Empathy for the Fallen World: Sufjan Stevens's *Illinois* as a Redemption Narrative

Even without considering its title, Sufjan Stevens's album *Illinois* contains enough direct allusions to places, events, and individuals specific to the state of Illinois that the album's setting–a modern American city–cannot be mistaken. Upon a closer look, however, these seemingly simple allusions are drawn parallel to more ancient, biblical ideas: The Sears Tower in Chicago is compared to the ancient Tower of Babel, the UFOs supposedly sighted in Highland in the year 2000 are compared to Christ descending to Earth, and the state of Illinois itself is painted as a modern-day promise land when Stevens refers to it as the "land of God." These parallels create a seemingly problematic relationship between the apparently devout faith of the narrator of the album juxtaposed with his constant trend of rebelling against traditional Christianity. He expresses faith as he sings "Hallelujah!" in multiple songs, sounding his horn for the "Lamb of God" (Stevens "Predatory"). However, while everyone else travels "seven miles above the earth" to find Emmanuel, the narrator instead goes "to the deepest grave" where he will "sleep alone" (Stevens "Seer's"). The narrator even goes as far to say that even on his best behavior, he is "really just like" the Illinoisan serial killer John Wayne Gacy Jr., whose values could not be farther from those of traditional Christianity (Stevens "John"). This faithfulness in conflict with apparently intentional rebellion brings into question the concepts of spirituality versus religion, the divine versus the worldly, and salvation versus damnation.

While the album *Illinois* has been generally appreciated among the music community since its release, very few formal analyses have been performed on it. While articles written by Pitchfork and NPR have identified themes of "spirit," "death," and "healing," it has only been in the form of a short album review and no attempts have been made to define the conceptual realizations that *Illinois* requests from its listeners (Petrusich*,* Zoladz). The podcast *Strong Songs*

highlights "Chicago"–the most popular song from *Illinois*–and performs an in-depth analysis of it, but again, it lacks an analysis of the album as a whole and cohesive piece (Hamilton).

As far as the conceptual ideas of spirituality and Christianity explored in this album, the research and analysis that has been done, while beyond plentiful, is still lacking in the areas that an analysis of *Illinois* can fill. This is specifically true when it comes to the common conversation about what role the world and worldly things should play in one's spirituality. As Jenny Odell states, "contemplation of the spiritual" and "participation in the worldly" are two things that the traditional Christian "Church [has] long articulated as opposites" (Odell 58). This idea is summed up by R.J. Magill with the phrase "*contemptus mundi*: contempt for the world," in reference to the plentiful biblical verses which suggest that "if any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (Magill 34; *Authorized King James Version* 1 John 2:15). While this assumed Derridan dichotomy of worldliness versus spirituality–in which spirituality is the privileged term–is certainly well-founded and largely believed among the Christian community, it does little to account for the beauty that can be found even in the most worldly of people and places: the "glory" of the "World's Columbian Exposition," for example; the "spirit" of riding the train "after dark;" and even the abundance of our own "mistakes" (Stevens "Come On!", "Jacksonville," "Go!"). When it comes to analyzing Christian music in particular, the musicians are largely seen as "ministers or musical missionaries," which characterization leaves little room for the unorthodox exploration of worldliness in *harmony* with spirituality that is Stevens's *Illinois* (Howard).

With this in mind, this paper will seek to provide some missing connections between the dots of these various studies, while also exploring the apparent dissonance between spirituality and religiosity which the album suggests. It will do so by demonstrating how the concept album

Illinois uses its titular state as the setting for a larger spiritual allegory, which seeks to define God and general divinity not as something above the world but instead as integral and intimate pieces within it. Faith is not defined as membership within a given religion, but as loyalty to that worldly interpretation of God as well as one's own conscience. This conceptual chain culminates with the realization that redemption is not a departure from the fallen world, but rather a joining with it.

