother" for having spawn them through his own mother! This transgression surrounding "brother" is why Lacan notes that Antigone "is motivated by no good" but "a criminal good" (SVII, 240), even before she chooses to defy a King's decree apropos of him, which was that her brother should lie unburied upon the ground, as feast for dogs and carrion birds, for daring to attack the city. But Antigone's response is to say: "my brother is my brother" and bury him anyway, earning Creon's wrath and the sentence of

execution brought down upon her fair head. And Charlie, too? Or is it more the case that Charlie *has* two, two brothers that is, the older and younger, where killing the older will save the younger as well as himself in the eyes of Captain Stanley's colonial law.

This article will read "the proposition" put by Stanley to Charlie—that he should kill his older brother Arthur to "civilize this land"—as a *translation* of perverse desire into the language of law and morality, with fatal consequences "revealed to us in tragedy" (SVII, 259) much in the way Lacan saw in Creon's stance towards Antigone. [ii] It considers Charlies' *refusal* of Stanley's proposition to kill a brother apropos of Antigone's refusal of Creon's decree to leave a brother's corpse rotting upon the ground. And it suggests that the final Oedipal rape of Stanley's wife Martha (Emily Watson) while he is made to watch by Arthur is a punishment of Stanley for his colonial hubris, akin to that suffered by Creon at the end of *Antigone*, whose demise is foreshadowed by the gods and encapsulated in "the dead son he carries in his arms" (SVII, 277). The article concludes that Charlie changing his mind *post-hoc* and shooting his brother dead is an allegory of restoring social taboo by murder of the primal father, who affirms a fantasy that is transgressively heterogeneous yet also erotic and very *real*—retranslating this post-colonial allegory back into the Nietzschean void whence it came, from the spirit of its haunted Dionysian music (Nick Cave, Warren Ellis, 2005).

1. Stanley's Creonic Posture

Before moving into the complexities of Charlies' decision, this section will focus on what we might call, with aid of Lacan, Stanley's Creonic posture. Creon's error for Lacan is to want "to promote the good of all as the law without limits," an "error of judgement" that: "goes beyond or crosses the limit" (SVII, 259) concerning treatment of the dead. Creon, in short, as Lacan finds already noted by Goethe, tries to strike his enemy "beyond limits within which he has

the right" (SVII, 254), and in this he can be read as translating his perverse desire into "the identity of law and reason" when claiming "one cannot at the same time honor those who have defended their country and those who have attacked it" (SVII, 259). But as with Captain Stanley who, while claiming his aim is "to civilize this land"—this "fresh hell" that is the Antipodean Australia for him—there is more than a hint of Sadean *jouissance* displaced in such a moralizing posture. Stanley, for instance, has already been gloating that he aims to *really* bring Arthur down, "to show that he is a man like any other," "to hurt him" with "what would most hurt him" by getting him killed by his own brother, rather than wait till the bounty hunters get him; just as Creon's arguably legitimate desire to not bestow *equal* honors on those who defended the city and those who attacked it need not have entailed a slow, public mutilation, allowing gnawed off limbs to be scattered round town by birds and dogs, causing "an offense," Lacan notes, "to heaven and to earth" (SVII:279). Here we can say, then, with Lacan, that the Good is only invoked by Captain and King "in the guise of some alibi on the part of the subject" merely to serve "the subject's defences" (SVII:221).

Captain Stanley has nevertheless sensed a wedge between Charlie and his older brother, which he is out to exploit and is what makes Charlie's choice so difficult. For the excess of Stanley's proposition is matched only by the criminal excess of Arthur, who, while not precisely doing an Oedipus, recently presided over the murder of a white settler family, which likely included a ritual rape of the mother before the father's eyes who turned out "to have a child in her belly."[iii] It was this outrage that caused Charlie to grab his younger brother and leave, only now to be propositioned, or blackmailed even, to return with fratricidal intentions. Such are the ensuing complexities unfolding as Charlie rides out to the ranges alone with a gun, thinking, drinking, gazing up at what Lacan via Kant calls "the starry heavens above" as if

they could reflect some determinate "moral law within"—where we know that ever since "the disorienting effect of Newtonian physics is felt," we find ourselves rather alone, "in the middle of a huge construction site," like "a watch that someone forgot" (SVII, 316, 76).

Charlies' uncertainties can only unfurl further, for here in this colonial context, the 'Irishness' of the Burns family forever hovers, as do the genocidal programs against the Indigenous that Stanley is busily presiding over at the behest of his Anglo-Saxon masters. But this is perhaps also at the behest of his wife Martha, the "well-bred Woman," as she is described by the Mayor, "with a capital *W,*" as Lacan might say, suggesting an imaginarized "universal" of purity, innocence, and wholeness of which "there's no such thing" because "she is not-whole [*pas-tout*]"—neither wholly within the phallic function *nor* wholly beyond it.[iv] This lack of *wholesomeness* is a key consequence of Lacan's thesis of the absence of an idealised sexual relation in nature, as is indicated when he proclaims: "what do you expect?––if the sexual relationship doesn't exist, there aren't any Ladies" (SXX, 57). But in playing at one, Martha is the "idealized woman, the Lady, who is in the position of the Other and of the object," with the *transcendental* "value of representing the Thing" (SVII, 163, 126), that Lacan identifies in "courtly love" (SXX, 69)—a "terrifying, an inhuman partner" who is "emptied of all real substance," deprived of "flesh and blood," to meet the demand "to be deprived of something real" (SVII, 126, 149-50, 214). In this Martha unconsciously propels Stanley's impossible tasks—as her "invention of the master" to "reign over" that Lacan identifies as "the hysteric's desire"[v]—of rendering a dark continent pure and white enough as a safe space for her to complete the phallic circuit with a baby of her own: a fantasy of completion to plug the holes of the sexual relation by the overcoming of a "barrier" (SVII, 149), of the "obstacles" Lacan senses we "erect" to be "feigning" to be the only things standing in the way (SXX, 69).[vi]

