

Adaptation and Transposition in Ulver's *Themes from William Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

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This article is a survey of the specificity of the process of adopting William Blake's 'illuminated book' *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) by the Norwegian (heavy-)metal band Ulver. The illuminated plates of Blake inspired and also structured an album highly praised for its originality, that must be analyzed in the context of metal music and word/music adaptation. The paper also sketches, as Robert Walser suggested in 1993 (*Running with the Devil*), a view of metal music as discourse, by analyzing the signifying practices the album *Themes from William Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1998) is based on.

The album initiated a new direction for Ulver, not only as ideological or lyrical perspective, but also musically. The avant-garde electronic and progressive metal with clean vocal style supported Blake's idea that the sensual world can lead to the spiritual, and that the repression of desire destroys the spirit.

As adaptation studies are now central to intermedia studies, it is necessary to take into account the adaptation issue as broad as possible. Michael J. Meyer emphasizes in *Literature and Musical Adaptation* the idea that every reading of the text is necessarily a misreading, and that our readings are made in the direction of our own interests. If so, then we could easily affirm that the reading that pop music does today is the reading that opera, for example, has done in the past, when Verdi or Berlioz read Shakespeare, as David Francis Urrows affirms. Influenced by Theodor W. Adorno's critique of popular music, my point is that Ulver's version of Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is not a mere adaptation, but a transposition, with specific meanings, as Alison Stone argues, and can be an alternative musical discourse as opposed to pop music.

When pop music started in a big way in the 1950s and 1960s, it seemed a particularly frivolous medium. By contrast, philosophy and literary studies had the reputation of being deeply serious and impressive. But since the 1960s, pop has conquered the world. It is now, as Alain de Botton once observed, the foremost medium for the articulation of ideas on a mass scale and this explains why, if it is to survive, philosophy should study pop culture.

William Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is a highly innovative and somehow personal work, mirroring the poet's vision on a spiritual cosmos. It is generally accepted that through the Devil's voice, Blake comments on Emmanuel Swedenborg's ideas on the afterlife as they appear in *De Caelo et Ejus Mirabilibus et de Inferno. Ex Auditibus et Visibus* (translated into English in

1758, as *Heaven and Hell*). A dense and densely cryptic text, *The Marriage* can also be considered a theological manifesto mixed with poems and proverbs. Dualism is the main theme: God and Satan, light and darkness, Good and Evil, angels and demons. Blake adopts the Romantic (*avant la lettre*) approach and rejects a dualistic “classical Christian” view of the afterlife, where the virtuous are sent to Paradise (Heaven) and the evildoers to Hell. Instead, Blake presents Angels and Demons as essentially two sides of the same archetypal coin: Demons represent the Feminine, Liberal and Creative Energies from Genius flows, while Angels represent the Masculine, Conservative and Controlling Energy seeking to constrain Genius. The Demons actually are the Romantics seeking to liberate humanity from false social constructions and social orders.

Also, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* refers to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), but inverting the power relationships between Satan and God: Jesus becomes the voice of restraint, while Satan is the revolutionary voice of liberty and desire. Here, Blake develops the idea that the sensual world can lead to the spiritual, and that the repression of desire destroys the spirit. “A Song for Liberty” – the last part of *The Marriage* – calls for a revolt against the tyrannies of Church and State.

Joseph Viscomi observed, in his accurate and scrupulously careful research on the evolution of Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, that the absence of drafts and manuscripts is not unusual for an illuminated book. Unusual for *Marriage* is:

the disjointed structure, its discrete textual units and diverse genres, topics, and points of view, Structurally and thematically, the work appears to have been written at different times, and in different order from the one we have. Textual analysis, however, cannot by itself recover the chronology of plate production, without which no reasonable idea of his work is possible. When we group the *Marriage* plates according to the style of their letter g into three sequential sets and then reconfigure the plates back into their original sheets, the chronology of sheet and plate production begins to emerge.

