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I Am/Was the Walrus

By Daniel Beller-McKenna

I.

For most of his adult life, John Lennon fought to define himself against his public identity as “Beatle-John.” That image, crafted by the Beatles’ manager Brian Epstein and the pop music industry became a burden to all four of the Beatles during the group’s seven years of international stardom. In place of the rough leather-clad rock and roll band that played rambling one hour sets in the Hamburg Kaiserkeller and the Liverpool Cavern Club during 1960–61, Epstein forged a more commercially viable group of four well (and uniformly) dressed young men whose stage act was reduced to twenty minute carefully scripted sets. Over the course of the next few years, all four of the Beatles assumed clean-cut, safe personae in accordance with the necessities of marketing the group to a broad, middle-class audience. Willing though he and the others were to take part in the group’s public transformation, Lennon later claimed to have felt uncomfortable all along with selling out the Beatles’ rock and roll roots: “What we generated was fantastic when we played straight rock, and there was nobody to touch us in Britain. But as soon as we made it, the edges were knocked off. Brian Epstein put us in suits and all that, and we made it very, very big. We sold out” (Wenner 2000:20). Lennon’s reflections are born out by a contemporaneous witness, Paul McCartney’s brother Michael, who spent a great deal of time with the group during their Liverpool days:

The others didn’t have John’s resentment of having to do what he was doing to be a Beatle . . . They thought they were just bloody lucky they were getting away with it for so long. But John always had that drive, something ticking over, the need to do something else. It was “Ah, so this is what we have to do to be bigger than Elvis? Ok, let’s go. But I’m not going to give one hundred percent of me.” (quoted in Coleman 1992:311)

Submitting to Epstein’s plan forced Lennon (and all of the Beatles) to

suppress aspects of both their public and private personae (gone, for instance, were the days of Lennon performing with a toilet seat around his neck and hurling expletives at his German audience). For Lennon, most commentators then and now agree that his primary sacrifice was the rebellious anger that drove him to achieve the very success Epstein offered. (Epstein himself wrote of Lennon, "There is in the set of his head a controlled aggression that demands respect" [Epstein 1964:21].) Lennon chronicler John Wiener expands on this idea: "John was a genuinely angry young man. His anger may have been inchoate, expressed through the stereotyped working class macho, but it was real. When he played the cheerful wit, he had to repress a vital part of himself" (J. Wiener 1991:51). The Beatles' famous wit was emblematic of the intellectual promise many heard in their music and sensed in their demeanor. In one of the first social critiques of the Beatles, for example, literary theorist Terry Eagleton argued in 1964 that the Beatles' middle-class mentality distinguished them from their tougher pop music predecessors. The songs of a previous wave of Elvis-spawned British rockers of the late fifties (Adam Faith, Cliff Richard, Marty Wilde, and Billy Fury) expressed a social bitterness engendered in the singers' working-class backgrounds: "I feel so blue, I don't know why," writes Eagleton, "was the equivalent, at this level, of the intellectual's inability to rationalize his angst. Aggression became a built-in reflex in the pop song and the singer's technique" (1964:175). Eagleton goes on to argue that the Beatles represented a grammar school mentality in distinction to the "secondary-modern" world of their British rock precursors:

The real cultural shift which [the Beatles'] arrival effected was not from London to Liverpool, but from secondary modern to grammar school. One of the Beatles attended a Liverpool grammar school and the College of Art [John Lennon]; two others attended the Liverpool Institute [Paul McCartney and George Harrison], and one of these got a pass at 'A' level English [McCartney]. (ibid.:176)¹

Eagleton is biographically correct, as Lennon would be the first to admit.² But whatever the reality of their upbringings, as teenagers the Beatles had thoroughly adopted rock and roll's rebellious stance. Their middle-class intellectual façade, whether true to their roots or not, was not how the four (least of all Lennon) saw themselves or wanted to be seen. Rather, it represented a social background that Epstein was able to tap into as he molded the group into a marketable commodity. As the Beatles' music became ever more complex and self-consciously artistic through the mid-1960s, John Lennon's intellectual cache grew ever stronger. This was, how-

ever, merely one part of the larger pop star persona that defined the Beatles through the middle and late 1960s. Above all else, they were defined by their friendly accessibility and approachable charm.

Upon Epstein's death in August 1967, Lennon effected a radical change in his public persona, moving sharply away from the Epstein-inspired Beatles image and depicting himself instead as a rebellious champion of various counterculture political agendas. From the demise of the Beatles in 1970 on, Lennon sought to present himself as an unpackaged "real" person. At first (in the years around 1970) this move towards recapturing his own public persona manifested itself in a series of political stunts, aimed at displaying his uncompromising expression of ideals, and such symbolic acts of stripping away his previously false persona as appearing naked with partner Yoko Ono on the album jacket of their *Two Virgins* LP (1968). Beatles fans and the media either applauded his agitprop antics with Yoko Ono towards the end of the decade as a responsible and necessary reaction to the tenor of the times or criticized them as lavish, naïve, and self-absorbed attempts to use Lennon's pop star celebrity as a vehicle for expressing the couple's political views. In either case, Lennon had successfully shattered his "Beatle-John" self by the early 1970s, and presented instead a John Lennon more in line with the rebellious youth Lennon had suppressed to achieve stardom in the mid-1960s.