In thinking of the tragedies that will befall Creon, moreover, Lacan notes that: "One would have to have a character that was deeply out of touch with the cruelties of our time to attack the subject […] by focusing on the tyrant" (SVII, 240). And the same could be said if we focus our sympathies with Stanley and Martha, despite the horrors they are predestined for––we could be accused of a superficial moralism a-historically out of touch with the full weight of cruelties of colonialization befalling both Ireland and Australia's First Nations, all at the hands of this same Anglo-Saxon machine. For not only were First Nations' Laws not respected despite thousands of years of prior dwelling on the land, but their tribal law of reciprocity, of "kill one of them and they are going to kill one of ours," as Mayor Fletcher (David Wenham) put it, was countered by him with the direct order for genocide, angrily exclaiming to Stanley: "So if you have to kill one, make sure you bloody well *kill them all!*" And Stanley has no qualms in carrying out these orders, while being commended for having done "well" for himself in managing to secure his Martha as a "clever, well-bred Woman," impressed as the Mayor was with Martha's white-laced fineries, and fine-china teas.

As for the Irish, there was also little luck there, as the bounty hunter, Jellon Lamb (John Hurt), Charlie meets at the bar on the way to the Rangers reminds us with his sardonic racial slurs; with Charlie soon drawing his gun and saying: "One more crack about the Irish, Mr. Lamb, and I'll shoot you!" But Jellon only pretends to apologize before adding the gratuitous, "Let us drink, then, to the Irish. Never has a finer race of men … peeled a potato"—leading Charlie to reach for his gun again.[vii] Then Jellon offers his racial thesis about the Aboriginals Darwin studied in Tasmania, rejecting his discovery that we are all evolutionary one and "descendent from monkeys." "We are white men," Jellon shouts, "not beasts;" with the irony being his decrepit state and the brutal colonial situation he is proud to have partaken in. Later

he will catch Charlie again and reveal his true thoughts about any shared Anglo-Irish "whiteness" implied by his "We," if not the harsh core of Anglo-Imperialism over Ireland, "Australia," and much of the globe in saying to Charlie: "For what is an Irish man but a 'nigger' turned inside out," which calls to mind the language of the novels of Joseph Conrad that Terry Collits reads as undermining any redeeming idea of Colonialism as "a civilizing" project. For: "the drive for colonial expansion is always" "the product of collective impulses that are beyond rational control because they are derived from a deeply split structure"—a Lacanian insight which Collits notes "exposes the factitiousness of all 'justifying ideas.'"[viii]

Such horrors of colonialism allow a window into Anglo-Irish tensions in the 1880s, which plays as a question of loyalties in the back of Charlie's head as he contemplates if he should kill a criminal brother in the name of an Anglo-Colonial Law unworthy of the name. But it is here that Jellon reveals himself as a bounty hunter set to kill his brother himself, describing him as a sitting up in the "melancholy hills" where he "slumbers deep like the Kraken," and "sleeps in caves like a beast." And Charlie makes a kind of choice here and fells him with his drinking mug. Although it is not yet clear if this is to protect his brother from his would be killer, or to protect Stanley's Creonic "proposition" that Charlie must kill his brother himself.

2. Charlie's "No" as Antigone's

As Charlie leaves the bar for the Ranges he is speared by Aboriginals and passes out, only to be rescued by the Burns gang who happen to be nearby. And so it comes to pass that Charlie is reunited with his brother. This section reads Charlie's eventual refusal of Stanley's proposition apropos of Antigone's refusal of Creon's to leave her brother unburied. It also

begins to reflect on the mercurial nature of Arthur Burns, who is shown now weeping next to Charlie's body, in a cave with pages of text stuck all over the wall, pining for him to come to.

When Charlie finally does come to, Arthur begins his enigmatic speech about how "Love is the key, Love and family," saying how, as his brother, Charlie "belongs with" him, which confronts Charlie with the *burn* of a choice far from complete. Arthur invokes the importance of family and enquires about their younger brother. But Charlie lies that Mikey met a girl called Molly O'Boyle and stayed behind, being as vague as he could. In any case, after further thought, Arthur steps over to the edge of a precipice, tells Charlie he was right to take Mikey away as he is "not the same stock as us" — *us*, that is, who are "flung to the depths"—which assumes Charlie is at peace with Arthur being a kind of shamanic, sociopathic primal father of the horde they run in as a family or gang. Charlie has his first chance to kill Arthur here, just a shove would do it, but does not take it, saying only that Mikey still worships Arthur, that: "there *was* a time" when they "*both* did"—invoking, tensely, a past gone wrong. And Arthur responds just in time to stop Charlie's fratricidal intention in its tracks, saying: "Mikey deserves better. You were right to leave, and take him with you."

