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Aspects of Evil in Traditional Murder Ballads

Summary

Traditional, or folk, ballads deal with common themes, often “leaping” over some details of plot and character while “lingering” on others, with the result that songs passed down orally through generations often appear in many variants. This paper will examine several songs from Martin Simpson’s 1976 debut album, *Golden Vanity*. I will trace their historical origins and argue that even some ancient ballads still speak to audiences today.

Key words: ballad, music, song lyrics, *Golden Vanity*, Martin Simpson

Podobe zla v tradicionalnih baladah o umorih

Povzetek

Tradicionalne ali ljudske balade obravnavajo splošne teme in pri tem pogosto »preskočijo« nekatere podrobnosti o fabuli in osebah, ali pa se »zadržujejo« pri drugih; pesmi, ki se z ene na drugo generacijo prenašajo z ustnim izročilom, imajo tako pogosto več različnih verzij. Prispevek obravnava več pesmi z debitantskega albuma Martina Simpsona z naslovom *Golden Vanity* iz leta 1976. V prispevku predstavim njihov izvor in dokazujem, da so celo nekatere stare balade za poslušalce aktualne še danes.

Ključne besede: balade, glasba, besedila pesmi, *Golden Vanity*, Martin Simpson

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1. Introduction

Most pop music is made for the commercial market, and its protest is superficial. Any way the wind blows, it doesn't really matter, as long as it sells; performers today praise the regime they opposed yesterday (Velikonja 2013, 5). In contrast, protest in traditional folk music is more consistent, and part of what makes that consistency possible is lack of specificity. Characters and settings come and go, but it is the human reaction to situations in songs that makes them universal. Folk music has historically incorporated stories of injustice and crime, and throughout its history, folk artists such as Pete Seeger and Joan Baez have protested against prevailing political and social beliefs and institutions, risking prosecution and imprisonment rather than betray their beliefs and artistic integrity.¹

The many recordings of traditional and folk songs attest to their enduring appeal. David Atkinson writes about the appeal of traditional music to modern audiences and points out that the Child collection, compiled at the end of the nineteenth century, formed a canon for both British and American singers (Atkinson 2001, 370).² Like traditional or folk music, popular song lyrics address the prevailing issues of their time, and although some of them are sincere and often trenchant criticisms of social and political situations, such as Stephen Stills' "For What It's Worth" (1966) and Neil Young's "Ohio" (1970), when the situation passes, the song loses its widespread appeal.³ On the other hand, protest songs with a less specific message, such as Woodie Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" (1940) and Bob Dylan's "Blowing in the Wind" (1962) have passed into folklore tradition. As Atkinson writes, "part of the aesthetic value of the ballads probably always lay in their combination of intense human emotion with a conscious distancing from everyday experience (Atkinson 2001, 373). In an essay on ideology and culture, Natalia Kaloh Vid argues that when certain aspects of a particular message are universal, those are the aspects that are translated into different languages and adopted by different cultures, while culture-specific ideological messages are often deleted or modified (Kaloh Vid 2014). For example, "The Skye Boat Song" (1884), a ballad lamenting the defeat and exile of Bonnie Prince Charlie, is still popular in Scotland, but not well known outside the country except, as Josephine Dougal points out, among expatriates (Dougal 2011, 293).⁴

2. The Ballads of *Golden Vanity*

An excellent example of traditional music updated for modern audiences is Martin Simpson's 1976 debut album, *Golden Vanity*. *Golden Vanity* invites a mixed reaction from its listeners. Although it was a commercial release, and Simpson has become a major international performer, his debut album was released on a small label and is now difficult to find. Throughout his career, Simpson has continued to perform and record traditional music, and he has built a reputation as a virtuoso

¹ Seeger refused to plead the Fifth Amendment at the McCarthy anti-communist hearings and was indicted for contempt of Congress in 1957. In 1961, he was sentenced to 10 years in prison, but the sentence was overturned in 1962. Baez was imprisoned several times for protesting against the Vietnam War.

² David Evans has written on the American folklore revival (Evans 1979).

³ "Ohio" tells the story of the fatal shooting of four university students at Kent State University by the National Guard on May 4, 1970. The soldiers fired into a crowd of unarmed students who were protesting against the Vietnam War.

