

“You Know, I’ll Be Free”: Gnosticism, Feminism, and Creativity in David Bowie’s *Blackstar*

Introduction

Elvis Presley once sang, “When a man sees his black star, he knows his time has come.”¹ Critics have proposed that David Bowie was referencing this song when he wrote his final album, titled *Blackstar* (2016), after being diagnosed with liver cancer.² Bowie kept his cancer diagnosis private from the world. Two days after the album’s surprise release, Bowie passed away, and, following Buddhist traditions, his ashes were scattered in Bali. As can be expected from a man who once said, “I’d like my death to be as interesting as my life has been and will be,”³ Bowie left behind a wealth of cultural, intertextual, and religious references embedded into the *Blackstar* album. The album deals with themes of mortality, pain, and loss. To address the knowledge of his impending death, Bowie cobbled together references to various religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Kabbalism, and Gnosticism, reflecting his own “hazy personal cosmology.”⁴ Two singles off the album, “Blackstar” and “Lazarus” were released simultaneously with accompanying music videos. Within the “Blackstar” video, Bowie appears as various characters. “Lazarus,” which was released after “Blackstar,” seemed to continue the story of two of the characters within the “Blackstar” video. The two videos meld together to tell a complex continuous narrative.

This paper focuses on analyzing these final two music videos through the lens of Gnosticism. I argue that Bowie’s last two videos “Blackstar” and “Lazarus” reference the Gnostic myth of the Fall and that the sacrificial female figure in both music videos can be interpreted as Sophia, the Gnostic mother of the Demiurge--the god who created Earth--who comes from the perfect world beyond Earth.

Throughout my analysis, I also engage with feminist philosophy, which has drawn on process philosophy as a resource for reimagining religion free of sexism and moving away from centering masculinity in depictions of God. To show how Bowie’s videos reference the Gnostic

¹ Elvis Presley [song], “Black Star,” track 4 on *Collector’s Gold*, RCA, 1991.

² Tiffany Naiman, “‘More Solemn Than a Fading Star’: David Bowie’s Modernist Aesthetics of Ending,” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Popular Music Video Analysis* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 300.

³ David Bowie, “The Playboy Interview with David Bowie,” interview by Cameron Crowe, *Playboy*, 1976.

⁴ John O’Connell, *Bowie’s Bookshelf: The Hundred Books That Changed David Bowie’s Life* (Gallery Books, 2018), 168.

myth of the Fall, I analyze the woman referenced in both “Blackstar” and “Lazarus” along with the jeweled skull and argue that she can be interpreted, as I mentioned above, as the Gnostic goddess Sophia. I also put these analyses in conversation with an ancient Gnostic text describing the creation of the universe, *The Secret Book of John*.

Alfred Whitehead, a British philosopher at Cambridge, created a new approach to metaphysics called “process philosophy.” Process philosophy holds that a person can come into being by taking actualized entities that already exist and integrating those entities within a self that is still coming into being.⁵ Adopting the lens of process philosophy, the act of becoming and knowing yourself through creativity could be interpreted as a method for achieving gnosis. In this way, Bowie’s final act of creating the *Blackstar* album before his death could be read as a way to acquire gnosis, which, according to the Gnostics, would allow him to achieve absolute transcendence upon his death. I interpret a character played by Bowie in his final video “Lazarus” who is shown to be creating and writing with a sense of desperation as having achieved gnosis. This character’s anxiety elucidates the ways in which Bowie may have felt during his creation of the album under the looming mortality of his cancer diagnosis.

The link between creativity and attaining gnosis can be understood by looking at creativity as a way to come into being and gain a deeper understanding of oneself. Whitehead’s philosophy proposes that a person is constantly coming into being and their identity is changing and developing all the time. When a person creates anything, what they create is also now a part of their identity. In a sense, creativity represents a reality that describes the formation of all other realities, or as Whitehead has referenced it, the “universal of universals ... The many become one and are increased by one.”⁶ Theologian John B. Cobb, Jr. has called creativity the “Life Process,” in which creativity “signifies a dynamism which is... the very act of [things] being there at all.”⁷

When considering the process philosophy of religion, creativity is also linked to transcendence and the divine. Whitehead said, “It is as true to say that God creates the world, as that the world creates God.”⁸ This quote implies that God is in a state of becoming and that this

⁵ Nancy Frankenberry, “Feminist Philosophy of Religion,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, sec. A Process Feminist Proposal.

⁶ Alfred Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: The Free Press), 21.

⁷ Nancy Frankenberry, “Feminist Philosophy of Religion,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, sec. A Process Feminist Proposal.

⁸ Alfred Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: The Free Press), 348.

process of becoming is influenced by his creation, the world. Whitehead's statement also establishes a non-dualistic relationship between the creator (God) and what has been created (the world), where God creating the world also leads to the world creating him. In other words, the creator and what has been created aren't held as completely distinct--rather, their relationship can be best understood as co-creative.

The Gnostics are also concerned with this idea of the ultimate reality, which they believe is the world beyond the Earth. Individuals who achieve gnosis experience an absolute transcendence, where when they die and leave this world, they enter an entirely different world. To achieve gnosis is coveted. However, "...gnosis is not primarily rational knowledge. ... As the gnostics use the term, we could translate it as 'insight,' for gnosis involves an intuitive process of knowing oneself. And to know oneself, they claimed, is to know human nature and human destiny."⁹ Creativity is a way to know and become oneself and gain this knowledge through experience.