But when Arthur gets up one morning, after a night of seeming meditation and trance on family and love, he decides to "burn" all his possessions, much to Charlie's dismay; as if to play on their paternal signifier "Burns," or indicate *lack* of symbolic distance from the drives in the real.[ix] This is akin to what Bataille calls "ruinous expenditure" in analyzing the case of serial killer Gilles de Rais who: "liquidated an immense fortune without thinking"—opposing his transgressive register to taboo, reason, and accumulation in a perverted potlatch literally mixing sex-and-death where: "he would sit on the belly of his victim and, in this fashion, masturbating, come on the dying body."[x] But here Arthur leans over Charlie, making him

flinch, and indicates he does not really believe what he was told about Mikey, as if to dissolve the past night's reconciliation. "Molly O'Boyle my arse," he sneers, and decides to ride off towards the gunshots they had earlier heard in the distance of Sergeant Lawrence (Robert Morgan), one of Stanley's men, out there "miles away," but still audible, "shooting blacks."

Lawrence and his men, meanwhile, have returned to the bar, still covered in blood from the Aboriginals they have slaughtered, the corpses of which are strewn outside. And Lawrence and his troopers are drinking and singing "Rule, Britannia," a patriotic song of the British military about how "Britannia rules the waves," and how "Britons never, never, never shall be slaves." But none of the Aboriginals in the bar are singing along, or even smiling, even though they are in uniform and ostensibly working with the troopers. The irony regarding the triumphalism about Britons never being slaves is that historically the indigenous Briton-Celts *were* enslaved by the Romans, for 400 years of occupation, after which, when they withdrew, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes took over from North-West Germany, followed later by the Norman Vikings of northern France and Vikings of the North. Perhaps it is a case of Freudian repetition, internalizing violence so as to pass it on according to the death-drive, where, Freud notes, "the most painful experiences" are felt "as highly enjoyable" through "an instinct of mastery"—where *repeating* the trauma is to be "master of the situation" by revenging "on a substitute."[xi] And so, like the child at play, with what Freud calls the shift from "the passivity of the experience to the activity of the game" (SE18, 17), *Anglo*-Britain went on to become the largest colonizing power in history instead of placing a cut in the cycle, with *Anglo*-America taking over from WWII with the 'cold war' and 'war on terror,' forever full of pretexts, civilian casualties, commercial motives, and imperial bombs. But Freud himself, in the context of WWI, warns against disillusion here, insofar as "we had expected the great world-dominating

nations of white race upon whom the leadership of the human species has fallen, who were known to have world-wide interests as their concern"—and whose "creative powers were due not only our technical advances" but also "the artistic and scientific standards of civilization"––to find a less barbarous "way of settling misunderstandings and conflicts of interest."[xii] For in reality, Freud concludes, "our fellow-citizens have not sunk so low as we feared, because they had never risen so high as we believed" (SE14, 285).

When Arthur arrives, however, he immediately captures Sergeant Lawrence who, to bargain for his life, tells him about the proposition, as if to confirm Arthur's suspicions and give him precisely the information he lacks. He does not take it well, stomping Lawrence's face to death while seen to enjoy his work, getting down low to the carnage as if to whiff up all his grisly *jouissance*. This again can invoke Gilles de Rais, where, Bataille notes, "what mattered to him was less the sexual enjoyment than to see death at work."[xiii] But when Arthur returns to his cave, like the Palaeolithic being he partly is, he finds that Jellon Lamb has found it too and strung Charlie up, only now to be shot by Two-Bob (Tom E. Lewis), Arthur's right-hand aboriginal man, and here the ambiguity of the "brother" signifier will rear its destining head.

As he slowly bleeds out, Jellon begins to sing, "Life is very sweet, Brother, who would wish to die," which Arthur names as by George Borrow, whom he calls "A worthy writer," with "a beautiful sentiment," which briefly fills Jellon with hope: Only to see it dashed when Arthur pushes him down and says, "but you're not my brother," which is true in more ways than one in this colonial setting. Two rugged men of letters, one Irish, and one English, who couldn't thus be further apart, as Arthur hands his knife to Charlie, who *is* his brother, so he can have the opportunity to finish Jellon off by hand. But one glare from Charlie says "I'm not doing that," establishing again a distance between them too. So Arthur does it himself, with the

understatement that “this might hurt a little,” as he starts slowly, sadistically, twisting his cutlass knife into a screaming Jellon’s chest, getting down low again because, as Bataille notes of Gilles de Rais, “he liked to watch,” and “had the body cut open, the throat cut, the members carved to pieces,” because “he relished seeing the blood.”[xiv]

But suddenly Arthur freezes at the sound behind him, of Charlie cocking his gun, and says: “Why can’t you ever just … *stop me?*” And the ambiguity is if what is meant is why can’t Charlie intervene to stop Arthur’s violent excesses—as if they are becoming even too much for himself—or if Arthur is indicating that he knows about the proposition and is sounding Charlie out, to see if it is true and he is thinking to honor it by stopping Arthur literally dead. In any case Charlie finally makes his choice. He *shoots Jellon instead of his brother*, a mercy killing to put him out of his misery, and confesses to Arthur that Mikey has been caught and will hang on Christmas unless they break him out. Arthur’s response of “When’s Christmas, Charlie?” again indicates how outside the symbolic norm he is. Nevertheless, the choice is made, “my brother is my brother,” as Antigone would put it, so to hell with Stanley’s Creonic proposition—as the gang rides out, united again as this strange, primal family to rescue the younger brother from Captain Stanley’s cell. With Charlie on point, perhaps they are with more purpose here than when Gilles de Rais gathers his men-at-arms, randomly “brandishes a battle-axe and brutally enters a church,” where, Bataile notes, “the archaism of his character” made him less like his Grandfather, the feudal lord he inherited power from who was attracted to crime for “the result” of “advantage.”[xv] But still, there is something borderline about Arthur, and with him on board it is inevitable that a frenzied violence will soon unfold.

