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Love and Disillusionment in the world of In Rainbows

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Radiohead's In Rainbows [1], their eighth full length LP, ends not with the seven colours of the rainbow, but only three — red, green and blue. The colours represent the narrator's final memoir, packaged neatly as a videotape, a feeble attempt at encapsulating an individual's life. The narrator urges the recipient of the tape to not be afraid, since the day of his death has been "The most perfect day [he's] ever seen." Despite Mephistopheles lurking beneath the narrator's ascending soul, reaching upwards to drag the narrator to hell, he remains unafraid as he faces the pearly gates.

In Rainbows came out on the 10th of October, 2007, a 10 song album that was lauded by the masses and critics alike for being a revolutionary art rock record, a record that still holds its weight 18 years after its release. The album effortlessly pairs a vibrant soundscape with gloomy, existential lyricism, and as such has found its place within internet culture as a testament to the band's revolutionary artisticism. Described by Michael Hubbard of musicOMH as "Packed, but sparse," the album is easily digestible with its mere 42 minute runtime while also being incredibly layered with themes of love, lust, disillusionment and suicide.

I adore In Rainbows. I believe that one cannot discuss music in the 21st Century without mentioning In Rainbows. Most songs immediately connected with me. However, on my first listen, the track Faust Arp stood out as somewhat odd. In classic Radiohead fashion, the flow of the album is interrupted by a short, interlude-like track where Thom Yorke, the frontman, delivers an almost train-of-thought-like performance. Compared to the rest of the beautifully produced album, Faust Arp is shockingly minimal, being completely drumless and composed solely of a guitar and Thom's vocals. Lyrically, too, it is jarring in the way it expresses its ideas. With the rest of the album consisting of subtle allusions, Faust Arp is almost blatant with its intention and inspiration. Both the verses and the guitar are incredibly repetitive, and Thom uses this repetitive rhythm along with similarly jittery lyricism ("It's on again, off again, on again", "Duplicate and triplicate...") to convey to the listener his frustrations with the dreariness of a repetitive, banal lifestyle that has become the standard in the 21st Century. Similar qualms are expressed across the album, in tracks like 15 Step and Bodysnatchers. Throughout its 42 minute runtime, the narrator is conscious of his sisyphean condition, constantly driven to the extent of suicidal ideation by this maddening banality of life, and Faust Arp almost feels

like Thom breaking down in the face of his noisy life. The narrator describes himself as being "Dead from the neck up"; rather than being paralysed from the neck down, it is his mind that has been numbed by the noise of life, the colours of existence's rainbow merging into a dreadfully plain white.

Perhaps the most obvious inspiration for the track can be found in Goethe's Faust, which begins with Faust, the protagonist, suffering from a similar disillusionment. Having mastered all knowledge in the mortal realm, Faust suffers from what can only be described as a divine boredom. Subsequently, he attempts to take his own life, but is narrowly prevented by the bells of Easter. Faust Arp, as suggested by the title, deals with Faust's internal arpeggio, his life a mere chaining of a broken, repetitive routine, similar to an arpeggiated chord. This was the revelation that made me realise Faust Arp's place in the album's tracklist, for it is at this point in the album where one discovers that In Rainbows, for all intents and purposes, is a modern day retelling of Goethe's Faust.

Repetition is woven into the fabric of In Rainbows. Most indicative of this is the album cover itself. Described by the artist Stanley Donwood as a "rainbow, but ... very toxic, the sort of one you'd see in a puddle" is a visual that can only be perceived as a vibrant mess, overlaid with a multicoloured repetition of the words "In Rainbows" and "Radiohead", each repetition slightly distorted by slashes and underscores. Even the instrumentation of the album is often repetitive, jittery and high-tempo, most notably in songs like Jigsaw Falling Into Place and Weird Fishes / Arpeggi, but this is not the sole characteristic of the album's soundscape. In Rainbows sounds almost carnal with its sensuality, an amalgam of synthesizers and acoustic guitars with organically evolving drum patterns, supplementing the themes of love and lust that the album wishes to explore in its interpretation of Faust.