In a way, we can use this self-knowledge to attain gnosis. Monoimus, a Gnostic scholar, advises followers of Gnosticism who wish to achieve gnosis: "Look for him by taking yourself as the starting point. Learn who it is within you who makes everything his own and says, "My God, my mind, my thought, my soul, my body." Learn the sources of sorrow, joy, love, hate . . . If you carefully investigate these matters you will find him in yourself."¹⁰ Therefore, the Gnostics believed that once a person undergoes the process of coming into being and gains a deeper understanding of themselves, they will find the knowledge of the true God and attain gnosis.

Understanding Gnosticism

Scholars differ on whether Gnosticism was an early offshoot of Christianity or a pre-Christian movement dating back to Babylon and Persia, but the Gnostic tradition was considered heresy by many in the proto-Orthodox church.¹¹ The modern understanding of the Gnostic religious tradition originates from the Nag Hammadi scriptures. In the winter of 1945, a man named Muhammad 'Ali found a set of papyrus scrolls buried in a red earthenware jar near the town of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt.¹² The scrolls contained several texts considered

⁹ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (Phoenix, 2016), xix.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, xx.

¹¹ *Ibid*, xxx.

¹² *Ibid*, xiii.

heretical and banned by the proto-Orthodox church, including the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Secret Book of John*. These texts share a common ideology. The Gnostics believed that there were two worlds: the Earth and a perfect, divine realm. They held that the Earth was created by a flawed craftsman, the Demiurge, and that beyond the Earth lies a more perfect world, which the Invisible Spirit, the one God who is perfect and can do no wrong, has created.

The Gnostics believe that people on Earth are trapped in a prison, most of them unaware of this more perfect existence that lies beyond the surface of the world, and death releases them from bondage since people who are dying transition from the Earth into the perfect world. But, the Gnostics believed, not all people are ignorant of this greater world beyond our world. The word “Gnostic” comes from the Greek word “gnosis,” which means knowledge. For a person to achieve gnosis, they must be aware of this world beyond our world.

The Gnostic teacher Theodotus explains that the gnostic is someone who “understands who we were, and what we have become; where we were ... whither we are hastening; from what we are being released; what birth is, and what is rebirth.”¹³ In other words, someone who has attained gnosis understands that there exists another world beyond our world from which humans have come and that upon death, we are returning to that other perfect world beyond our current existence. Theodotus also references the idea of rebirth, which is more common with Eastern religions, and historians have commonly theorized that Gnosticism was influenced by Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism.¹⁴ In particular, there is a Hindu school of thought called Advaita Vedanta, which believes that the real world is illusory and that there is only one true reality underlying everything.¹⁵ Indeed, one text in the Gnostic canon is *The Gospel of Thomas*, and traditionally, Thomas is the disciple who is said to have visited India.¹⁶

The Gnostic version of describing Genesis--how the Earth came to be--is a myth called the Fall. The myth holds that in the beginning of the universe, before the Earth existed, the only realm that existed was the “imperishable realm,” where the Invisible Spirit resided. This

¹³ Ibid, xix.

¹⁴ Ibid, xxvi.

¹⁵ Advaita Vedanta philosophy has several other connections to Gnosticism, including the idea that humans and God are created from the same substance and that this return to divinity (in Advaita Vedanta, primordial Unity) through self-knowledge is possible. This also has connections to the idea I bring up about the separation between the creator (God) and the created (humans), as Advaita Vedanta holds that humans and God are of the same substance. For more on this connection, see Kazanas, “Advaita and Gnosticism.”

¹⁶ Pagels, xxi.

creation myth is described in the *Secret Book of John*. The Invisible Spirit was the Gnostic stand-in for the one God who was also somehow “more than God.”¹⁷ Within this realm, there existed twelve Pleroma or divine realms. In the fourth realm, there were three Pleroma called Perfection, Peace, and Wisdom.¹⁸ The realm of Wisdom was personified as a woman named Sophia. “Sophia” also means wisdom in Greek. At first, all of the Pleroma resided in the imperishable realm. But then Sophia “began to think for herself.”¹⁹ She wanted the power of creation that the Invisible Spirit had. She sought to create life from herself without a sexual partner and so, without either the Invisible Spirit or her consort knowing, she created the Demiurge. But this attempted act of creation went wrong, and Sophia ended up creating a demon. *The Secret Book of John* holds that: “Because she had created it without her masculine counterpart / She gave rise to a misshapen being unlike herself.”²⁰

This misshapen being who Sophia created goes by several names, including Ialdabaoth, Saklas, and Samael. In this paper, I will refer to him as the Demiurge. After creating the Demiurge, Sophia was ashamed and she tried to hide him away by surrounding him with a cloud. At first, the Demiurge assumed the form of a dragon who spit fire at her. Then the Pleroma and the Invisible Spirit noticed his existence and cast him out of the perfect realm. The Demiurge created the physical universe and Earth, and also enlisted a team of demons to sculpt the first man, Adam. He was envious of man’s ability to have a soul and tried to keep the fruit of knowledge of good and evil from Adam so that Adam would not “look upwards to the fullness” and know how much he was lacking.²¹ Sophia’s mistake in creating the Demiurge led to her being cast out of the perfect realm and for her and the universe to be plunged into darkness and chaos.

