In a January 1982 article in *Interpretation* entitled "Who Tells the World's Story?" Douglas Hall suggested that it was time theologians abandoned philosophy, their traditional dialogue partner, for a new interdisciplinary dialogue, especially with the arts and social sciences. His argument was twofold. First, philosophy has become so specialized and truncated that it no longer addresses the big questions of meaning and thus can no longer be regarded as expressing >
adequately the zeitgeist or spirit of our contemporary age. And secondly our times have become so complicated, with a baffling interconnectedness of problems, that no single discipline could possibly constitute an adequate dialogue partner. In his proposal for a new, interdisciplinary dialogue that would renew theological discourse and contribute to global healing, Hall suggests that we follow his mentor, Paul Tillich, in engaging the arts and the social sciences in order to comprehend the questions, attitudes and moods of our times.

This paper attempts to accept part of Hall’s challenge by engaging one particular artist in extended dialogue—the Canadian songwriter, singer, and musician, Bruce Cockburn. We have selected Cockburn not simply because he is a Canadian artist, and is thus uniquely equipped to help Canadian theologians in their self-understanding, but for at least three larger, interconnected reasons.

To begin with, Bruce Cockburn is an exceptional musician and songwriter with a mature career of twenty albums released over twenty-two years. Not only have his music and lyrics received continual critical acclaim (his lyrics have been compared to the poetry of Wallace Stevens and T.S. Eliot), but Cockburn has been able to capture a significant portion of the popular music market. Cockburn’s most recent album, Nothing But a Burning Light, received the Associated Press Award for the best album of 1991. On Christmas Eve of that year CBC’s The Journal ran a thirty-minute special devoted to his career. His significance as a Canadian artist of stature is further indicated by the ten Juno awards and six Performing Rights Organization awards he has accumulated, as well as by his inception into the Order of Canada in 1983. He was also recently honoured by the release of an album of his songs performed by various Canadian “independent” artists, Kick at the Darkness: Songs of

Bruce Cockburn. This public recognition is simply corroboration for our judgement that Bruce Cockburn is quite likely the most learned, intelligent songwriter in North America today. This in itself makes him eminently suitable as a dialogue partner for theologians.

But secondly, Bruce Cockburn is a Christian, and a deeply reflective one at that. Ever since his 1974 album Salt, Sun and Time, which contains, in the song “All the Diamonds,” the evidence of his conversion (or “evolution” as he sometimes puts it) to Christian faith, Cockburn has struggled with the relationship of his evolving faith to this complex world of joy and brokenness, pain and glory. Although his songs have always creatively exploited the symbolic repertoire of the Christian tradition, forging a unique iconography in the process, his work of the last decade has matured significantly, so that his songs have increasingly brought his Christian vision to bear on the socio-political realities of the contemporary world. This renders Cockburn uniquely valuable as a dialogue partner for theological reflection. Indeed, in some ways Cockburn might be viewed as a model of theological reflection.

The third reason for selecting Cockburn is perhaps the most significant of all. Through an intense inner crisis in his personal life, Cockburn was driven to struggle with the overriding public crisis of Western civilization, namely the breakdown of modernity and the transition, gradual and painful as it is, to a postmodern situation. Though modernity and postmodernity are not his terms, Cockburn has in the past decade come to articulate a profound understanding of the relationship of his faith to “this world of pain and fire and steel” (“Broken Wheel”) in a manner that makes him a most valuable dialogue partner for theologians seeking wisdom in postmodern times.

When we meet the early, pre-Christian Cock-
burn in 1970-73, it is his antipathy to human culture and his almost wiccan, neopagan reverence for nature that stands out in his music. With the transition to christianity, we find Cockburn dazzled with a spiritual vision rich in Christian sacramental and mystical imagery, yet strangely distanced from the realities of the modern urban world. Indeed, when the Christian Cockburn of 1974-79 actually engaged modernity it was primarily to pass judgement, and from the outside.

Around 1980, however, a significant shift is discernable in Cockburn’s artistry. Cockburn’s marriage came apart at the seams, precipitating a major spiritual crisis. At this time he also moved from the Ottawa valley to downtown Toronto. This confluence of events shattered a significant barrier, evident in Cockburn’s previous lyrics, between the safe inner world of spirituality and familial love on the one hand, and the dangerous socio-cultural, political reality of modern urban life on the other.

