“COMMAND ME TO BE WELL”[1]:
AN EXPLORATION OF RELIGIOUS IMAGERY IN HOZIER’S MUSIC

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[1] Hozier, “Take Me To Church” (Dublin: Rubyworks Records, 2014), https://lyrics.lyricfind.com/lyrics/hozier-take-me-to-church-1.

Since his debut in 2013 with the release of his hit single, "Take Me to Church," Irish musician Andrew Hozier-Byrne, performing under the name Hozier, has established himself as a cross-genre talent and modern-day troubadour. One particular feature of his style is his poetic lyrics, which often comment on social or political themes and employ a number of literary references to further the story. Many of these images are religious in nature. However, Hozier's music is not necessarily sacred; rather, he frequently subverts traditional interpretations of religious images to describe intimate romantic themes. In addition to traditional Catholic imagery, Hozier also alludes to literary works such as Dante's *Inferno* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which have informed the way society views the Church despite not being canon interpretations of Christianity.

This is not a groundbreaking concept. The use of double entendres, sexual innuendo, and social-political commentary traces back to Medieval times with the troubadours, continuing with Renaissance madrigals, and to the present day with the twentieth-century singer-songwriter movement. Hozier thus establishes himself as the next generation in this movement by employing the same devices in his lyrics. In doing so, Hozier speaks about what he considers to be a "cultural hangover from the influence of the church,"[2] a sort of pervasive Catholic guilt that exists in Ireland, even for non-believers, because of the heavy Roman Catholic influence in the country. By drawing on his Catholic upbringing and repurposing traditional images from Christianity as metaphors for romance and sex, Hozier illustrates a kind of passionate, consummate love that would be considered corrupt by Catholic standards. It is exactly that

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[2] Elena Canido Muiño, "'Shaking the wings of their terrible youths': Exploring references and allusions in Hozier's eponymous debut album," *Études irlandaises* 47-2 (2022): 115, accessed December 2, 2023, https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.13453.

sinfulness that makes his description of romance all the more passionate because it opposes traditional norms of love and faith.

The political nature of secular music has its roots in the troubadours of Medieval southern France. They are known best for songs of *fin'amor*, or courtly love. The central theme to *fin'amor* is unattainable love and restraint; the speaker would risk anything to be noticed by their love interest (often a member of the royal court), but it would be dishonorable to act upon it given their differences in social status. Over time, however, "poems of desire that would be fulfilled, no matter the cost…gave rise to later poems of decorous and often tormented sublimations of desire…Desire became worship, as the flesh became once again an object of shame."[3] Views toward carnal love became more negative, leading to an uptick in the use of allegorical language and euphemism as a coded way to express desire. Hence, the troubadours' adulterous desires–since they were singing about courting a woman who may already be married–could be masked as simply showering their patrons with adoration. Sometimes this was less implicit as the troubadours believed in "a secular unchristian idea of love […] a love dominated by a strong expression of sensuality and eroticism, free from any principle of sin and guilt, achristian and amoral in the context of prevalent Church standards."[4] Given the religiosity of the Medieval period, the troubadours were right to tread carefully on religious themes, since their ideas of love often run counter to the Catholic view of marriage as a sacrament.

Where the troubadours established themes of romance and the use of euphemism, the madrigals of the Renaissance made the use of these tropes into something of a game. Throughout

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[3] Michael Bryson and Arpi Movesian, "The Troubadours and Fin'amor: Love, Choice, and the Individual," in *Love and its Critics: From the Song of Songs to Shakespeare and Milton's Eden* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 20170: 125, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1sq5vd6.8.