David Bowie and Gnosticism

Throughout his career, David Bowie explored and engaged with Gnostic ideas. His feelings were mixed towards the system of religion. Bowie said, “I have no sympathy for organized religion. What I need is to find a balance, spiritually, with the way I live and with my

¹⁷ Stevan Davies, *The Secret Book of John: Annotated and Explained* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2006), sec. The Inexpressible One.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, sec. Tertiary Structures of the Divine Mind.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, sec. A Crisis That Became the World.

²⁰ *Ibid*.

²¹ *Ibid*, sec. Adam in Yaldabaoth’s Paradise.

demise. And that period of time from today until my demise is the only thing that fascinates me.”²² From this quote, we can see his keen interest in life itself. His mention of finding a balance between death and his way of life seems to indicate that he was thinking about and responding to the eventual knowledge of his death approaching throughout his entire life. Interestingly, by citing the period from now to his demise, he seems to exclude any hypothesizing about an afterlife--maybe to suggest his uncertainty about what that would look like. When David Cavanagh asked Bowie if he believed in an afterlife, Bowie said, “I believe in a kind of continuation, a dream-state without the dreams. Oh, I don’t know, I’ll come back and tell you.”²³

In the same interview, when Bowie spoke about his record *Earthling* (1997), he mentioned that there existed “an abiding need in me to vacillate between atheism and a kind of Gnosticism. I keep going back and forth between the two things, because they mean a lot in my life.”²⁴ Note how Bowie never explicitly commits to one religious ideology; he invites both atheism and Gnosticism, which could be seen as contradictory ideologies, into his life as part of his shifting spiritual beliefs. The music journalist John O’Connell posits that Bowie himself, in a drugged-out haze, could have considered himself to be one of these select few people who have attained gnosis.²⁵ Indeed, “The Gnostic Gospels” by Elaine Pagels is part of “Bowie’s Bookshelf,” a collection of one hundred books Bowie said changed his life.

Gnostic ideas are embedded in some of Bowie’s songs. On his first album, *Hunky Dory* (1971), Bowie’s song “Quicksand” contains the line: “Knowledge comes from death’s release.”²⁶ In this line, death serves as a release from the mortal world. The singer also gains knowledge after death. These two ideas speak to the Gnostic concept of attaining gnosis through death, and of death as an escape from the chains of the flawed world.

In an interview with Dutch TV, Bowie said, “There’s this term that the Gnostics used which is called the god beyond god, and I think that there’s a sense of one trying to find some merit in the chaos that we perceive as our existence. And for someone like myself who ... come[s] from a Judeo-Christian upbringing, there’s something that pulls with the idea of having

²² David Bowie, interview by David Cavanagh, *Q Magazine*, 1997.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ O’Connell, 170.

²⁶ David Bowie [song], “Quicksand,” track 6 on *Hunky Dory*, RCA, 1971.

a god who is a judge and ... an arbiter of morals ... it seems too symbolic, it's too easy.”²⁷ The term “god beyond god” in Gnosticism refers to how there are two gods: the Invisible Spirit, or the one true God, and the Demiurge, the craftsman who created the Earth. It promotes the idea that the Invisible Spirit is the “god beyond” the Demiurge, because the Invisible Spirit is the one true God who lives in the perfect realm, perfect in all respects, and the Demiurge is an imperfect, flawed god who resides in the earthly universe. In the same interview, Bowie brought up feeling compelled by the early Gnostic idea of the “depth of the god beyond god” and the multiplicity of entities beyond the world and this idea of an underlying reality that pervades everything. He goes on not to authoritatively claim that the Gnostic tradition is exactly what he believes in, but rather to involve this idea of the “god beyond god” within the larger search for spiritual meaning he has made in his life. All these references that Bowie has made to Gnosticism throughout his career show why it is crucial to analyze Bowie’s last works through this particular religious lens. Gnosticism was relevant to how Bowie viewed the world and it is likely he was considering this religious tradition at the end of his life.

Gnosticism in David Bowie’s “Blackstar” Video

The “Blackstar” video leads the viewer down a twisting labyrinth of images, literary allusions, and references to Bowie’s past. There is a glimpse of a dead astronaut who could conceivably be a reference to Major Tom from *Space Oddity* (1969), Bowie blindfolded in an attic with buttons for his eyes, and a candle melting slowly. For my analysis of how this video references the Gnostic myth of the Fall, I will focus on the twelve girls dancing together in a circle.²⁸ Prior research has highlighted the connections between this group of dancing girls and Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*.²⁹ The *Rite of Spring* ballet depicts a fertility rite to ensure a lucky harvest, where one girl is selected to dance herself to death. This prior research suggests that these twelve girls are involved in a ritualistic sacrifice, connecting this dance to themes of paganism. In the video, all twelve girls look towards a dark-robed figure at the center, who is holding the jeweled skull from before. The scene is shot in a “soft-focused, blood-like tint,” the connection to blood hinting at violence.³⁰ Then a female figure steps forward and holds the skull

²⁷ David Bowie, interview with Dutch TV, 1996.