In Goethe's poem, The Devil initially appears as a black dog trailing Faust, eventually assuming a humanoid form as Mephistopheles when tempting Faust with worldly pleasure. In the world of In Rainbows, it isn't immediately clear what the manifestation of The Devil is meant to be, but on subsequent listens it becomes apparent. As sung by the protagonist in Bodysnatchers, the second track of the album, "It is the 21st Century, It can follow you like a dog," (alluding to Goethe's use of the black dog as a symbol for The Devil), "It brought me to my knees." The Devil has manifested into the world of In Rainbows as the 21st Century, or rather what the 21st Century represents — a vapid era of conformity. In this age, the protagonist feels dissociated from reality, as if he isn't in control of what his body does or says ("I have no idea what I am talking about, I am trapped in this body and can't get out."). The protagonist has been forced into a life not of his choosing, and as he himself states, he is "a lie". The penultimate line of Bodysnatchers, "I'm a lie" could also be heard as "I'm alive", a sarcastic remark pointing to the fact that in this new millennium, to be alive is to be trapped in repetition. This fate is something that the protagonist has seen coming.

The most intimate instrumentation of the album can be found on Nude, the third track of the album. The slowed down, swung, 6/8 instrumental with the almost alien vocals from Thom acts as a surreal yet calm escape from the chaotic atmosphere of the tracks preceding it (with Bodysnatchers almost drowning in distortion, and 15 Step's unconventional 5/4 time signature adding to the disorder). The soothing nature of the instrumental is then juxtaposed by the sheer hopelessness of the

lyrics, dealing with the transient nature of pleasure and purpose ("now that you've found it, it's gone"). This ties back into Goethe's poem, where Faust enters a pact with Mephistopheles (the personification of the Devil) ensuring that Faust's thirst for ultimate knowledge and worldly pleasure remains fulfilled as long as Faust never finds such a perfect satisfaction in a moment that he wishes for the moment to linger for a second more.

In Nude, the protagonist is advised to not "get any big ideas", since things never go according to his will. His mindless existence is absolute, and to hope for any escape from the chains of his routine would be an act of blasphemy against the postmodern deity of conformity. Similar to Faust, the protagonist is able to "paint himself white" (white symbolising the union of every colour) and "fill up with noise", alluding to Faust's conquering of all mortal knowledge (by exploring all the sciences of his time, Faust had effectively 'painted' himself with every colour, and by cramming himself with knowledge, he has filled his mind up with 'noise'), and yet he finds that something is missing. A clear dichotomy is apparent, where the lyrics, speaking on behalf of Mephistopheles, affirm that to wish for more of anything would break their pact, and that the protagonist would "go to hell for what [his] dirty mind [was] thinking.", while the tone in which said lyrics are sung is indicative of the protagonist's desperation for a release from his trite routine and a full stop to his eternal disillusionment.

The protagonist's mind being referred to as 'dirty', a word with a usually lustful and corrupt connotation, is also to be noted. When introduced to Faust in Goethe's poem, one of the first things Mephistopheles does is attempt to corrupt Faust's mind. While unshaken by most worldly pursuits, Faust falls victim to the vice of desire when he is enraptured by the innocent maiden Gretchen. Faust sees this love as an escape from the banality of his life, and thus indulges in his affair with Gretchen completely, eventually abandoning her after his lustful desires are fulfilled and causing her subsequent ruin. These themes of love, lust and abandonment are explored across various songs in In Rainbows. Songs like 15 Step and Weird Fishes / Arpeggi deal with the constant betrayal in love that the protagonist, as if he was being fished for sport ("you reel me out, then you cut the string") or toyed with.

Weird Fishes is particularly similar to Faust's affection in Goethe's poem. The song starts off with the protagonist trapped at the bottom of a deep ocean, the ocean of his own psyche. From within this desolate ocean, he catches a glimpse of someone's eyes, and he decides to follow them. The protagonist is aware of what will follow; he will follow them to the ends of the earth and before he realises it, he will fall back into the depths of the sea and be eaten by weird fishes, as has happened to him multiple times. The lines "Everybody leaves if they get the chance / And this is my chance" show how the protagonist is accustomed to abandonment, being left behind in his ocean of woe by those he has loved in the past. However hopeless it may be, he believes this new love is still his only chance at escaping his miserable ocean. He is desperate for this love to work.

This tone of desperation is amplified tenfold in All I Need. The protagonist likens himself to an insect that is driven towards the shining light of a lamp, deluded into thinking that the light offers freedom, only to be burnt to a crisp. The protagonist is nothing short of obsessed, constantly proclaim-

ing that this love is "All [he] need[s]". The lines "I am in the middle of your picture / lying in the reeds" are likely a reference to John Everett Millais' Ophelia, a painting of the eponymous character from Hamlet after her death. The protagonist sees his own predicament in Ophelia's tragedy, being driven to madness due to the constant manipulation by the men in her life. Believing himself to be a victim of manipulative love, the protagonist can't help but relate. The protagonist, however, does not realise that his obsession is what ruins his relationships. By the end of the song, he almost grasps the fact that "It's all wrong", but he chooses to delude himself into thinking that his pitfalls are nonexistent and that he is a victim of circumstance, that "It's alright", because at least he isn't in the wrong.

