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"American Pie" and the Self-critique of Rock 'n' Roll

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More than thirty-five years after its first release in 1971, Don McLean's "American Pie" still resonates deeply with music listeners and consumers of popular culture. In a 2001 public poll sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Recording Industry Association of America, McLean's eight-and-a-half-minute masterpiece was ranked number 5 among the 365 "most memorable" songs of the twentieth century.[1] In 2002, the song was voted into the Grammy Hall of Fame. In 1997, Garth Brooks performed "American Pie" at a concert in Central Park, and in 2000, pop icon Madonna performed her own version of "American Pie" on the soundtrack of her movie *The Next Best Thing*. In 1999, *American Pie* became the title of a popular—and irreverently comical—coming-of-age movie starring Jason Biggs (the movie *American Pie* was followed by *American Pie 2* in 2001, *American Wedding* in 2003, and *American Pie Presents—Band Camp* in 2005). Like the movie to which it lent its name, the song "American Pie" presents a coming-of-age narrative; and, also like the movie, the song appealed strongly and immediately to its contemporary audience. Three months after its release in November of 1971, the song reached the number one slot on the charts in January of 1972, and it remained in the Top 40 for a total of seventeen weeks (longer than any other single during the year 1972). Unlike the movie, however, the song "American Pie" is highly nuanced and sophisticated, containing multiple allusions and layers of meaning which challenge and heighten our understanding of rock 'n' roll music and the possibility of self-reflection and self-critique in popular culture.[2]

THE TASK OF INTERPRETING "AMERICAN PIE"

Before directly addressing the philosophical issue of rock 'n' roll's self-critique, it is important to make some hermeneutical observations, or observations about how one should—or should not—think about interpreting "American Pie" in the first place.

In approaching "American Pie" from a critical, philosophical point of view, it is tempting to think that one can best interpret the various phrases and moments in the song by linking them—through a sort of one-to-one correspondence—to actual persons and events in rock 'n' roll history. Indeed, dozens of studies—and, more recently, dozens of websites—have identified and established clear linkages between the lyrics of "American Pie" and specific events in the difficult and sometimes dark days of rock 'n' roll.[3] The song's allusions to Buddy Holly are perhaps the most unmistakable of all. For example, the words in the refrain—"this'll be the day that I die"—are clearly an allusion to Buddy Holly's own song, "That'll Be the Day." And the lines about "bad news on the doorstep" and "his widowed bride" refer to news reports about Buddy Holly's death in a plane crash (Holly had been married to wife Maria Elena for less than a year). The ill-fated plane was also carrying two other legends of early rock 'n' roll: Richie Valens (who recorded "La Bamba") and Jiles P. Richardson ("The Big Bopper," famous for his 1958 hit, "Chantilly Lace"). Thus the fateful day was a day on which "the music died," and not just Buddy Holly. The day of the plane crash was February 3, 1959, and correspondingly, McLean specifically identifies the month of the fateful day: "February made me shiver / With every paper I'd deliver."

In another set of unmistakable historical allusions, McLean clearly has Bob Dylan in mind. Consider, for example, the following lines: "the Jester sang for the King and Queen / In a coat he borrowed from James Dean." On the cover of the 1963 album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, Dylan is pictured wearing a red windbreaker, which is precisely what James Dean wore in the film *Rebel Without a Cause*. And shortly before the release of this album, Bob Dylan had performed several times (in 1962) at the King and Queen Pub, located at 1 Foley Street in London, England. "American Pie" also includes a clear and unambiguous reference to one of the darker days in the career of the Rolling Stones. At their free concert at Altamont Speedway (given on December 6, 1969, in Altamont, California), the Rolling Stones hired members of the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang to work as security guards. During the concert—and reportedly during the performance of the song, *Sympathy for the Devil*—the Hell's Angels beat and stabbed to death an audience member named Meredith Hunter. Referring to this incident, McLean writes, "No angel born in hell / Could break that Satan's spell."

Finally, to give just one more example, "American Pie" refers specifically to an actual cultural-historical event involving the music of the Beatles. The line about "Helter Skelter in a summer swelter" clearly refers to the infamous Manson family murders, which took place in the summer of 1969. On the evening of August 9, 1969, members of a cultlike group of hippies, led by psychopath Charles Manson, murdered pregnant actress Sharon Tate and several of her houseguests at her Hollywood Hills mansion. On the very next evening, August 10, 1969, Manson family members murdered Leno and Rosemary LaBianca in their Hollywood Hills home. The gruesome murder scenes included messages—written in blood on the walls of the victims' homes—with phrases such as "Helter Skelter," "Death to Pigs," and "Arise." It was later determined that these murderous rampages were inspired in part by Charles Manson's interpretations of certain lyrics from the Beatles' 1968 *White Album*, which featured the songs *Helter Skelter*, *Piggies*, and *Blackbird* (in *Blackbird*, one hears the line, "You were only waiting for this moment to arise").