Instead of standing at arm’s length, “safe within the harmony of kin,” as he had sung in “Gavin’s Woodpile” in the mid-seventies (In the Falling Dark, 1976), Cockburn for the first time embraced the pain of what he had once called the “outer world” (“January in the Halifax Airport Lounge,” Joy Will Find a Way, 1978). In the years 1980-85, in particular, we find Cockburn’s songs filled with a prophetic passion on behalf of those suffering the consequences of human violence and greed, the consequences of (as he puts it) “the grinding devolution of the democratic dream.” (“The Trouble with Normal,” The Trouble with Normal, 1983) It is as if Cockburn allowed his own pain to resonate with that of others—whether inner-city Torontonians, Guatemalan refugees or native Canadians—allowing him to understand their plight and to take up their cause. While there are occasional eruptions of self-righteous anger, as in his anti-FBI song “People See Through You,” or his protest song against right-wing christianity, “Gospel of Bondage,” his lyrics on the whole are remarkably free from strident triumphalism.

Like the weeping prophet, Jeremiah, who cried out to the people with their judgement, Cockburn comes to identify himself with the crisis of those living at the end of the modern age, those living in what theologian Langdon Gilkey calls, in Society and the Sacred, the “autuminal chill” of Western civilization. Indeed, Cockburn’s identification goes so deep that in his 1981 song “Broken Wheel,” from which the title of this paper is taken, we find him openly admitting his own complicity and participation in the brokenness of the world: “you and me, we are the break in the broken wheel” (Inner City Front, 1981).

We have said that Cockburn’s personal spiritual crisis parallels the public crisis of the end of modernity. It is of theological significance that it is precisely through an engagement with suffering that Cockburn experienced a profound renewal of faith. To use the categories that Walter Brueggemann developed in The Message of the Psalms, Cockburn’s marriage breakdown functioned as the catalyst for an experience of disorientation. This disorientation shattered his previously settled and secure Christian orientation. Through the embrace of pain—his own and that of the world—Cockburn came to what Brueggemann would call a reorientation, a transformation of his previous inadequate stance of faith into one that takes seriously the broken and dislocated character of life, without accepting the resignation of despair as final. What Brueggemann calls reorientation, Paul Ricoeur in The Symbolism of Evil names “second naïveté.” Yet in this case it is a naïveté that has passed not through the criticism of Enlightenment rationality, but (more profoundly) through the crucible of suffering, life in disarray, and the loss of personal and cultural meaning.
For those of us in a theological tradition who have been tempted in the past to embrace the autonomous values of modernity, shrugging off the naïveté of pre-critical faith, it is time to listen to Cockburn as he profoundly exposes the malaise of modernity and dismantles its optimistic myths of progress and rationality. Indeed, for those of us who have been "doxified" by the doxa of modernity (as Roland Barthes would put it), Cockburn is a good antidote. He engages in a therapeutic act of "de-doxification."

Or, to put it differently, Cockburn participates in the postmodern "de-naturalization" of some of the dominant assumptions of modernity that have been taken for granted. In biblical terms, he strips the idols of their pretensions.

For those of us, on the other hand, who have always been suspicious of modernity, living either in an uneasy compromise between its claims and those of faith, or in a myopic stance of avoidance, eyes averted to the inner world of faith and theology, it is also a time to listen. For the truth is that neither those who embrace nor those who avoid modernity will be able to address adequately our contemporary postmodern climate. Having never come to grips with the modern project, we are in no position to deal creatively with its demise. In Brueggemannian/Ricoeurian terms, we are stuck in a naïve orientation, whether of modernity or of faith.