Lennon's death in 1980 only raised the stakes for those who saw him as either the hero or the villain of the 1960s. Ironically, the debate over Lennon since then has hinged on the discrepancies between his private and public self, the very dichotomy Lennon had sought to destroy by presenting himself as direct, truthful, and unpackaged. Take, for example, the battle that raged over his legacy eight years after his murder. In 1988 Albert Goldman released his scathing biography, *The Lives of John Lennon*, in which he depicted Lennon as a drug-diminished "Nowhere Man" who allowed those around him to manipulate his identity. Goldman had long been a harsh critic of pop culture and its icons, having written equally damning books on Lenny Bruce and Elvis Presley (1974, 1981), as well as several articles criticizing various other rock stars or aspects of youth culture. His critique of Lennon, therefore, was itself widely criticized as part of his ongoing assault on rock, and the mean-spiritedness towards Lennon that permeated Goldman's book added credence to those critiques. In any case, Goldman's depiction is largely a media-based fabrication. For whereas, according to his own account, he and his research assistants conducted around 1,200 interviews over six years, the first source he cites is the body of published interviews with Lennon. He adds to this "available documents in the national press of England, the United States, and Japan," as well as previously published biographies (Goldman 1988:700). Goldman is either

unable or unwilling to recognize his "John Lennon" as a public media figure, and his claim to portray his as the real John Lennon behind the public image remains unconvincing.

Shortly after Goldman's book appeared, Lennon's widow Yoko Ono initiated the film-and-book project *Imagine*, which buttressed the established media image of Lennon as peaceful-revolutionary-turned-mellow-family-man (Solt and Egan 1988; Solt 1989). Fred Fogo goes so far as to label *Imagine: John Lennon* "an official counter document to *The Lives of John Lennon*" (1994:122). Like Goldman's book, Ono's projection of her late husband can be understood as an act of mass media manipulation. Working from a wealth of privately held film and tape footage, Ono chose to depict Lennon in the best possible light, and we can easily see her "John Lennon" as a self-consciously constructed fiction—one (very positive) interpretation of the public figure who was John Lennon.

John Lennon had been very much aware of and actively concerned with questions of public and private personae and their uncomfortable co-existence during his life. Indeed, presenting himself as a real person (not Beatle-John) became a theme in some of his later songs with the Beatles and most of his early solo work. Given Lennon's continued centrality in interpretations of 1960s pop and counter-culture, coming to a better understanding of his various self-portrayals will help to illuminate his role in the culture of his times. This essay traces Lennon's attempt to dissociate himself from his Beatles image between 1966 and 1970, the year of the Beatles' breakup. I take as my terminal points two songs, "I am the Walrus," written for the Beatles' 1967 film *Magical Mystery Tour*, and "God," the final song on Lennon's premiere solo album in 1970, *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*. The first song dismantles Lennon's Beatle-image by challenging the basic notion of identity, especially as the song is rendered visually in the movie *Magical Mystery Tour*, while the second overtly rejects a litany of established cultural icons including and culminating with the Beatles. Lennon had begun to dismantle Beatle-John before writing "I am the Walrus," and his public persona would continue to evolve beyond his first solo album. Yet each of the two songs at hand recommends itself as a significant juncture in that evolution. "I am the Walrus" marked the end (and arguably the pinnacle) of Lennon's psychedelic musical explorations during 1966–67, a phase in which the Beatles' traditional methods of composing were severely altered, thereby radically changing the group's musical profile and popular perception. "God" ends a stark album of simple means and (sometimes) violent expression in which Lennon attempts to thoroughly purge his Beatle-self. Near the end of that song Lennon claims "I was the Walrus, but now I'm John." Lennon thereby completes a process begun in 1967, entirely removing the walrus mask once and for all to os-

tensibly reveal his real and pure self: "John." I will consider each song as part of that process.

II.

At the beginning of 1966 there was little to suggest to the public that John Lennon would have any need or desire to undo his Beatles identity. The previous three years had witnessed the group's unprecedented rise in popularity first in England and then worldwide. After six albums, eleven number-one singles, two successful movies, and numerous well-received tours, maintaining the status quo would have seemed a reasonable strategy. Yet the status quo was already in flux by the end of the previous year. Live performances, the group's forte prior to Beatlemania, had become extremely difficult and unrewarding due to the ecstatic behavior (and noise) of their audiences. As a result, the Beatles began experimenting in the studio during mid-1965 with the use of a string quartet on the song "Yesterday," a flute on the album *Help!*, and later in the year with still more exotic instruments on the album *Rubber Soul*: sitar, fuzz bass, and harmonium, as well as unusual recording effects like the backwards guitar solo on "I'm Only Sleeping" and backwards vocals on "Rain."³

As their studio explorations intensified during the spring of 1966 on the album *Revolver*, the Beatles' relationship with the public began to change as well.⁴ That summer, controversy surrounded the group for the first time on the world tour that followed the recording of *Revolver*. After run-ins with the press and dignitaries in Japan and the Philippines, the Beatles suffered their greatest fall from grace to date over the "more popular than Jesus Christ" flap that developed in the United States during July and August. Several months earlier, in a February 1966 interview with Maureen Cleave of the *London Evening Standard*, Lennon had remarked: "Christianity will go, it will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that, I'm right and I will be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus Christ right now. I don't know which will go first—rock and roll or Christianity. Jesus was alright, but his disciples were thick and ordinary. It's them twisting it that ruins it for me" (reprinted in the Beatles 2000:223). His remarks touched off an uproar in the United States when they were reprinted in the July 1966 issue of the fan magazine *Datebook*. Before the Beatles arrived for a tour in August, mass record burnings were held in several cities and thirty-five radio stations banned their records (A. Wiener 1986:96; J. Wiener 1991:11–16). By the time the summer tour ended on August 29th at Candlestick Park in San Francisco, the group had decided to cease touring.

Lennon's public reaction to the controversy over his Jesus remark is noteworthy. When the Beatles first came to the U.S. in early 1964 amid the onset of Beatlemania, their press conferences were famous for cheeky wit

and brash irreverence, an earthy sincerity that won over the press and helped secure their popular success in this country.⁵ Three years later, however, at an August 11 press conference in Chicago near the end of the Beatles' long summer tour, Lennon's tone was quite different:

I am sorry I opened my mouth. I just happened to be talking to a friend and I used the word "Beatles" as a remote thing—"Beatles", like other people see us. I said they are having more influence on kids than anything else, including Jesus. I said it in that way, which was the wrong way. I'm not anti-God, anti-Christ, or anti-religion. I was not knocking it. I was not saying we are greater or better. I think it's a bit silly. If they don't like us, why don't they just not buy the records. . . .