Returning to the conceptual problem of the narrator's declared faithfulness in conjunction with his apparent rebellion, Stevens is suggesting that real rebellion is not the act of disobeying an authority figure or the guidelines of a given religious denomination, but rather disobedience to your own heart. Coming to this conclusion first requires listeners to gain trust in the narrator himself, specifically in his sincere desire to be moral and faithful as opposed to rebellious. Without that trust, his apparent rebellion could be chalked up to simple dishonesty or immorality. However, Stevens is intentional in encouraging this trust by instilling in the voice of the album admirable qualities, namely sincerity, humility and self-awareness. These qualities are evident in the narrator's sincere declaration of "great intentions" alongside the humble and self-aware admission that "I cried myself to sleep last night / for the Earth, the materials, they may sound just right to me." This illustrates the narrator's ability to feel guilt when he finds himself engaging in what he deems to be immoral (in this case, "the Earth, the materials" in opposition to the things of God). As the narrator is initially working under the assumption that a lifestyle of *contemptus mundi* is synonymous with a lifestyle of faithfulness, he cries when he feels that he is falling short. This suggests both a defined moral compass as well as a desire to be in line with it. If we consider an unreliable narrator to be one who "makes mistakes about how she perceives herself" or who demonstrates "discrepancies" between their "statements and actions," we have

no grounds to confer that title to Stevens's narrator (Nünnings qtd. in Olson). It is clear, then, that Stevens does not intend for listeners to view the narrator as immoral or rebellious. Once this trust has been secured, we can only interpret the narrator's choice to prioritize "follow[ing] [his] heart" over "car[ing] what the captain said" not as an act of rebellion but as a redefining of it (Stevens "Jacksonville"). As he continually returns to and repeats the question, "Are you writing from the *heart*?" and asserts that it is for the "hearts of man for whom [God] saved the Earth," we can conclude that Stevens's understanding is that rebellion is only significant or immoral when it is against one's own heart–in other words, true and moral faithfulness is only dependent on one's determination to be faithful to their own conscience, without regard for established religion or authority (Stevens "Come On!", "In This").

Following this line of thought, Stevens asserts that church–meaning, a site where one cultivates a spiritual connection with God–should not refer to any specific denomination's building but rather to any average, even lowly, area of land which leaves room for an individual to follow their personal conscience or "heart." Many songs make it clear that Stevens holds issue with the conventional view of churches as "meeting place[s] for worship and ministry" whose purpose is to give us a "sense of awe and reverence for the magnificence of God" (Welty). The narrator attends Bible study and prays for a miracle, and leaves convinced that "nothing ever happens" (Stevens "Casimir"). When it comes to the teachings conventionally taught within churches, Stevens says that he "laugh[s]" because "they reminded us of death" (Stevens "Come On!"). On the flip side, it is established early on that Stevens sees the state of Illinois as a type of promised land, in reference to the promised land to which the Israelites fled from Egypt. A promised land is a "real terrority in the Bible," but it can also act as a metaphor for "salvation in Jesus Christ and the promise of the Kingdom of God" (Zavada). As the very first song on *Illinois*

depicts Christ himself–"the revenant," "incarnation"–descending into Highland, Illinois, it becomes a site of "salvation in Jesus Christ" (Stevens, "Concerning"). This symbol of the promised land is more directly stated towards the end of the album as Stevens and his choir sing, "I-L-L-I-N-O-I-S / Land of God" (Stevens "They Are"). These characterizations of the state of Illinois serve as a stark contrast from the conventional church buildings where "nothing ever happens." Stevens subsequently makes the jump that Illinois is not only a symbolic promised land but also that promised lands themselves can serve as a type of church. He sings: "I-L-L-I-N-O-I-S / Land of God, you hold and guide us." This suggests that a promised land is not merely a passive location but a force in and of itself which can inspire morality and cultivate connection with the divine. In this way, the land itself becomes more of a church than a traditional church building ever could in terms of its ability to nurture spirituality and connect with God.