²⁸ David Bowie [song], “Blackstar,” track 3 on *Blackstar*, ISO Columbia Sony, 2016, 8:57.

²⁹ Naiman, 304.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

on her back, kneeling in front of the dark-robed figure. From here on, I will refer to this sacrificial figure as “the figure of Sophia.” The twelve girls start shaking and rotate in circles around the figure of Sophia as she kneels. They also punch up, a gesture referencing the “Rite of Spring,” signifying that the sacrifice has begun.³¹

The fact that there are twelve girls in the sacrifice is significant. The number twelve recurs several times within Christianity, as Jesus has twelve disciples and in the Book of Revelation, there are twelve gates in God’s kingdom. Within Gnosticism, there are twelve Pleroma, or divine realms, of which Wisdom is one of the realms, represented by Sophia. Indeed, the ordering of the Pleroma “denotes perfection, and in contrast to this concept is the notion of the unordered universe after the fall as deficiency or shapelessness.”³² The Pleroma is often used to suggest a totality, meaning “that which fills.”³³

The Fall, which caused the number of the Pleroma to dwindle from twelve to eleven, signifies a divergence from this fullness. The concept of the Pleroma also relates to the idea of self-knowledge, which as Monoimus suggested, is one of the methods to achieve gnosis. If a person were to understand why the loss of this fullness caused the Fall, then this self-knowledge would provide a way back to the perfect realm, a way to achieve gnosis.³⁴ By referencing the fracturing of the Pleroma, Bowie cites a legend that is fundamental to Gnosticism, and one that the Gnostics believed would lead one to gnosis.

Twelve women engaging in a mystical rite evokes the idea of multiple female divinities and the way they’re all suggested to form one whole, one totality, one divine feminine figure. Within the original Gnostic myth, the Pleroma is not all female. The realms themselves emerge from God in pairs of male and female, and so each female realm has a masculine counterpart.³⁵ Indeed, the fall of Sophia is brought on by her refusal to create life with her masculine counterpart, a rejection of the Pleroma structure.

Bowie’s “Blackstar” video reimagines this totality of divine power as entirely feminine. Within feminist spirituality, the presence of a singular female divinity, analogous to the

³¹ Ibid.

³² Violet Macdermot, “The concept of the Pleroma in Gnosticism,” *Gnosis and Gnosticism*, vol. 17 (September 1979): 77, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004437203_007.

³³ Ibid, 76.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Harvard University Press, 2010), 57.

Christian and Gnostic God, is often referred to as Goddess. Among women who write about feminist spirituality, there is a tendency to speak about Goddess as a unified entity, even when she may express herself in pluralities. Writing from the perspective of Native American theology, Paula Gunn Allen, a Native American poet and literary critic, writes that “[t]he essential nature of the cosmos is female intelligences, that is, goddesses. There are several rather than one, indicating that multiplicity is a fundamental characteristic of all that is.”³⁶ Through female spirituality, there is a common recurring theme of many Goddesses coming together to form a single entity, similar to how Bowie’s representation of the Pleroma is a totality of divine power.

The idea of many multiplicities combining into one cohesive Pleroma indicates that the sum of all the realms is more than its parts. The theology of process philosophy subscribes to panentheism, or the idea that all is in God. Carol Christ, who directs the Ariadne Institute for the Study of Myth and Ritual, argues that panentheism “provides a way of understanding God that moves beyond the polarities of immanence and transcendence.”³⁷ She describes immanence as “pantheism,” holding that all is God, and transcendence as “theism,” holding that God is beyond all.³⁸ This is where process philosophy and Gnosticism diverge. Gnosticism subscribes to a type of absolute transcendence, where God is beyond our world, reachable to only a select few. Yet the idea that “God is ‘more’ than the sum total of all the discrete beings in the world”³⁹ justifies why breaking apart the Pleroma, this singular divine entity, throws the universe into such disharmony. Therefore, understanding panentheism is a step on the path to achieving gnosis. If one were to understand why the Pleroma disintegrating caused the Fall, then they would be closer to gaining this deeper knowledge about the nature of the universe.

Returning to the video, before the female figure steps forward, the twelve girls are arranged in two lines of six standing opposite each other.⁴⁰ This arrangement is symmetrical. As the female figure steps forward to bow to the skull, the number is broken into five and six people per line, and this symmetry is disturbed. In the myth of the Fall, Sophia is cast out of the

³⁶ Paula Gunn Allen, *Grandmothers of the Light: A Medicine Woman's Sourcebook* (Beacon Press, 1993), 107.

³⁷ Carol Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (Routledge, 2004), 104.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 104-105.

⁴⁰ David Bowie [song], “Blackstar,” track 3 on *Blackstar*, ISO Columbia Sony, 2016, 8:12.

twelve Pleroma, introducing asymmetry and disorder into the world. This breaking of symmetry can be interpreted to reference the introduction of an unordered universe post-Fall.

In Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring," the female figure falls to the ground accidentally and this fall is what causes her to be sacrificed. Unlike this accidental fall, the Sophia figure *volunteers* to see and touch the skull. This difference of agency shows how Sophia, as was written in the Secret Book of John, wanted to know too much. The Gnostic Sophia craved the power that the Invisible Spirit held, to create life without having intercourse, and that desire eventually led to her fall from the perfect realm.