Meanwhile, Mayor Fletcher has heard about the proposition, accused Stanley of the same *hubris* as Charlie—of trying to be “judge and jury” in one—and ordered that Mikey be

publicly flogged for his role in the assault of the Hopkins. Stanley is aghast at this, not only because he knows Mikey is a simpleton not responsible for the actions, but also because he fears a hundred lashes will kill him, break the proposition, and bring Arthur's wrath upon himself. And this is precisely what does happen, as the gang burst into the prison to find a lacerated boy near death, leaving Charlie to bury him when soon he passes, as the rest of the gang ride off to find Stanley's house, with Charlie left behind to cry over a brother's grave.

3. Stanley's Demise and Arthur's Primal Father as (per)version of Dionysos

This section translates Stanley's ultimate demise back into Creon's, leaving Charlie in a strained Antigone position and his brother Arthur as a (per)version of Dionysos, whose libidinal excess intertwines with Freudian primal Father savagery. I will also reflect on some of the formal and allegorical components of the film, in particular its tragic use of music.

After the flogging, Stanley and Martha retire to their home at town limits, to focus on a nice Christmas. Martha had feinted at the sight of Mikey's body, gushing blood before even half of the sentenced lashes were reached. But equally she bore complicity for pushing it forward, crying out that Tiffany Hopkins was *her* friend, to protest the delayed punishment implied of her husband's proposition. It was only Martha's surprise appearance at the jailhouse, to look him ambiguously in the eye while saying, "*It could have been me*," that led Stanley to lower his gun and drop his keys to the dirt, having tried to stop the angry townsfolk from dragging Mikey out. And so to forget the trauma, which lead to Stanley's sacking after he shoved the blood-stained whip to the Mayor's chest: which separates the wilting Martha from his arms as well as if to confirm an unconscious cuckold[xvi]—Martha orders in cotton to hang about the tree for a "white Christmas." But the signifier "white" is strangely disproportionate to their indigenous surrounds, and wonderfully encapsulated as Stanley

dismisses their black servant with the farewell of "Merry Christmas," who looks at him with indifference while calmly removing his shoes and socks to walk out into the dessert barefoot. Stanley is left looking at the abandoned shoes, facing him before his white picket fence, where, as McGowan would say, it is really more a case of that the shoes are left, as signifier of the real, *gazing* back at him—emptying out his alleged subject position of "anything resembling mastery.[xvii]

The shoes are like the sardine can floating in the waves that Lacan discusses apropos of the *real* gaze in *Seminar XI*. This is where a sardine reflecting light in his eyes, disrupting his vision, told him that he was "out of place in the picture"—out on a fishing boat off the coast of Brittany—that to the fishermen living a hard and "pitiless" life around him he looked, as a young avant-garde doctor, "like nothing on earth."[xviii] And it is similar with Stanley's Hebraic resurrection myth and Anglo ways, out amidst the outback and genocidal effects of his settler-colonialism. He *looked like nothing on earth*, as he uttered Merry Christmas, to people who had been there for thousands of years and developed their own Law and dreamtime myth. But the empty gaze of the abandoned shoes is also a portent of the horrible things to come again, as discussed in *Seminar XI*, functioning like the gaze of the real of the anamorphic skull at the bottom of Holbein's portrait of *The Ambassadors*—reminding the viewer of the deathly costs of so many accoutrements of power and prestige in the modern world: as it "reflects our own nothingness," Lacan notes, "in the figure of the death's head" (SXI, 92).

And no sooner had Martha and Stanley finished grace on their well-laid table, dressed in Sunday best and imported decorations, did Arthur and his understudy, Samuel Stote (Tom Budge), burst into the room with guns drawn. Previously they had tarried to hack the heads and limbs off of the troopers who were guarding the prison, the sight of which even causes

Mayor Fletcher to feel the fear, suggesting perhaps some method to Arthur's madness. But now Arthur sets upon Stanley, dragging him out into his office while Samuel threatens Martha with a silver fork and is monstering the food, his dirtiness contrasting with its ornateness. Suddenly he is called to drag Martha to the office, where Arthur has Stanley blindfolded by a Union Jack he found there, and, with the portrait of the *English* Queen visible behind him, shoots him through the shoulder and throws him to the ground, making space only for his eyes to see the festival of rape about to begin. Then, kicking back on a chair as if to enjoy the sight and take it all in, with the lineaments of a mixed *jouissance* visibly writing itself across his face, Arthur notices that Charlie has slowly wandered in.

Charlie tells Arthur Mikey is dead, but Arthur wishes to remain unperturbed, telling Charlie he is "just in time" for the perverted feast, beckoning to Samuel's angelic singing while he is raping Martha on the desk. This substitution of Samuel for Mikey, of the low for the high, is finally too much for Charlie. He shoots Samuel in the head, and shoots his brother twice when he stands to protest. "*No more!*," Charlie cries, as Arthur staggers out, leaving a trail of blood. Here Charlie turns to a shell-shocked Stanley, who is thinking of crawling for a gun, and utters, "*I'm going to be with my brother*," following *his blood* out through the manicured garden, through the gaping hole now crashed through the white picket fence. He finds Arthur seated, gazing at the sunset and sits beside him, both of them with legs stretched out like children. And Arthur asks "*what are you going to do now?*," but receives no answer, leaving us to ponder the question for ourselves, as the sunset fades the silence to darkness.