There can be no doubt, then, that a one-to-one correspondence can be established between specific lyrics in "American Pie" and specific persons or happenings in rock 'n' roll history. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that the critical, philosophical meaning of "American Pie" is to be found primarily in such one-to-one correspondences. Indeed, many lyrics in "American Pie" positively resist any such one-to-one correspondence with actual events and thus defy any straightforward or univocal interpretation. One could even go so far as to say that the meaning of several passages in "American Pie" consists precisely in their having multiple meanings at once. The song is full of instances involving multiple meaning, but three examples come readily to mind. First, "American Pie" includes a line observing that "Lennin read a book on Marx." In the liner notes from the 2003 rerelease of the album *American Pie*, one can see that the name is spelled "Lennin," not "Lennon" or "Lenin." It is clear, then, that we listeners (and we readers of the liner notes) are to think not only about John Lennon and his political attitudes in the 1960s (and perhaps also the song *Revolution*, which he performed with the Beatles), but also about Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and the legacy

that he bequeathed to American popular culture in the 1950s and 1960s, when the American-Soviet Cold War was at its height.

A second instance of simultaneous multiple meaning—and an instance that similarly involves the mixing of music and politics—can be found in a pair of lines patterned after a nursery rhyme: "Jack be nimble, Jack be quick / Jack Flash sat on a candlestick." On one level, the line about "Jack Flash" alludes to the song "Jumping Jack Flash," which was released as a single by the Rolling Stones on May 24, 1968. But on another level, the line most likely refers to John F. Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis. In October of 1962, President Kennedy (also known as "Jack") had to be nimble and quick, since he had only days to respond to the Russian threat to send into Cuba shipments of missiles (represented by the image of the "candlestick"). Kennedy's success in quashing the crisis is suggested by the image of Jack's actually *sitting* on the candlestick.[4]

Thirdly, "American Pie" also contains a pair of suggestive lines about a jester and king: "Oh, and while the King was looking down / The jester stole his thorny crown." Here the "jester" most likely refers to both Bob Dylan and John Lennon, who were well known for their sense of humor, wit, and rebelliousness. If the jester is taken to be Bob Dylan, then the king would almost certainly be Elvis Presley. Elvis was famously known as "the King," and his popularity began to wane precisely at the time that Bob Dylan became increasingly famous and popular. Furthermore, Bob Dylan's ascendancy was accompanied by his decision to move away from folk music (with which he began his career) and to perform more rock 'n' roll music (which had previously been the proper territory of Elvis Presley). If Bob Dylan is regarded as the jester here, then he not only borrowed a coat from James Dean, but he also sang—at least at first—in a voice "that came from you and me" (that is, he sang in the voice of folk music's common man). But if the lyrics about the jester and king are allowed to have more than one meaning, then the jester could also be John Lennon, and "the King" Jesus Christ himself. After all, the lyrics refer to the king's thorny crown, and traditional religious artwork typically depicts Jesus as wearing a crown of thorns. John Lennon would have "stolen" the king's thorny crown insofar as Lennon presented himself as the equal—or perhaps even the superior—of Jesus Christ. And indeed, this is precisely what John Lennon did—or at least it is what he was thought to be doing—when he was interviewed by a reporter from the the *Evening Standard* on

March 4, 1966. Speaking of the Beatles' worldwide popularity, Lennon said the following to his interviewer, Maureen Cleave:

> Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that; I'm right and will be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus now; I don't know which will go first—rock 'n' roll or Christianity.[5]

Lennon's now-infamous words shocked the American public and provoked many Americans to boycott Beatles music and even burn Beatles albums in the streets. In his interview, Lennon had predicted that history would eventually prove him right. And as if in direct response, McLean tells us in the very next line of "American Pie" that the jury is still out: "The courtroom was adjourned / No verdict was returned."[6]