When I first heard about the repercussions I thought "It can't be true—it's just one of those things." And then when I realized it was serious I was worried stiff because I knew how it would go on, and the things that would get said about it, and all those miserable pictures of me looking like a cynic, and it would go on and on and on and get out of hand, and I couldn't control it. I can't answer for it when it gets that big, because it's nothing to do with me then. (reprinted in *Beatles 2000*:226)

Watching and listening to the excerpt of this press conference on the video portion of *The Beatles' Anthology* project, the bitterness and frustration behind Lennon's words are readily apparent.

Upon returning from the summer tour, Lennon immediately set off for Germany (and Spain) to play Private Gripweed in the film *How I Won the War*, directed by Richard Lester, who had also directed the Beatles' first two films. Whereas Lennon had played his Beatle-self in *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965), in *How I Won the War* he portrayed a relatively secondary and pathetic character in a dark parody of Hollywood war films. Working on Lester's film, therefore, served two immediate purposes for Lennon. First, the film carried a strong anti-war message that gave Lennon's public aura the political slant it would maintain until the end of his life. Secondly, it was a professional venture that allowed Lennon to work outside of the Beatles.⁶ Indeed, from the fall of 1966 until the Beatles disbanded in 1970, much of Lennon's activity can be understood as an attempt to escape his Beatle-John persona. And if the much discussed personal and artistic union he began with Yoko Ono in 1968 fostered Lennon's most iconoclastic behavior, his political statements and activities in 1966 indicate that he was already well on his way to shedding his Beatle persona.

III.

All four Beatles had gone on separate vacations after the 1966 summer tour. They reunited in EMI's Abbey Road studio on November 24 to begin recording Lennon's "Strawberry Fields Forever," which he had written in Spain while filming *How I Won the War* (Lewisohn 1988:87). In many ways this song can be seen as the direct precursor to "I am the Walrus," which they would begin recording about nine months later. Between those recordings the Beatles noticeably changed their public image (visually as well as figuratively) and their musical style. Generally, the group no longer appeared in public wearing matching clothes and haircuts (excepting of course, the Victorian military-band attire of *Sgt. Pepper*, which was itself a self-conscious identity transformation device). Musically, the decision to stop touring led to a freedom to expand the studio experiments begun in early 1966, and the soundscape of *Sgt. Pepper* and *Magical Mystery Tour* is defined by a nearly complete freedom from producing songs that could be replicated on stage.

"Strawberry Fields" and "I am the Walrus" exemplify this freedom, and the two songs are frequently compared for their use of orchestral instrumental overlay and complicated tape-mixing effects.⁷ More importantly for present purposes, "I am the Walrus" carries further themes of identity dissociation that had surfaced in "Strawberry Fields" which, like its later counterpart, comprises a jumbled collage of images and psychological references. Questions of identity emerge haphazardly throughout "Strawberry Fields Forever"; such phrases as "It's getting hard to be someone," and "Always, no, sometimes, think it's me" are the most obvious cases. Here, for the first time in his songwriting, Lennon raises the issue of identity in a self-conscious fashion.

Between "Strawberry Fields" and the recording of "I am the Walrus" in September 1967, two decisive events changed Lennon's (and perhaps his bandmates') attitude toward his participation in the Beatles. In August their manager Brian Epstein died of a drug overdose, just as the group began their brief but intense association with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and his Spiritual Regeneration movement. Epstein had met and begun managing the group in late 1961, and had been singly responsible for transforming the group's rough and rebellious image into the cleaner, less threatening, and more marketable "Mop-Top" package by which they achieved their initial fame and fortune.⁸ Although Epstein's absence left the group relatively rudderless as a business concern and entertainment act, it conversely allowed any lasting creative fetters on the four members to fall away. Bearing witness to the bonuses and pitfalls of such freedom are the Beatles' next two projects, the film *Magical Mystery Tour* and the double album *The Beatles* (the "White" album). The film, produced and directed by the Beatles

Example 1: "I am the Walrus": opening melody of verse 1.

A A/G C D D/E A A/G

I am he as you are he as you are we and we are all to-ge - ther, -

C D A

see how they run like pigs from a gun see how they run I'm cry - ing. -

themselves, aired the day after Christmas 1967 in the U. K. Shown in black and white, many of its colorful effects fell flat. Moreover, the amateurish writing, directing, and composition were panned by the British press, marking the Beatles' first public failure. The White Album, while more sympathetically received, also contained numerous songs that have never been embraced by one or another contingent of Beatles fans: from the avant-garde tape compilation "Revolution #9" to the treacley-sweet "Honey Pie" and "Ob-la-di, ob-la-da," to cite two extremes. In any case, these efforts (the film and the extremes of the White Album—including its length) would not likely have taken the shape they did had they occurred under Epstein's management of the group.

By the fall of 1967, then, the Beatles were well on their way towards obliterating their earlier "Fab Four" identity, and "I am the Walrus" illustrates clearly that Lennon was at the front of the line. Lennon immediately announces the theme of identity-dissipation in the opening line of "I am the Walrus": "I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together" (0:21–0:28). Not only do these personal equations dissolve the distinct identity of all members (I, he, you, me, we), but the sonic equivalence of he-me-we (mono-syllabic two letter words ending on a long -e vowel) projects an aural sameness as well. Just two notes—an undulating semi-tone, E–D \sharp —form the sparse melody here (ex. 1). Such a tense, static delivery of the lyrics throws the identity relationships in the song's text into strong relief against the shifting harmonies below. Those harmonies seem to be unable to help direct the melody beyond its remarkably narrow

Example 2: "I am the Walrus": refrain.

