

Against All Odds — “Sam Hall” and “The Man in Black”: From British Social Disparagement to American Defiant Individualism

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This article traces the development of the “Sam Hall” *topos* from its 18th or 17th century British origins to William Blake, to the Dubliners’ version of a Celtic traditional, to Hayes’ Harvard version, and finally to Johnny Cash. As an expression of socio-cultural criticism, the outlaw Sam Hall has been formed into a prototype of American defiant individualism “against all odds.”

In 1701, a criminal career came to a violent climax when Jack Hall was hanged at Tyburn Tree. His *curriculum vitae* is, to say the least, rather obscure: myth has it that, when still a child, Jack Hall was sold to a chimney sweep for a guinea, later became a criminal, was seized, sentenced for burglary, and then finally strung up. While this life story remains so sketchy and rudimentary, and although no minutiae about his character, background or circumstances are known, soon after the episode of his execution, the melodic spirit of “Jack Hall” began to spin in the air. And to this day, it has never faded.

The “Sam Hall-*topos*”—as it came to be known—is a very rich and productive one, and many groups and singers have recorded either one or another version. Yet hardly any scholar has tried to identify the different adaptations in view of their historical developments and cultural contexts.

This essay discusses “Sam Hall” as a cultural brand, highlighting that Sam Hall developed into the ideal prototype of the social outlaw, whose primary and exceptional characteristic is his ingenious defiant individualism.¹ A closer look at the history of the Sam Hall-theme, tracing the various transformations, will serve to elucidate its unique place within changing cultural landscapes. As one outstanding example of classic folksong tradition, the genesis of Sam Hall before the backdrop of its situatedness within specific historical, national, political and social settings will both illustrate how, and explain why one man’s name became a timeless synonym for the outlaw, for the enacted form of defiant individualism against all odds.²

Oh my name it is Jack Hall,
Chimney sweep, chimney sweep,
Oh my name it is Jack Hall, chimney sweep.
Oh my name it is Jack Hall,
And I’ve robb’d both great and small,
And my neck shall pay for all
When I die, when I die,
And my neck shall pay for all when I die. I have twenty pounds in store,
that’s no joke, that’s no joke,
I have twenty pounds in store, that’s no joke.
I have twenty pounds in store
And I’ll rob for twenty more,
And my neck shall pay for all
When I die, when I die,
And my neck shall pay for all when I die.

O they tell me that in goal
I shall die, I shall die

O they tell me that in goal, I shall die.
O they tell me that in goal
I shall drink no more brown ale,

But be dash'd if ever I fail
Til I die, til I die

But be dash'd if ever I fail til I die.

O I rode up Tyburn hill
In a cart, in a cart
O I rode up Tyburn Hill in a cart.
O I rode up Tyburn Hill,
And 'twas there I made my will,
Saying, "The best of friends must part,
So, farewell, so, farewell."
Saying, "The best of friends must part,
So, farewell."

Up the ladder I did grope,
that's no joke, that's no joke
Up the ladder I did grope, that's no joke.
Up the ladder I did grope,
and the hangman spread the rope,
O but never a word said I,
coming down, coming down,
O never a word said I coming down.³

This version is most probably the "ur-text", which, over the centuries, went through various adaptations and concomitant alterations. Supporting this argument, Sharp adds that this "original" must have been written before 1719, because of a reference to a tune "Chimney Sweep" in a publication that year with the same metre as Jack Hall. This early 18th century song contains many characteristic elements later renditions would either preserve, and often even accentuate, or alter according to purpose and context: the narrator Jack Hall, a chimney-sweep, has committed robbery, and amassed a small fortune. Certainly, he does not qualify for a Robin Hood figure, since instead of robbing the rich and giving to the poor, he "robbed both great and small" and kept the loot all for himself: "I have twenty pounds in store/ And I'll rob for twenty more"; furthermore, "great and small" provides a cutting across of all social strata—pecuniary just as well as social. He has been imprisoned and sentenced for his crimes, yet the decisive characteristic of this folk song figure is that he never weeps and pleads, nor suffers. To the contrary, in a rather jocular manner, he reports the story of his hanging, of his own (impending) death, without the slightest note of repentance or remorse; he'd even "rob for twenty more." The song's distinctive inherent tension derives from the poignant juxtaposition between the two omnipresent words: "joke" and "to die." Ultimately, death is a joke Jack Hall plays on the living. He thumbs his nose at those who have allocated to themselves the power to settle his earthly fate. Riding on the cart up Tyburn Hill, he "makes his will": "The best of friends must part, so, farewell, so, farewell." The mocking irony here is more than apparent. As unabashed sinner and social outcast, he addresses the anonymous audience as "friends" whom he has robbed, and who now prepare to make him pay for his misdeeds. Apart from that slight sneer, he submits himself to his execution in self-righteous silence, "never a word said I coming down."