The preceding observations have suggested that the lyrics of *American Pie* may very well have multiple and simultaneous meanings—even if these meanings are connected to clearly identifiable persons and events in the early days of rock 'n' roll. But there is another important hermeneutical point to keep in mind as well. While on one level "American Pie" is McLean's attempt to speak for his entire generation, it is on another level a deeply personal and intimate account of his own thoughts, hopes, feelings, and experiences. For example, McLean alludes to his own early thoughts and desires about becoming a musician: "I knew if I had my chance / That I could make those people dance." And McLean's references to the death of Buddy Holly incorporate personal information about his own childhood job as a paperboy: "February made me shiver / With every paper I'd deliver" and "Bad news on the doorstep / I couldn't take one more step." In other words, the song explicitly intertwines the personal and the public, or the particular and the universal. Indeed, the strategy of the song is to undermine any attempt at disentangling its personal and public levels of meaning. With such a strategy, McLean seems to be saying that the general message of "American Pie," about rock 'n' roll's self-understanding and self-critique, is inextricably tied to his own personal experiences. The song's general message is simply inseparable from the intimate and personal meaning that it has for its author: "Something touched me deep inside / The day the music died." It's almost as if McLean wishes to say that what he endured so personally and intimately in the 1950s and 1960s was actually just the concentrated experience of his entire generation, and, conversely, that what his generation experienced as a

whole came to accurate and precise expression in him as an individual spokesperson for the times.

Even the song's title—"American Pie"—illustrates the strategic intertwining of the private and the public which characterizes the song as a whole. "American Pie" is a term of McLean's own invention, and so it denotes nothing in general. But it does call to mind the notions of "Miss America" and "apple pie." And so while it is McLean's own term, "American Pie" also readily connotes a general sense of all that is good, redeeming, and beautiful in American culture. Anyone can immediately infer that to say goodbye to "American Pie" is to bid farewell to the sense of optimism that had permeated the younger generation before rock 'n' roll's turbulent coming-of-age in the late 1950s and 1960s. A similar intermingling of the particular and the universal can also be found on the inside cover of the album *American Pie.* On the inside cover, one reads an ode by McLean to one of his personal heroes, television cowboy Hopalong Cassidy. In the ode, McLean addresses his hero directly:

> No matter how scary life got I could depend on you
> You had that easy smile and white, wavy hair
> You were my favorite father figure with two guns blazing. . . .
> My hat's off to you, Hoppy
> Say goodbye to all the boys at the Bar-20
> The black and white days are over
> So long Hopalong Cassidy.

Some commentators—having noticed in "American Pie" the technique of intertwining the personal and the public—even suggest that the song's well-known refrain conveys a generalized message while simultaneously playing with allusions of unique significance to McLean himself. The famous refrain tells us that "them good old boys were drinking whiskey and rye / Singing this'll be the day that I die." But if one listens carefully, McLean seems to be singing "whiskey in Rye," not "whiskey and rye." If this is what McLean is singing, then his famous refrain could actually contain an allusion to the town of Rye, immediately adjacent to McLean's own hometown of New Rochelle (both just outside of New York City).[7] Of course, the possible connection between the song's refrain and McLean's boyhood environs is a matter of unverified (and perhaps unverifiable) speculation. But there is at least one regard in which the refrain does figure into McLean's technique of combining the personal or particular with the public and universal. Each verse of the song ends with words about "the day the music died," and each verse leads into a refrain recounting the composer's hearing of eerily similar words: "This'll be the day that I die." If the day on which the music died is the same as—or is associated with—the day on which the composer (McLean himself) is to die, then an interesting lesson readily suggests itself: the *music* of the generation and *Don McLean himself* are closely connected or even identified in some sense. Once again, McLean is implicitly suggesting that he himself *is* the music of his generation—or at least is the spirit of such music—and that he can speak for his generation precisely by speaking for himself through his own composition.

Along these lines, McLean has suggested that in his writing of "American Pie," it was unclear to him whether he was composing the song or the song was composing itself through him. In a 2003 interview with Paul Grein, McLean compares his writing of the song to the activity of Mickey Mouse in Walt Disney's movie *Fantasia.*[8] In the movie's episode about "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," Mickey Mouse undertakes to guide and control the magical forces that the sorcerer has left at Mickey's disposal. At first, Mickey believes that he has succeeded in his task, for he sees himself directing and controlling the movements of the stars, the seas, and other terrestrial and extraterrestrial phenomena. By the end of the episode, however, it becomes clear to Mickey that his experience of directing and being in control was illusory. As a matter of fact, Mickey had only been dreaming, and his own activities—far from being in control of the phenomena outside of him—were in fact only the consequences or effects of the phenomena operating outside of him and upon him. In short, Mickey was not so much directing and controlling the sorcerer's magical forces as he was being directed and controlled by them. The lesson of the episode is that Mickey's experience of complete self-possession and independence was nothing but a dream. In a BBC Radio 1 interview, McLean harkens back to this theme, observing that his "American Pie" could accurately be called "the first Rock dream."[9]