B C D E

I am the egg-man they are the egg-men I am the wal-rus goo-goo-g'joob

range, as if the melody resists being pulled into any recognizable pop contour just as strongly as the lyrics defy a strict identity association. Even when the chords C and D are lengthened in the next strain ("See how they run like pigs from a gun") to one chord per-bar, the melody clings to the E–D \sharp dyad. And no matter how the pacing of the chords is altered in the ensuing strains (0:38–0:54), little changes melodically; the unremitting semitone alternation in the melody is relieved only by the falling cadential figures on the words "together," "how they fly," and "crying" and by its transposition to the pitches A and B and its slight expansion (now a whole tone apart) at the line "Corporation tee-shirt, stupid bloody Tuesday" (etc., in subsequent verses).

"Detachment" best describes the relationship between the terse melody and the chord changes that accompany it; just as the ego in the song defies identification, the vocal line refuses to take melodic shape around the song's underlying harmonies. It is as if the multiple I-he-you-me-we persona refuses to form into a recognizable, distinctive melody and thus commit to one or another of its constituent parts. Perhaps the only strongly directed melody occurs in the refrain ("I am the eggman . . ."), where the voice follows major chords up diatonically from B to E (0:54–1:03, ex. 2). Again we are confronted with an identity jumble: "I am the eggman / they are the eggmen / . . ." As the melody rises we anticipate some sort of textual conclusion or resolution, but are left instead with the song's enigmatic title statement: "I am the Walrus."

The song's structure does not give any clearer sense of where it is headed. Like many Lennon songs from 1967–68, "I am the Walrus" dwells on descending (and also in this case ascending) bass lines and chord progressions.⁹ Yet unlike some more clearly directed examples, these linear patterns in "I am the Walrus" occur only after false starts and/or abrupt changes in direction, producing a formal sense of randomness to match the disjointed images and identity scramble of the text. For example, the descent begun with A to G in the bass under the words "I am he as you are

he" is twice interrupted by the upwards progression C–D, first in the space of one bar ("... you are me and we are all together") and later across two full bars ("see how they run..."). A more complete descent from A is only realized in the second half of the verse at the words "Sitting on a cornflake," where the bass descends A–G–F \sharp –F over the chords A \flat_3 – $\frac{4}{2}$ D \flat_5 –F (0:39–0:49). When that F major chord gives way to B major, the resulting ascent from B up to E not only incorporates the C–D progression from the first half of the verse, but also provides a context in which to make tonal sense of the song's opening instrumental descent from B–E (now reversed), which recurs as a bridge after verse two, now with words added ("Sitting in an English garden waiting for the sun"; 2:10–2:24). In essence then, the song rests on a linear descent in the bass from A to E and a linear ascent (also a chord progression) from B to E, which also appears inverted in the bridge, and extended in the introduction. But Lennon breaks down and scrambles these progressions, thereby obscuring any tight formal scheme to the song.

Some frequently repeated stories about how Lennon wrote the song might shed light on the meaning (or lack thereof) of the song's structure and its title. At one point, Lennon claimed he had originally wanted to write an entire song on an ambulance siren sound. The opening electric piano riff embodies his original inspiration (F \sharp –D \sharp alternating with B), and the vocal dyads, therefore, represent an edgy and strained variation of the introduction.¹⁰ As for the genesis of the text, two separate (though not mutually exclusive) accounts have been given. Lennon himself commented that "The first line was written on one acid trip one weekend. The second line was written on the next acid trip the next weekend, and it was filled in after I met Yoko" (Golson 1981:156) Lennon's old Liverpool friend Pete Shotton recalls that Lennon made up the mostly non-sequitous lyrics to the song upon hearing that a literature class at their old high school was analyzing Beatles songs. Such bizarre concepts as "Semolina pilchard climbing up the Eiffel Tower" were Lennon's attempt to confound and thwart those who would try to make sense of his lyrics (especially the masters at his old school) (Shotten 1983:216–17). Finally, Lennon traced the general dream-like quality of the song's imagery to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll was a favorite author and one who frequently inspired Lennon's literary efforts). In particular, Lennon's song draws on the story of "The Walrus and the Carpenter" from chapter 4 of *Through the Looking Glass* ("Tweedledum and Tweedledee"). The latter reference might explain the repeated refrain "I'm crying" that frequently halts the verses of "I am the Walrus," since in the story it is the Walrus who repeatedly weeps for the young oysters whom he and the carpenter have tricked into coming to dinner (only to eat them). In light of the role identity plays in "I am the Walrus," Lennon's attraction to Alice may not have been inconsequen-

tial, given her own malleable form and size. Even within the vignette he chose, Lennon himself seemed to have been confused with the identity of the characters:

I was the walrus, whatever that means. We saw the movie in L.A. and the walrus was a big capitalist that ate all the fuckin' oysters [laugh], if you must know . . . I always had this image of "The Walrus and the Carpenter"—and I never checked what the walrus was. I've been going around and saying "I am the walrus," that it's something, but he's a fucking bastard [laugh] . . . The way it's written everybody presumes that it means something. I mean even I did, so we just presumed, just cause I said, "I am the walrus" that it must mean that I am God or something, but its just poetry. But it became symbolic with me. (Wenner 2000:88)¹¹

In addition to exchanging the identity of the characters in the story, here Lennon suggests that the walrus and the concept of God are somehow related to him, a connection that will be played out obliquely in the song "God" from his first album (which had been released shortly before he made the previous comment). I will return to the latter song below.

Whereas the Carroll inspiration accounts for the title of the song, all four elements in these accounts of the song's genesis (the siren, the first line written separately, the attempt to confuse his old school masters, and the Lewis Carroll inspiration) resonate with the feeling of detachment that exists between the song's siren-like melody and its chord changes. Two parts of this account also confirm that Lennon was concerned with an identity-distortion project in "I am the Walrus." To begin with, the isolation on the first line, as written separately from (literally a week before) any other text in the song suggests that the identity dissolution it expresses (I-he-you-he-you-me-we) formed the seminal idea for the song. Secondly, Shotton's story about fooling the masters at their old school directly raises Lennon's frustration with how other's perceived his public self while also vividly depicting his efforts to escape from his Beatle image, ducking out from under the disguise, as it were.