The reconfigured and sequenced sheets reveal the following plate chronology: 21-24, 12-13, 1-3, 5-6, 11, 6-10, 14, 15, 16-20, and 25-27. (Viscomi, 1995: 334)

When adaptation of poetry to music occurs (or the modal transformation of literary works to music), three main aspects are generally considered: 1) the issue of fidelity, 2) the role of the adaptor as co-author, and 3) the ability of solitary artistic modes to augment each other when combined.

The power of poetry lies in the effectiveness of the linguistic elements that are present in the poem: figurative language, word stress, punctuation, while the power of music lies in the combination of tonal frequencies and the duration of sounds. Music is a vehicle for the circulation of literary ideas, plots and characters, a means to encourage reading, even a genuine way of knowledge and understanding. Moreover, by combining literary text and modern (pop) music traditional forms of expression and categories are challenged. Set to music, the written word of poetry gets a new level of expressivity by appropriating expressive “materials” such as melody, (dis)harmony, instrumentation, rhythm, dynamics.

The title itself is somewhat ambiguous: this may be an album simply inspired from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, a mere framework for the music, and not properly a transposition of Blake’s text into music. In fact, it *is* a transposition, and a good one, of poetry to music.

However, a number of questions arise. Could a musical album based on Blake's poetry be of any profit? Is it commercially conceived? Is it metatextual or "meta-musical"? Is it art for art's sake? Is it just an experiment, showing a great capacity of challenging the actual definitions of music?

Rygg perfectly seized the essence of the Romantic literary text, in which time and space are freely manipulated, the order of events being not always specified: the narrator travels to Hell and back, hangs over abysses with an angel, and dines in the approximate present with Isaiah and Ezekiel.

Themes from William Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell is the fourth studio album of the Norwegian band Ulver (meaning "wolves"), having been for more than ten years the point of no return: formerly this band was hugely obscure due to their label as black-metal band, and since 1998 it is obvious that they have become even more obscure due to their post-black-metal experimental approach. More electronic and eclectic elements are present in their compositions, seen as operatic albums (they should be listened as a whole). This was considered a vital change for the band, as it exposed the "personality" of the band, expressing and predicting their direction in music: to endlessly seek new territories and sounds. It was the first album without black-metal tendencies, without conventional labelling possibilities. Seemingly they wanted some progressive and psychedelic rock to lose themselves in a very eclectic, uncategorizable, abundance of styles and possibilities.

The album, also known as *The Blake Album*, proved very original: its main goal was to be modern, yet full of substance, with the ambition to redefine what was called underground music, by using and incorporating elements from industrial, ambient, rock, trip-hop, neoclassical and traditional heavy-metal. In fact, one of the main original features of this Ulver album is that it has more lyrics than any of the other albums. Most of the critics have recognized that they had not managed to dive into this 1 hour and 40 minutes album until they have read the William Blake's text. This sounds like an approval of the idea that music makes literary texts more popular, more visible. Blake's ideas and his most important words are emphasized, showing (or giving at least the impression of) a good understanding of the literary text. It is probably the best popular way of introducing a listener to the work of a great (but not very accessible) poet like William Blake.

Of great relevance are also the ratings given by listeners on various websites and a wide range of reviews that emphasized the importance of the lyrics to the success of the album. For example, on *progarchives.org*, *Themes from William Blake's The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* has 115 ratings (which may seem a poor reception considering the figures of King Crimson's *Larks' Tongs in Aspic* – 2,827 ratings, Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* – 4,245 ratings, *Selling England by the Pound* by Genesis – 4,102 ratings or Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells* – 1,153 ratings); 29% of them proclaimed the album as "essential: a masterpiece of progressive rock music" and 40% of them an "excellent addition to any prog rock music collection". On *amazon.com* it is rated with five stars from five, but, again, there are only 23 buyers. On streaming platforms there are no signs of reception, as neither Spotify, nor Apple Music makes this album available for streaming or downloading. On *AllMusic.com* the reviews were also positive: "Between eerie music, awkward vocals, and mysterious religious lyrics, this album has everything for the eccentric fans out in metal-land", wrote reviewer Jason Hundy. The German rock & metal magazines also welcomed this album: 10/10 in *Rock Hard*, 7/7 and "Album of the Month" in *Hammer Magazine*. The webzine Metal Reviews correctly pointed out: "A complete musical reboot, and as such it has its flaws. As their peers floundered around them, Ulver took flight,

and if they hadn't chosen to abandon metal entirely, they may have not have existed today". While the album and the band received backlash from the metal community, a wider audience was paying attention to Ulver's approach. The avant-garde electronic and progressive metal with clean vocal style was somehow suggested and previewed by another band in which Rygg was active: in 1997 Arcturus released the album *La Masquerade Infernale*.