THE SELF-CRITIQUE OF ROCK 'N' ROLL

The hermeneutical or interpretive issues raised in the preceding section are relevant to the larger question to be addressed in this chapter, that is, the question of how the culture of rock 'n' roll—or any culture or tradition, for that matter—can engage in genuine self-critique. As we have already seen, McLean

presents "American Pie" as much more than a particular song written by a particular individual at a particular time. While he certainly did write the song as an expression of his own personal reflections on rock 'n' roll music in the 1950s and 1960s, McLean equally—and perhaps more importantly—claims that the song is an instance of the generation's self-expression through him. But this sort of claim raises an important philosophical problem. On the one hand, McLean presents himself as the embodiment and spokesperson of his generation's social and cultural experience. On the other hand, he claims to take a critical and reflective stance toward this generation and its cultural commitments. But how can McLean and the song be genuinely reflective and critical of the rock 'n' roll generation if they are an instance of that generation's own embodiment and self-expression?

There can be no doubt that "American Pie" presents a critical perspective on what the culture of rock 'n' roll has become. As indicated above, McLean's language about a "jester" and "King" conveys the worry that rock 'n' roll music has become a usurping substitute religion. And McLean expresses the same sort of concern elsewhere in the song, for example when he asks, "Do you believe in rock 'n' roll? / Can music save your mortal soul?" But the worry is not just that rock 'n' roll music has become something of a substitute religion; it has also grown to exercise a negative—and perhaps even demonic—influence on American youth and culture. In another allusion to the Rolling Stones' deadly concert at Altamont Speedway, McLean put himself in the position of a concertgoer and describes what he sees:

> And as flames climbed high into the night
> To light the sacrificial rite
> I saw Satan laughing with delight
> The day the music died.

"American Pie" further suggests that rock 'n' roll's usurpation of religion was accompanied by other ills, for example, widespread drug use ("the half-time air was sweet perfume"); violence in war and in antiwar protests ("in the streets the children screamed"[10]); selfishness and competition within the music industry itself ("the players tried to take the field / The marching band refused to yield"); and public discussions about God himself being dead and gone ("The three men I admire the most / The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost / They caught the last train for the coast"[11]).

But how can McLean present "American Pie" as a critique of what is wrong with rock 'n' roll while at the same time presenting it as the expression and embodiment of that very same music and culture? Or how can McLean achieve a genuinely critical stance with respect to American rock 'n' roll, when his own beliefs and his own activity in writing "American Pie" are themselves so deeply indebted to that very same culture? It would seem that McLean—in his very attempt at critique—runs the risk of being co-opted by the very culture that he wishes to criticize. That is, he runs the risk of unconsciously reasserting—and thus unwittingly reinforcing—the very problems that he seeks to address. Of course, the issues that we are raising about McLean's "American Pie" can be discussed in connection with any culture's or any tradition's attempt at self-critique. Doesn't the very idea of self-critique imply that the "tools of critique" are derived from—and thus virtually useless with respect to—the culture or tradition being scrutinized? In three revealing lines from the penultimate verse of "American Pie," McLean touches upon these very problems:

> Oh, and there we were, all in one place
> A generation lost in space
> With no time left to start again.

In all likelihood, McLean's mention of being "all in one place" is a reference to the Woodstock musical festival, which in August of 1969 brought together over thirty of rock music's leading bands and attracted nearly 500,000 fans. And there can be little doubt that McLean's phrase about being "lost in space" is an allusion to the 1960s' science-fiction television show of the same name.[12] But the most important point to be gleaned from these lines is McLean's implicit epistemic point: in the midst of rock 'n' roll's heyday, an entire generation found itself lost and confused and realized that it was now too late—there was "no time left"—to make a fresh and unbiased start of things. Any attempt to "start again" would inevitably be too late, for every member of the generation—and every would-be reformer—had already acquired a set of problematic attitudes, opinions, and beliefs. No truly "fresh start" was possible, since any new start would inevitably take its direction from the very beliefs and understandings that had led the rock 'n' roll generation into its present difficulty.

The problem being raised here is a problem that potentially affects any culture's or any tradition's attempt at self-critique.[13] Within the philosophical

tradition, it was René Descartes, the so-called father of modern philosophy, who attempted to "start again" by doubting everything that could be doubted, and by accepting as his firm new foundation for knowledge only that which could not be doubted whatsoever. As Descartes famously argued, there is indeed one knowledge claim that cannot be coherently doubted, since the very act of doubting it would inescapably confirm the truth of the knowledge claim. This foundational and indubitable knowledge claim is the claim that "I think." Because doubting is itself a species of thinking, Descartes reasoned, it is not possible for me to doubt that I think without performatively demonstrating (through the very act of such doubting) that I think. And if I can know beyond all doubt that I think, then I can arrive at the foundational and indubitable truth that I am a thing that thinks. It is this foundational and indubitable truth ("I am a thing that thinks") which provides the starting point for Descartes' project of critically grounding the entire edifice of human knowledge, including knowledge of God and knowledge of an external, material world.