⁴ "The Skye Boat Song" describes the loss of the Battle of Culloden in 1746 by the Scottish highlanders under Bonnie Prince Charlie, the last of Scotland's Stuart kings, to the English forces under the Duke of Cumberland.

on guitar and banjo; this album focuses much more on the instrumental accompaniment than the work of most folk revival artists.⁵ *Golden Vanity* is a collection of dark ballads of injustice, betrayal, murder, revenge, and punishment.⁶ The songs contain a certain thematic unity, with stories of hard work or heroism by members of the lower class rewarded by betrayal and murder by those in authority over them. The horror of the stories is brought into even sharper focus by the beauty of Simpson's guitar accompaniment. In "Golden Vanity", the title track, a cabin boy is betrayed by his captain and sacrifices himself for the good of his shipmates, showing a more Christ-like compassion than the young Jesus of "Bitter Withy" who abuses his divine powers by first avenging himself for the insults of three young lords by luring them to their deaths, and then for his punishment by cursing the withy (willow) tree. The main character in "Beaulampkin" is driven to take revenge on his grasping landlord by murdering the landlord's wife, knowing it will lead to his own execution; in "Pretty Polly," Polly is murdered by her lover, and the title character in "George Campbell" is murdered by a stranger for no reason at all. In "Louisiana 1927," the President of the United States stands idly by and watches as his people suffer from the effects of a disastrous flood. In this collection we can see how folk songs operate as an outlet for dissatisfaction with life, and perhaps as a catalyst for social change; also, as John Niles points out, there is an element of the tabloid fascination with the gruesome and the grotesque (Niles 1977, 49).

The title song, "Golden Vanity," Child 286 (Child 1892-1898), is a traditional English folk song that tells a story of heroism and betrayal. In different versions of the song, a sailing ship named *Sweet Trinity* or *Golden Vanity* or *Golden Willow Tree* is threatened by French, Turkish, Spanish or (in American variants) British pirates.⁷ In some variants, the captain is identified as Sir Walter Raleigh.⁸ In every version, however, the common themes are heroism, betrayal, and the loneliness of life at sea, and the basic story is the same. The ship is threatened, a cabin boy offers to sink the attackers, and the captain promises him a reward. The boy swims to the enemy ship, bores holes in its hull, and sinks it, but when he returns to his own ship, the captain refuses to take him up.

In Simpson's version, the *Golden Vanity* is an English sailing ship attacked by a Turkish galley. The cabin boy, encouraged by the captain's promise of a reward of ten thousand pounds and his daughter's hand in marriage, swims to the galley and sinks it by drilling holes in the hull below the waterline. On his return, however, the captain refuses to pull him from the water and he drowns, but not before telling the captain,

⁵ In this respect, Simpson is following in the tradition of Bert Jansch and John Renbourn.

⁶ The only song on the album without a dark theme of abuse of power, other than several interspersed upbeat instrumentals, which provide an ironic contest to the dark ballads, is Simpson's arrangement of Bob Dylan's "Love Minus Zero/No Limit," a brooding and melancholy love song.

⁷ The Carter Family recorded the song in 1935 with the title "Sinking in the Lonesome Sea"; The Almanac Singers on *Deep Sea Chanteys and Whaling Ballads* (1941); Aaron Copland included an arrangement entitled "The Golden Willow Tree" on *Old American Songs* in 1952; A.L. Lloyd on *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads, Volume III* in 1956; Lonnie Donegan as "The Golden Vanity" in 1960; the Brothers Four as "The Gallant Argosy", also in 1960; The New Lost City Ramblers in 1963; The Chad Mitchell Trio in 1964; Boudewijn de Groot as "Noordzee" in 1965; in 1966 Benjamin Britten arranged the song (opus 78) for boys' voices and piano; Gordon Bok, Ann Mayo Muir, and Ed Trickett in 1978; Bruce Hubbard recorded it as "The Golden Willow Tree" in 1989; Peter, Paul and Mary as "The Golden Vanity" in 1992; Bob Dylan on *Golden Vanity* (recordings made 1988 - 1992); Steeleye Span in 1995; The Friends of Fiddler's Green in 1997; John Roberts recorded a version entitled "The Weeping Willow Tree" in 2003; June Carter Cash as "Sinking in the Lonesome Sea" in 2003; Loudon Wainwright III as "Turkish Revelry" in 2006; and Crooked Still as "The Golden Vanity" in 2009 and again in 2011.

⁸ Charles Firth notes that several ballads were written about the political downfall of Sir Walter Raleigh during the reign of King James I, but that this one first appeared in broadside in 1682 (Firth 1911, 41).

If it wasn't for the love that I hold unto your men
I would do unto you as I did unto them
And sink you in the low and lonesome low
Sink you in the lonesome sea.