The female figure in the "Blackstar" video steps forward and kneels. When she's on her knees, the figure cloaked in black places the skull on her back. The skull begins to glow golden on her back as the flute plays, signifying that it's taking on a new life and a new meaning when it's united with this figure. Throughout the entire video, the skull only glows in this particular moment.⁴¹



This moment signifies that the figure of Sophia is affecting the jeweled skull, infusing it with a new life. But other indications suggest that a new life is being created at this moment. In a brief flash near the end, the skull is shown on the female figure's back from an angle that almost makes it uncannily resemble a person with the head of a jeweled skull who is wearing a dress.⁴²

⁴¹ Ibid, 9:33.

⁴² Ibid, 9:49.



I interpret this image as the figure of Sophia creating something new from herself--a creation that throws the “Blackstar” video universe into imbalance. Dorothee Soelle proposes using process philosophy to reimagine the theology of creation. With Soelle’s “non-dualistic theology of creation,” the separation between God and the world is blurred, as the world is both changed by God and in turn, also changes God. She notes that the problem with separating the creator from the creation leads to “sexist dichotomizing, in which we ascribe ‘godly’ characteristics to the male and ‘worldly’ characteristics to the female ... Must we subscribe to this imperialistic concept of creation? Is there not a different way of construing creation and the relationship between God and the world?”⁴³

There are several layers of relationships between the creator and the creation to unpack here. The first layer is between Sophia and the Demiurge. The second layer is between the Demiurge and the Earth and, finally, the third layer is between Bowie and the *Blackstar* album. In the Gnostic story of Genesis, the creation of the Earth is portrayed almost as an accident--Sophia creates the Demiurge from herself, which is shown as a mistake for which she is cast out of the perfect world, and the Demiurge then enlists a team of demons to create the

⁴³ Soelle, Dorothy and Shirley Cloyes, *To Work and To Love: A Theology of Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 24.

first man.⁴⁴ In both of these stories, the creators are flawed or make mistakes, and their creations are flawed as well--the Earth is shown to be deeply flawed, from which people try to escape from. Also, the creations they make affect their creators deeply. Sophia creating the Demiurge leads directly to her being cast out of the Pleroma. The demons that the Demiurge creates end up growing envious of him and cast him down into the “lowest depths of the material world.”⁴⁵ In both these stories, the interplay between the creator and what they create goes both ways, and their position relative to each other keeps changing--Sophia, although shown as being more godly than the Demiurge, enters his spirit to become the life force of the first man, and the demons that the Demiurge creates end up betraying him for they envy his power.⁴⁶

Bowie’s act of creating “Blackstar” and “Lazarus” can be interpreted as a final prayer, a search for divinity within the act of creativity itself. The feminist theologian Mary Daly proposes characterizing God as a verb, and that he could be interpreted as the act of creating.⁴⁷ We can see an understanding of creation as close to divinity exemplified by the Shakers, a religious sect that creates furniture with minimalistic designs, believing that “to make a thing well is itself an act of prayer.”⁴⁸ If we connect this to process philosophy’s idea of “panentheism,” or the theology that “all is in God,” then we can see that every creation is taken to be a part of God, and not entirely descriptive of God itself. God instead causes all of the creations to exist, similarly to Whitehead’s description of creation as the “ultimate reality that describes all other realities.”⁴⁹ In the *Secret Book of John*, there is a description of the ultimate God which says that “Since everything exists within it / It does not exist within anything.”⁵⁰ This idea that “everything exists within” the god beyond god ties in with the theology of

⁴⁴ Davies, sec. Construction of the Human Body.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ After the Demiurge’s team of demons has assembled the body of the first man, the Demiurge realizes that he still needs to breathe life into the body. Then, the Demiurge is advised by the five lights (Eleleth) and, by their counsel, within Davies’s translation of the Secret Book of John, in the section “Yaldabaoth Deceived,” it is written that the Demiurge he “blew some of his Spirit into the man. That Spirit was the divine power of his mother.” Within the story, Sophia’s divine power is what animates the first man and gives him light and life. This detail connects the story of Genesis, and what happens in the divine realms, to the creation of humans. In addition, Sophia’s significance and power is underscored within the myth, as not only does her action cause the Fall, but also her divine female power is channeled into human life.

⁴⁷ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 33 - 34.

⁴⁸ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Shaker furniture." Encyclopedia Britannica, May 13, 2013, <https://www.britannica.com/technology/Shaker-furniture>.

⁴⁹ Frankenberry, sec. A Process Feminist Proposal.

⁵⁰ Davies, sec. The Inexpressible One.

panentheism, showing the connections between Gnosticism and panentheism. Within this interpretation, seeing God as creativity itself could relate to understanding him as the Gnostics see him as “the god beyond god”: a force and an action that describes all other things.