[4] Ibid.

the rebirth of arts and philosophy in this period, it was more important to engage in intellectual play with knowledge rather than to simply demonstrate knowledge. “More important than breadth of knowledge was verbal agility, for the art of verbal repartee was the essence of social grace.”[5] As a result, madrigal texts were rife with metaphors, euphemisms, and double entendres. This included well known ones, such as *la petite mort* as a euphemism for orgasm, and more extended imagery, such as the kiss:

> Kissing makes a good metaphor for sexual intercourse since it shares two features unmentionable in the context of the latter: penetration (by the tongue in the case of a kiss) and the exchange of bodily fluids with (in Renaissance thought) the spirit carried within. When a reference to death is added to a description of kissing, the sexual metaphor is complete.[6]

Images and metaphors like these gained popularity in this period for their role in promoting intellectual witticism, rather than explicitly describing intimate scenes. Their continued use made them a common feature in the artistic world, into the modern era.

Several centuries later, the singer-songwriter movement became a sort of modern-day troubadour revival. Artists of the mid-twentieth century such as Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Joni Mitchell, Jackson Browne, Carole King, and James Taylor laid the groundwork for a new era of singers who built their performance largely on a stripped-down, acoustic sound and lyrics that were either authentic to the singer’s experience, or that would resonate with the American everyman. Their songs were often a commentary on social or political concerns, reflecting a growing sense of self-identity and disillusion with bigger sociopolitical structures. Hence, the tone of music and the themes of its lyrics shifted greatly in the twentieth century, seeing

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[5] Laura Macy, “Speaking of Sex: Metaphor and Performance in the Italian Madrigal,” *The Journal of Musicology* 14, no. 1 (1996): 6, accessed December 2, 2023. https://www.jstor.org/stable/763955.

[6] Ibid., 30-31.

musicians like Guthrie speak out about labor protests, Nina Simone on civil rights, and Seeger becoming embroiled in the Red Scare of the 1950s. “The idea of an individual voice speaking against a dominant culture invites the political interpretation of singer-songwriters, even when an artist is not engaged in direct-action political protest.”[7] Hence, we see a change in the twentieth century where art, especially music, becomes intrinsically politically-inspired.

Additionally, the rise in emotionally-charged writing from male artists was unconventional for the time. Singer-songwriters like Taylor, Browne, and Cat Stevens/Yusuf Islam wrote lyrics that both commented on their social concerns and were often considered emasculating, a far cry from the hard rock that dominated mid-century radio. However, if authenticity is the focus of the singer-songwriter movement, we would expect artists to channel difficult feelings to convey a sense of vulnerability. Hozier, decades later, continues this tradition: “In his lyrics, Hozier also creates stories about characters who want to escape the asphyxiating world they know to find themselves, accept themselves, and eventually, make sense of themselves.”[8] In addition to a more vulnerable-sounding acoustic musical style, the singer-songwriter movement placed a strong emphasis on lyricism and storytelling. In this period, poetry superseded music, and the most enduring lyrics in this era are the ones that are closest to poetry and evoke a level of empathy with the speaker. The music’s lighter texture allows the lyrics to take center stage, a bit like madrigals’ emphasis on repartee and troubadours’ praise of their patron.

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[7] Christa Anne Bentley, “Los Angeles Troubadours: The Politics of the Singer-songwriter Movements, 1968-1975,” Doctoral dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (2016): 28. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/210600563.pdf.

[8] Muiño, “Shaking the Wings,” 121.

Although religious imagery is a common theme throughout all three of Hozier's albums, the two that are built most exclusively around religious themes are "Take Me To Church" and "From Eden", both from Hozier's eponymous debut album. In "Take Me To Church,"[9] the listener is immediately confronted with a perplexing idea: the speaker's irreverent lover is "the giggle at a funeral" but he "should have worshipped her sooner". The speaker's lover is sick, dark, and disrespectful, demonstrating a twisted kind of humor. But the speaker, too, was "born sick"; this is meant in two ways. On the surface, this can be interpreted an interjection–"you people are sick!"–as a reaction to them running against social norms. The laughter at a funeral, perhaps even the speaker choosing to worship his lover over God, would certainly cause holier-than-thou believers to clutch their pearls. On a religious level, this is a nod to original sin. By the Catholic Church's definition, "In that sin man *preferred* himself to God and by that very act scorned him…the union of man and woman becomes subject to tensions, their relationship henceforth marked by lust and domination."[10] It seems as though Hozier capitalizes on the lust and domination referenced in this definition, illustrating a relationship between two people that is almost exclusively defined as such. Equating the speaker's lust with worship describes exactly this kind of relationship, but "[he] loves it", living for the attention from his lover and others, living for the rush of doing something conventionally considered immoral.