The heroism and restraint of the cabin boy are in stark contrast with the avarice and lies of the captain. The repeated refrain, "in the lonesome low," emphasizes the isolation of life on a ship at sea, where the men are at the mercy of those in authority over them. Like many folk songs, the theme here is the betrayal of trust by those in positions of power. Simpson's arrangement, consisting of acoustic guitar and harmonica, is noticeably slower than that of most other versions, so that the song clocks in at ten and a half minutes, giving the words plenty of time to sink in.

The third song on the album, "Bitter Withy" (Sharp 2, 1911), describes an episode from Jesus' childhood that shows him in an unusual and humanly flawed light.⁹ In common with the other songs on the album, there is an instance of social injustice; three young lords use their social superiority to insult young Jesus, who takes his revenge by luring them to their deaths by drowning. The scene begins with a typical playground argument. Jesus goes out to play, meets the three boys and asks, "Which of you three rich young men/Will play at ball with me?" Conscious of their social superiority, the boys reply

We are lords' and ladies' sons.
Born in a bower and hall;
And you are nothing but a Jew's child,
Born in an oxen stall¹⁰

Stung by the insult, Jesus turns the tables on them and replies, in true playground fashion, by repeating the insult, then makes His own claim for superior status:

Now you may be lords' and ladies' sons,
Born in your bower and hall,
But I'll prove to you in the latter end;
I'm an angel above you all

To complete His revenge, He takes the altercation one step further, following his words with a miracle:

And He built Him a bridge with the beams of the sun,
And over the river ran He.
And these young lords run after Him,
And drowned they were all three.

The playground game of dare turns deadly. The irony is double: the social order is trumped by divine order, so that the everyday state of things is inverted; however, in his juvenile reaction to the boys' taunts, Jesus claims superiority over the lords, but acts in an un-angelic way. According

⁹ Reed notes that "Bitter Withy" was printed in the sixteenth century (Reed 1932).

¹⁰ Instead of the adjective "poor maid's" used in some variants, Simpson restores the racial slur "jew's", a common variant in some early versions.

to Tillyard and Lovejoy, in the medieval world view, angels possessed reason, love and imagination but lacked the physical passions of humans and lower animals (Lovejoy 1936, Tillyard 1943). Jesus is shown here in an entirely human light, with all the fears and emotions of an ordinary child. Unlike the traditional, perfect role model offered by church and state, this Jesus is a common man for common people. As Mark Booth points out, “the song has clear class prejudices, offering its audience indulgence in a fantasy of revenge upon snobs” (Booth 1978, 374).

Ironically, the mothers of the boys call on Jesus’s mother for justice:

Mary mild brought home her child
And laid Him across her knee
And with a bundle of withy twigs
She give Him thrashes three.

Unlike the female characters in most other ballads, who tend to be victims, Mary holds a position of power, albeit over a child, no matter how special He is. Mary, too, is shown in an unusually human light in the song’s lyrics. In typical English vernacular, she warns her son to behave Himself before letting Him go out to play:

At ball! at ball! me own dear Son!
It’s time that you were gone;
And don’t let me hear of any doings
Tonight when you come home.

Beaten by His mother with the withy for abusing his powers, Jesus takes his revenge once more, this time on the withy tree:

An’ it’s Withy! Oh, withy!
Oh bitter withy that causes me to smart,
The withy shall be the very first tree
To perish at the heart!”

The legend of the willow, or withy, tree that is rotten on the inside is a common one in folk songs and ballads (Gardner-Medwin 1991, 237).¹¹ The central metaphor of the ballad, the tree rotten at the heart that represents the core of evil deep within the human heart, points to both Christian and pre-Christian lore. The curse upon the withy tree is similar to Jesus’s curse on the fig tree in Mark 11: 12-25 (Carroll and Prickett 1997). The bridge made of sunbeams recalls the rainbow from the story of Noah’s Ark. The magical challenge to cross it is similar to the paradoxes in many medieval and Anglo-Saxon songs and riddle poems such as “I Syng of a Mayden” and “I Have a Yong Suster”.¹² Booth argues that the revenge theme is a very old one: “this boy Jesus is a pre-Christian Jesus, a pre-adult and a pre-social trickster” (Booth 1978, 376).

A variant of the ballad appears in “The Holy Well” (Quiller-Crouch 1910), which tells the same story until the point that the three young lords insult Jesus. In “The Holy Well,” however, Jesus runs home to tell his mother, who counsels him to take revenge, but Jesus refuses, saying

¹¹ It is still current in fantasy stories, such as the evil Old Man Willow in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (1954) and The Whomping Willow in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998).