On behalf of the members of Ulver, Kristoffer Rygg stated in *Unrestrained* magazine in 2007:

[We] spent a couple of years designing [this album], so that was by far the most serious and elaborate musical process we undertook at the time. (...) I think the whole perception that we just made a 180-degree shift towards something else is not entirely correct. I think we just wanted to leave the black metal thing because we felt it was limiting. Our perspectives on religion and society had started to become more difficult as well. That's why Blake was hugely interesting to us, because it was so much more of a meticulous vision that the dissentient perspective we were part of at the time. You're always more angry when you're young and you become more moderate as you grow older so that's why Blake was fascinating to us. That was the start of chapter two, if you will, of our history. (Hughes, 2007)

Rygg also admitted he had identified with Blake's way of seeing things. This so-called chapter two in the evolution of Ulver is not characterized only by a new beginning from an ideological and lyrical perspectives, but also from a musical one. It was the time when Rygg learned how to work with technology, software and computers in music.

In 1973, the musicologist Wilfrid Mellers proposed his version of the standard discursive analytical practice in analyzing Beatles and observed that in investigating "popular music" we need an investigative methodology. (Later, there were mentioned at least three approaches: the analytical-interpretive, the anthropological and the historical.)

Michael J. Meyer observed that for many critics "musical adaptations seem often more likely to be created by musicians' intent on transforming previously written texts (novels, poetry and short stories) into notes and sounds that they feel enhance and energize the original" (Meyer, 2002: 5). Besides, sometimes a tune motivates a writer to compose a text. Unfortunately, combining music with literary text seldom creates "a work of art that is diminished or lessened because of the combination" (Meyer, 2002: 5).

In a broad sense, by adaptation we may understand the many processes by which one work frames itself as a version of another: an extended paraphrase, re-enactment, parallel, recounting, transposition, condensation, expansion, travesty, meta-commentary. David Francis Urrows has noticed that in word-music adaptation studies the issue of "fidelity" prevails, doubled by that of "virtue". Many scholars are frustrated by the devaluing of adaptation, arrangement, transcription, palimpsest, fantasy, a devaluation made possible by the fact that in the 20th century the main criterion was authenticity.

According to Robert Walser in *Running with the Devil*, the analysis of pop music tends to focus on the structure and the musical details, "beyond the vocals". By contrast, when discussing (heavy-)metal music, the main accent is laid on the idea of musical discourse. Walser argues that "musical details can be evaluated in relation to interlocked systems of changing practices and that shifting codes constitute the musical discourses that underpin genres" (Walser, 1993: 26). Also, the musical structures are intelligible only in direct relation with the

historically discursive systems – an idea that may be questioned, as genres are fluid and disputable. Borrowing the “horizon of expectations” from Bakhtin’s theory of genres, Walser reaffirms that genres are developed, sustained and reformed by artists and common people, who bring a variety of histories and interests to their encounters with generic texts. A well-known poem or a novel are more than generic texts. When they are adopted by or adapted to music, they reflect their social existences and their cultural uses (even appropriations).

“Heavy-metal” is a generic label covering a great variety of musical practices or even “ideological stances”, having been influenced by pop, rock, rap, electronic music, etc. Today, by (heavy-)metal we understand a variety of diverse and different styles. There are cases, Ulver included, when a metal music group evolved from a rigid and conventional approach to a more nuanced combination of musical discourses and sounds. Such proliferation determined and made relative the categories or the terms involved in explaining “divergent practices”. As Tzvetan Todorov previously observed, genres are generated by the “metadiscursive discourse”, from the discourse about discourse, in a dialogic manner. On the other hand, Walser argues, from a post-structural view of music, that like discourses and genres, musical meanings are “contingent, but never arbitrary” and are “always grounded socially and historically, and they operate on an ideological field of conflicting interests, institutions, and memories”. Therefore, musical meaning has social bases and constituencies upon which interpretation is dependent, and also various political economies, cultural and commercial contexts that organize all stages of production and, more important, of reception.