If Charlie were to be employed by Captain Stanley, expunged for his crimes in honoring the proposition and shooting his brother dead, he might be thrust into Antigone's position more definitively if, say, his new found life were at the expense of Stanley decreeing *à la* Creon

that the corpse of his brother Arthur must lie unburied upon the ground, as a lesson to others who would defy colonial law. But instead the film ends with this unanswered question of praxis, after Charlie's choice to kill his brother as he began to have his way with Martha, and after younger brother Mikey was dead. This puts Arthur in the position of Freud's primal father, with Charlie and Stanley as the new brothers to forge a social contract of equality and justice, as long as they can keep the past and excessive desire at bay. Desire, of course, can never completely stay at bay, which is whence the fantasy of the primal Father came. For as Lacan saw, it was not really the murder of the primal father that established the law, but the "operation" of the libidinally repressive Law of Judeo-Christianity that "determines" and can "cause" such a "hysteric's desire" or "fantasy" of the "omnipotent Father" (SXVII, 129)—who has "*all the women*" (SXIX, 34), and all the *jouissance*—and "who is not the serf of the phallic function" (SXIX, 92), "this business of castration" (SXIX, 25), encompassing nigh everyone else, where "*the exception proves the rule*" (SXIX, 92) due to its infrequency.[xix]

Arthur Burns is more real than all that, and does not completely fit Freud's primal picture, which repeats toward completion in the murder-resurrection of Jesus and is thus dismissed by Lacan as "strange Christocentrism" (SVII, 176). For Arthur is keen to dole out *jouissance* to his horde, content to enable it and watch. But there is also something political in his "savage" Dionysian generosity[xx]—in seeming to target the Anglo settler families, part of a system ultimately responsible for the subjugation of his own Ireland Law, as well as of the Indigenous tribes around. For what is the idea of "God save the King/Queen," and country, after all, but the enshrining of sovereignty of a previous name of a previous kind of primal father? Arthur simply meets them at the disavowed roots of their own terrain. Then there is the film's score, with Nick Cave claiming he wrote the lyrics and the script *out of* the music,

that the music came first: For this speaks to Nietzsche's thesis of the "birth of tragedy out of the spirit of music," that tragic poetry and theatre emerges *from* the Dionysian mode of music and ritual (BT, 7, 16-7), which was also noted in Aristotle's *Poetics* in 335BC (1449a).[xxi] And it is the quality of the music of *Proposition*, particularly Warren Ellis's violin, that lends the film a tragic beauty enabling us to face the real of Christian-colonial horror without also subjecting us to nihilism and despair. This ecstasy in the face of tragedy fits well with the minor Phrygian mode used in Greek tragedy—where, Lacan notes, "the music concerned is the most disturbing kind," which "made them forget themselves," which "in classical antiquity gave rise to the question of whether or not it should be prohibited" (SVII, 245).

The cinematography of Benoît Delhomme and direction of John Hillcoat also add immensely to the Apollonian gauze of beauty, laid across the terror, luring us to Dionysian dissolution in the real. But if there is to be a Nietzschean lens on this tragedy, it is a Bataillean Nietzsche Cave has invoked, with the tendency to "base materialism," "the formless," and "heterology," a consistent feature of his life's work.[xxii] This return of the base cuts against but completes the Christian-Platonic idealism we find ourselves amidst in the modern world, whether it is with Bataille's dissident surrealist work of interwar Paris, or Cave's fleeing of Australia to the underground arts communities of West Berlin's 1980s, with a dark abysmal voice ready to be heard.[xxiii] It is very much the Macbethian case that a little water of idealism does *not* cleanse us of our deeds, whether it is the libidinal repression of ourselves or the colonial oppression of whole other nations, with the two being quite connected. Felicity Collins has in particular noted the *return-of-the-repressed* structure of Cave's film, noting how her "first viewing of *The Proposition*" left her "with an unshakeable sense of the 'irrefutable truth' of frontier violence as a 'fact' of Australian history," wondering just "how can a fictional

narrative tell an 'irrefutable' truth about the past?"[xxiv] Nevertheless, she senses that "when Captain Stanley surveys this desolate landscape after the violent, opening shoot-out" and "asks the allegorical question, 'Australia—what fresh hell is this?,'" that "the film sets out to demolish the myth of colonial history as 'civilizing progress,'" as in "in the name of progress, Stanley unleashes" a "hellish circle of retributive violence" piling "one catastrophic event upon another."[xxv]

To explain this paradox of allegory—where for Lacan "truth takes the structure of fiction"[xxvi]—Collins cites Hayden White's very psychoanalytic observation that "holocaustal events," defined as "programs of genocide undertaken by societies utilizing scientific technology and rationalized procedures of governance and warfare," "function exactly as infantile traumas," for they "cannot be simply forgotten or put out of mind, but neither can they be adequately remembered.'"[xxvii] Film is a place for ensuing repetition, which is what Collins sees in those such as *Proposition* that "displace the nation's myth of origin from the sacred trenches of Gallipoli to the 'immense, historical crime scene' of the colonial frontier"––where "Australia returns obsessively to the 'traumatic scene', or 'holocaustal event,' of frontier violence between indigenous and settler Australians" to reengage the "necessity of remembering and 'mourning' or 'working through' a contested past," and what "Judith Butler calls the 'unmourned losses' or 'ungrievable lives' of the defeated, of those written out of nation-building histories."[xxviii] Thus, for Collins, such "scenes of frontier violence" have "transformed the postcolonial myth of *terra nullius* (an 'event without a trace') into a violent primal scene" which is "redefining the nation's origin and identity": Where the aim is not in "redeeming the past for new national myths, as *The Proposition* demonstrates," but of "using allegory against myth to realize a different history"—to "transform national identity into

something other than a 'sacred parable' built on the hellish repetition of violence and catastrophe."[xxix]