Returning to Bowie’s interview on Dutch TV, Bowie said that the idea of God as a “judge” and an “arbiter of morals” feels “too symbolic” and that he is more concerned in a search for the ultimate reality that pervades everything. He also said, “If you feel safe in the area that you’re working in, you’re not working in the right area. Always go a little further into the water than you feel you’re capable of being in.”⁵¹ This quote makes a statement that creatively, he likes to step outside his boundaries, which adds to the idea of him experimenting and discovering new facets of himself, instead of re-treading the parts of himself that he already knows. This relates to the process philosophy idea of a self constantly coming into being.⁵² As the Gnostic teachers hold, this search for self-knowledge is instrumental in finding gnosis. Bowie’s quote also ties in with the idea of the “god beyond god,” and of pushing past the point where you would normally end the search. This interpretation of God as creativity moves away from God as a moral arbiter and towards God as an action, a form of creation.

After the shot where the skull is placed upon the figure of Sophia’s back, a monster starts appearing in the “Blackstar” video. This creation is, like from the *Secret Book of John*, imperfect and flawed, standing out from the more human-looking characters in this scene. While it is not a dragon spitting fire, it certainly causes a disturbance and indicates a note of disorder entering the world. We could interpret this monster as the figure of the Demiurge, the creation wrought by Sophia. Its appearance throws the video universe of “Blackstar” into chaos.

The androgyny of the monster figure also refers back to the Gnostic ideas of the Mother-Father, a God who is neither traditionally masculine nor feminine but somehow both.⁵³ The “Blackstar” video twists the Gnostic myth of the Fall on its head. Rather than being focused on creating life from herself, without a partner, this version of Sophia is focused on creating life out of a jeweled skull, fashioning life from death.

⁵¹ David Bowie, "David Bowie on why you should never play to the gallery," uploaded by Stuart Semple, May 12, 2016, YouTube video, 1:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNbnef_eXBM.

⁵² Nancy Frankenberry, “Feminist Philosophy of Religion,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, sec. A Process Feminist Proposal.

⁵³ Davies, sec. The Origin of Reality.

This final scene, with the black-robed figure setting the skull on the sacrificial female figure's back, could also be referencing another moment from the *Secret Book of John*. After Sophia has created the Demiurge, all the light goes away from her. Before she is cast out of the Pleroma, the Pleroma requests that the Invisible Virgin Spirit bless her.

“All of the divine realms (pleroma) heard her repentant prayer
They sought blessing for her from the Invisible Virgin Spirit.

The Spirit consented.

He poured the Holy Spirit over her
Brought forth from the whole full realm.”⁵⁴

In this case, if we interpret the skull as the blessing from the Invisible Virgin Spirit, then this ritual is like the Pleroma blessing Sophia before they cast her out. With either reading, the number of the Pleroma sitting in the circle dwindles from twelve to eleven, signifying imperfection and the beginning of the Fall. In the final few seconds, the electronic music pipes discordant notes out towards the end, almost like a robot struggling to power down, ending the “Blackstar” video on a note of dissonance.

Gnosticism in David Bowie’s “Lazarus” Video

The “Lazarus” video picks up where “Blackstar” leaves off and takes up the Gnostic narrative of Sophia post-Fall. In the Gnostic narrative, Sophia begins to repent creating the Demiurge, and, cast out of the perfect realm, she travels down to the Earth to see the extent of what she has created. An interpretation of the monster who appears at the end of “Blackstar” could be that the monster is the Demiurge, an imperfect, flawed creation who throws the universe into disorder.

In the beginning moments of “Lazarus”, the figure of Sophia steps out of a dark closet into the room where the video takes place. The only light in the world she enters comes through a square window that shines directly on the closet. Sophia is said to have lost all her light after the Fall, existing in a state of darkness.⁵⁵ She also commonly passes between the perfect, divine

⁵⁴ Ibid, sec. The Fashioning of This World.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

world and Earth, since she has been cast out of the Pleroma. It could also be a reference to how by creating the Demiurge, Sophia has now fallen into mostly darkness.



“In the darkness of ignorance
She [Sophia] began to forget. She began to be ashamed.
But she could not yet return above.
Yet she began to move.
And so she moved back and forth.”⁵⁶

After she exits the closet, the female figure hides under the bed. Inside the bed is the man with buttons over his eyes, played by Bowie. This character is not aware of her presence; he never sees her directly. As we established earlier, this character could symbolize a lack of gnosis. But the female figure is always present underneath the bed, signifying this underlying reality that the Gnostics believe pervade this world’s existence. At one point in the “Lazarus” video, she reaches up as if to touch the figure in the bed, who looks like he is in great pain, but she only touches the bedsheets and never reaches him.⁵⁷

Similar to the “moving back and forth” mentioned in the *Secret Book of John*, this woman is stuck below the bed, moving back and forth, fingers convulsing as she thinks in the darkness. She remains in the darkness, the ignorance, repenting. This is the last image we see which includes the figure of Sophia, mirroring the way Sophia repents in the darkness as she sees what she has created. Although the monster from “Blackstar” who parallels the Demiurge does

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ David Bowie [song], “Lazarus,” track 3 on *Blackstar*, ISO Columbia Sony, 2016, 1:06.

not appear again within the “Lazarus” video, the presence of darkness and disorder is felt throughout “Lazarus.”

There is the figure of the man dressed in all black who begins biting his nails, indicating anxiety and nervousness.⁵⁸ Then he picks up a pen and starts scribbling everywhere. This scene likely reflects Bowie’s own sense that he is under pressure, and that time is short for him to create art before his impending death from cancer. Bowie’s urgency to create, brought on by the pressures of time, also relates to the audience’s loss of all the potential of his future work. There are the songs Bowie didn’t have time to create and record, songs that we’ll never get to hear, a loss to his audience and the world at large.