Like Cockburn, we require a reorientation, a dynamic processing of the disorientation of postmodern brokenness, that moves us on to the sort of second naïveté that allowed Cockburn to juxtapose hopeful images from Isaiah’s vision of the light of Yahweh shining in the New Jerusalem (in chapter 60) with the grim realities of Pinochet’s Chile in “Santiago Dawn,” written in 1983:

I’ve got a dream and I’m not alone
darkness dead and gone
all the people are marching home
kissing the rush of dawn
Santiago sunrise
see them marching home
see them rising like grass through cement
in the Santiago dawn.
(“World of Wonders,” 1985)

What is it that allowed Cockburn to articulate such a powerful eschatological hope in the midst of an oppressive military dictatorship? We receive a hint in the previous verse where Cockburn sings of church bells in a Santiago slum ringing out protest against, and triumph over, a brutal military crackdown. As mass is celebrated in the midst of soldiers, dogs, smoke, and gas, the sounds Cockburn hears are “bells of rage ... bells of hope.” Hope is integrally connected to anger. A close reading of Cockburn’s lyrics, especially from 1980 on, reveals that it was anger at injustice and suffering that opened him up to the possibility of an alternative future, to hope in a vision of a better world rooted in the loving action of God.

To explicate the dynamics of the move from disorientation to reorientation, we need to begin by noting that anger is a natural response to a situation of disorientation, whether it be the disorientation of a marriage breakdown or the demise of modernity. It is even an appropriate response, since one’s “world,” one’s prior orientation, worldview, and grounding have been disrupted and called into question. Cockburn eloquently captures the appropriateness of anger in his 1979 song “Grim Travellers,” written during his marriage crisis, which comments on the near universal hardness of heart that produces a world characterized by terrorism, commodity capitalism,
and environmental destruction. Anger is an appropriate response to such a world:

grim travellers in dawn skies
I see the beauty—makes me cry inside
it makes me angry and I don’t know why
we’re grim travellers in dawn skies.

(Humans, 1980)

Although Cockburn’s anger here is expressed with a sense of poignancy, in other places it erupts into coarse language, into the sort of expletives that got a consumer advisory warning slapped onto his 1984 album Stealing Fire in American record stores. But unlike Eddie Murphy’s movie Harlem Nights, which uses the word “fuck” as punctuation (one reviewer stopped counting after eighty occurrences), Cockburn’s expletives are well-chosen and optimally sparse. His coarse language expresses not a limited vocabulary, but moral and emotional outrage at the “extremes of what humans can be.” (“Rumours of Glory,” Humans, 1980) From his 1971 response to the Vietnam war, “God, damn the hands of glory that hold the bloody firebrand high” (“It’s Going Down Slow,” Sunwheel Dance) to his 1983 description of the Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan as “so full of shit his breath makes acid rain” (“Put Our Hearts Together,” The Trouble with Normal), Cockburn is articulating his gut reaction to evil. Whether it is his famous song written in 1983, where he admits that “If I had a rocket launcher … some sonofabitch would die” (“If I had a Rocket Launcher,” Stealing Fire, 1984) or his 1985 exposé of Third World exploitation disguised as “democracy” when he sings “It’s just spend a buck to make a buck, you don’t really give a flying fuck about the people in misery” (“Call it Democracy,” World of Wonders), it is outrage at suffering that generates Cockburn’s critique and his language.

One might legitimately argue about the appropriateness of such language in some contexts, but if we cannot appreciate the depth of emotion and rage out of which such language is forged, we are likely to have a blissfully naive view of the world. In particular, we are likely to have disqualified pain as illegitimate on the basis of a prior, naive orientation, rather than to have taken seriously the fact that something is terribly wrong. And if we disqualify pain, we suppress it. The result is numbness, not anger—certainly not the sort of anger that we find in Cockburn’s song “If I had a Rocket Launcher.” When he introduces this song in concerts, Cockburn has been at pains to point out that he doesn’t counsel violence. The song is not meant as a statement of his position on violence, but rather as a testimony of what he felt, standing in that Mexican refugee camp when the Guatemalan helicopter came in, “second time today,” strafing the refugees with automatic weapon fire. Cockburn says both that he was surprised at his rage that day and that he doesn’t like to perform the song thoughtlessly, because it trivializes the experience. He therefore tries to relive the painful emotions of that day in 1983 every time he sings the song. Here is the last, climactic verse:

i want to raise every voice—at least i’ve got to try
every time i think about it water rises to my eyes
situation desperate, echoes of the victims cry
if i had a rocket launcher …
some sonofabitch would die.