¹² MS Sloane 2593. c. 1430.

Nay, nay, sweet Jesus said,
 Nay, nay, that may not be,
 For there are too many sinful souls,
 Crying out for the help of me

William J. Titland points out that early printed versions of “The Holy Well” are more common than “The Bitter Withy,” which was first discovered in 1905, which he explains by the unflattering picture it paints of Jesus committing murder and cursing a tree (Titland 1967, 69). Titland surmises that “The Bitter Withy” may have been the “underground” version of the more official “The Holy Well.”¹³ Booth, on the other hand, argues that “The Bitter Withy” may predate “The Holy Well”, which could be an attempt to “salvage” the unflattering portrayal of the Saviour in the former. Janet Graves points out that the fragmentation and divergence of the different variants of the ballad attest to its age, as versions of the story have been found in manuscripts from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries (Graves 1967, 16). In Graves’s view, the two versions of the ballad are likely fragments of a longer medieval apocryphal legend similar to the fifteenth-century poem “The Childhood of Jesus”, British Library MS Addit. 31042.

The first song on *Golden Vanity*, “Beaulampkin,”¹⁴ (Roud 6; Child 93) tells the story of the murder of a woman and her infant son by a mason who “built a fine castle, and pay he got none.” Versions of the ballad originated in Scotland, England and the United States.¹⁵ Variants on the killer’s name include “Lambkin,” “Lambert,” “Lamkin,” “Lankyn,” “Lincoln,” “Lonkin,” “Limkin,” “Linkin,” “Lammikin,” “Rankin” and “Balankin,” and he is variously described as “Long,” “Bold,” “Cruel,” and “False.” Most of the Scots and Northern English versions introduce the story with the background of non-payment for work done, but some omit this detail and present the killer as a deranged madman, radically changing the song and its theme from a revenge tragedy to a gothic horror story.

Before leaving for England,¹⁶ the lord warns his wife against Beaulampkin:

Said the landlord to the lady when I am from home,
 ‘You beware of Beaulampkin lest he catch you alone.’
 And said the lady to the landlord ‘You need not fear him,
 Our doors are all bolted, our windows are barred in.’

Her hubris is matched by her naiveté; since Beaulampkin built the castle, he would know how to find a way in. However, it turns out that he has no need to break in; he has an accomplice and the crime is an inside job. A “false nurse” lets Beaulampkin into the house and says to him, “the lady,

¹³ “Bitter Withy” may be the more appropriate version for our time: “Jesus is ‘returning with a gun’ say former US General” The Independent, Thursday 20 February 2014 (Krishnan 2014).

¹⁴ The song was recorded as “Cruel Lincoln” by Ben Butcher in 1955; as “Bo Lamkin” by Frank Proffitt in 1962; as “Long Lankin” by Martin Carthy in 1968; as “Long Lonkin” by The High Level Ranters in 1973; as “Long Lankin” by Steeleye Span in 1975; as “Lamkin” by Dave Burland and Nic Jones in 1979; as “Long Lankin” by Fire + Ice in 1992; as “Long Lankin” by The Devil’s Interval in 2006; as “Long Lankin” by Jim Moray in 2010. Fleur de Bray wrote a short opera entitled *Long Lankin* in 2013. De Bray’s version emphasizes that the Lady and the baby are innocent victims, targets of opportunity for the vengeful mason who is unable to reach the powerful lord.

¹⁵ Gilchrist enumerated 40 variants in (Gilchrist 1932).

¹⁶ The line “He’s gone to Merry England for to visit his son” hints that this is a Scottish or Irish version of the story, raising the absentee landlord issue.

she is upstairs, how shall we get her down?" He replies, "we'll stick her little baby full of needles and pins," which they do, until "the tears and the red blood from the cradle did run." The lady, confronted by Beaulampkin and facing death, tries to bargain with him:

'Oh spare me Beaulampkins, Oh spare me a day
And you shall have as much gold as your horse can take away
Oh spare me Beaulampkins, Oh spare me an hour
And you may have my daughter Betsey and my own blooming flower'

but to no avail. He replies, "You can keep your daughter Betsey for to wade in the flood/now hold this silver basin for to catch your heart's blood."¹⁷ Punishment is swift: "Now Beaulampkins he's hanged on the gallows so high/The false nurse being burned to a stake standing by." The ballad in its long form is a comment on greedy absentee landlords and tenant rebellion, a pattern common throughout the history of British folk music. The gruesome, grotesque and sadistic acts of violence evoke a picture of relentless class warfare, and as in "George Campbell," the jaunty, frailing guitar provides an ironic accompaniment to the lyrics that, in its incongruity, emphasizes the horror.¹⁸ At first we have some sympathy for Beaulampkin, cheated as he was, but his revenge is out of all proportion to the wrong.¹⁹ Our initial feeling of sympathy turns to repulsion, coupled with a fascinated attraction, much like that felt by viewers of Greek or Shakespearean tragedy, or modern television series like *Dexter* or *Breaking Bad*, when the hard-pressed protagonist wreaks violent revenge of epic proportions (Lindsay 2004, Gilligan 2008). Niles notes that Beaulampkin's revenge is out of proportion to the wrong, and speculates that over its long history, some explanatory lines or verses have been lost. His explanation is that Lambkin must be the devil (Niles 1977, 59).

"Pretty Polly" is another traditional murder ballad, known in variants such as "The Gosport Tragedy" and "The Cruel Ship's Carpenter" (Laws 36B, 1957; Roud 15). The song tells of a young woman lured by her lover into the forest, where she is killed and buried in a shallow grave.²⁰ In some variants of the story, the murderer is a ship's carpenter who promises to marry Polly but murders her when she becomes pregnant. When he goes back to sea, he is haunted by her ghost, confesses to the murder, goes mad and dies.²¹ In a song entitled "Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight," described by Barry and Mackenzie, the story is similar, but the lady turns the tables on her would-be murderer (Barry 1905, Mackenzie 1910). In Simpson's version, Willie is a gambler with no apparent motive for murdering Polly, since pregnancy is not mentioned. He lures her away with a promise, "Polly, Pretty Polly, won't you come and go with me/And before we get married some pleasure we'll see," but soon they "Rode on a little further and what did they spy/But a newly dug grave and a spade lying by." We find out that the murder was premeditated when he says "I dug on your grave the best part of last night," and the song ends with "A debt unto the devil our Willie he

¹⁷ Gilchrist explains the detail of the silver basin by pointing out the old superstition against shedding noble blood: (Gilchrist 1932, 13-14); in Beaulampkin's twisted logic, the crime of spilling noble blood may be averted by catching it.

¹⁸ Frailing is a technique developed by banjo players, adapted to guitar, of alternating a downstroke with the thumb and an upstroke with the first finger on one or more strings, allowing a full, even busy, accompaniment by one player that sounds like more than one instrument playing.

¹⁹ Different versions and interpretations raise the suspicion that there may have been an affair between the lady and the labourer, providing a motive for both the lady's complacency and Beaulampkin's rage.

²⁰ Field found fifty songs with a similar theme (Field 1951).

²¹ Recorded versions include those by B.F. Shelton (1927), Dock Boggs (1927), Woody Guthrie's "Pastures of Plenty" (1941), Bob Dylan's "The Ballad of Hollis Brown" (1964), Bert Jansch (1966), and Judy Collins (1968).

must pay/For killing Pretty Polly and running away.” Willie’s only apparent motive for murdering Polly is that he wanted to seduce her, lied about marriage, then disposed of her when he was done. The apparent senselessness of the killing can be explained only by the mention of the fact that he is a gambler, a shorthand way of establishing his bad character from the beginning.

Rounding out Simpson’s collection of traditional murder ballads is “George Campbell,” an American variant of the Scots ballad “Bonnie George Campbell” (Child 210). The original Scots ballad tells of a man who goes off to fight in battle, from which only his horse returns. The name differs across variants; several sources have been suggested as inspiration for the ballad: Archibald or James Campbell killed, in the Battle of Glenlivet (October 3rd, 1594), or Sir John Campbell of Calder, who was murdered in 1591.²² His bride comes out, grieving for the fact that the crops in the fields are still growing and the harvest will soon be ready, but he will never return. In some variants, his mother or sisters also come out when his horse returns.²³

In Simpson’s version, George Campbell is an American farmer in Texas:

George Campbell lived in Texas with his mother and his wife
Two little children they make a hard, hard life

George Campbell left his mother likewise his darling wife
For to go to Austin make him a better life

George Campbell went a-walking down by the river side
And there he met a rounder who shot him till he died

Unlike the other murder ballads, which have a traditional mood created by the acoustic accompaniment, for this one Simpson uses an upbeat accompaniment of guitar, electric bass and harmonica to give the song a more modern, American feel, and to provide an ironic contrast between the words and music. Simpson took a traditional Scottish ballad based on an old story of a man lost in battle and set it in the wild American west; the result is a story of an act of senseless violence that leaves a family bereft, and as in “Pretty Polly,” the fact that there is no apparent reason for the murder makes it more chilling.²⁴ As in “Pretty Polly” the only reason we can deduce for the murder is that the killer is a bad character from his description as a “rounder”. In these folk songs, description of character and motive is pared away to a minimum. Why people do the things they

²² Although the date of the events that inspired the ballad may be in the 16th century, the song we have is probably much later; Louise Pound dated it as 18th century (Pound 1932). As we have seen with the other ballads, variants occur across time and space as the songs are adapted by generation and region.