The contextual musical analysis is always important because music is social practice, as music is a type of social activity. Moreover, the range of possible interpretations are theoretically infinite, evolving around contexts and ideologies. Genres as heavy-metal are “places” where discourses “temporarily organize the exchange of meanings” (Walser, 1993: 33). Furthermore, music is itself a material, a social practice, marked by negotiating the subject position, by transgressing the social relations or by interrogating the ideologies. Music can enact relationships and narratives that have not previously been imagined or valued. It may create new meanings in new media cultures.

The analysis of pop music, for instance, can help us become aware of the seemingly fragmented modern world and “can help us understand the thoughts and desires of many whose only politics are cultural politics” (Walser, 1993: 34). And Ulver seems to beget a strong cultural politics, by promoting a musical language that reflects a cultural stance. This should be a good motivation to study music based on such famous literary pieces like William Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

However, in contrast to the sequential, narrative and static traits of the written text of a poem, music enacts a dramatic and dynamic experience. Music is collective and social, while literature is individual. Going further, Walser emphasizes that

writing about music (...) tends to treat music as an artifact, as it attempts to pin down the concrete realities of sound into static, abstract words in a logical, linear order. Musical scores and song lyrics, as literate modes of communications, are both closer in character to writing about music than to music itself. This discursive affinity is itself in part responsible for the historical neglect of musical meaning in popular music, in favor of concentration on either lyrics or static score-based musicological analysis. (Walser, 1993: 40)

The main reason to analyze the musical discourse of pop music is actually less complex and less... serious: it is based on the assumption that pop music – pop culture as a whole –, could be treated like serious music. Following the argument of Alison Stone, it must be accepted that considerations about form and structure are more important in popular music, than those on meaning, as

popular music typically has a particular *kind* of organisation in which the whole song, as a meaningful unit, emerges out of the specific set of individual materials that coalesce together into it. The point concerns not form *versus* meaning (or *versus* content or *versus* expression), but *how matter-form relations* are configured in popular music, such that materials form – «form» in the sense of the song as a whole that is unified in terms of its meaning. (Stone, 2016: 104)

As Theodor W. Adorno shows, what characterizes popular music is its difference from serious music and this difference is taken for granted. Adorno's approach is important due to its influence and to the radical and paradoxical separations proposed – perhaps he is the greatest philosopher of music. In *On Popular Music*, he showed that modern music and modern popular songs are very often put in an equivalence equation; the existence of the popular songs is possible and but they are condemned for their standardization, frequently having interchangeable parts. Many critics are influenced by one major idea of Adorno, that of a structural isomorphism between how part-whole relations are configured in popular songs and in capitalist modernity.

Initially, for Adorno (as for Thomas Mann), modern music meant Arnold Schoenberg and his twelve-tone serialism and atonal composition, and just subsequently jazz music or popular music. Adorno's critique of mass culture is an engagement with modernity and its context of production: music is a product predetermined by centralization and profit – on the expense of truth and individuality. Truth is: in the logic of capitalism, music may be a product. It is the artistic intention and the mode of production that make the difference: art for art's sake or for profit. On the other hand, in totalitarian societies after WWII, there are ideological challenges: mass culture is not for profit, but for propaganda. Conformism applies for both worlds. For Adorno, what makes a work of art valuable is its autonomy, as it presents an alternative to the concept over materiality. But, as Alison Stone stresses, “the idea of autonomy does have some application to some classical music” (Stone, 2016: 72). We simply cannot judge all music at all. According to Stone, two assumptions made by Adorno are to be amended: first, the idea that popular music is a result of a music industry searching for profit and profit only, instead of artistic goals; second, the idea that popular music affects listeners, making them thoughtless (Adorno, 1941). Also, we have to face the truth that music simply has no standard form (“repetitive construction” being accused to be this unique form). In reality, motifs and themes highly vary, and accordingly, popular music plural and eclectic. Alison Stone observes that