The song Reckoner, positioned in the tracklist after Faust Arp, is a moment of clarity in the album. Framed as a conversation between Mephistopheles, the Reckoner, and our protagonist, this is the point in the album where the protagonist realises that he is solely to blame for his "bittersweet distractors", and not any external force like The Devil. The protagonist grapples with his own mortality, pondering the futile nature of worldly pleasure, that nothing can be taken to that place beyond death. "Like ripples on a blank shore", the protagonist strays away from people and perhaps even society as a whole, for he has sinned. He comes to terms with the fact that his actions are the direct cause for his failure in love.

This is where the album diverges from Goethe's poem, because rather than trying to redeem himself through creative expression, the protagonist asks the Reckoner to take him with him, accepting his role in the world as a sinner, ready to play the part as he falls further into sin. He is but a domino lined up to be toppled, a jigsaw piece falling into place in a predetermined image.

The following two tracks, House of Cards and Jigsaw Falling Into Place detail the protagonist's fall into sin. In House of Cards, the protagonist yearns for an extramarital relationship with his lover, who is married. He urges her to "kiss [her] husband goodnight" and come with him, throwing her keys into a bowl (common tradition in swinger parties, where keys are randomly picked from a bowl by suitors) and forget about her 'House of Cards', which represents the life that each of them have carefully orchestrated for themselves, a life as fleeting and fragile as a house of cards that may collapse any second. The protagonist wishes to leave this house of cards behind along with all his anxieties for just a moment. He urges the woman to "fall off the table", to fall from grace and indulge in sin with him, and "get swept under [the rug]", like a painful memory in the husband's mind, to become an incident one wishes to forget rather than a memorable person in one's life. Despite his obvious desire for this woman, he is not without doubt. He wants this affair to happen "No matter how it ends / No matter how it starts." The fact that he thinks about the affair's ending before its beginning shows an air of pessimism and insecurity that the protagonist is haunted by. Throughout House of Cards, Thom repeatedly sings the refrain of "denial, denial" to let us know that the protagonist is aware of the immorality of his actions, but chooses to willingly ignore it, living a life of denial.

Jigsaw Falling Into Place further displays the protagonist's downfall, showcasing the life of voyeurism that he has dedicated himself to. There is no shred of denial left, only acceptance for the person that he has become. Thom uses anaphora throughout the track almost like a ticking clock, as the protagonist finds himself in a bar trying to coerce a woman into being with him, before she is lost into the mayhem of the night. This is the lowest that the protagonist has morally fallen throughout this album, and it is also ironically the most honest that he has been. He wears his intentions on his sleeve, even coming clear as he narrates that he "never really got [drunk], [he'd] just pretended that [he] had", pretending to be drunk to engage with a clearly intoxicated woman. By the end of the night, he lets go completely, losing himself to the music, dancing his woes away. His jigsaw has fallen into place, and this is the role that he has chosen to play.

There is no redemption from Jigsaw Falling Into Place. The final track of the album, Videotape opens with the protagonist's death, just as Goethe's Faust ends with the titular character's death. Faust, having redeemed himself by turning his nation into a paradise for his people, marvels at the great things that he has done for his world, and is filled with a sense of fulfillment so pure that he finally utters the words: "Stay, moment, stay; Thou art so fair!" When Faust dies, his soul ascends to heaven, forgiven for his sins, out of Mephistopheles' grasp.

The protagonist does not have this moment. And yet, despite never having redeemed himself, he still remarks the day of his death to be his happiest, shockingly similar to Faust's final day. In red, blue, and green, he speaks to the recipient of his videotape, urging them to not be afraid, for the world is punishing but fair, and the protagonist passes on without regret.

Despite the different lives that Goethe's Faust and In Rainbows' protagonist have led, both of them die a similar death. Yet again, death has played its role as The Great Equalizer, and as Seneca once said, "in the ashes, all men are levelled". The drums spiral out of control as he says goodbye, playing in an erratic manner as the protagonist's soul faces the pearly gates. Mephistopheles reaches up to condemn him, and the gates of heaven are indecisive. The protagonist faces his final judgement, but is unafraid.

> No matter what happens next
> you shouldn't be afraid,
> because I know today has been
> the most perfect day I've ever seen.

Perhaps this is the thesis of In Rainbows, the point that Thom Yorke wants to drive home. Amidst love and disillusionment in the world of In Rainbows, only death sets our protagonist free.

FOOTNOTES

1. Ideally, listen to In Rainbows while reading.