The song obtains much of its resonating effect from the reverberations of William Blake's two "Chimney Sweeper"—poems published in *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794) respectively. Whether or not Blake was aware of the Jack Hall folksong must remain a moot point. Yet as John Adlard was able to show in his study *The Sports of Cruelty*,⁴ Blake was indeed very intrigued by folksongs and tales, working many into his poetic *oeuvre*. Thus it seems justified to compare Jack Hall and Blake's "Chimney Sweepers."

When my mother died I was very young,
And my Father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry "'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!"
So your chimneys I sweep, & in soot I sleep. There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head,
That curl'd like a lamb's back, was shav'd: so I said

“Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head’s bare
“You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair.”

And so he was quiet, & that very night
As Tom was a-sleeping, he had such a sight!
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned & Jack,
Were all of them lock’d up in coffins of black.

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,
And he open’d the coffins & set them all free;
Then down a green plain leaping, laughing, they run,
And wash in a river, and shine in the Sun.

Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,
They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind;
And the Angel told Tom, if he’d be a good boy,
He’d have God for his father, & never want joy.

And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark,
And got with our bags & our brushes to work.
Tho’ the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm;
So if all do their duty they need not fear harm.⁵

Swinburne remarked in astonishment that the “Chimney Sweeper” of *Songs of Innocence* (1789), being “so slight and seemingly wrong in metrical form” should “come to be so absolutely right.”⁶ Both, the literal and the metaphorical paths of interpretation lead to illuminating findings, and the most pertinent and influential shall be traced here briefly.

Particularly among scholars of the last two decades, Blake has been read and understood primarily before the background of political and social developments in the Great Britain and America of his own time.⁷ This emphasis on Blake’s political “radicalism” and social criticism has opened up new vistas for refreshing revaluations of his poetry. And particularly in the context of the Jack Hall-*topos*, Blake’s critique calls for greater recognition and appreciation, since he clearly instrumentalizes the chimney sweeper as a representative figure, as the ideal embodiment of society’s dire shortcomings and blatant miseries. The narrator’s life story is at first reminiscent of the Jack Hall myth in so far as a small boy is sold to a chimney sweeper, thus into misery and destitution. Yet after the first stanza, Blake uses the chimney sweep for a different purpose. Nurmi, K.E. Smith, Makdisi and others have diligently discussed the realism of Blake’s poem as “agit-prop” for improved protective legislation and against the employment of children as chimney sweeps.⁸ In harsh and unmistakable light, Blake, “the greatest radical poet in English”⁹ and social critic, draws a tableau of 18th century British reality. The loneliness, the soot, the cold, the narrow chimneys in which many a child got stuck, and which are here symbolically represented as “coffins of black,” sketch out the living and working conditions of those pitiable creatures on the lowest rungs of the social ladder. The poem’s main structuring device is the contrast between the black and sooty misery of the children’s earthly existence, and the white and clean happiness of promised heaven, where God’s sheep will blissfully gather. In addition, Tom Dacre’s white hair points towards the low life-expectancy these children had, the bags they carry, and which they would discard in their heavenly state of purity and innocence, signify the heavy physical and above all psychological burdens the chimney sweeper children had to bear.

In this sense, Blake’s poem was certainly a poignant contribution to a at the time pressing humanitarian problem. One might well argue that together with publications such as Jonas Hanway’s *A Sentimental History of Chimney Sweeps* (1785), Blake’s poem served as an influential tool in order to raise public consciousness and finally press for legal action¹⁰—a first parliamentary act was passed in 1788, yet remained ineffective; only in 1840 would the employment of children in the chimneys be officially prohibited.¹¹

The poem culminates in the last line with: “So if all do their duty they need not fear harm.” Scholars have interpreted this particular verse in various ways, on occasion derisively stressing the “shabby pronouncement,”¹²

and the “triteness and commonplace”¹³ or “platitudinous” nature of the final words.¹⁴ However, the word “duty” seems to have triggered the most interesting and controversial interpretive attempts.¹⁵ Larrissy has been one of the first to argue along socio-critical lines, pointing out that the platitudinous moral of the last stanza is reminiscent of the hymns and improving songs for children and workers so prominent in 18th century Britain (e.g. Isaac Watts’ *Divine Songs for Children* or Thomas Day’s *The History of Sanford and Merton*).¹⁶ Generalized moralizing rhymes such as “Happy the child whose tender years/ Receive instructions well;/ Who hates the sinner’s path, and fears/ The road that leads to hell” resound ironically in Blake’s last line,¹⁷ exposing the hollowness of official rhetoric with which “the young generation” was indoctrinated, regardless of their actual living conditions.