But, echoing McLean's concerns about the self-critique of rock 'n' roll, one might reasonably ask whether the Cartesian project of "starting again" was itself begun "too late." For in spite of his stated intentions, isn't it the case that Descartes actually had to accept at least some alleged truths borrowed from the very culture or tradition that he sought to criticize? As others were later to argue, if one really doubts all that can be doubted and refuses to accept any truths except those that are beyond doubt, then one cannot legitimately arrive even at the seemingly uncontentious knowledge claim that "I am a thing that thinks." For this knowledge claim (if accepted as presented in Descartes' argument) presupposes the objective validity of the concept of "finite substance."[14] But this concept has been borrowed uncritically from the very tradition that Descartes sought to criticize, and its objective validity has not been demonstrated. Accordingly, the Cartesian inference from the proposition that "I think" to the claim that "I am a thing that I thinks," as well as his later inferences (e.g., about God and the material world), are not justified with the sort of rigor required by the Cartesian project itself. The Cartesian project of criticizing the tradition and setting it upon a new and firm foundation harbors opposing tendencies within itself and ultimately fails on its own terms.

Like the critics of Descartes, McLean rejects any "foundationalist" or "externalist" approach to the self-critique of rock 'n' roll music. As a generation

"lost in space," those who would criticize and reform the culture of rock 'n' roll music simply have no access to a privileged, independent, external Archimedean point for conducting such critique and reform. The broader point is that we are all emotively and cognitively indebted to the cultures and traditions within which we live and think, and so our critical examinations and attempted reformations of our cultures and traditions must always operate from within the medium of—and must utilize the "tools" of—those cultures and traditions themselves. In spite of our best attempts at identifying an entirely independent, objective, or external criterion for our theorizing and criticizing, we inescapably make use of the concepts, discourses, presuppositions, and strategies of that which we inherit from the traditions and cultures to which we belong.

But McLean goes further. He suggests that even the very desire to find a privileged, independent, external Archimedean point for the critique and reform of rock 'n' roll culture is not as innocent as it may first appear. Recall that McLean presents himself in "American Pie" as the personification of his generation and its music. Working within this conceit, McLean explains how the tribulations affecting his generation and its music have led him to search for answers outside the culture of rock 'n' roll, for example in the alternative but related culture of blues music. One might think that the turn to blues music (one of rock 'n' roll's earliest sources) can lead to answers which are rooted in a purer, more genuine form of expression from earlier times. McLean sings,

> I met a girl who sang the blues[15]
> And I asked her for some happy news
> But she just smiled and turned away.

This potent set of lyrics contains a threefold message. First and most obviously, these lyrics tell us that to search for comfort and guidance from a source just outside the boundaries of rock 'n' roll itself is to search in the wrong place. A "girl who sang the blues" is clearly not the sort of person who is well-positioned to be a source for "happy news."

Secondly, these lyrics suggest that this strategy of searching in the wrong place tends to intensify and exacerbate, rather than alleviate, the seeker's sense of anxiety and unfulfilled longing. The blues-singing girl from whom comfort is sought evidently knows that the seeker's quest is misguided—hence her

(knowing) smile. But rather than divulging this potentially helpful truth, she turns away, thus leaving the seeker even more perplexed; the seeker not only lacks an answer to his initial query, but he now also has to wonder about the girl's strange silence. The problem here is not just that the search for an external and independent criterion or foundation always fails (as noted above); the deeper problem is that this centrifugal search amounts to a kind of flight from self-knowledge, and thus ends up intensifying the seeker's sense of confusion and disenchantment. Notice the vicious circularity that ensues. The searching in the wrong place yields no answers and thus convinces the seeker that he or she is truly disoriented, and this intensified sense of disorientation convinces the seeker all the more fully that he or she can find answers only by fully escaping the limitations of his or her own culture and adopting the wholly independent, external, and "objective" perspective of an Archimedean observer. That is, the misdirected searching seemingly confirms the (wrongheaded) belief that one can find answers only by looking for them in an external source or point of origin (which is precisely in the wrong place), and thus one remains (unwittingly) trapped in a vicious circle of one's own making. This, briefly stated, is the vicious circularity which affects all "foundationalist" or "externalist" attempts at cultural reform. When one begins with an unrealistic, foundationalist ideal, then one's failure to live up to that ideal (that is, one's failure to achieve the desired Archimedean perspective) only seems to confirm the belief that one's own culture (and one's own thinking) is so badly in need of reform that it cannot reform itself except by reference to an independent, externally derived foundation or criterion. But this conclusion only restates the wrongheaded foundationalist belief with which one began in the first place.