²³ This ballad “is probably a lament for one of the adherents of the house of Argyle who fell in the battle of Glenlivet, stricken on Thursday, the third day of October, 1594” (Motherwell 1846, 44). The Earl of Argyle lost in this battle his two cousins, Archibald and James Campbell (Gordon 1813, 229). On the other hand, “there can be little doubt” that the ballad refers to the murder of Sir John Campbell of Calder by one of his own surname, in 1591, and alters the title accordingly to Bonnie John Campbell (Maidment 1868, 240). “But Campbells enow were killed, in battle or feud, before and after 1590, to forbid a guess as to an individual James or George grounded upon the slight data afforded by the ballad” (Child 1898, 142). “The easy lilt of the waltz tune, instead of detracting from the grimness of the story, seems to add to it. It should be sung fairly impersonally” (Norman Buchan, *Weekly Scotsman*, Dec 4, 1958).

²⁴ In more commercial cowboy ballads, such as Marty Robbins’ “Billy the Kid” and “El Paso” (1959) the murders are the result of emotions of revenge and jealousy.

do is intrinsic to who they are. Characters are classified as belonging to broad types; the gambler and the rounder are evil, while the innocent young girl and the hard-working family man are inevitably victims of the predators all around. For working-class people, life is hard, and fortune inexplicable and unpredictable.

Who'll rock the cradle who'll sing the song
 Who'll rock the cradle who'll sing the song
 Who'll rock the cradle and sing it when I'm gone
 Who'll plant the cotton, who'll hoe the corn?

For listeners familiar with older versions of the song, removing the context from Scottish dynastic wars to the struggle for survival of settlers in the American West emphasizes the frailty of human life and the senselessness of murder at any place or time.

The last song on the album is a departure from the genre of traditional ballads. Randy Newman's "Louisiana 1927" tells the story of a severe flood and the inability of the President of the United States to deal with it. The song ends with the verse,

President Coolidge came down in a railroad train
 With a little fat man with a note-pad in his hand
 The President say, "Little fat man isn't it a shame what the river has done
 To this poor cracker's land."

In contrast to the other songs on *Golden Vanity*, this modern ballad gives specific details of time and place and identifies the President by name. Unlike the folk ballads, there is no feeling of malevolence or supernatural explanations for evil. As Peter Winkler notes, "Newman's lyrics tend to be simple in vocabulary, terse, and elliptical: what is left unsaid is often more important than what is said. And irony is his most characteristic mode" (Winkler 1988, 2). The magnitude of what has been left unsaid, and the focus on the small details, is an excellent example of the traditional ballad technique of "leaping and lingering", leaping over the well-known historical facts and lingering on the personal touches that humanize the story (Campbell 1961). Like the omission of characterization and motive in the murder ballads, this allows the listener to draw his or her own conclusion. Paralyzed by a laissez-faire capitalist philosophy that values money over people's lives, the President and the little fat man choose to stand by and watch as the people suffer. In 1927, before the Great Crash of 1929, there was plenty of money in America that could have been used for disaster relief. Newman's lyrics are an indictment not only of the selfish philosophy of the Jazz Age, but of those in power in America in the 1970s who were prepared to let the same thing happen again.²⁵ The motif of disdain for the poor is a constant throughout American history and culture. Bruce Boyd Raeburn wrote thirty years later,

²⁵ Another of the songs on Newman's album *Good Ole Boys* is entitled "Mr. President, (Have Pity on the Working Man)"; it includes the lines

Maybe you're cheatin'
 Maybe you're lyin'
 Maybe you have lost your mind
 Maybe you're only thinking 'bout yourself

Too late to run. Too late to cry now
 The time has come for us to say good-bye now