I concur with Nurmi that “Blake deals with particular social evils symbolically in the comprehensive “prophetic” context of Innocence and Experience,” but “a symbolic interpretation [...] that does not keep the cruel facts firmly in view is in danger of going badly astray.”¹⁸ Thus, whether one really desires to find sexual symbolism,¹⁹ and whether Swedenborgian thought actually contributes essentials to the understanding of the poem shall remain a moot point here.²⁰ Paul Fauvet has voiced the harshest criticism of Swedenborgian and neo-platonist approaches: “The prime sinner here is Kathleen Raine, who appears to believe that poetry is vastly improved if its content is ignored while the critic ransacks the most unlikely and obscure corners for ‘source material.’”²¹

It is quite obvious that the chimney sweeper boy, the climbing-boy, serves various purposes for Blake, and that the narrative reveals numerous layers of symbolic meaning, as sketched out rudimentarily above. Without getting caught in the trenches of scholarly dispute at this point, it should be safe to argue that one of the most pertinent lines of argument is certainly Blake’s socio-cultural and socio-political criticism as couched in the realistic narrative.

In *Songs of Experience*, the weeping misery combined with biting criticism of all social strata—family, Church and monarchy—oozes out of the poem, and does not seem to require a close *en détail* analysis to prove its point and reveal its importance for the Jack/Sam Hall context.

A little black thing among the snow,
Crying “weep! ‘Weep!” in notes of woe!
“Where are thy father & mother? say?”
“They are both gone up to the church to pray.“Because I was happy upon the heath,
“And smil’d among the winter’s snow,
“They clothed me in the clothes of death,
“And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

“And because I am happy & dance & sing,
“They think they have done me no injury,
“And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King,

“Who make up a heaven of our misery.”²²

As in *Songs of Innocence*, the criticism of social ills is obvious. Blake here uses again the black-white contrast and the warmth-cold opposition. The last two lines epitomize the message; in ironic manner all hierarchical levels of the patriarchal system—father, priest, King and God—are united to convey the notion that the lived and experienced misery is nothing but a heavenly disposition.

Whereas Jack Hall, the poor chimney sweep, has reverted to robbery for survival, Blake’s chimney sweeper children suffer passively as victims of a repressive and exploitative system, where even the church does not provide rescue.²³ In both cases, the chimney sweepers are dependent and marginalized; and in both cases, the “I”-“they” dichotomy is omnipresent and will characterize later versions to an even more prominent extent.

What differentiates Blake and the folk song is primarily that Blake’s adolescents are not constructed as individuals clearly separating themselves from the rest of society. And whereas all forms of 18th century “Erbauungsliteratur” were geared towards repentance (followed by adequate resocialization) of those unfortunate sinners who had

strayed from the right path—examples such as Defoe’s Moll Flanders come immediately to mind.²⁴ Jack Hall remains an asocial individual, unrepentant, but without objection to the supreme rule of the law. In contrast to Blake’s chimney sweeper poems, where the narrator parrots the official mantras of the time, just in order to deconstruct them, Jack Hall, by jocularly saying his farewells, underscores his defiant individualism in stark opposition to expected social deference.

In the 1850’s, the English comic minstrel C. W. Ross popularized a “vulgarized” version of the song, now entitled for the first time: “Sam Hall”.

Now my name is Samuel Hall,
Samuel Hall, Samuel Hall
Oh my name is Samuel Hall, Samuel Hall
Oh my name is Samuel Hall,
And I hate you one and all
You’re a bunch of mockers all
Blast your eyes.
You’re a bunch of mockers all
Blast your eyes. Now I killed a man they said
So they said, so they said
Oh I killed a man they said
Yes they said
I killed a man they said
And I left him layin dead
Cause I bashed his bloody head
Blast his eyes.
Cause I bashed his bloody head
Blast his eyes.

Now they put me in the quad
In the quad, in the quad
Oh they put me in the quad, in the quad
Oh they put me in the quad
And they left me there by God
Fastened to a bloody chain rod
Blast their eyes.
Fastened to a bloody chain rod
Blast their eyes.

Now the preacher he did come
He did come, he did come
Oh the preacher he did come he did come
Oh the preacher he did come
And he looked so doggone glum
As he talked of Kingdom Come
Blast his eyes.
As he talked of Kingdom Come
Blast his eyes.

And the sheriff he come too
He come too, he come too
Oh the sheriff he come too he come too
Oh the sheriff he come too
With his yellow boys and blue
Sayin Sam I’ll see you through
Blast your eyes.

Sayin Sam I'll see you through
Blast your eyes.

Oh it's up the rope I go I go I go
It's up the rope I go I go
Oh it's up the rope I go
While you critters down below
Are sayin Sam I told you so
Blast your eyes.
Are sayin Sam I told you so
Blast your eyes.

Oh it's swingin I must go
I must go I must go
It's swingin I must go, I must go
It's swingin I must go
Just because she loved him so
Just because she loved him so
Blast her eyes.
Just because she loved him so
Blast her eyes.