post-rock-‘n’-roll music is a hybrid cultural form that draws on a plurality of musical traditions and sets of harmonic norms, adding further norms on its own. All musical traditions hybridise with others, but this is particularly so of popular music, which only emerged at all from the bringing together of diverse traditions – blues, jazz, gospel, country, folk, mainstream pop – which were relatively self-contained in the pre-war period. (Stone, 2016: 103)

It is obvious that Alison Stone advocates for a generous approach of popular culture. The analysis of popular songs made by Adorno might provide useful insights for examining pop music. Adorno's denunciation of popular music in the larger context of criticizing Western modern society offers a better understanding of pop music as a cultural form. However, we must observe how Adorno's work gives us grounds to value popular music positively, "as embodying and alternative to the concept's dominance" and also "as presenting the truth that is good for materials and material bodies to realise themselves" (Stone, 2016: 69).

The importance of Adorno's philosophy of new music becomes more evident. His critique of mass culture and culture industry is very powerful and convincing as it takes into account the connection between art and truth, making possible the autonomy, influenced by Hegel: "Intra-artistic autonomy thus has direct social and ethical import. To the extent that autonomy structures the art-work, that work reminds us the autonomy is needed for a flourishing human life, implicitly criticising societies that stifle human autonomy" (Stone, 2016: 77).

What Ulver achieved in making *Themes from William Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is a return to polyphony – the indispensable medium of new music, in terms of Adorno. Ulver's musical experiment is best described by the term polyphony, as "polyphonic music says «we» even when it lives uniquely in the imagination of the composer without ever reaching another living person" (Adorno, 2006: 18).

In such an intellectual frame, we should insist upon the originality and the intellectual turn of the Norwegians of Ulver: they underline the fine threads that design the boundaries and delimitations between various kinds of art. In the case of Ulver's approach the discussion is held on the context of the cultural and musical experiment, without any relation with the commercial benefits of what we usually call popular music. By choosing unexpected and unusual musical directions and structures, Ulver actually criticize mass culture and mainstream music, with their narrow definitions, genres and labels.

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Album Tracks Listing:

Disc 1 (48:56):

1. The Argument, Plate 2 (4:03)
2. Plate 3 (2:48)
3. Plate 3, Following (1:33)
4. The Voice of the Devil, Plate 4 (2:49)
5. Plates 5-6 (2:31)
6. A Memorable Fancy, Plates 6-7 (4:24)
7. Proverbs of Hell, Plates 7-10 (9:06)
8. Plate 11 (2:01)
9. Intro (3:26)

10. A Memorable Fancy, Plates 12-13 (5:59)
 11. Plate 14 (2:08)
 12. A Memorable Fancy, Plate 15 (4:51)
 13. Plates 16-17 (03:17)
- Disc 2 (52:13):
1. A Memorable Fancy, Plates 17-20 (11:23)
 2. Intro (2:27)
 3. Plates 21-22 (3:11)
 4. A Memorable Fancy, Plates 22-24 (4:50)
 5. Intro (3:59)
 6. A Song of Liberty, Plates 25-27 (26:23)
- Total Time: 101:09

Line-up / Musicians:

“Garm” (Kristoffer – Trickster – Rygg) – vocals, producer
 Tore Ylwizaker – programming & mixing
 “Haavard” (Håvard Jørgensen) – guitar
 “Skoll” (Hugh Stephen James Mingay) – bass
 “AiwariquiaR” (Erik Olivier Lancelot) – drums

With:

Stine Grytøyr – vocals
 “Ihsahn” (Vegard Sverre Tveitan) – vocals (2.6)
 “Samoth” (Tomas Thormodsæter Haugen) – vocals (2.6)
 “Fenriz” (Gylve Fenris Nagell) – vocals (2.6)
 Fredrik Falch Johannessen – vinyl scratching

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