Collins's is an impressive response to the question of how "a national cinema's allegorical reworking of colonial documents" and "frontier iconography into 'scenes' of violence, 'sting' viewers into an affective and ethical response?"[xxx] For not many films can go the distance of Cave's, and not every viewer, or distribution-production infrastructure, is capable of going with him, as some of his other films with Hillcoat, put through the Hollywood wringers, bear out.[xxxi] But without the work of an actual analysis, too often we are left with a Culture Industry deserving of Adorno's hostile critique, juxtaposed only with what Alison Horbury notes is a "short-circuit from the protest discourse of the hysteric to that of the university," forever "bypassing the critical phase of the analyst," which "perpetuates a politics of the symptom *as* a solution."[xxxii] The result is what Horbury calls a subject "split-off from what motivates them, their desire, and their enjoyment," which, from left to right, is perhaps best encapsulated by Nietzsche's proto-Freudian articulation of: "'I have done that,' says my memory. 'I cannot have done that'—says my pride and remains unshakeable. Finally—memory yields."[xxxiii]

The more we fail to remember, the more we fail to adequately forget, as identity formations continue to try and dress the wounds of psycho/socio-historical castration, and our dreams, metaphors, and filmic allegories return the truth in code for evermore. We should be thankful that in Australia Nick Cave and his team have put together such a vision of the ever-pressing void that grips in horror, but also in Dionysian ecstasy, lured to catharsis with a strength to experience the truth of the real yet still carry on. Our answer to Charlie's dying

brother, of the question of what are we going to do now, should look something like this artistic work.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to translate *The Proposition* back into the psychoanalytic insights of Lacan's reading of *Antigone*, and in doing so demonstrate how both Captain Stanley and King Creon translate their perverse desire into the guise of the common good: to lead the gaze awry while their crimes of passion go aided and abetted. I have shown how Charlie's initial choice to refuse Stanley's Creonic proposition of fratricide translates into Antigone's chthonic defence of a brother, a criminally transgressive Oedipal brother; and I have shown how Creon's eventual punishment by the gods for his hubris, foreshadowed by the prophet Tiresias, translates into Stanley's punishment for colonial hubris, albeit at the hands of the fractured (per)version of Dionysos of the Christian-modern world.[xxxiv] This is why I suggest Charlie's decision to change his mind after Stanley's comeuppance to shoot his brother dead is fitting, because the primal father figure of Arthur is still a symptom of what Nietzsche calls the poisoning of Eros that occurs with the universalising of Christian mores (BGE, 168), that morphed into what Bataille notes with Max Weber is the rise of capitalism with the protestant work ethic.[xxxv] The murder of the openly transgressive Arthur is a chance to establish a better praxis once the drive is exposed: to sublimate a social contract that might allow for a properly erotic outlet for the drive, rather than its disavowed displacements into more destructive war.

To conclude, then, by translating these findings into the thought of Bataille, this film by Cave, and the dark truths it allegorically presents to us, bears the hallmarks of what Bataille calls "the Accursed Share," where the aim is to bring this base material to light so as to "lift the curse" on the *gift* of the drive again (AS I, 9). In putting together this film I have shown

how Cave and team have done a commendable job in focussing the cinematic gaze on the heterogeneous real, layering it with so many Apollonian veils of beauty, from the music to the imagery and the countenance of the hero, that we are lured into a cathartic *jouissance* beyond the usual bars of pleasure, of self-censoring "reality"—as per the Dionysos whom Bataille simply calls "the god of transgression."[xxxvi] No filmic achievement could be more applauded.

> "Unless we consider the various possibilities for consumption which are opposed to war, and for which erotic pleasure—the instant consumption of energy—is the model, we will never discover an outlet founded on reason."
>
> – Bataille, *The Tears of Eros* (1961, 149)

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[i] Lacan, *Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis,* trans. D. Porter (New York: Norton, 1991), 243. Henceforth SVII.

[ii] I use "translation" the way Bruce Fink defines "*Übertragung*," usually translated as *transference* but literally meaning transmission, translation, or transposition "from one idiom or register to another." Fink, *Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique: A Lacanian Approach for Practitioners* (London: Norton, 2007), 126.

[iii] Russell Grigg notes the "symbolic, strictly Oedipal structure" where war atrocities take the "ritualised form" of "raping of women in the presence of a helpless, impotent, intimidated father or father figure," where "transgression externalises guilt that is of unconscious origins and relates to the Oedipal." See chapter "Guilt, the Law, and Transgression" of Grigg, *Lacan, Language, and Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY, 2008), 113, 117.

[iv] Lacan, *Seminar XX, On Feminine Sexuality,* trans. Fink (New York: Norton, 1999), 72-4. Henceforth SXX.

[v] Lacan, *Seminar XVII, The Other Side of Psychoanalysis,* trans. Grigg (New York: Norton, 2007), 129. Henceforth SXVII.

[vi] Martha's *recurring* dream of Tiffany Hopkins handing her a baby, which she feels squeezing her arm as she awakens, is, Lacan might say, a passage through the modes of *penisneid* to the substitution of the baby for the missing phallus, "which she will never possess"—from the "long-maintained wish" "that the clitoris be a penis"

to where "what is desired is the father's penis," to where "the fantasy of having a child by the father emerges—that is, of having the penis in symbolic form." Todd McGowan notes the myth of the idealised sexual relation as central to the Hollywood machine, noting that "even subjects sceptical about everything else often invest themselves in this fantasy," which, paradoxically, "creates the illusion of possible satisfaction by erecting a barrier." Lacan, *Seminar V, Formations of the Unconscious*, trans. Grigg (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2017), 260. McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (Albany: SUNY, 2007), 17, 24, 203-4.