I must hang until I'm dead
Til I'm dead, Til I'm dead
I must hang until I'm dead
I must hang until dead
Caused I killed a man they said
And left him layin dead
Blast his eyes.
And left him layin dead
Blast his eyes.

This version eliminates the chimney sweeper as a social marker, and thus basically omits the element of social criticism, which the “ur-text” still contained through the allusion to Blake’s poems. Here, Sam Hall acquires a fairly aggressive tone and is now portrayed—or rather, portrays himself—as an alleged murderer. The narrator “hates” the “bunch of mockers,” breaks up the previously anonymous audience, and identifies the preacher and the sheriff as representatives of the community, of religion and law as the two decisive ordering and supporting social frames. Sam Hall sneers at them both, “Blast your eyes,” and unmasks their behaviour as farcical, their words as futile hollow phrases.

The next to last stanza entails another interesting addition to the original: “Just because she loved him so,” indicates that Sam Hall actually killed a man, most probably out of jealousy and bruised emotion. This slightly romantic touch, together with the aggressive accusatory tone of a Sam Hall who has committed a capital crime, separates Ross’s text clearly from the previous version. Here we find again the individual as outlaw, unrepentant, proud and defiant in view of the social community which has sentenced him to death; here, though, in a much more radical manner. “Sam I told you so” meets his “Blast your eyes”.

The Irish group The Dubliners in genuine Irish style recorded another highly popular adaptation of the *topos*. The “Celtic Original”, based on Ross, also reverberates William Blake’s two versions of “The Chimney Sweeper.”

Oh my name it is Sam Hall, chimney sweep, chimney sweep
Oh my name it is Sam Hall, chimney sweep
Oh my name it is Sam Hall and I've robbed both great and small
And my neck will pay for all when I die, when I die
And my neck will pay for all when I die I have twenty pounds in store, that's not all, that's not all
I have twenty pounds in store, that's not all

I have twenty pounds in store and I'll rob for twenty more
For the rich must help the poor, so must I, so must I
For the rich must help the poor, so must I

Oh they took me to Cootehill in a cart, in a cart
Oh they took me to Cootehill in a cart
Oh they took me to Cootehill where I stopped to make my will
Saying the best of friends must part, so must I, so must I
Saying the best of friends must part, so must I

Up the ladder I did grope, that's no joke, that's no joke
Up the ladder I did grope, that's no joke
Up the ladder I did grope and the hangman pulled the rope
And ne'er a word I spoke, tumbling down, tumbling down
And ne'er a word I spoke tumbling down

Oh my name it is Sam Hall, chimney sweep, chimney sweep
Oh my name it is Sam Hall, chimney sweep
Oh my name it is Sam Hall and I've robbed both great and small
And my neck will pay for all when I die, when I die
And my neck will pay for all when I die

Again, Sam Hall is a chimney sweep, who has "robbed both great and small/ And my neck will pay for all when I die."

The Celtic Traditional gives one interesting twist to the initial English program: whereas in the "original version" Jack Hall had "twenty pounds in store" and will "rob for twenty more," the Irish version adds another verse: "For the rich must help the poor, so must I". At first glance, Sam Hall here seems to be fashioned as a Robin Hood persona. Yet his interpretation of the Robin Hood creed is rather idiosyncratic and self-centered: he takes from the rich, and gives to the poor, which means: to himself. The Irish Traditional version puts heavier emphasis on Hall's asocial attitude. He represents an individual with no social ties at all. Even his fellow poor do not elicit in him any sense of communal responsibility. In typical Irish fashion, though, we see again the depravity and hardships of the chimney sweep turned criminal and the prototypical laughing defiance.

From here, it seems, Sam Hall crossed the Atlantic. In William Hayes's *Selected Songs Sung at Harvard College*, published in 1866, we find a version, which fuses the three previous ones.

My name it is Sam Hall,
Chimney-sweep, chimney-sweep;
My name it is Sam Hall,
Chimney-sweep, chimney-sweep;
My name it is Sam Hall,
And I robs both great and small;
But now I pays for all,
Chimney-sweep. Then the parson he will come...
With looks so bloody glum,
And talk o' what's to come,
Chimney-sweep.

Then the sheriff he'll come too...
With all his bloody crew,
Their bloody work to do,
Chimney-sweep.

Then up the drop we'll go...
While the people all below

'Il say 'Sam Hall, I told you so,'
Chimney-sweep.²⁵

Hardly any breath is wasted on the deed itself, the simple statement “I robs both great and small” is immediately followed by the—appropriate—consequences: “now I pays for all.” Wrongdoings and crimes are identified and punished accordingly, accompanied by the moral lesson: “I told you so.” Both the parson and the sheriff are not presented as ironically hypocritical as in the earlier 18th century versions. The parson simply looks “bloody glum” and the sheriff comes to do the “bloody work,” yet there is no underlying trace of criticism or sneering condescension. Law and order perform without further assessment or questioning. “Bloody,” of course, is the dominating adjective, and functions well through its double meaning—literally and as an expletive.