Thirdly and perhaps most importantly, these lyrics suggest that the supposedly purer origins out of which "decadent" rock 'n' roll emerged were not so pure and perfect, after all. The bygone days of early rock 'n' roll and its immediate precursors were certainly not devoid of their own forms of disenchantment and disorientation. In looking back to the earliest days of rock 'n' roll, McLean not only reminds us about "the blues"; he also tells us something about difficult personal experiences, which—as we have seen—are representative of the experiences of his entire generation. For example, he relates the painful experience of seeing that the girl after whom he had been longing is now dancing with someone else:

Well, I know that you're in love with him
'Cause I saw you dancing' in the gym.

And in a similar pair of lines, McLean candidly confesses,

I was a lonely teenage broncin' buck
With a pink carnation and a pick-up truck.

The line about "a pink carnation" is clearly an allusion to the 1957 Marty Robbins song, "A White Sport Coat (and a Pink Carnation)," which refers to the typical dress code for high school dances in the 1950s. But, more importantly, this allusion reminds us that life in the early days of rock 'n' roll was also filled with moments of anxiety, pain, and loss. The original lyrics of the Marty Robbins song declare,

A white sport coat and a pink carnation
I'm all dressed up for the dance.
A white sport coat and a pink carnation,
I'm all alone in romance.
Once you told me long ago
To the prom with me you'd go
Now you've changed your mind it seems
Someone else will hold my dreams.
A white sport coat and a pink carnation,
I'm in a blue, blue mood.

Perhaps most revealing of all are the central lyrics of the 1957 Buddy Holly tune, "That'll Be the Day,"[16] which resonate throughout McLean's "American Pie." By alluding to this classic Buddy Holly song, McLean subtly reminds us that the supposedly better, purer days of early rock 'n' roll were also prone to cynicism and darkness, for "That'll Be the Day" represents the perspective of a man who is not the "traditional" 1950s gentleman, but rather a smug and detached lover who is willing to use, and then abandon, the object of his supposed affections:

Well, you give me all your lovin'
And your turtle dovin'

Ah, all your hugs and kisses, and your money too.
Well, uh, you know you love me baby,
Still you tell me maybe,
That someday well I'll be blue.
Well, oh, when cupid shot his dart
He shot it at your heart
So if we ever part, then I'll leave you.

Significantly, McLean makes repeated use of a particular line from the famous Buddy Holly song—the line about "the day that I die." The implication here is that early rock 'n' roll (personified by Buddy Holly, just as later rock 'n' roll is personified by Don McLean) contained the seeds of its own eventual destruction and thus anticipated its own demise.

Now while rock 'n' roll music—from the days of Buddy Holly onward—has always contained a dark, destructive, and sinister side, there is a tendency within the culture's own self-understanding to forget this fact and to pretend that the reform and salvation of rock 'n' roll depends on appealing to an external, Archimedean perspective, one that becomes available if one looks to the culture's earlier, purer (predecadent) origin or foundation. But the idea of a better, purer "state of nature" or an unadulterated, "original" Archimedean perspective—free of all tension, uncertainty, and ambiguity—is illusory. And as we have seen, the desire to glimpse such a pure "state of nature," or to achieve such an "external," Archimedean perspective tends to exacerbate—rather than to alleviate—the disorientations and disenchantments to which a culture or tradition is prone. Of course, this is not to suggest that the genuine self-critique of rock 'n' roll culture (or of any culture or tradition) is impossible—far from it. The point, rather, is that genuine self-critique becomes possible only on the basis of a nonfoundationalist or nonexternalist approach. Genuine self-critique takes place within the medium of the culture or tradition being criticized, and it does so by appealing to the culture's or tradition's own concepts, vocabulary, memories, presuppositions, ideals, and values. Accordingly, McLean's message about rock 'n' roll music is not just a critique of rock 'n' roll music; it is a critique that is articulated and presented precisely within the medium of rock 'n' roll music itself.