Unlike the Catholic church, the speaker's lover "offers no absolutes"–a reference to absolution from sin. Like the giggle at the funeral to begin the song, we are told here that the

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[9] All references to song lyrics for "Take Me To Church" that follow are taken from Hozier, "Take Me To Church," LyricFind, Accessed November 9, 2023, https://lyrics.lyricfind.com/lyrics/hozier-take-me-to-church-1.

[10] Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church, second edition* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 2000): paragraphs 398, 400. Citations for the *Catechism* are typically given as "CCC (paragraph)" and will be done in this manner for the remainder of this paper.

lover lives unapologetically and expects the speaker to do the same, in the face of those who shun their lust. Since, in Church tradition, sex outside of marriage is a sin[11], the speaker's "church" is rooted in sin, in his lust–he and his lover may be going to Hell in the Church's eyes, but worshipping her is "the only Heaven [he'll] be sent to." This makes the line "command me to the well" at the end of the first verse all the more powerful, and all the more backwards. In addition to evoking a sense of submitting to his lover's dominance with the imperative to "command" him, it is a clear play on the Biblical image of Jesus the healer, who orders figures in the Gospel to be healed: "Jesus said to him, 'Rise, take up your mat, and walk.' Immediately, the man became well, took up his mat, and walked."[12] Of course, the "Amen" after this line serves the same purpose as it does in worship: an affirmation of one's belief or faith.

Typically, people worship with the intention of getting something out of it–individual peace, patience, a moral compass, or in the speaker's case, "that deathless death". Aside from being a use of the famous euphemism for sexual climax, "deathless death" may also allude to the salvation of the soul. In the Catholic church, death is corporeal, but the soul resides eternally with Christ in Heaven.[13] Here, Hozier also plays with the contrast of death and life: "offer me that deathless death / Good God, let me give you my life." In the context of the story, the speaker worships his lover like a disciple, who abandoned their ordinary lives to follow Jesus in his ministry.[14] Like most of these cases, though, this can read euphemistically; "let me give you my life" may also refer to literally giving her his sperm, his seed of life, during sex.

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[11] CCC 2353

[12] Jn 5:8 (NAB)

[13] CCC 996

[14] Mt 5:18-22

In the bridge, there are "no masters or kings when the ritual begins." In a religious context, believers come before the altar to worship as equals, in a place where no earthly titles matter in relation to God the Father (the "ritual" here being the Mass). In a sexual one, this act is vulnerable and fragile, carrying with it no sense of power. This may also be a return to the *Catechism*'s commentary on dominance from Original Sin. Since the words "master" and "king" have masculine connotations, and there are "no masters or kings", the speaker suggests he is submitting to the dominance of his lover's sexual allure.

The next line cleverly juxtaposes innocence and sin: "There is no sweeter innocence than our gentle sin." For a sin like theirs to be mortal, it has to be made with "full knowledge and complete consent…sufficiently deliberate to be a personal choice"[15] directly opposed to God's law. Hozier also uses this contrast, as well as the subsequent line, "in the madness and soil of that sad earthly scene," to allude to the fall of man in the Book of Genesis. In the story of Adam and Eve's banishment from the Garden of Eden, Eve succumbs to the serpent's temptation and eats the fruit from the forbidden tree. Both Adam and Eve intentionally eat the fruit, aware that this fruit was from the forbidden tree, despite their naïveté toward the serpent's guile. As a result, "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked."[16] This Biblical verse traditionally represents the loss of humanity's innocence and the consequence of its original sin.