[vii] This refers to *an Gorta Mór* (1845-1852), the Potato Famine, which, as an Irish President recently noted, left a million dead and a million displaced to Australia and the US, caused by policy out of England. See <retrieved 27/11/218> https://www.president.ie/en/media-library/speeches/speech-at-university-of-melbourne-australia

[viii] Lacan concludes *Seminar XIX* with the observation that what is "rooted in the body, the fraternity of bodies, is racism," casting doubt on the "rose-tinted" idea of brotherhood emerging from the murder of the primal Father, and harking back to his *Seminar XVII* debunking of the primal Father myth which asserts *all* brotherhood is "founded on segregation (SXVII, 114). Collits also notes that "if colonialism were not underpinned by racist assumptions and materialistic desires it would not require redemption in the first place," for "Desire and the Law" exist in "reciprocity and tension, because the Law not only constrains desire but generates transgressive forms of it that cannot be appeased," where "the law itself in Lacan can strike back in the 'obscene, ferocious figure of the superego.'" Lacan, *Seminar XIX, …Or Worse*, trans. A. Price (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018), 211. Collits, *Post-Colonial Conrad: Paradoxes of Empire* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 111, 121-2.

[ix] "Distance" is from what in Lacan's *Seminar VII* is the primary repressed of "the Freudian Thing" or *Id*/*Es*—"the real" which "is always in the same place" which the pleasure principle orbits "to avoid excess, too much pleasure," to "maintain the distance" from our more primitive impulses (SVII, 69, 132, 137, 70, 54, 58). Instead of "distance," Lacan's *Seminar XVII* uses the term "castration" (SXVII,125). Richard Boothby notes "it is the function of the Oedipus complex to stabilise the moment of separation," which "assigns to the Thing its proper place beyond every object of satisfaction" through "the prohibition of incest with the establishment of the proper distance." By *Seminar XVII* the Oedipus complex is considered "Freud's dream," and the murdered-primal-Father a hysteric's invention of the castrating father the Oedipal function requires to distance. Boothby, *Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology after Lacan* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 215.

[x] Bataille, *The Trial of Gilles de Rais* (1965), trans. R. Robinson (Los Angeles: Amok, 2004), 14, 28.

[xi] Freud also notes how repeating can be an *inadequate* way of remembering involving unconscious "acting out" due to a lack of working-through of past situations, eternally trapped in a bad return. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *The Standard Edition*, ed. J. Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 18: 16-7. References to *Standard Edition* henceforth SE. Freud, "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through," in SE12, 150-1.

[xii] Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," in SE14, 276.

[xiii] Bataille, *The Trial of Gilles de Rais*, 14.

[xiv] Bataille, *The Trial of Gilles de Rais*, 14.

[xv] Bataille remarks, "faced with Gilles and his grandfather, it is possible to imagine the brutalities of the Nazis…" He also notes that Gilles' lavish wartime heroics as Joan of Arc's right-hand man soon had no place in a world that "gave way to the problems of reason," leaving behind the ruinous "*potlaches*" of the past which, after the war, he himself "ought to have renounced." It is possible to imagine a similar backstory for Arthur in *Ireland's* wars of liberation against the English. Bataille, *The Trial of Gilles de Rais*, 21, 25, 27, 43, 51, 48-9.

[xvi] Lacan notes that psychoanalysis enables us to assert that in any sexual encounter "the vulgar term *partouze* [group sex] is not to be altogether ruled out" (SXIX, 83). Revealing also is how on nursing Martha back to health, Stanley confesses his "idea about justice, in the town, for the country," was really about Martha. "For You. For You," he repeats, concluding, "But now, I don't know," putting him in what for Lacan is Creon's position of the blind master's "he didn't know" (SVII, 236, 277; SXVII, 108), but also where the fantasy of the sexual relation, woven around the Lady inaccessible for her demands of purity, begins to dissolve. As McGowan might put it, in discussing how films "translate private fantasies into public ones" to address "shared forms of dissatisfaction"—Stanley "imagines the achievement of the impossible: direct justice in the case of the state of exception," by playing judge-and-jury with the proposition; "or accessing the impossible object in the case of fantasy," which playing husband to Martha and the proposition was for. McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 24-5.

[xvii] McGowan documents the lack in how Laura Mulvey misapplied Lacan's gaze to cinema. Alison Horbury uses Lacan's *Seminar XVII* to show how feminism uses Mulvey to invent an omnipotent "male gaze" to support a hysteric's discourse. McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 6-8. Horbury, "What does Feminism Want?," *CT&T: A*

Journal of Intellectual Freedom 1-3 (2017): 569-70, 575, 578-80; and "Digital Feminisms and the Split Subject: Short-circuits through Lacan's Four-Discourses," *CM: Communication and Media* XI-38 (2016): 149-50, 157.

[xviii] Lacan, *Seminar XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. D. Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1998), 96. Henceforth SXI.

[xix] Lacan suggests nothing *human* could be an exception to castration, which is why he calls the primal father an "orang-utan"—referencing "Abraham's sacrifice" of a ram in place of the Father-god, the animal paintings of "Lascaux caves," and how "as in any self-respecting human lineage, its mythical descent is animal" (SXIX, 179-80). Bataille agrees with Levi-Strauss that Freud's is an account "not of the beginnings of civilisation" but of "the living compulsions," "an inveterate fantasy," "of its present state." But he disputes Levi-Strauss's reductive claim that the taboo on incest *founds* "the transition from Nature to Culture." Bataille's discussions of how taboos on *sex-and-death* in general found our transition "from *animal* to human" and "a world of work"—with repressed animality returning *deified* in the imaginary of the art of Lascaux—are in a number of places including *Lascaux, or the Birth of Art* (1955), and the recent collection of his specialist works on the topic, *The Cradle of Humanity* (2009). Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. M. Dalwood (London: Penguin, 2001), 200, 198, 258, 74-5, 83-5.