I use the image of a disguise here because it pertains to the visual image of "I am the Walrus" that the Beatles created for their movie *Magical Mystery Tour*. The made-for-television film was a quasi-surreal, plotless romp across the English countryside, containing five "music videos" (to use the somewhat later term and idea), not including the title song, which was played to the cinematic introduction and closing credits. Of these, only "I am the Walrus" makes any attempt to depict an actual "performance" of the song by the Beatles as a rock group (that is, in stage position, playing

their instruments, lip-syncing the words, etc.) That, however, is as far as the realistic depiction goes. Throughout the “I am the Walrus” video, the members of the group don a variety of costumes and guises. They are shot from a number of camera angles with various effects, and their stage set stance is interlaced with shots of them standing in a variety of poses: with interlocked arms on each others’ backs; swaying to the song with fingers snapping as if coolly detached from the performing Beatles; directing the cameramen; etc. As the group performs, several images from the song’s lyrics are realized visually: the “policemen in a row,” the “eggmen” (and perhaps Lennon, who wears a white skullcap, as the “Eggman”), and the “Walrus” (again, Lennon), as one animal costume among four that the group members wear.

Putting on masks and costumes is a central theme in *Magical Mystery Tour*. Although the film was critically trashed, it gives a much better idea of how the group thought and where their interests lay at the time than did either of their previous, commercially successful films with Richard Lester. Lennon later remarked of *A Hard Day’s Night*: “We were a bit infuriated with the glibness and shiftiness of the dialogue[,] and we were always trying to get it a bit more realistic, but they wouldn’t have it.” He added that in *Help!* the Beatles felt like extras in their own film (Wenner 2000:56). Bob Neaverson, whose book *The Beatles Movies* provides a thorough account of how the group’s film efforts fit into their musical development as well as film trends of the 1960s, considers in detail how the Beatles played with their identity in *Magical Mystery Tour*:

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the Beatles’ image in *Magical Mystery Tour* is that it broke with their previous tradition of appearing in films as “themselves”, and attempted to scramble any sense of identificatory perception by mixing footage of dramatic action in which they appear as actors who play characters within a dramatic context, sequences where they appear as themselves in a dramatic or performance-based context, and sequences where the distinction is unclear . . .

Moreover, when the group do [*sic*] appear as “themselves” (either within the dramatic context or when “performing” songs), their image marks a total departure from the imposed boyishness and cheeky conformity of their previous cinematic excursions. (Neaverson 1997:48)

Following the film just beyond the video of “I am the Walrus,” one sees a scene on the bus with Lennon and the little girl (named Nicole), which exemplifies Neaverson’s point. In “I am the Walrus” Lennon is Beatle-John

the performer, nonchalant Beatle-John swaying and snapping his fingers with his bandmates, John Lennon helping to choreograph and direct the film's various sequences in the interpolated outtakes, the eggman, and, of course, the Walrus. On the bus, however, he presents himself as John Lennon, the "real" person, sharing a laugh with a small child, playing the children's rhyme-game "Five Little Dickie Birds," and blowing up a balloon, while his friend "the real" George Harrison sits by. These representations (of Lennon and Harrison) are, of course, strongly filtered; they are also staged scenes intended to portray particular versions of the two Beatles' personae. Yet their stark distinction from the surrealistically portrayed characters of the preceding music video and the everyday nature of their playful banter with Nicole clearly is intended to mark these as more genuine characters than their alter-Beatle-egos. Whether or not we accept this Lennon and Harrison as "real" is less important than the fact that we understand them to be intended as such.

As the song fades out in the movie, the walrus, the three other animals, the eggmen, the policemen, and a shutterbug midget dance into the distance behind the bus. This provides a fitting visual metaphor for the breakdown of identity that occurs in "I am the Walrus" and for the musical structure of the song's fade-out. The fantastical characters behind the bus are part of the show. Happily oblivious, they trail the "real" people on the bus, dancing and singing into eternity (if you will), while the "real" people get on with their journey. Lennon's homey little scene with Nicole into which the audio of "I am the Walrus" fades aims to make the stark difference between characters of the song and the "real" John Lennon abundantly clear.

Immediately preceding that scene, the visual imagery that accompanies the musical fade-out of "I am the Walrus" directs the viewer to see the John Lennon depicted on the bus as a separate entity from the various John Lennons encountered in the song's video. Musically, the song ends over a repeated wedge pattern, as a cycle of diatonically descending major chords and bass line (from A back to A) is countered by a diatonically rising line in the violins, also from-and-to A (ex. 3). All of this extends into perpetuity the generic descending and ascending linear progressions on which the song is based, now pitted directly against each other. Whereas many pop songs end in a fade-out, this one seems to imply something endless and irreversible through that gesture. The two contrary lines are headed in different directions; the fade-out implies that they cannot be reconciled. Identity is not meshed in this song, but rather it is divided and blown apart. Beatle-John, the walrus, and John Lennon must all go their separate ways from now on.

Against that closing pattern, Lennon's nonsense syllables "juba, juba"

Example 3: "I am the Walrus": closing 'wedge' theme. (Harmonies on the middle staff are a generalized representation of the accompanying chords, not a literal notation of what any particular instrument is playing.)