What emerges from these reflections is a broader Aristotelian point. The point is that the self-critique of cultures and traditions ought to be conceived, not on the model of the technical sciences, but rather on the model of the moral (or prudential) sciences.[17] The technical sciences operate upon matter that is given as external to the activity of the technician. Accordingly, the technician subjects that externally given matter to a rule (or technique) with a particular end in view, and thereby transforms that externally given matter without (necessarily) transforming himself or herself as technician (of course, such self-transformation may take place incidentally, but it is not the aim or end of the technician's activity qua technician). By contrast, the moral (or prudential) sciences—instead of operating upon matter that is given as external to the agent—aim rather to transform the agent himself or herself, and thus aim to facilitate the agent's own self-constitution *as* a moral agent. Following the model of the moral sciences, one recognizes that the critique of one's culture or tradition is never a form of critique aimed at an externally given subject matter; it is never a form of critique which approaches its subject matter from the external, independent, "foundationalist" perspective of an Archimedean observer. Following the model of the moral sciences, one rightly regards the tradition or culture that is the subject matter of one's critique as itself the source of one's own (often unexamined) emotive and epistemic commitments. And thus, in criticizing one's culture or tradition, one is indirectly criticizing oneself and one's own thinking. But this is not all. For this critique of oneself is conducted within the medium of the culture or tradition to which one belongs, and so this critique of oneself is equally (even if minimally) a participation in and contribution to one's broader culture or tradition.

Notice how this account of a culture's self-critique depends on the rejection of the "foundationalist" or "externalist" paradigm discussed earlier. Precisely because one's culture or tradition is the (often unacknowledged) source of one's emotive and epistemic commitments, the activity of identifying and grappling with the problems, limitations, and tensions endemic to one's culture or tradition is simultaneously *both* an exercise in individual self-critique *and* a participation in one's own broader culture or tradition. On the prudential (as opposed to technical) model, one criticizes the culture to which one belongs, not by observing such culture from the perspective of an allegedly external, Archimedean observer who has access to an unshakeable foundation or criterion, but only by participating in the culture so as to identify, expose, and grapple with the culture's internal contradictions, tensions, and limitations. Of course, no culture or tradition is entirely free of internal contradictions, tensions, and limitations; but it is possible, even from within a very imperfect

culture or tradition, to become aware of such contradictions, tensions, and limitations—and in thus becoming aware, to transcend them.

The importance of participation is implicitly recognized and addressed by McLean's "American Pie," insofar as the song subtly elicits the listener's own participation. In its opening moments, the song's lyrics are sung by a solitary voice and accompanied by a spare, folksy-sounding guitar. In its midsection, the song shifts into a faster, more percussive and electronic mode. But at the end, just as it leaves us with its final message, the song returns to an acoustic sound; but this time the acoustic guitar's strumming is accompanied by a sing-a-long featuring many ordinary-sounding voices—like those that would belong to you and me—so that McLean's voice is no longer distinguishable from our own as we are induced to sing along.

As a final concern, one might wonder whether the preceding account of the self-critique of cultures and traditions is overly optimistic. Can't one belong to a culture or tradition that is so corrupted and so degenerate that it becomes altogether impossible to criticize it from within? This is, of course, a theoretical possibility, but as a matter of fact, if one actually did belong to such a culture or tradition, then one could never know it, and one could never even speculate about it. For if a culture or tradition were entirely corrupted or degenerate (and thus beyond all possible reform), then it would be impossible for anyone from within that culture or tradition even to speculate and raise questions about its being so corrupted or so degenerate. And thus the very fact that someone—like McLean, or you, or me—can pose such questions about his or her own culture or tradition indirectly demonstrates that the culture or tradition is not beyond all self-critique and reform. Within a fully corrupted or degenerate and unreformable tradition, every scruple about corruption, degeneration, and possible reform will have disappeared. As the good Edgar astutely observes in Shakespeare's *King Lear,*

> And worse I may be yet. The worst is not,
> So long as we can say, "This is the worst."

NOTES

1. According to this poll, "American Pie" was topped (in rank order) only by Judy Garland's "Over the Rainbow," Bing Crosby's "White Christmas," Woodie Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land," and Aretha Franklin's "Respect."

2. For extended discussion of what constitutes an allusion and the role of allusion in popular culture, see Theodore Gracyk, "Allusion and Intention in Popular Art," in this volume.

3. Two of the more useful websites dedicated to "American Pie" and its cultural-historical allusions are the following: www.levitt.co.uk/interpret.html (authored by Saul Levitt) and www.understandingamericanpie.com/index.htm (authored by Jim Fann).

4. According to the nursery rhyme, Jack did not *sit* on the candlestick but successfully jumped over it: "Jack be nimble / Jack be quick / Jack jump over / The candlestick."