The use of "gentle sin" alone feels like an oxymoron. The speaker imagines the lust between him and his lover to be gentle and innocent, but he cannot shake the external judgment

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[15] CCC 1859

[16] Gn 3:7

from others that his desire is sinful, not that it deters him or his lover. Only by taking part in that "gentle sin" does the speaker feel "clean". Speaking of being cleansed from sin evokes images of baptism, the ritual of initiation in Christianity by which a person, symbolically bathed in water, is made clean from the stain of original sin. "By baptism *all sins* are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins, as well as all punishment for sin."[17] Hozier is deliberate in his use of becoming clean here, as it creates a stark contrast between the Church's ritual cleansing from sin and the speaker, who must dig deeper into a relationship that would traditionally be considered sinful in order to cleanse himself from what Hozier considers the "cultural hangover"[18] of the Catholic Church.

There are a couple musical devices which Hozier uses to enhance the religious imagery in "Take Me To Church". Throughout the verse, the tonic chord, E minor, is prolonged mostly through the use of i-iv-i motion. This is reminiscent of the plagal cadences to which the word "Amen" is traditionally set in sacred music. Hozier's "Amen", too, is set over a plagal cadence, and it stands out as the only part of the lyrics set to a melismatic line. The verses and chorus are all largely set syllabically. The melismatic style here is evocative of more florid Gregorian chant styles, and the listener is drawn to the contrast; it feels climatic.

"From Eden"[19], also on Hozier's self-titled album, plays further into the sex-and-sin link from "Take Me To Church" in a more direct way, by having the speaker portray the serpent from that fateful scene in Genesis. However, instead of drawing on the usual images from Genesis,

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[17] CCC 1263

[18] Muiño, 115.

[19] All references to song lyrics for "From Eden" that follow are taken from Hozier, "From Eden," LyricFind, Accessed November 9, 2023, https://lyrics.lyricfind.com/lyrics/hozier-from-eden-2.

Hozier references depictions of original sin in Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*. Throughout the first verse, the speaker addresses his love directly with contrasting adjectives: tragic/magic, lonesome/wholesome, wretched/precious. The rhyming pairs are dripping with temptation masked as flattery, following Satan's motive in *Paradise Lost*. Satan chooses the serpent to inhabit as "subtlest beast of all the field… / Whatever sleights none would suspicious mark."[20] By chance, Satan finds Eve alone ("something lonesome about this"), drawn into her beauty and innocence ("something wholesome about this"). For a minute, Satan is so struck by "her heaven'ly form / Angelic, but more soft and feminine, / her graceful innocence, her every air / of gesture"[21] that he momentarily forgets to go through with his plan to tempt her. However, the guile continues; in the song, Hozier's lyrics are flirtatious in nature, playing to the lover's ego and playing a bit into both courtly love and effeminate singer-songwriter tropes where the male begs for recognition from the female. It is an allusion also to Satan playing coy in *Paradise Lost.* Knowing that Eve's hubris is her weakness, Satan appears "Fawning, and licked the ground whereupon she trod. / His gentle dumb expression turned at length / The eye of Eve to mark his play."[22] Holding her attention, Satan continues his plot, and Hozier brings us into the chorus.

The speaker's lover is "familiar, like my mirror years ago"; in the analogy to Satan and Eve, this is a roundabout way of calling Eve angelic. The phrase "my mirror years ago" reveals that Eve reminds Satan of his former self, the angel he was before being "thrown down to earth, and [his] angels were thrown down with [him]."[23] Canonically, Satan once enjoyed the same

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[20] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Scott Elledge (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1993): IX.86, 92.

[21] Ibid., IX.457-460.

[22] Ibid., IX.526-528.

[23] Rv 12:9b

Paradise as Eve in communion with God,[24] and it was perhaps his envy of Eve's position still in Eden that prompted him to tempt her.