In more recent American versions the chimney sweep has disappeared, primarily because the chimney sweep never became such a quintessential cultural prototype in America as it had been for centuries in Great Britain. In the American folkloristic context, Sam Hall, the autonomous individualist turned outlaw, could fill the mould of no other socio-cultural persona but that of the Western cowboy.

Despite his diverse other “preoccupations and distractions” that year, “The Man in Black” recorded *Johnny Cash sings the ballads of the True West* as a double album in 1965 as the second concept album after *Bitter Tears* (1964).²⁶ Most certainly one could now hunt down the obvious and dig one’s toes into the easy prey, that is analyze the representation of the West and the Western myth, especially before the backdrop of a mid-1960’s audience. Yet much more exquisite and rewarding is a closer inspection of that one particular song not included on any other Cash-album, “Sam Hall.”

It certainly goes without saying that any autobiographical interpretation bears well-known dangers, and surely this author is not game for psychologized argumentation. However, in the so-called autobiography (written “together with Patrick Carr”),²⁷ Cash writes about the concept albums:

They [the concept albums] brought out voices that weren’t commonly heard at the time—voices that were ignored or even suppressed in the entertainment media, not to mention the political and educational establishments—and they addressed subjects I really cared about. I was trying to get at the reality behind some of the country’s history.

Keeping in mind particularly that last sentence, it can well be argued that Cash deliberately chose the Sam Hall song as a prominent piece of traditional American folklore in order to take a socio-political stand.

Well, my name it is Sam Hall, Sam Hall.
Yes, my name it is Sam Hall; it is Sam Hall.
My name it is Sam Hall an’ I hate you, one and all.
An’ I hate you one and all:
Damn your eyes. I killed a man, they said; so they said.
I killed a man, they said; so they said.
I killed a man, they said an’ I smashed in his head.
An’ I left him layin’ dead
Damn his eyes.

But a-swingin’ I must go; I must go.
A-swingin’ I must go; I must go.
A-swingin’, I must go while you critters down below,
Yell up: “Sam, I told you so.”
Well, damns your eyes!

I saw Molly in the crowd; in the crowd.
I saw Molly in the crowd; in the crowd.
I saw Molly in the crowd an’ I hollered, right out loud:

“Hey there Molly, ain’t you proud?
“Damn your eyes.”

Then the Sheriff, he came to; he came to.
Ah, yeah, the Sheriff, he came to; he came to.
The Sheriff, he come to and he said: "Sam, how are you?"

An I said: "Well, Sheriff, how are you,
"Damn your eyes."

My name is Samuel, Samuel.
My name is Samuel, Samuel.
My name is Samuel, an' I'll see you all in hell.
An' I'll see you all in hell,
Damn your eyes.

The adaptation Cash recorded presents Sam Hall as the stereotypical American Western misfit-turned-outcast. He is well known in the community, but in a collective sweeping blow, and with utter defiance, he yells at the gathered crowds that he hates them "one and all. Damn your eyes." Just as in the previous versions, the individual, the isolated narrating "I," is *leitmotif*-ish pitted against the "they" or "you."

Sam Hall sneers at (the local) community which has sentenced him to death for murder although, as the text suggests, there is no clear evidence for his guilt: "I killed a man, they said; so they said/ I killed a man, they said an' I smashed his head./ An' I left him layin' dead, Damn his eyes.// But a-swingin' I must go; I must go." Was he really going "an eye for an eye," the typical rough-and-ready, wild and woolly Western form of vigilantism? Surely he does not care a damn about that dead fellow: "Damn his eyes". He addresses the gathered people in the crowd as "critters down below," who yell: "Sam, I told you so"—well, damn their eyes!

On the pedestal of penalty Sam Hall looks down—condescendingly, one might say—on those who have settled his fate. He sneers at Molly, the only identified person in the crowd. Is she his "belle," the female corrective for the uncouth Western male? The lines: "I saw Molly in the crowd an' I hollered right out loud:/ "Hey there Molly, ain't you proud?"/ "Damn your eyes" are ambiguous. Is he being cynical, implying that the two of them are robbed of a shared future together? Or is he really proud of his rugged and recalcitrant behaviour? Considering the 1850's rendition of "Sam Hall," another explanation for the entire context could tentatively add to the picture. The lines of the 7th stanza: "Oh it's swingin I must go/ I must go.../...Just because she loved him so/...Blast her eyes" give a quite romantic slant to Ross' version, which is hard to detect in Cash's rendition; Ross' Sam Hall has murdered the competitor his sweetheart had made eyes on, and will thus be hanged; "Blast his eyes." That was murder for love, not for material gain or caused by a frontier bar-brawl. The background and situation of Cash's Molly, maybe intended to be a personification of emotion and compassion, remains nebulous. Therefore, interpretive attempts in the direction of linking the two concepts of individualism (Sam Hall) on the one hand, and domesticity (Molly) on the other hand, would certainly move on ice too thin for a sound argumentation.