Cockburn is on to something important with his anger. In “Call it Democracy,” the song with the “F” word, which goes on to call the IMF (International Monetary Fund) “dirty MF,” Cockburn reveals that he understands the source of his coarse language. It arises from the response that injustice
and oppression elicit in sensitive people who insist that things ought to be different. Cockburn sings of those who, under the thin guise of “democracy,” are really “international loan sharks backed by the guns / of market hungry military profiteers,” who “rob life of its quality / who render rage a necessity.” And in doing this they also render necessary a certain kind of language to articulate this rage.

Our point, however, isn’t the language; it’s the rage. Injustice renders rage necessary. But rage can move in at least three quite different directions, all of which are illustrated in Cockburn’s lyrics. In his 1976 song, “Gavin’s Woodpile,” we meet Cockburn with his barrier between the inner and outer world still intact. While splitting logs one evening, Cockburn reflects on a series of hopeless scenes culminating in the mercury poisoning of the English River on the Grassy Narrows reserve in Northern Ontario and the callous insensitivity of the government to this tragedy:

and the stack of wood grows higher and higher
and a helpless rage seems to set my brain on fire
and everywhere the free space fills
like a punctured diving suit and I’m
paralysed in the face of it all
cursed with the curse of these modern times.
(In the Falling Dark, 1976)

This rage is helpless; it is a disempowering rage, precisely because of the barrier between the safe inner world of faith and the dangerous outer world of Realpolitik. And although that barrier, described as a protective diving suit, begins to crack in the song, the initial response is paralysis. Anger is not always liberating.

A very different kind of anger is revealed in “Tropic Moon,” a song written in 1982 about guerrilla resistance fighters living on the run. Cockburn sings that “in the rage in the hearts of these men / is the seed of a wind they call kingdom come,” (The Trouble with Normal, 1983). This is the sort of rage that leads desperate revolutionaries to blow someone to kingdom come, in the name of a coming kingdom. Rage is a seed that can grow into the ugly tree of violent revolution, where the fruit is often more suffering and oppression than before. But that is a simplistic externalization of rage against the Other. That is the direction of anger outward, against that which we oppose, against those whom we oppose. Unlike the helpless rage of “Gavin’s Woodpile,” this is a rage acted out. The trouble is that such acting out simply perpetuates the mirror image of the enemy. Instead of a passive inner/outer split resulting in paralysis, we are left with a strident us/them opposition, generating violence.

But there is a third direction in which anger can move. Instead of paralysis or violence, rage can open us up to the suffering of others and to our complicity in their suffering. Rage can be the beginning of feeling the pain of the Other, the signal that we have let the Other in. Rage, in other words, can be a form of compassion for, and solidarity with, those who suffer. And Cockburn has a large repertoire of critical, political songs in which there is no trace of strident self-righteousness, in which he does not simplistically bring an external critique to bear on the world. Take, for example, a song like “Stolen Land,” which addresses the European colonization of the Americas and the plight of native peoples “from Tierra del Fuego to Ungava Bay”:

Apartheid in Arizona, slaughter in Brazil
if bullets don’t get good PR there’s other ways
to kill
kidnap all the children, put ‘em in a foreign
system
bring them up in no-man’s land where no
one really wants them
it’s a stolen land
stolen land—but it’s all we got
stolen land—and there’s no going back
stolen land—and we’ll never forget
stolen land—and we’re not through yet.
(\textit{Waiting for a Miracle, 1987})

Notice the unstinting use of “we” in the chorus. There is a clear perception here of complicity in a situation of brokenness. Further, there are no simplistic answers offered. And while this song does call for action in the final questioning line, “what steps are you gonna take to try and set things right / in this stolen land,” the overall tone of the song is one of pathos and solidarity, not of unthinking activism.

Such pathos is powerfully expressed in “Planet of the Clowns,” which pictures Cockburn standing on the seashore, overwhelmed by the suffering of creation:

This bluegreen ball in black space
filled with beauty even now
battered and abused and lovely.

And as Cockburn’s heart goes out to a broken world, he wonders at his own place before God in the plight of creation:

Each one in our own heart
Desperate to know where we stand
Planet of the clowns in wet shoes.
\textit{(The Trouble with Normal, 1983)}

There is not an ounce of triumphalism in that song. Instead, Cockburn weeps over planet earth, much as Jesus wept over Jerusalem.