The speaker contends that "idealism sits in prison," which is the crux of Satan's argument in his temptation of Eve. Satan argues that Adam and Eve are actually held prisoner in Paradise because of God's commandment not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, lest they be cast out and die. Satan convinces Eve she should not settle for this, and that she "certainly will not die."[25] Yet, the death to which God refers is not a physical one, and Satan intentionally plays with the connotation of the word in telling Eve this. So, with "innocence dies screaming / Honey, ask me, I should know," it is as though the speaker, as the serpent, is looking back on the fall of Eve and nearly reveals his deceitful intent. The choice to use the word "screaming" is a nod to the immediate cacophony following Eve's betrayal:

> Earth trembled from her entrails, as again
> In pangs, and nature gave a second groan;
> Sky loured, and muttering thunder, some sad drops
> Wept at completing of the mortal sin
> Original;[26]

Here, the speaker has laid all his cards on the table: we know that he is likening himself to Satan, the tempter, who "slithered in from Eden just to sit outside your door", selecting his next victim carefully as the one he next wishes to seduce.

There is not much musically that Hozier does to connect to his imagery, but what is most noticeable about the song is the irregular 5/4 meter. The listener can settle into the triple-plus-duple structure fairly easily, but it is still an unsettling departure from what we are used to in

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[24] CCC 391

[25] Gn 3:4b

[26] *Paradise Lost*, IX.1000-1004.

popular music or the rest of the album. As soon as it feels predictable, Hozier switches to an even 4/4 for the pre-chorus. Something so regular as common time instead feels disorienting because we have adjusted to the 5/4 pattern; we also hear accents only on beats one and three in the stop-time pre-chorus as the rhythm has been lost altogether. This unevenness conveys a wary tone. The rhythm is slinking and coy, comfortable enough for the listener to go along with but nonetheless proceeding with an air of unease, like the interaction between Satan and Eve.

Hozier's use of religious themes is less explicit in other songs of his, but is still largely present. In his second album, *Wasteland, Baby!*, the song "Nina Cried Power"[27] invokes the names of a number of past singer-songwriters and activists who have spoken up against a variety of injustices: "Nina cried power / Billie cried power / Mavis cried power", and so on. This structure parallels that of the Litany of Saints in the Catholic Church. "A litany is a series of short invocations or prayers, followed by an equally short response, often repetitive. For example…'St. Peter, pray for us'; 'St. Agnes, pray for us.'"[28] Traditionally, the response "pray for us" suggests that the believer is looking for the aid and guidance of the saints, and the saints to which the believer prays are often chosen intentionally; a musician may offer a prayer to St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music, before a performance. In a similar fashion, Hozier invokes the names of artists like Nina Simone, Mitchell, and B. B. King, aspiring to live in a way that mirrors theirs, calling out social injustices through art. Given Hozier's attitude toward the hypocrisies of the Catholic Church[29], it seems intentional that Hozier is mirroring the practice of

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[27] All references to song lyrics for "Nina Cried Power" that follow are taken from Hozier, "Nina Cried Power," LyricFind, Accessed November 9, 2023, https://lyrics.lyricfind.com/lyrics/hozier-nina-cried-power.

[28] D. D. Emmons, "The Litany of Saints…," *Priest* 75, no. 11 (2019): 19, Accessed December 4, 2023, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=139397146&site=ehost-live&scope=site..

[29] Muiño, 116.

praying to the saints for guidance by referencing the names of past activists. In doing so, he also establishes himself as the next singer-songwriter in the line of succession he has outlined in the song.