Sam Hall scoffs at the sheriff and his feeble attempt to initiate conversation: "Sam, how are you?"/ An I said: "Well, Sherriff, how are you?"/ "Damn your eyes". Have the eyes of the law gone blind, has watchfulness dissipated in view of communal collective power? Does the sheriff close his eyes to the truth? Nothing but petty small talk takes place here in the most secularized form. Compared to Ross's version, Cash's rendition not only entirely omits the preacher, but where Ross's sheriff says: "I'll see you through," here the representative of law and order is reduced to a helpless awkward interlocutor of chitchat. Regardless of these discrepancies—both, Cash and Ross, celebrate ruthless self-assertion ruling supreme.

Despite the absence of the priest persona, Cash has preserved the religious *topos* through an interesting twist occurring in the last stanza, where Cash changes "Sam" to "Samuel." This is most certainly more than a reference to Ross or just a matter of rhyme (with "hell"). Samuel in the Old Testament is a seer and priest in Ramah, turning into the sole mediator of God's power. He acts on God's behalf to select King David and to monitor the king's adherence to requirements of God's covenant with Israel. Cash's Samuel Hall is indeed characterized by his seer-qualities; "eyes" and "to see" are words which occur in unprecedented abundance. With "And I'll see you all in hell," Samuel discloses and condemns the community's utter hypocrisy, inferring a society *in nuce*, which bathes in its holier-than-thou rhetoric, quick to pass judgement, probably fast to yield to prejudice and pre-conceived

opinions.

Arguing cautiously from the biographical perspective, then Cash's references to the bible do not come as a surprise, considering that he stresses his religiosity throughout his autobiographical writings.²⁸ Nicholas Kulish had a good point when he wrote in *The New York Times*:

Johnny Cash merges our seemingly contradictory American traditions of outlaws prone to wild gunplay and pious Christians singing hymns, without stopping to explain how you can be both at once. [...] This was a man who could comfortably recall playing host to Rev. Billy Graham and killing a crocodile named One Eyed Jack on the same page of his autobiography.²⁹

Sam Hall as the incarnation of self-reliance, defiance and "true-to-oneseif-ness", constitutes the model prototype of American defiant individualism.

The sources of American individualism are varied, and without delving too deeply into its genealogy and the historical transformations of the term's definition as well as of the relationship between the individual and society, three main areas of origin should be at least sketched out at this point.³⁰

The Puritans, following in many respects the teachings of John Calvin, gave the individual judgement and conscience the same position in which traditional modes of thought (had) placed the authority of the King and the state. However, Puritan society should be composed as a tight-knit community, and certainly not be ruled by anarchy. Being one of God's chosen, and working under the social contract for God's glory, for Calvin the individuals are united in a cohesive social group, a "society of individuals," and individual fate is thus turned into collective destiny.

Cash's setting is reminiscent of the Western frontier town. At the frontier, where the individual had to rely on himself rather than on any social net(work), individualism and self-reliance were—by necessity—encouraged, and metamorphosed into a constitutive American concept, including initiative, optimism and the belief in opportunity and future success. Perhaps the most prominent, yet certainly the most notorious advocate of this notion was Frederick Jackson Turner, who pointed out that the frontier as "the line of most rapid and effective Americanization" instilled an intense individuation in the national character, implanting in Americans "traits that made for aggressiveness, individuality, and an impatient habit of self-assertion."³¹ He argued strongly in favour of the positive and unique formative influence of the frontier:

The coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness, that practical, inventive turn of mind, [...] that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends, that restless, nervous energy, that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom, these are the traits of the frontier....³²

Thirdly, Enlightenment notions of man's innate goodness, free will, and ability to determine his own fate by acting according to reason lead to the American Democratic experiment, based first on self-evident truths, and then manifested in the Constitution.³³

The mixture of these three realms—religious foundation, geographical realities which demanded practical solutions and brought about changes in the American character, and philosophical *a priori*s put to action—forms the core of the American concept of individualism. Provocatively put: the history of American individualism reaches from the likes of John Calvin to Thomas Jefferson, to Alexis de Tocqueville,³⁴ to Ralph Waldo Emerson,³⁵ to Frederick Jackson Turner, to Herbert Hoover³⁶ and John F. Kennedy, to its (logical?) extreme: Johnny Cash.