Bowie keeps using the pen to scribble what he’s creating down on the paper, even going off onto the desk, representing how urgent his need to create truly is. When thinking about Mary Daly’s theory of God as a verb, as the force of creation, we can think of this force being expressed through Bowie’s scribbling action at this point, as he fights to get the words down on the desktop, wherever he can write it before leaving the world. The character is engaging in the process of creating things, emphasizing the physicality of actually scribbling down words. This emphasis on creation also ties in with feminist process philosophy. Revisiting a concept from process philosophy, creativity “signif[ies] a dynamism which is the very actuality of things, their act of being there at all.”⁵⁹ This dynamism is represented by the character himself, Bowie, who is shown to be very much engaged in the act of creating.⁶⁰

In this way, the actual “Lazarus” video itself contains a reflection on the process of creating it. In this case, the separation between the creator and what has been created is reduced,

⁵⁸ Ibid, 2:49.

⁵⁹ Frankenberry, sec. A Process Feminist Proposal.

⁶⁰ The costume that Bowie’s creator character is wearing in the “Lazarus” video is the same costume he wore on the record sleeve for *Station to Station* (1976). In this photoshoot, Bowie is shown drawing a Tree of Life, which could be a reference to both Aleister Crowley and Kabbalah. In addition, as Jude Rogers points out in his Guardian article, certain lyrics in Blackstar reference Crowleyism. For instance, Bowie sings about “the village of Ormen,” and Ormen, in Norwegian, means “serpent,” a creature who occurs frequently in Crowley’s writings. Also, the “serpent” suggests a connection to the Christian story of Genesis and the story of the serpent tempting Eve to eat an apple, drawing attention to creation myths, which relates to my reading through the lens of the Gnostic creation myth. This connection through the costume to *Station to Station* references a time of Bowie’s life when he was actively engaging with ideas from the occult, suggesting that Bowie is returning to those ideas and reflecting on the time when he was recording *Station to Station*, a tumultuous time when he was living in Los Angeles and addicted to cocaine. For more on Crowley references in Blackstar, see Jude Rogers, “The final mysteries of David Bowie’s Blackstar—Elvis, Crowley, and ‘the villa of Ormen,’” *The Guardian*, January 21, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/jan/21/final-mysteries-david-bowie-blackstar-elvis-crowley-villa-of-ormen>.

since the actions of this character merge the process of creating “Lazarus” within the music video itself. What has been created becomes a part of the creator. This idea is in concert with process philosophy’s characterization of creativity, and that the art Bowie creates also in turn serves to create him.

So who is the changed version of Bowie, who emerges near the end of the video? How has the act of making this final album changed Bowie himself? I argue that Bowie, by the end of this video, makes a statement that he has acquired gnosis. We can see this if we look at the significance of Bowie stepping back into the closet near the end of the “Lazarus” video.

The video begins with the female sacrificial figure, who I parallel with Sophia, stepping out of the closet. At the end of the “Lazarus” video, Bowie steps back into the closet. I interpret the enclosing of the video between the female sacrificial figure stepping out of a closet and David Bowie stepping into a closet as a two-world story, where there is a world outside the closet and the world in the closet. In other words, after Bowie passes away, he will escape to the world inside the closet.

Closets, in popular culture, are rich with symbolism. They often symbolize a portal between two worlds, whether that dualism is between performing heterosexuality and being openly queer or between the real world and a fantastical world. Using a Gnostic reading, I argue that this world inside the closet represents the perfect world, which Bowie is released to upon his death, and that the world outside the closet represents our Earth, from which the sick man is in pain and Bowie is scribbling on a desk.

If we interpret the act of entering the closet as departing the Earth, then we can see that this character who creates is, ultimately, the version of Bowie who achieves gnosis and transcends. The Gnostics are very concerned with this idea of the ultimate reality, which they believe is the second world, the world beyond the Earth, from which Sophia comes from. Individuals who achieve gnosis experience an absolute transcendence, where when they die and leave this world, they enter an entirely different world. At the very end of the “Lazarus” video, the scribbling character steps back into the closet, the frame showing a piece of paper on the desk. This character’s act of creation allowed him to transcend and finally leave the Earth. In other words, creating this final album brought him to achieve greater self-knowledge, which led to him achieving gnosis. His achieving gnosis led to him experiencing the absolute

transcendence that the Gnostics believed in, of completely leaving this world behind and entering a second universe.

The multiplicity of the characters within Lazarus are all represented by Bowie, tying back to the idea of the Pleroma, where there are multiple manifestations who tie together to create a cohesive whole. If Bowie considered himself to have attained gnosis, then at the end of his life, he must have related both to Sophia, who has fallen into a dark state full of pain, and also the creator figure, who is desperately writing his way towards transcendence. At the end of the music video, this character deliberately steps back into the closet, indicating his departure from our world. This final act of departing into an entirely new world indicates that this creator character in “Lazarus” has achieved absolute transcendence through the act of his creation. During all of the “Lazarus” video, what the creator character is scribbling down on the desk is never shown to the audience, so we’re not quite exactly aware of what his end product will look like. Rather, it’s the *process* of creating which is shown to consume him in his final hours, before departing into this other world.