This fresh view of churches also demands a fresher view of God himself, who Stevens paints not as a great and all-powerful entity, above humankind and in the heavens, but as one who is intimate and omnipresent even within humankind itself. In "Casimir Pulaski Day," the narrator relays his experiences with a lover dying of bone cancer. He sings, "at the Bible study / we lift our hands and pray over your body / but nothing ever happens" (Stevens "Casimir"). This initially appears to suggest the narrator's feeling of abandonment from God, but later passages clarify that the narrator doesn't feel abandoned–he's just finding God elsewhere. Rather than accessing God in a conventional church setting, where He is viewed as a great entity in the heavens, he accesses divine glory in his intimate relationship, singing "all the glory that the Lord has made… when I kissed you on the mouth." He even sees God in the lover herself, even in her imperfections: "all the glory when you ran outside / with your shirt tucked in and your shoes

untied.” This realization that God is not *above* people but rather *within* people occurs within the narrator’s mind during “John Wayne Gacy Jr.,” the fourth song on the album. As he mourns the deaths of 27 boys who were victims of the titular serial killer, he reaches the melodic and thematic pinnacle of the song as he realizes, “Oh my God–are you one of them?” (Stevens “John”). One might initially assume that the lyric “Oh my God” is just a generic exclamation in response to the horrible deaths, and the question “are you one of them?” is directed at the listeners. However, the word *God* is the singular highest note in the melodic range of this song, and the uniquely long duration of it demands extra focus, suggesting that Stevens is actually referring to God Himself, and it is to God Himself that Stevens is posing the question, “are you one of them?” This line thus serves as a sort of volta for the album, as Stevens realizes that God was not watching the deaths of these boys from up in heaven, but rather He was there experiencing it with them. Before this volta at this point in the album, Stevens likens God to a foreign UFO descending from the sky, one who can “demolish an entire civilization” and “still feel good about [him]self in the morning” (Stevens “Concerning,” “Black Hawk”). After this volta, Stevens claims that “the great I Am” is his step mother, and begs Andrew Jackson to “show us the wheel and give us the wine,” which are obvious assertions that even these imperfect people at least in part house God within them (Stevens “Decatur,” “Jacksonville”). It is also after this volta that Stevens can confidently sing that, although “nothing ever happens” within conventional prayers to God, he can still find “all the glory” of God within his lover. In other words, Stevens determines that a distant and exalted view of God as an overseer lacks the power and glory present in the view of God as one housed within man on Earth.

If the earth–not the heavens–is home to God Almighty, it must not be a fallen place as it is conventionally seen in religious contexts, but rather the site of redemption from that Fall. This

claim is supported by the shape of the album as a whole when it is considered as a redemption story–which consideration is demanded of us by the final song entitled "Out of Egypt…", a clear allusion to the redemption of the Israelites from their enslavement in the Bible. It seems counterintuitive for a redemption story to utilize the same "descent narrative" style as, for example, Dante's *Inferno*–just as *Inferno* opens with an attempt to climb a mountain and closes in the depths of hell, *Illinois* opens with view towards the high heavens and closes in "the deepest grave" (Falconer; Alighieri; Stevens "Seer's"). However, this locational descent throughout the album clearly mirrors the narrator's journey towards God, as discussed in the previous paragraph. The first song, which is focused on the high heavens, suggests that God is a sort of alien from outer space. As the setting of the album descends–from the sky to a Ferris Wheel, from the highway to a valley, and finally, from a bed to a deep grave–the narrator seems increasingly comfortable and confident in his relationship with God. Stevens suggests that this increased intimacy with God does not take place *despite* the descent narrative form but rather *because* of it. Akin to the Tower of Babel which counterintuitively led its builders away from God even as it was built towards the heavens, it is not just coincidental that the narrator finds God and redemption in "the deepest grave" as opposed to the "tower above the earth" (Stevens "Seer's"). With this imagery, Stevens is suggesting that the world is not a fallen place preliminary to the glory of an afterlife in heaven–instead, the world is itself portrayed as the site of that glory.