"Be"[30] is a nod to Eden again, and Hozier also makes a reference to St. Peter and the gates of Heaven. Hozier speaks about "the love that first discovered the sin" and "the hopeful feeling when Eden was lost", which refers to the same kind of carnal lust that he sang about in "Take Me To Church". However, this love "freed the first man and will do so again." In a Catholic view, this is a reversal of the usual view of Original Sin, as this suggests that sin freed Adam. Just as the speaker in "Take Me To Church" placed his faith in lusting after his lover as a way for him to become "human" and "clean", so too is the speaker here looking for a love which frees him through ecstasy, despite it traditionally being considered sinful. Looking deeper into the Catholic stance on the necessity of Original Sin, the *Catechism* speaks hopefully as well. Original Sin was the catalyst for salvation, so that what was once lost could be found again. "After his fall, man was not abandoned by God. On the contrary, God calls him and in a mysterious way heralds the coming victory over evil and his restoration from his fall."[31] Without the story of Adam and Eve's transgression, there is no salvation; there is no Christianity.

Hozier began work on his most recent album, *Unreal Unearth*[32], during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. In an interview with the Recording Academy, Hozier speaks candidly about the influence Dante's *Inferno* had on his songwriting process:

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[30] All references to song lyrics for "Be" that follow are taken from Hozier, "Be," LyricFind, Accessed November 9, 2023, https://lyrics.lyricfind.com/lyrics/hozier-be.

[31] CCC 410.

[32] All references to song lyrics for *Unreal Unearth* that follow are taken from "Hozier - Unreal Unearth Lyrics", *Lyrics On Demand*, Accessed November 9, 2023, https://lyricsondemand.com/h/hozierlyrics/unrealunearthalbumlyrics.html.

> [Dante's *Inferno*] is a poem about a person who's wandering through this sort of underworld space, and in each Circle, they meet a new person who shares their grievance, their pain, their experience. That was something I allowed myself to play with a little bit – that each song starts in my own voice, but it allows into itself and the license to just let the song grow to where it needs to be.[33]

Although *Inferno* is not a canon interpretation of Christian ideas of hell and the afterlife, it has informed common cultural interpretations of hell, and is certainly an intentional inclusion in the way Hozier employs religious imagery in his writing. Once Hozier mentioned a connection to the *Inferno*, listeners assumed that the whole album was directly inspired by the poem, almost akin to a song cycle. Although some songs contain explicit references to Dante, *Unreal Unearth* lacks the one-to-one relationship that one would expect between, say, the songs and the circles of Hell. However, some of the references are extremely veiled unless the listener is aware of them, which is not ideal if the goal is to make the listener aware of the connections. But, since this was written during the pandemic, we should consider that so much art at the time was created for personal endeavors, not necessarily with a particular audience in mind. On a macrocosmic level, and keeping with Hozier's recurring themes of romance, perhaps the whole album is bound together by the line, "love has moved me and makes me speak."[34]

"Francesca" alludes to the lustful condemned to the second circle of Hell, where the damned are "lashed by conflicting winds,"[35] unable to reach their destinations. When Dante arrives in the second circle, he meets Francesca da Rimini, the titular character of Hozier's song,

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[33] Taylor Weatherby, "Inside Hozier's 'Unreal Unearth'…," *Grammy Awards*, Recording Academy, August 28, 2023., https://www.grammy.com/news/hozier-unreal-unearth-interview-dante-inferno-poem-inspirations-irish.

[34] Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, ed. Robert M. Durling (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996): II.72. The break in the line has been omitted from Durling's English translation because the original Italian, "amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare," is one unbroken line.

[35] Ibid., V.30. Likewise, the original Italian "se da contrari venti è combattuto" is one line, but two in Durling's translation.

who warns him: “There is no greater pain / than to remember the happy time / in wretchedness; and this your teacher knows.”[36] Playing into this pain, Hozier first alludes to the punishment in the second circle, writing, “My life was a storm since I was born / How could I fear any hurricane?” Later, the hook is particularly powerful given this context: “Darling, I would do it again / If I could hold you for a minute / … Heaven is not fit to house a love / like you and I.” Despite being condemned to punishment in Hell, the speaker is undeterred and considers their love to be stronger than the punishments that Hell may bring. Even though the result is torture, pain and pleasure are inextricably linked in this relationship, again not unlike the speaker grappling with sin and love in “Take Me To Church”. However, despite the obstacles and the pain, the speaker will find his way to his love.