The musical score is presented in three systems. The top system is labeled "Violins" and contains three staves: a treble clef staff with a melodic line, a middle staff with block chords, and a bass clef staff with a bass line. The bottom system is labeled "Cellos" and also contains three staves: a treble clef staff with a melodic line, a middle staff with block chords, and a bass clef staff with a bass line. The key signature is D major (two sharps) and the time signature is common time (C). The notation includes various rhythmic values and accidentals, with the middle staff using a simplified chord notation.

are joined by a cacophony of chanted phrases and miscellaneous excerpts from a performance of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, which happened to be aired on the BBC on the night Lennon re-mixed the recording of the song. Just as the musical wedge provides an abstraction of the elements that made up the song, the accompanying textual mayhem is only a more extreme version of the senseless lyrics of the song. Whatever meaning might have been gleaned from the text in the rest of the song disappears into a surrealistic jumble at its end. And with it disappears Beatle John, allowing the "real" John Lennon (on the bus that is) to ride off without the media circus that trails behind.

IV.

Lennon treated the Walrus as a mask. Once behind this disguise (a more enigmatic and fully concealing artifice than that offered by the Sgt. Pepper garb from earlier in 1967) Lennon could slip away unnoticed from his previous Beatle image. Thus when he sings a year later (almost to the day) in the song "Glass Onion" on the White Album, "Well here's another clue for you all, the Walrus was Paul," he is yet again confounding those who would try to unravel the supposed hidden meaning of his songs. It is clear

enough from the video in *Magical Mystery Tour* that the Walrus is Lennon. His statement here, then, is one of affinity with McCartney, or another manifestation of the fluid sense of identity suggested by the opening line of "I am the Walrus (or, as Lennon later claimed, a knock at all those Beatles fans who read too much into the group's songs).¹²

During 1968–69, the Beatles' last two years of recording, Lennon began to peer out from behind that mask. Many of the songs on the White Album, *Let it Be*, and *Abbey Road* hint at the stark realism of the 1970 album *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*, his first solo studio project. Songs like "Yer Blues," "I'm So Tired," "Don't Let Me Down," and "I Want You-She's So Heavy," all carry a hint of the autobiographical and directly personal style that would strongly color Lennon's solo efforts.¹³ Moreover, each of these songs uses a scaled-back rock band scoring in contrast to the various tape effects and orchestration of "Strawberry Fields Forever," "I am the Walrus," "Glass Onion," and some other Lennon songs (not to mention many of McCartney's efforts) on these later Beatles LPs.

First, however, according to Lennon, he went through a Christ-like ego resurrection, centered on his use of LSD. When asked in his 1971 *Rolling Stone* interview whether he had ever had any bad trips, Lennon explains:

Oh yeah, I had many. Jesus Christ. I stopped taking it cause of that. I mean I just . . . couldn't stand it. I dropped it for I don't know how long. Then I started taking it just before I met Yoko. I got a message on acid that you should destroy your ego, and I did. I was reading that stupid book of Leary's and all that shit . . . And I destroyed myself. I was slowly putting meself together after Maharishi, bit by bit over a two year period. And then I destroyed me ego and I didn't believe I could do anything. I let Paul do what he wanted and say, them all do just what they wanted. And I just was nothing, I was shit. And then Derek [Taylor] tripped me out at his house after he'd got back from L.A. He said, "You're alright." And he pointed out which songs I'd written and said, "You wrote this, and you said this, and you are intelligent, don't be frightened." The next week I went down with Yoko and we tripped out again, and she freed me completely, to realize that I was me and it's alright. And that was it. I started fighting again and being a loud-mouth again and saying, "Well, I can do this," and "Fuck you, and this is what I want," and "Don't put me down. I did this." So that's where I am now. (Wenner 2000:53–54)

This re-emergence of Lennon's assertive side was at least partly exhibited

by a series of avant-garde recordings made by Lennon and Ono that were released between 1969 and 1970, which moved completely outside the realm of pop music. A series of tape collage pieces were released as four unbroken sides on two separate albums entitled *Two Virgins* (1968) and *Life with the Lions* (1969). Although most people were probably more aware of the hue and cry over the full frontal nudity on the cover of *Two Virgins* (where the naked Lennon and Ono posed holding hands) than ever actually heard either of the albums, these releases and the couple's highly publicized bed-ins and other off-beat demonstration gimmicks unmistakably signaled Lennon's departure from the Beatles as a purposeful public phenomenon. Lennon had recreated his public persona as a peace movement artistic radical, an image that could never be reconciled with his Beatles pre-Sgt. Pepper identity.

Despite these more roughly presented songs and iconoclastic projects with Ono, little could have prepared Lennon's listening public for the bleakness of his first conventional solo studio album, *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*, released in December 1970. This is an album that pares away any aural opulence in favor of sparse arrangements, largely unfiltered instrumental sounds, and a plain, often anguished vocal quality in Lennon's mostly unharmonized voice. Most of the songs on *Plastic Ono Band* were written in Los Angeles during Lennon's primal scream sessions with psychologist Arthur Janov and recorded shortly thereafter.¹⁴ Janov's method aimed at liberating one's feelings from the painful realization that our parents do not really love us for who we are. John Lennon had been abandoned in turn by each of his parents; his father Freddie Lennon left the family shortly after John was born, and his mother Julia Lennon left John as a small child to the care of her sister and brother-in-law, Mimi and George Smith. What's worse, in 1958, after seventeen-year-old John had established a mature and friendly relationship with her, Julia Lennon was run over by a car and killed.

There was still more in Janov's published theories with which Lennon could relate. In particular, Janov wrote that LSD stimulated intense real feelings," but that it also produced "a wild flight of ideas . . . that is also a race away from feeling." And heroin (to which Lennon had graduated during the late 1960s) completely deadened feelings. Primal scream therapy, Janov argued allowed one to come to terms with their feelings and, more importantly, to recognize their pain. "Feeling," Janov wrote, "is the antithesis of Pain. The more pain one feels, the less pain one suffers" (1970:99; quoted in J. Wiener 1991:136).

Pain has a very real presence on *Plastic Ono Band*, nowhere moreso than in the opening song, "Mother." A series of death knell-like bells precedes the song in which Lennon sings a plain and simple melody against a

barely existent accompaniment from his sparse ensemble: a bass guitar and drum along with Lennon's piano. Pain becomes visceral at the end of the song as Lennon gives us a brief glimmer of what his primal scream sessions probably sounded like.