Conclusion

After analyzing the continuous story within “Blackstar” and “Lazarus,” I have shown the way that these stories reference the Gnostic myth of the Fall and also how they lend themselves to interpreting God as the force of creativity, which relates to the Gnostics’ understanding of God as the ever-present force underlying our world, as creativity can describe all other realities. We have also seen how in the music videos, this separation between Bowie and what he has created becomes reduced. Bowie and the *Blackstar* album engage in a co-creative relationship, where not only did Bowie create the album, but also, the *Blackstar* album changed Bowie and the way he is remembered. I have further proposed an interpretation that, by the end of the song “Lazarus”, Bowie’s character of the creator has achieved gnosis.

Note also that the Gnostic story of the Fall is about the creation of our Earth. In this way, the “Blackstar” video references a story about understanding what Christians take to be the first act of creation. These references to the myth of the Fall and the beginning of the universe in an album so deeply concerned with the end inject a note of hopefulness and echo Buddhist ideas of

cyclical rebirth.⁶¹ In addition, these references to the story of how the world itself was created, mixed in with “Lazarus”’s reflections on the process of creating itself, reflect on the force of creativity not only as powering artistic mediums but also as the reason, according to Gnostics and other religious believers, behind how Earth was created and all of us came to be.

Such analysis is essential to understanding Bowie’s larger messages about the importance of creativity and how he was engaging with various religious references near the end of his life. Bowie’s life was devoted to the act of creating--music, movies, paintings, and all the characters who filled his albums. For a man whose life was filled with creativity and a search for spiritual meaning, his art contains so many reflections on what it means to be a creator. His art also touches on how creating leads to deeper self-knowledge. Bowie’s art offers an interpretation of creativity as a way to keep searching for spiritual meaning, even when confronting the knowledge that death is imminent.

There are threads of feminist spirituality and references to the divine feminine running through the *Blackstar* album. The female sacrificial figure herself, who I interpret as Sophia, chooses to accept the skull on her back, initiating the fracturing of the Pleroma and the Fall. The twelve women in the sacrificial rite serve to reimagine the twelve Pleroma as entirely feminine. The Gnostic story of the Fall is also a story of motherhood, where Sophia seeks to create a child entirely on her own. This focus on birth is central to several ideas within the feminist philosophy of religion. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, author of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, proposed in her book *His Religion and Hers* the idea of a birth-based religion rather than a death-based religion. She argued that several contemporary religions were androcentric and focused on the major question, “What is going to happen to me after I am dead?”⁶² A birth-based religion, in contrast, would focus on the question: “What must be done for the child who is born?”, a question that Gilman characterizes as “an immediate altruism.”⁶³ Frankenberry suggests that nowadays female philosophers of religion might find Gilman’s distinction an oversimplification, albeit with interesting implications.⁶⁴ Gilman’s feminist reimagining of one of the main questions driving

⁶¹ The Buddhist concept of *samsara* states that individuals reincarnate over several lifetimes. In this ideology, the end of one life is the beginning of another. The references contained within *Bowie’s* album to both the symbolic beginning, creation stories and references to Genesis, and the end of one’s life echo this beginning/end duality. Bowie has a history of referencing Buddhist ideologies. For a longer discussion of Bowie’s engagement with Buddhism, particularly his song *Buddha in Suburbia*, see Jeffrey W. Chupnik, “Buddhism and Popular Music” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music*.

⁶² Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *His Religion And Hers* (AltaMira Press, 2003), 46.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Frankenberry, sec. A Process Feminist Proposal.

religious inquiry opens up the possibilities for how religion could be a way to grapple with mortality.

Bowie said, “All art is unstable...There is no authoritative voice. There are only multiple readings.”⁶⁵ Making pop music is rarely done in a vacuum. Having a career as a pop star, in some ways, means that you are always responding to and engaging with an audience. We the public, whether fan or casual listener, were active participants within Bowie’s artistic journey. The separation between the creator, Bowie, and what he has created, his art and music, was often blurred during his lifetime, as fans and critics, particularly interviewers, tried to use his music to make assumptions about his personal life, especially with the character of Ziggy Stardust. Nevertheless, Bowie himself did want to draw strict lines between what he created and his own personal life. In an interview with the Guardian, Bowie’s second wife Iman said that she fell in love with David Jones, not David Bowie, and that: “Bowie is just a persona. He’s a singer, he’s an entertainer.”⁶⁶ Bowie himself is a creation, a constructed persona. We will never truly know what the man himself, David Jones, was thinking near the end of his life--such knowledge is personal to him. But the Gnostic reading of Bowie’s art can open up the possibilities of what creativity can do for us in our final hours. Indeed, the process of creating art can lead to a deeper self-knowledge, a gnosis which allows Bowie’s creator character in the “Lazarus” video to step into the closet, symbolizing his return to the divine realm, and transcend the Earth to face whatever comes next.

⁶⁵ Kathryn Johnson, “David Bowie Is,” in *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane, and Martin J Power (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 4-5.

⁶⁶ Iman Abdulmajid, interview by Carole Cadwalladr, *Guardian*, 2012.

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