Judging by the name, it would seem logical that “Eat Your Young” would refer to the third circle of Hell, where the gluttons and the greedy are punished. However, the song focuses more on the way society metaphorically consumes the younger generation’s youth, “eating” away at their innocence: “Skinning the children for a war drum / Putting food on the table selling bombs and guns / It’s quicker and easier to eat your young.” As a result, this is more of a reference to Jonathan Swift’s satirical essay, “A Modest Proposal,” than Dante’s *Inferno.* Just as Hozier suggests it would be “easier to eat your young” than subject them to the horrors of the world, Swift suggests that using children for food would given the poor of Ireland “something valuable of their own…[and] the nation’s stock will be thereby encreased £50,000 per annum.”[37] There do not appear to be any concrete images to *Inferno*.

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[36] Ibid., V.121-123. The line breaks are changed to be consistent with the Italian.

[37] Jonathan Swift, “A Modest Proposal” (Champaign, IL: Project Gutenberg, 1997): 3. https://search-ebscohost-com.uri.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1021700&site =ehost-live&scope=site.

It is not until we get to "Unknown/Nth" that Hozier returns to more concrete Dantean imagery. The lyrics read as if Dante is recounting his journey through Hell for Beatrice, beginning with the opening, "You know the distance never made a difference to me / I swam a lake of fire, I'd have walked across the floor of any sea." Of course, Dante's journey through Hell is a long one. We do not know how long exactly, since Dante is not clear in his sense of time; Hozier is suggesting more that Dante (and by extension, the speaker) has literally gone to Hell and back for Beatrice. The "lake of fire" might refer to the river Styx, which Dante and Virgil cross in the fifth circle of Hell. The river itself is not burning, but the city of Dis, which lies on the opposite shore of the Styx, is marked by "the eternal fire / that burns within it makes them glow red / as you see in his lower hell."[38] We can consider this simply poetic license by Hozier and the speaker (playing Dante), who we may assume is conflating details of his journey in retelling it to his Beatrice.

If there was any doubt that Hozier is using Dante and Beatrice as characters, he writes, "I thought you were like an angel to me." This directly references the *Inferno*, when Dante first meets Beatrice; Dante describes Beatrice as speaking "gently and softly, / with angelic voice, in her language,"[39] and Beatrice refers to what she "had heard of him in Heaven."[40] In the context of the *Inferno*, it confirms that Beatrice was sent by God to inspire Dante to embark on the journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. In "Unknown/Nth", because of this reference, the lyrics read in a similar way. Recalling "Francesca," the speaker would gladly endure the journey all over again if it means finally entering into a relationship with his love interest. It is evocative

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[38] *Inferno*, VII.73-75. Line breaks consistent with original Italian.

[39] Ibid., II.56-57. Line breaks consistent with original Italian.

[40] Ibid., II.66.

also of how the speaker of a courtly love song often sings of the risks or the heroic tales they would undertake to be able to be recognized by their love interest. “Unknown/Nth”, then, becomes a song more about the risk and the journey of developing and maintaining a relationship than the outcome.

It is evident that Hozier was inspired by the *Inferno* in writing *Unreal Unearth*, but it does not seem apparent that he was any more inspired by that than he was *Paradise Lost*, “A Modest Proposal”, or the Bible. The use of references to *Inferno* or any part of the *Divine Comedy* would need to be far more consistent to consider it a work completely inspired by Dante. However, this does not diminish the impressive manner in which Hozier is able to weave together literary references together in a deep level while ensuring that a listener can still understand the theme of each song, even if they might not pick up on all of these allusions. In doing so, Hozier maintains a level of intellectual play reminiscent of the wordplay found in Renaissance madrigals. His academic approach toward employing religious imagery, social commentary, and literary references has unsurprisingly made him a unique star in the music industry, but most notable has been his use of that religious imagery in a subverted way that contrasts a deep, intimately obsessive love with the restrained piety of Catholic teaching.

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