Building on that portrayal of the world as a redemption site, Stevens clarifies that redemption still requires focus on and effort from the individual, as opposed to simply requiring one's presence within a promised land. This focus on the individual as opposed to the masses is a very prevalent theme throughout *Illinois*: The key difference between the original, biblical telling

of the redemption of Israel and Stevens's Illinoisan allegory of it is the focus on the individual. Where the Bible uses blanket terms like "Egyptians" and "Israelites," Stevens speaks of individual love interests, his girlfriend's father, John Wayne Gacy Jr., Stephen A. Douglas, and so many more individuals by name (Exodus 9:7-11). Where the Bible describes the general "affliction" and "sorrow" of being in bondage in contrast to the freedom of delivery, Stevens describes in greater specifics the hatred that evolved into appreciation for his stepmother; the fear, excitement, and sorrow involved with a high school girlfriend; and the feeling of having been "degraded or forgot" by God in contrast to later feelings of His "glory" and "love" (Exodus 3:7; Stevens "Come On!", "Casimir"). Even within this promised land of Illinois, Stevens illustrates the journeys of bondage and redemption within individuals. While the biblical story is written as if the redemptive journey looked fairly similar for all of the Israelites, Stevens suggests that redemption is a deeply personal journey. Most importantly, while the Bible implies that redemption starts with a prophet–Moses–in contact with God, Stevens claims that "it can only start with you" (Stevens "Tallest"). It makes sense, then, that although that narrator has been present in Illinois, the supposed "land of God," throughout the entirety of the album, it isn't until he works through his own personal redemptive journey that he can claim in the concluding song to be finally "out of Egypt" (Stevens "Out"). This demonstrates to listeners that redemption cannot be inflicted by any external forces–no matter how promised the land or how holy the prophet–but that it instead comes on an individual and personal basis.

Pulling all of these ideas together, Stevens's exploration of redemption culminates with the idea that, although the redemption journey is experienced on an individual basis, it is dependent on that individual's ability to empathize with other individuals. It is not uncommon for people to feel that "the only way" to seek solace from spiritual distress is for them to

"renounce the world" and the individuals–specifically the sinners–within it (Odell 39, 57). It is this urge that draws religious people towards a path of *contemptus mundi*. While this lifestyle may be well intentioned, the allegory presented in "Predatory Wasp of the Palisades" illustrates that it is not redemptive because it fails to foster Godlike empathy between individuals. The characters in this song include: the wasp up in the palisades (representative of the conventional Christian church), and the narrator and his assumed boyfriend down in the prairie. Both are present within the "land of God" that is Illinois, and yet the boys down in the prairie are portrayed as closer to God than the wasp up in the palisades: It is "unto *us*"–the boys in the prairie–that the holy "ghost is born / Hallelujah!" (Stevens "Predatory"). This remains consistent with Stevens's narrative form which frames descent as redemptive. But what is it about the boys in the prairie which invites the holy ghost more than the wasp? While the boys are focused simply on building a relationship with one another, the wasp–the Church–gives them a "terrible sting." This "sting" is representative of the chastisement one might get within a conventional Christian church for acting on homosexual feelings. While the narrator shouts, "We were in love! We were in love!" the line "Palisades, palisades" sung in an ascending scale consistently interjects that declaration, just as the Christian tradition of condemning homosexuality is a barricade to those who identify with that orientation. In a broader sense, Stevens is proposing that those who practice *contemptus mundi*–for example, by settling high up in the palisades or by building a "tower above the earth"–are at greater risk of being judgemental towards others through "terrible sting[s]" (Stevens "Seer's", "Predatory"). By extension, their efforts to build themselves up towards God are actually the very thing pulling them away from Him. Afterall, God is not up in the heavens but rather in the depths of the world among all things lowly. If we ourselves seek spiritual redemption, Stevens claims that we must join God among the lowly

things of the world to establish solidarity and empathy–not only for the boys killed by John Wayne Gacy Jr., for example, but even for John Wayne Gacy Jr. himself. As opposed to contempt for the world, it is a cultivation of empathy for the world that leads to an individual's redemption.

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