He has reverted to the simplified form by giving expression to the rough-and-ready frontiersman who stands his ground no matter what "the social contract" enacts, cutting out half of the program by emphasizing the frontier individual's autonomy and derisive disregard of social norms and values in favour of the communal idea as derived originally from Calvinism and as rephrased later in the works of one Hoover or another John F. Kennedy. Cash has given this well known folk song in its American setting a message well-situated in a 1960's cultural landscape. Just as John Wayne's attempts to contribute to American folklore by speaking-singing a patriotic hymn

for America in times of national crisis (*America, Why I Love Her*),³⁷ Cash, the “Enduring American Icon,”³⁸ uses the Western genre to take a stand against 1960’s tendencies of alienation and insecurity. In a well-rooted American tradition, he reminds his fellow Americans of the heart and bone-ideas on which the nation is—according to official rhetoric—built. He emphasizes the individual—against all odds, combating the national feeling of insecurity dominating all levels of life: while foreign politics and affairs were characterized by Sputnik (1957) and American entanglements in Vietnam, and while at home, civil rights struggles, student protests and especially the assassination of JFK in 1963, stirred and traumatized the Great Nation, renegotiations of the relationship between individual and society began.

Herbert Hoover’s belief that “the progress of the nation is the sum of the progress in its individuals” and Kennedy’s Inaugural quip: “Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country”³⁹ meant much more than just rehashings of *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*. Similarly, Lyndon B. Johnson knew why he dubbed his political and rhetorical program “Great Society,” stressing the idea of both governmental and communal responsibilities,⁴⁰ calling for a reinvigorated 20th century version of Calvin’s “society of individuals.”

Whereas the British/Irish “Sam Hall”-version was much more geared toward a criticism of social ills such as pauperization and child labor, but also of the hierarchical system of patriarchy, Johnny Cash’s 1960’s rendition emphasizes individual strength and integrity, brought to a climax Western style: stubborn defiance against all odds, “Damn your eyes.”

Notes

1 It is neither within the scope, nor the focus of this essay to trace the historical development of the concept of individualism *per se*. A working definition for the American context will be provided with the discussion of Johnny Cash’s “Sam Hall.”² I owe the idea for this essay to the most heroic “fighter against all odds” I have ever had the fortune to come to know. To him, and to all those who “have not yet begun to fight” the essay is dedicated.

3 See C. J. Sharp, *Folk Songs From Somerset* (London: Simkin Novello, 1908), 20, and Sharp, *One Hundred English Folk Songs* (1916; Mineola, New York: Dover, 1975), 182.

4 See John Adlard, *The Sports of Cruelty: Fairies, Folk-Songs, Charms and other Country Matters in the Work of William Blake* (London: Cecil and Amelia Woolf, 1972). See especially articles 1 and 2 on: “Folk-Rhymes, Folk-Songs, Prophecies and Cries” (17–32) and “Folk-Tales” (33–46).

5 See “The Chimney-Sweeper” from *Songs of Innocence*. William Blake, *Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes. (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 117–18.

6 A.C. Swinburne, A.C. *William Blake: A Critical Essay*. 2nd ed. (London: John Camden Hotton, 1868), 115-16.

7 See John Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm. William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790’s*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Steve Clark and David Worrall, eds. *Historicizing Blake* (London: MacMillan, 1994); Jackie DiSalvo, G.A. Rosso, and Christopher Z. Hobson, eds. *Blake, Politics, and History* (New York: Garland, 1998); Saree Makdisi, *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

8 See Nurmi, “Fact and Symbol in ‘The Chimney Sweeper’ of Blake’s Songs of Innocence.” *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 1964, 249–56; Smith, *An Analysis of William Blake’s Early Writings and Designs to 1790*, 1999.

9 See, e.g., Larrissy, *William Blake*, 1985, 3.

10 See Taylor, *Jonas Hanaway Founder of the Marine Society*, 1985.

11 At about the same time that Blake wrote the *Songs*, another “battle against social evil” grew rapidly both in force and scope, namely abolitionism. In 1787, the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was being founded. By 1789, parliament was debating the issue, and with the passage of Wilberforce’s Bill in 1807, at least the slave

trade was finally abolished. For background see e.g. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery*, 1995.

12 D.G. Gillham, *William Blake* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 42.

13 Joseph Wicksteed *Blake's Innocence and Experience: A Study of the Songs and Manuscripts 'Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul'* (London: Dent, 1928), 108.

14 Edward Larrissy, *William Blake* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 16.

15 Wicksteed sees it in the context of man's duty to dream dreams, a notion which ties up with Raine's claim that dreams were for Blake "states of real insight into the world of the imagination," Kathleen Raine, *Blake and Tradition*, vol. 1, (Princeton, N.Y.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 20–26; and Gilham connects "duty" to an "exercise of fellow-feeling" which the speaker has for Tom (31f.). Just as these interpretations vary, so does the final judgement about the speaker's alleged naiveté and innocence. See Stewart Crehan, *Blake in Context* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1984). Crehan's opinion "Tom's innocence here is close to naiveté" (103) clashes with Gilham's opinion that "the state of Innocence is not a condition of ignorance or of naiveté, even though children and folk who lead a simple life are more usually associated with that state" (33).