5. The complete *Evening Standard* interview can be found at the following web address: www.geocities.com/nastymcquickly/articles/standard.html.

6. My suggestion here is that McLean's lyrics about a jester and king are probably meant to refer simultaneously to both the Dylan-Presley pairing and the Lennon-Jesus pairing. There is yet a third possible meaning which I will not explore here. A third meaning might be connected to the Rolling Stones' 1968 song "Jumping Jack Flash." For in that song, singer Mick Jagger seems to identify *himself* as someone who wears a thorny crown: "I was crowned with a spike right through my head."

7. For more on this possible connection, see the website authored by Saul Levitt: www.levitt.co.uk/interpret.html.

8. The section of the interview containing McLean's reference to Mickey Mouse and *Fantasia* can be found in the liner notes to the 2003 rerelease of the album, *American Pie.*

9. For more on this, see Saul Levitt's website: www.levitt.co.uk/interpret.html.

10. This line could refer to the antiwar protests in American streets, but since the song was released in 1971, it cannot refer to the unforgettable black-and-white photograph (taken on June 8, 1972, by Associated Press photographer Huynh Cong Ut, also known as Nick Ut) depicting several Vietnamese children (including a naked young girl) screaming and running in the streets to flee a napalm attack near the village of Trang Bang.

11. The religion section of the October 22, 1965, issue of *Time* magazine featured an article about a group of young American theologians—led by Emory University professor Thomas J. J. Altizer—who called themselves Christian atheists and claimed that God was dead. The issue's front cover depicted nothing but a single provocative question—"Is God Dead?"—printed in large, white letters against a stark, black

background.

12. The television show was created by Irwin Allen and ran from 1965 to 1968. The show's plot—while unlikely to the point of being almost comical—is suggestive and clearly echoes some themes in "American Pie." In a futuristic scenario, planet Earth has become overpopulated and so Professor Robinson, his family, and Major West are sent into space in order to establish a colony for future settlement by Earthlings. The evil Doctor Smith is sent by an enemy government to sabotage the mission. After having reprogrammed the ship's robot, Doctor Smith becomes trapped on board. Because of the extra passenger and weight, the ship becomes lost, and the passengers must struggle to survive and find their way back home. When juxtaposed to the themes of "American Pie," the lesson of this science fiction plot seems rather straightforward: an entire generation of rock 'n' roll adherents finds itself in the midst of a journey or project that harbors within itself the dangerous seeds of its own undoing.

13. Indeed, the problem faced by rock 'n' roll music in its self-critique is a specification of the problem faced by any culture or tradition that has become disenchanted or disillusioned with itself. Another instantiation of this problem is the problem of the disenchantment of modern reason (or modernity in general), which is discussed by James South in "Of Batcaves and Clock Towers: Living Damaged Lives in Gotham City," in this volume.

14. This sort of anti-Cartesian argument was made by thinkers of widely divergent philosophical perspectives, from the extreme rationalist Spinoza to the extreme empiricist Hume.

15. This line about "a girl who sang the blues" is almost certainly an allusion to Janis Joplin, who—at only twenty-seven years of age—died of a drug overdose on October 4, 1970, shortly before McLean wrote the song "American Pie."

16. Interestingly, the catchphrase "That'll Be the Day" was made famous by John Wayne in his 1956 film *The Searchers* (directed by John Ford). Throughout the film, this catchphrase is used by John Wayne's character (Ethan Edwards, an embittered, sarcastic loner who had fought on the side of the Confederacy in the American Civil War and who now finds himself on a mission to rescue two white women who have been kidnapped by members of the Comanche Indian tribe). It was this catchphrase that reputedly inspired Buddy Holly and the Crickets to write and record their song of the same title. In one famous scene, the character Martin Pawley (played by Jeffrey Hunter) shouts at Ethan Edwards, saying, "I hope you die," to which the latter responds, "That'll be the day." The genealogy that links Don McLean to Buddy Holly

and John Wayne may be significant: in spite of its apparent valorization of an ideal past, Don McLean's "American Pie" reminds us of the less-than-ideal forms of "love" that prevailed in the 1950s (as depicted in Buddy Holly's "That'll Be the Day"); and in turn, Buddy Holly's song reminds us of the less-than-ideal relations that prevailed in the late nineteenth century between the North and South, and between Americans of different races (as depicted in *The Searchers*).

17. The distinction that I am drawing here between the technical and prudential model for the self-critique of cultures and traditions goes back to Aristotle's distinction (in book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*) between *techne* and *phronesis*.

18. See *King Lear*, Act Four, Scene One.

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