Only a few other moments on the album match this intensity (the end of "I Found Out," for example). But the theme of honest and direct confrontation with one's demons is a constant thread across the entire album.

At the end of *Plastic Ono Band*, Lennon begins the last full song, "God," with the words "God is a concept by which we measure our pain." Lennon's cryptic remark is likely connected to the primal scream therapy he was undergoing at the time. "God," for Lennon, had long been a "concept," as witnessed in his remarks at the 1966 Chicago press conference quoted above. Having long known what he did not believe in, Lennon seems to have been in search of something believable in order to fill the ego-void that had been created by his loss of self to Beatlemania, his subsequent campaign to eradicate Beatle-John, and his drug use through the late 1960s. Lennon's concept of God might reflect the comfort people take in the divinity figure as a way to compensate for suffering pain.

Lennon sets the opening lines of the song to a highly conventional rock and roll chord pattern, I-vi-IV-V, with an ensemble and a piano articulation that evoke a gospel blues sound, as if he is preaching to us. As a parody, this song is unique on *Plastic Ono Band*. During the Beatles' last few years, Lennon had occasionally followed Paul McCartney's penchant for parodistic styles, as in Lennon's doo-wop tinged closing section to "Happiness is a Warm Gun" or the rockabilly sound of "The Ballad of John and Yoko." *Plastic Ono Band*, however, was practically dedicated to a revival of pure rock, and the throwback style of "God" sounds conspicuously familiar and thereby evocative.

The preachy quality of the song's opening verse is partly conveyed by the ensemble, especially Billy Preston's gospel-like piano chords. Lennon's vocal delivery also suggests a confessional, even evangelical atmosphere, as in the exclamatory interjection "I'll say it again" (0:34) and the closing "yeahs" (over a plagal C major [IV] chord, no less; 0:53-0:57). But any religious reference in the sound is merely a set up for the bridge. That long middle portion of the song (1:02-2:52) comprises a descending vi-V-IV ostinato in which Lennon delivers a litany of all the things he doesn't believe in, culminating in the Beatles.

I Ching
Bible
tarot
Hitler

Jesus
 Kennedy
 Buddah
 mantra
 gita
 yoga
 kings
 Elvis
 Zimmerman
 Beatles

By setting this laundry list of false idols to a brief, incessantly repeated musical figure, Lennon evokes a chant-like spiritual mantra—indeed, “mantra” is one of the items further down the list. The bridge, then, works as a credo (an anti-credo, really) by accessing a religious aural image that invites us to hear each element as some sacred object. Lennon’s reversal through the phrase “I don’t believe” is rendered that much stronger by the religious association.

Many items on the list form small groups or progressions of related ideas. For example, by beginning with “magic” and “I Ching,” two concepts that clearly lie outside of faith according to the Judeo-Christian culture in which he lived, Lennon is able to relativize and thereby cut down the Bible, embedding it within a group that also contains tarot, a less lofty form of mystical prophesying. Similarly, the presence of Hitler amidst Jesus, Kennedy, and Buddha taints them all by associating the latter three icons with a cultic figure widely held to be the Western embodiment of evil. The quasi-spiritual group that follows, “mantra, gita, yoga,” all Eastern-based fads of the 1960s, prepares for the final group in which a series of 1960s pop idols are renounced. “Kings” seems entirely generic, but may obliquely draw on the name of Martin Luther King, who had been murdered only two years earlier. More importantly, however, “kings” alludes to the 1960s pop status of the next three figures: Elvis (who was known as “The King”), Zimmerman (Bob Dylan’s real last name), and finally the Beatles. As he approaches the latter word, Lennon’s voice becomes suddenly more present, both louder and lacking the studio echo that had been applied through the preceding portion of the song. At the word “Beatles,” the music comes to a complete stop. Thereafter the song returns to its earlier chord changes and Lennon’s voice temporarily remains in its dry, unenhanced state as he announced his creed: “I just believe in me, Yoko and me.”¹⁵

Lennon had much to say about the genesis of this song in his 1971 *Rolling Stone* interview. Specifically explaining the litany of the bridge, he

says:

Well, like a lot of words, they just came out of me mouth. It started off like that. "God" was stuck together from three songs almost. I had the idea, "God is the concept by which we measure our pain." So when you have a [phrase] like that, you just sit down and sing the first tune that comes into your head. And the tune is the simple [sings] "God is the concept-bomp-bomp-bomp-bomp" cause I like that kind of music. And then I just rolled into it. [Sings] "I don't believe in magic"—and it was just going on in me head. And "I Ching" and "the Bible," the first three or four just came out, whatever came out. (Wenner 2000:10–11)

As for the Beatles' place at the end of the list, Lennon said:

I was going to leave a gap and say, just fill in your own, for whoever you don't believe in . . . But Beatles was the final thing because it's like I no longer believe in myth, and Beatles is another myth. I don't believe in it. The dream's over. I'm not just talking about the Beatles is over, I'm talking about the generation thing. The Dream's over, and I have personally got to get down to so-called reality. (ibid.:11)

Having torn down the false gods of religion and of the sixties, he returns to the earlier, 1950s-tinged music of the verse to close off the anti-credo and initiate the end of the song. Gone, however, is the preachy tone of the opening verse; the Beatles, Lennon implies, were just another false religion, a matter of faith. Without them (which is where we stand at the end of the song and the end of the album), there is no pulpit left from which to preach. Nevertheless, he maintains the religiously loaded musical parody and textual imagery at the end of the song, but merely as an ironic gesture—ironic because he effects a series of what might be called inverse-religious transformations. He is "reborn," but as the earthy John, no longer the dream weaver, and no longer the Walrus. We are left to "carry on," like zealots without their messiah, perhaps like the strange cohorts of the Walrus who were left following the bus in *Magical Mystery Tour*. Lennon believes only in himself and Yoko Ono. Such a strong focus on individuals is a direct affront to the greatest legacy of the Beatles: the myth of the group persona. Jon Wiener writes:

"God" rejects political, religious, and cultural false consciousness. John undertakes a deliberate shattering of the illusions of the

sixties, starting with the dream of the Beatles as the representation of a genuine community, a harmonious group of equals, filled with creative energy. This is a false dream, John says, and it is finished now. He can't and won't serve as our god any more; he declares that he is a person, like we are—he's just "John." For us to carry on, we need to find a way to shatter these gods outside of us, to transfer power from our mythical heroes to ourselves, to each other. (Wiener 1991:6)

Lennon had long been "transferring power" from one identity to another: from the apolitical Beatle-John to the anti-war character of Sgt. Gripweed, and from the mop-top Beatle-John to the psychedelic Walrus of the song and the movie *Magical Mystery Tour*. Transferring power from "mythical heroes" to oneself was a natural step for Lennon in the year of the Beatles' breakup.

Lennon's message at the end of "God" became central to his public comments during the 1970s. He repeatedly exhorted his listening public not to follow him, but rather to lead themselves, to make their own decisions. Although "I am the Walrus" may have blended stylistically into Lennon's psychedelic experiments around 1967, it occurs in retrospect to have been a beginning of his active efforts to get out of the Beatles. And it even presaged the religious connotations of "God" (or anti-religious, if you prefer). Revelatory scriptures and mystical ceremonies frequently employ masks, indecipherable prophecy, and wondrous vestments. If "I am the Walrus" involved the donning of these trappings as a prelude to revelation, "God" provides the apocalypse—only it reveals a sober and earthly message, that we are all individuals after all, and that our "Gods" are mere mortals.

A few months after recording *Plastic Ono Band*, Lennon was busy working on the song and album *Imagine*, in which many of the 1960s ideals would be resurrected in his music. Within the next two years he would embrace a series of radical political causes, all of which emphasized the legacy of the 1960s. His message in the song "God" then, must be understood in the context of the Beatles and his ongoing disengagement from the band after 1966. By naming the Walrus as the last mask to be removed, the last idol to be set aside, he points back to the critical role "I am the Walrus" had played in starting the process of dissociation from his Beatles-image.

Notes

1. The British secondary-modern school is roughly the equivalent of the American technical high school.

2. In an interview for *Playboy* magazine in the fall of 1980, shortly before his death, Lennon remarked: "My childhood was not all suffering. It was not all slum. I was always well dressed, well fed, well schooled, and brought up to be a nice lower-middle-class English boy. You know? And that's what made the Beatles different, the fact that George, Paul, and John were grammar school boys. Up till then [*sic*], all rock-and-rollers basically had been black and poor, rural South or whatever, city slums. And the whites had been truckers like Elvis . . . But the so-called thing of the Beatles was the fact that we were pretty well educated and not truckers" (Golson 1981:138).

3. Of course the Beatles' use of drugs also increased during these years, beginning with marijuana in 1965 and moving on to LSD in 1966.

4. On the Beatles' recording of *Revolver*, see Lewisohn (1988:70–84).

5. The Beatles' friendly rapport with the U.S. press is witnessed most famously in the press conference held upon their arrival at New York's Kennedy International Airport on February 7, 1964. Film of this event can be seen in the video *Imagine: John Lennon* (Solt 1989) and in *The Beatles Anthology* video recording, part 2.

6. For a cogent discussion of the political import of Lennon's involvement in *How I Won the War*, see Wiener (1991:25–32).

7. Charts of both songs may be found in *The Beatles Complete Scores* (Beatles 1993).

8. Epstein visited a lunchtime performance by the Beatles on November 9, 1961, and began managing the group shortly thereafter.

9. Other Lennon songs featuring descending bass lines are "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite," "A Day in the Life," "Dear Prudence," "Cry Baby Cry" (in the bridge), and "All You Need is Love."

10. In a November 23, 1968, interview with Jonathan Cott for *Rolling Stone*, Lennon stated: "I had this idea of doing a song that was a police siren, but it didn't work in the end: . . . 'I-am-he-as-you-are-he-as . . .' You couldn't really sing the police siren." Reprinted in Cott and Doudna (1982:51).

11. Later, in the 1980 *Playboy* interviews, Lennon added: "I never went into that bit about what [Carroll] really meant, like people are doing with the Beatles' work. Later I went back and looked at it and realized that the walrus was the bad guy in the story and the carpenter was the good guy. I thought, Oh shit, I picked the wrong guy. I should have said, 'I am the carpenter'. But that wouldn't have been the same, would it?" (Wenner 2000:156).

12. On the recording of "Glass Onion," see Lewisohn (1988:155).

13. In 1971, Lennon remarked: "I didn't sit down to think, 'I'm going to write about this, that or the other.' They all came out, like all the best work of anybody's ever does. All this came out because I had the time. If you're on holiday or in therapy and you spend the time—like in India, where I could write a lot, I wrote the last bunch of my best songs. 'I'm so Tired,' and 'Yer Blues' were pretty sort of realistic. They were about me[.]" (Wenner 2000: 12).

14. Janov's ideas and Lennon's encounter with them are described by Jon Weiner (1991:136–38) and Ray Coleman (1992:513–16).

15. Lennon need not have focused such attention on the Beatles at this point in the song, as illustrated in an earlier version of the song released on the 1998

John Lennon Anthology. On that recording, the vi-V-IV ostinato continues right through the lines "I just believe in me / Yoko and me / and that's reality," deemphasizing the final position of "Beatles" in Lennon's litany of dis-belief. Thus, whereas the Beatles may not have loomed as large in one earlier concept of "God," the decision to contrast them as part of a lost dream as against the reality of Lennon's self-identity (and his identification with Ono) in 1970 was apparently a carefully calculated and self-conscious decision by Lennon.

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