That this is not a passive, paralyzed weeping is evident in the title track of the album on which this song appears. Cockburn’s complaint in “The trouble with Normal” is that “it always gets worse.” Cockburn neither accepts the present state of the world as normal or normative, nor does he simply grieve over its plight. Instead he engages in prophetic criticism, as in “Candy Man’s Gone” which insightfully declares the ending of the dream of modernity. Cockburn portrays the modern, idealized dream as a “sweet fantasia of the safe home / where nobody has to scrape for honey at the bottom of the comb.” He goes on to describe the universal appeal of the modern dream of progress in terms of prostitution and sales pitches, concluding by declaring it a false faith:

In the bar, in the senate, in the alley,
in the study
Pimping dreams of riches for everybody
Something for nothing, new lamps for old
And the streets will be platinum,
never mind gold
Well hey, pass it on,
Misplaced your faith and the Candy Man’s gone
I hate to tell you but the Candy Man’s gone
\textit{(The Trouble with Normal, 1983)}

In place of this false dream, Cockburn has an alternative dream. As we have already seen in “Santiago Dawn,” this is a dream of “darkness dead and gone.” It is a dream of “all the people ... marching home.” But unlike the “sweet fantasia of the safe home” which constitutes the naïve orientation of modernity, this dream of marching home is a vision of reorientation; a post-holocaust dream. This is, if you will, a postmodern vision with a liberated second naiveté that actually believes that homecoming is a
genuine possibility in a world characterized by literal and symbolic homelessness.

But isn't the dream of such a homecoming a pipe dream? Cockburn has heard this question and insists on hope in the face of paralysis and numbness:

don't I hear them talking
don't I know what they say
i'm a fool for thinking
things could be better than they were today

there must be more ... more ...
more growth more truth
more chains more loose
not more pain not more walls
not more living human voodoo dolls.

But what is it that has given rise to such a hope, or at least to the yearning that things be otherwise? In “Where the Death Squad Lives,” a song written in 1985, Cockburn indicates that hope arises in desperation, in boundary situations of suffering and evil.

this world can be better than it is today
you can say I'm a dreamer but that's okay
without the could-be and the might-have-been
all you've got left is your fragile skin
and that ain't worth much down
where the death squad lives.
(Big Circumstance, 1988)

From the history of apocalyptic thinking we know that when a situation is so desperate and intolerable that life becomes meaningless (“all you've got left is your fragile skin”), then the context is ripe for the rise of eschatological hope. Cockburn's hope, however, is rooted not only in a sense of historico-cultural dislocation and desperation, but also in a deep ethical yearning. Indeed, hope and normativity are integrally connected. Without a hope for that which could be and should be, there are simply no resources for ethical action in the face of the death squads.

It is a profound hope for that which could-be and should-be that informs Cockburn's analysis of our postmodern malaise in “Broken Wheel” (Inner City Front, 1981), one of his finest songs. In earlier songs from the 1970s that gave beautiful expression to the orientation of a Christian worldview (such as “Starwheel” and “Lord of the Starfields,” from Joy Will Find a Way, 1975 and In the Falling Dark, 1976, respectively), Cockburn often referred to the stars as a silent witness to God's sovereignty and love. In “Broken Wheel” he returns to these images. He turns his gaze again to the starwheel, to “the rim of the galaxy”—specifically to the left spiral arm of the Milky Way Galaxy. He turns his attention to planet earth in a cosmic, galactic context. And what does he see?

Way out on the rim of the galaxy
The gifts of the Lord lie torn
Into whose charge the gifts were given
Have made it a curse for so many to be born
This is my trouble —
These were my fathers
So how am I supposed to feel?
Way out on the rim of the broken wheel.

Cockburn’s confession in an earlier song that it is love that turns the starwheel is now matched by the observation that this starwheel suffers from a deadly flaw. “See how the Starwheel turns”—it bumps along on a broken rim! There is a dialectical interplay of orientation and disorientation in these lines. Precisely because the artist maintains an orientation in
which life in God’s creation is fundamentally gifted, the tearing or rending of those gifts is an occasion for disquieting disorientation.