There has been a lot of post-Katrina talk about making Randy Newman's satirical ballad on the flooding of the Mississippi River, "Louisiana 1927," the new state song, and my title is taken from its refrain. "They're Tryin' to Wash Us Away" sums up the state of mind of many New Orleans residents these days, especially musicians. Those hard feelings are related to slow government relief efforts, statements by self-appointed pundits that the city does not "deserve" to be rebuilt, perceptions of racism tied to mismanagement of resources before and after the storm, and accusations that the city's levee systems were so faulty that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is looking into possible corruption in their design, construction, and maintenance. (Raeburn 1997, 812)

Raeburn contends that, more than mere neglect, there is an active attempt by America's leaders to eliminate poor, black people in the American South. By the end of the song, its first line, "What has happened down here is the wind have changed," has taken on a double meaning; initially, the wind brought on the storm and flood, but Newman's satire shows the need for a change of heart.

Simpson's choice of folk and modern ballads for *Golden Vanity* makes the album less a folk revival album, as described by Atkinson (Atkinson 2001, 370), than a postmodern pastiche of old and new, with a common theme running throughout the songs of the struggle of ordinary people against the corrupting effects of power. Each song shows a different facet of this struggle, from the point of view of the innocent victims in "Pretty Polly" to the wider circle of people affected by the crime in "George Campbell." The motive for murder is obliquely shown in "Beaulampkin," where the listener is torn between horror at the crime and some sympathy for and identification with the wronged stonemason. We are also invited to identify with the temptation and transgression of the young Jesus in "Bitter Withy" as he responds to the cruel taunts of the other children. "Bitter Withy" is the only ballad in the collection that contains any sign of the supernatural, when Jesus builds his bridge and later curses the withy tree, but these are incidental to the main theme of the song, which is that even Jesus was a victim of petty human emotions of vanity, class-consciousness, and spite.²⁶ When the paragon of Christian virtue is shown to have the same base human motives and reactions as the rest of us, we are forced to face the real horror of the human condition. Finally, we are able to understand the sacrifice of the cabin boy in "Golden Vanity" when he chooses not to take revenge on his vile captain because of his feelings of fellowship and brotherhood with his shipmates. *Golden Vanity* shows us the full range of human responses to crime and injustice, both strength and weakness, a composite picture from both sides.

3. Conclusion

Music and songs have always been able to express the high and low points of culture, of the best and worst of human nature. A.O. Scott, in his *New York Times* review of Roman Polanski's film *The Pianist* (Polanski 2002), wrote

I thought Szpilman's encounter, in the war's last days, with a music-loving Nazi officer (Thomas Kretschmann) courted sentimentality by associating the love of art with moral decency, an equation the Nazis themselves, steeped in Beethoven and Wagner, definitively refuted. But on a second viewing, the scene, scored to the ravishing, sorrowful music of Chopin, was a painful and ridiculous testament to just how bizarre the European catastrophe of the last century was. (Scott 2002)

²⁶ Kaloh Vid points out an interesting parallel, in that Russian folklore also deals far more often with petty, banal demons, rather than the personification of evil present in official religion and art (Kaloh Vid 2013, 124).

The evil in “Louisiana, 1927” lies in the banality of Coolidge’s response to the disaster, recalling Hannah Arendt’s characterization of the nature of the evil behind The Holocaust. As when reading *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, these songs invite us to contemplate morality from without and within as we witness a series of evil acts, some motivated by a sense of injustice and revenge, others completely senseless. As Arendt pointed out when defining “the banality of evil”,

[e]xcept for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he [Eichmann] had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post. He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing. (Arendt 1963, 134)

As Arendt makes clear, the “banality of evil” is a simplification. The evil of the Nazi leadership was monstrous, but it could not have been carried out without the petty evil of the minions who obeyed the orders. This is the kind of evil we see in these folk ballads, and it is most evident in the tiny, mundane details and the deflationary observations. The ballad is the genre where we see this type of evil most clearly, because it is music for common people who live with stonemasons, gamblers, and petty bureaucrats, unlike romances and epics that describe the concerns of kings and princes. As Booth points out, however, better the devil you know than the one you don’t: “fearful things happen, we say, and (especially if we say it in proverb or song) we are mastering, containing the fearfulness” (Booth 1978, 376).

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***Golden Vanity* Track Listing**

- "Beaulampkin"
- "Snowdrop" (Kirk McGhee)
- "Bitter Withy"
- "Cindy"
- "Golden Vanity"
- "Soldier's Joy"
- "Pretty Polly"
- "Love Minus Zero/No Limit" (Bob Dylan)
- "George Campbell"
- "Gotta Little Home To Go To"
- "Louisiana 1927" (Randy Newman)

Appendix A – Song Lyrics

The Sweet Trinity (The Golden Vanity)

'I HAVE a ship in the North Countrie,
And she goes by the name of the Golden Vanity;
I'm afraid she will be taken by some Turkish gallee,
As she sails on the Low Lands Low.'