[xx] Nietzsche notes the lucid, formal, moderating force of Apollo, intertwined with Dionysos, that accounts for "the immense gap which separates the Dionysian Greek from the Dionysian barbarian," with its "savage natural instincts unleashed," "horrible witches brew of sensuality and cruelty," and "extravagant sexual licentiousness." He also notes how Euripides' substitution of a Socratic hyper-moral/rationalism for Apollo-Dionysos caused a regression of the Dionysian to its savage barbarous form—of a return of the repressed, in psychoanalytic terms, which accounts for parts of Arthur and the primal Father myth. For discussion of this regression in Lacano-Bataillean terms, see Tim Themi, "Bataille and the Erotics of the Real," *Parrhesia* 24 (2015): 316-20. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), 2, 4, 10, 12. Henceforth BT.

[xxi] Felicity Collins notes that "Cave claimed on numerous occasions that he wrote the screenplay to accompany the soundtrack," meaning "the soundtrack exhibits a strong allegorical intention. Collins, "Historical Fiction and the Allegorical Truth of Colonial Violence in *The Proposition*," *Cultural Studies Review* 14-1 (2008): 71.

[xxii] These notions largely emerge in Bataille's contributions to the *Documents* art journal he edited while in dispute with surrealist founder André Breton. See Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. A. Stoekl (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 1985), 15-6, 31,45-7, 97.

[xxiii] In documentary footage, Cave's studio has pages of text all over the wall reminiscent of Arthur's cave, a pile of books showing a copy of Freud's case studies on top, and a book he made juxtaposing images of Christian saints with pornography: such as Jesus at the well of Saint Genevieve de-sublimated with a man watching a woman urinating. An equivalent in Lacan is when he recounts Saint Martin giving his cloak to a naked beggar who may really have been begging that "Saint Martin either kill him or fuck him," or even when he imagines Marie Allacoque who ate a sick man's excrement as instead eating "that of a beautiful girl" or "the come of the forward of your rugby team"—aiming to show how "the erotic side of things remains veiled in the above examples" (SVII, 186, 188). See Bram van Splunteren, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (Berlin: VPRO, 1987), https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=T5JoaaQbtpU; and Nanni Jacobson, *Straight To You: Nick Cave—a Portrait* (GER 1994), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-Bj7alLKx0; <retrieved 13/12/2018>

[xxiv] Collins, "Historical Fiction and Allegorical Truth," 55.

[xxv] Collins, "Historical Fiction and Allegorical Truth," 65.

[xxvi] Lacan, "The Youth of Gide, or the Letter and Desire," in *Écrits*, trans. Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 625.

[xxvii] Collins, "Historical Fiction and Allegorical Truth," 59. White, "The Modernist Event," in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modernist Event*, ed. V. Sobchack (New York: Routledge, 2014), 20.

[xxviii] Nietzsche also notes the *ressentiment*, bad-conscience, and acetic structure that develops in a group oppressed by another more powerful, with the "instinct for freedom pushed back and repressed, incarcerated within," able to "discharge and vent itself only on itself," then projected out as the puritan Good which in terms of culture represents "the *regression* of mankind." Collins, "Historical Fiction and Allegorical Truth," 65, 61. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989). I, 43; II, 17.

[xxix] Collins, "Historical Fiction and Allegorical Truth," 61, 69.

[xxx] Collins, "Historical Fiction and Allegorical Truth," 68.

[xxxi] Cave notes his film *Lawless* (2012) as an example of this, saying it is not the film he and Hillcoat wanted, having passed through a "committee." See Angela Bishop, "Bish's Biz—Nick Cave special" (AUS: Channel Ten, 2013) https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=LQVzAAQJvss <retrieved 13/12/2018>

[xxxii] In showing how Hollywood is "fantasmatic support for the ideology of capitalist society" by "producing docile subjects," McGowan cites Adorno's *Minima Moralia* which notes how film transforms people "into social functions" such that they "enjoy their own dehumanisation as something human, as the joy of warmth." Horbury, "Digital Feminisms and the Split Subject," 135, 160. McGowan, *The Real Gaze*," 17.

[xxxiii]Horbury, "Digital Feminisms and the Split Subject," 160. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. M. Faber (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1998), 68. Henceforth BGE.

[xxxiv] For more on Lacan's *Antigone*, augmented with Nietzsche's critique of the Good, see chapter 3, "Before the Good: Strong Ethics in Sophocles' *Antigone*," in Themi, *Lacan's Ethics and Nietzsche's Critique of Platonism* (Albany: SUNY, 2014), 41-64. For point of contrast, starting with Lacan on Plato's *Symposium*, see its chapter 4, "Birth of the Good: Weak Ethics in Socrates' Alcibiades," 65-86; chapter 5, "God of the Good: Christocentric Oedipal Morality," 87-106; and chapter 6, "Service of Goods: Nature and Desire in Modern Science," 107-28.

[xxxv] Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Volume I: Consumption*, trans. R. Hurley (New York: Zone, 1991), 115-6, 123-4, 127. Henceforth AS.

[xxxvi] Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, trans. P. Connor (San Francisco: City Lights, 1989), 70, 74.