Further, since the gifts of creation have been entrusted to the stewardly care of human beings, created in the image of God, the tearing of those gifts is fundamentally a human responsibility. Cockburn is painfully aware of this: “Into whose charge the gifts were given / Have made it a curse for so many to be born.” And such a cursed and broken reality is one in which the artist is totally implicated: “This is my trouble / These were my fathers.” Consequently, as Cockburn says later in the song, “No adult of sound mind / Can be an innocent bystander.” “You and me—we are the break in the broken wheel.” It is human brokenness that occasions cosmic brokenness—indeed, the very wheel of the galaxy, the star-wheel. For Cockburn this brokenness is not merely a theological dogma concerning human fallibility and culpability. It is a deeply personal confession of complicity. “So how am I supposed to feel?” How do we feel when we realize not only our complicity in brokenness, but also our willful participation in and propagation of evil? How are we to feel when we realize that our mismanagement of the gifts of creation, our failed stewardship, has made it no less than “a curse for so many to be born”?

"Broken Wheel" explicitly rejects any spirituality of escape. It rejects any separation between the world of faith and the cosmos. There can be no bystanders, innocent or otherwise. Indeed, in this song there is an intensification of engagement with the world. But to engage this world one must engage its pain. It is only by embracing the brokenness of creation that we can begin to affirm the possibility of change. Walter Brueggemann sums it up well in his book on the exilic prophet, *Hopeful Imagination*, when he says, “Only grief permits newness.” Those who do not want the new are afraid of grief; they deny it to themselves and suppress it in others. Because grief, mourning, and tears are not expressions of powerless acquiescence. Rather, grief, mourning, and tears function as a radical critique of the present order by bringing what is wrong into conscious awareness. Such mourning refuses to cover up, and insists that we confront the brokenness, oppression, failed expectations, and empty promises of the present.

If grief permits the newness of hope, then “Broken Wheel” gives voice to a profound hope:

- Water of life is going to flow again
- Changed from the blood of heroes and knaves
- The word mercy’s going to have a new meaning
- When we are judged by the children of our slaves
- No adult of sound mind
- Can be an innocent bystander
- Trial comes before truth’s revealed
- Out here on the rim of the broken wheel.

The embrace of pain is the door to hope. In a world characterized by “pain and fire and steel,” a world that is a broken wheel, Cockburn is bold enough to proclaim in the second verse that the “water of life is going to flow again.” “Water of life” alludes to a prominent biblical metaphor for God’s presence. Significantly, that metaphor is often employed in the Bible during times of deep spiritual thirst and desolation. It is used by Second Isaiah during the time of the Babylonian exile (Isaiah 43:19-20; 44:3; 55:1). Jesus refers to himself as living water (John 4:1-15). And the Book of Revelation describes drinking from the waters of life to be one of the benefits of the end-time (Rev. 21:6; 22:1, 17).

This water, however, is not acquired without a
cost. This is a living water that will flow again, but it will be flowing from blood that has already been shed, the blood of heroes and knaves. But who are they? The presence of the metaphor of "water of life" in the Book of Revelation suggests that we might look there to find an answer to this question. In Revelation, before we come to the waters of life in the last two chapters, we have to pass through an awful lot of blood on the way. The blood of the martyrs and also the blood of the Lamb, the sacrificial blood of Jesus (Rev. 17:6; 7:14; 12:11). Are these the heroes and knaves? Most likely, given Cockburn's typical iconography. After all, what is a knave but another name for a joker, a fool? And Cockburn has employed the image of joker, fool, and Harlequin to refer to the Christ in such songs as "Feast of Fools" (Further Adventures of, 1978) and "Hills of Morning" (Dancing in the Dragon's Jaws, 1979).

But just as the cross precedes resurrection, so Cockburn anticipates the radical prophetic reversals we would expect of the messianic age.

In "Broken Wheel" Cockburn shows a profound grasp of the biblical insight that waters of life flow from the pierced side of the Christ. There can indeed be hope in this broken-wheeled world, but it is a hope that must walk the path that goes through Golgotha. It is the walk of the cross.