Then up starts our little cabin-boy,
Saying, Master, what will you give me if I do them destroy?
'I will give you gold, I will give you store,
You shall have my daughter when I return on shore,
If ye sink them in the Low Lands Low.'

The boy bent his breast and away he jumpt in;
He swam till he came to this Turkish galleon,
As she laid on the Low Lands Low.

The boy he had an auger to bore holes two at twice;
While some were playing cards, and some were playing dice,
He let the water in, and it dazzled in their eyes,
And he sunk them in the Low Lands Low.

The boy he bent his breast and away he swam back again,
Saying, Master take me up, or I shall be slain,
For I have sunk them in the Low Lands Low.

'I'll not take you up,' the master he cried;
'I'll not take you up,' the master replied;
'I will kill you, I will shoot you, I will send you with the tide,
I will sink you in the Low Lands Low.'

The boy he swam round all by the starboardside;
They laid him on the deck, and it's there he soon died;
Then they sewed him up in an old cow's-hide,
And they threw him overboard, to go down with the tide,
And they sunk him in the Low Lands Low.

Pretty Polly

There used to be a gambler and he gambled all around
 There used to be a gambler and he gambled all around
 And he courted Pretty Polly and a cure he never did found

And he said Polly Pretty Polly won't you come and go with me
 And he said Polly Pretty Polly won't you come and go with me
 And before we get married some pleasure we'll see

And she jumped behind him and away they did ride
 And she jumped behind him and away they did ride
 They went over the hills and the valleys so wide

Rode on a little further and what did they spy
 Rode on a little further and what did they spy
 But a newly dug grave and a spade lying by

Willie dearest Willie I'm afraid of your ways
 Willie dearest Willie I'm afraid of your ways
 I'm afraid you might lead my poor body astray

Polly Pretty Polly you guessed just about right
 Polly Pretty Polly you guessed just about right
 I dug on your grave the best part of last night

No time to talk now no time to stand
 No time to talk now no time to stand
 And his eyes fixed on the dagger he was holding in his hand

And he stabbed her to the heart and her heart's blood did flow
 And he stabbed her to the heart and her heart's blood did flow
 And then into the grave did Polly dear go

And he threw a little dirt over her and he turned to go home
 And he threw a little dirt over her and he turned to go home
 Leaving nothing behind but the wild birds to moan

A debt unto the devil little Willie he must pay
 A debt unto the devil our Willie he must pay
 For killing Pretty Polly and running away

The Bitter Withy

As it fell out on a bright holiday,
The hail from the heavens did fall;
And our Saviour asked His mother dear
If he might play at ball.

At ball! at ball! me own dear Son!
It is time that you were gone;
And don't let me hear of any doings
Tonight when you come home.

An it's up the town and down the town
Our sweet young Saviour run,
Until he come to three young lords:
Playing in the sun.

Good morning to you all said he:
Good morning to all three,
Which of you three rich young lords
Will play at ball with me?

We are all lords' and ladies' sons.
Born in a bower and hall;
And you art nothing but a jew's child,
Born in an oxen stall.

Now you may be lords' and ladies' sons,
Born in a bower and hall,
But I'll prove to you at the latter end;
I'm an angel above you all.

And he built Him a bridge with the beams of the sun,
And over the river ran He.
And these young lords ran after Him,
And drowned they were all three.

And it's up the town and down the town
The mothers did whoop and call,
Saying Mary mild, bring home your child,
Ours is drowned at all.

So Mary mild brought home her child
And laid Him across her knee;
And with a bundle of withy twigs
She give Him thrashes three.

And it's withy! O withy! O bitter withy!
That causes Me to smart;
The withy shall be the very first tree
To perish at the heart!

Bonnie James Campbell

High upon Hielands and laigh upon Tay
 Bonnie James Campbell rade oot on a day
 He saddled, he bridled, and gowned rade he
 Hame cam' his guid horse but never cam' he
 Oot cam' his mither dear greetin' fu' sair
 Oot cam' his bonnie bride reivin' her hair
 His meadow lies green and the corn is unshorn
 But bonnie James Campbell will never return
 Saddled and bridled and booted rade he
 A plume in his helmet, a sword at his knee
 Toom cam' his saddle a' bluidy tae see
 Hame cam' his guid horse but never cam' he