16 See Thomas Day, *The History of Sanford and Merton*, 3 vols. (London: J. Stockdale, 1783–89).

17 See Isaac Watts, *Divine Songs for the Use of Children* as quoted in Larrissy, *William Blake*, 16.

18 Martin K. Nurmi, *William Blake* (London: Hutchinson, 1975), 23.

19 In *Vision and Disenchantment: Blake's 'Songs' and Wordsworth's 'Lyrical Ballads'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), Heather Glen has pointed out that the climbing boys' reputation was "one of lawlessness and disorder", suggesting, that "the obvious sexual symbolism of his trade" made him "a very potent image of subversive passion (95–109).

20 See Raine, *Blake and Tradition*, 1969, 20–26. Raine claims to have discovered evidence of "a direct link between the chimney sweepers and Orc, who is Blake's Eros." See also Harvey F. Bellin and Darrell Ruhl, eds. *Blake and Swedenborg: Opposition is True Friendship* (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1985).

21 Qtd. in Larrissy, *William Blake*, 31.

22 Blake, *Complete Writings*, 212.

23 In the context of Blake's poems, Philip J. Gallagher has argued that the poems are suffused by "biblical parasitism" – a terminology which seems rather inappropriate and so exceedingly judgemental that one is tempted to discard his argument immediately, particularly since he claims that his "method" of teaching Blake's Songs "promotes a liberal education". Yet his observation that "in poems like "The Chimney Sweeper", Blake is deploying Christian commonplaces and biblical tropes to expose the exploitativeness of antichrists who dilute the power of Scripture for their own selfish ends" might bear a grain of sense and relevance. Gallagher understands these poems as "revisionist critiques of biblical tradition", and this ties up quite nicely with the later versions, which identify and openly address the representative of the church. See Philip J. Gallagher, "Songs and the Bible" in Robert F. Gleckner and Mark L. Greenberg, eds. *Approaches to Teaching Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience* (New York: MLA, 1989), 104–08.

24 See Daniel Defoe, *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* (1722; London: Penguin, 1999).

25 William Hayes, *Selected Songs Sung at Harvard College* (Cambridge: John Wilson & Sons, 1866). 58–59.

26 See Johnny Cash, *Johnny Cash Sings the Ballads of the True West* (New York: Columbia, 1965); and Johnny Cash, *Bitter Tears. Ballads of the American Indian* (New York: Columbia, 1964).

27 Johnny Cash, with Patrick Carr, *Johnny Cash: The Autobiography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 263.

- 28 See also Stephen R. Tucker, "Pentecostalism and Popular Culture in the South: A Study of Four Musicians," *Journal of Popular Culture* 16, no. 3 (1982).
- 29 Nicholas Kulish, "Johnny Cash's Journey Through the Other Side of Virtue." *The New York Times*, 27 November 2005.
- 30 Taking the risk of over-simplification. Cf. Russel B. Nye, *This Almost Chosen People. Essays in The History of American Ideas* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1966). See also, e.g., Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); and Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, David E. Wellerby, eds. *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986).
- 31 Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," (1893) in Daniel Boorstin, ed. *An American Primer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 542–70; 545, 566f.
- 32 Qtd. in Boorstin, *An American Primer*, 566.
- 33 See the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Further, e.g. the writings of Thomas Jefferson, e.g. "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge" (1778) in Thomas Jefferson, *Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 365–73.
- 34 According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word "individualism" came into the vocabulary in 1840, when Henry Reeve translated the second part of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and transferred the term *individualisme* into English unchanged—since, Reeve said, it had no English equivalent. Tocqueville used the term in a rather pejorative manner—to describe what he perceived as a uniquely American experiment: to organize a society around the individual person, locating individualism in the domestic sphere, removed from society. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve, 2 vols. (1835, 1840; New York: Knopf, 1945). See also James T. Schleifer, *The Making of Tocqueville's 'Democracy in America'* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).
- 35 See Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance" (1841) in *Ralph Waldo Emerson, Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin, 1982), 175–203.
- 36 See Herbert Hoover, *American Individualism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1922).
- 37 Billy Liebert and John Wayne, *America, Why I Love Her*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1977).
- 38 Karen Schoemer, "Johnny Cash, an Enduring American Icon," *New York Times*, 3 May 1992.
- 39 See John F. Kennedy, "Inaugural Address 1961," in Boorstin, *American Primer*, 937–43.
- 40 Particularly the publication of Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1962) had brought the issue of widespread poverty within the "affluent society" to the surface. Johnson raised a program of social reform, the "Great Society," in order to countermand these developments. See William Chafe. *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*. rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

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