But just as the cross precedes resurrection, so Cockburn anticipates the radical prophetic reversals we would expect of the messianic age. There will be waters of life, and there will be mercy. But that water will flow from blood and that mercy will "have a new meaning." Cockburn's hope here is set in the eschatological context of judgement. In a radical reversal, we are going to be "judged by the children of our slaves." The very children for whom our brokenness has made it a curse to be born, now return, scathed by that curse, but alive nonetheless, to judge us. As Jesus said, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last" (Matthew 20:16). It is only in a context of prophetic reversals that there can be any hope for a broken-wheeled world. Anything less would be cheap and escapist.

The coda of the song brings us to new depths of spiritual insight. In the first half of the coda Cockburn sings:

You and me—we are the break in the broken wheel
Bleeding wound that will not heal.

This has clear parallels with, if not dependence upon, the words of Jeremiah. Overwhelmed with grief, Jeremiah proclaimed to Israel just before the Babylonian captivity:

Your wound is incurable
your injury beyond healing.
There is no one to plead your cause,
no remedy for your sore,
no healing for you.
(Jeremiah 30:12-13)

In another place the prophet, standing in solidarity with the brokenness of his people, says:

Since my people are crushed, I am crushed;
I mourn and horror grips me.
Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why then is there no healing
for the wound of my people?
(Jeremiah 8: 21-22)

Like Jeremiah, Cockburn finds the human condition to be critical. In such a context a physician is desperately needed. Here, in the midst of his deeply painful identification with the brokenness of the world, Cockburn addresses Christ as the Great Physician and ultimate source of healing. In the
depths of his disorientation he thus returns to his most fundamental orientation in order to find restorative reorientation.

It should be noted, however, that Cockburn is well aware that such a reorientation is not to be found simply in a more entrenched restatement of the previous orientation. In "Justice" (which immediately precedes "Broken Wheel" on Inner City Front) he places himself in opposition to any and all kinds of absolutist sloganeering, whether it be of religion (even "the name of Jesus"), revolution, or the state. Such slogans will not awaken us from our tragedy because they result not in the flowing of waters of life, but in more blood. The only light that Cockburn can discern in this kind of absolutism is the light shed by flames of violence.

But although Cockburn opposes this absolutism, he doesn't self-righteously exempt himself from critique: "We all have to live with what we've been." We cannot escape the brokenness of our past. Indeed, we have to begin dealing with our own brokenness.

Got to search the silence of the soul's wild places
For a voice that can cross the spaces
These definitions we love create—
These names for heaven, hero, tribe, and state.

The artist tells us that we need a revelatory voice that can traverse the distant spaces we have created between each other by means of our definitions. But that revelation cannot come to us from outside our present situation. That revelation needs to be found precisely within "the silence of the soul's wild places." Any other voice would be a counsel of escape.

But in "Broken Wheel" Cockburn explicitly rejects this option. In the second half of the coda he sings:

Lord, spit on our eyes so we can see
How to wake up from this tragedy.

Cockburn alludes here to the healing story from the gospels in which Jesus made a paste of mud with his own spittle and applied it to the eyes of a blind man. Upon washing off the paste, the man could see (John 9:1-12; cf. Mark 8:22-25). It is for such renewed sight that Cockburn prays.

But he then goes on in the next line to mix the metaphors of blindness and sleep. He wants God to give us back our sight so that we can "wake up from this tragedy." Our problem isn't just that we are the break in the broken wheel. It is compounded by the fact that we are asleep to this tragedy. We have numbed ourselves to sleep. Our bleeding wound will not heal because we are unaware of it in our anesthetized slumber. So Cockburn asks that we regain our sight in order to be awakened to our predicament.

This is a profound prayer to be uttered by an insomniac. Many of Cockburn's songs throughout the '80s are situated at night. It is hard to sleep when you are deeply troubled. But the artist doesn't ask for the peace of a good night's sleep. Rather, he wants to be awakened. In this world, sleep is inappropriate. At a time of crisis we need to keep awake.

To be awake "way out on the rim of the broken wheel" is to feel the pain of that brokenness. So the coda doesn't ask for a healing that will necessarily alleviate the pain. It asks for a healing that is deeper—a healing that will be awake to the pain and conscious of the brokenness. The song then concludes by structurally manifesting brokenness. The third verse, with the exception of the second-to-last line, ("in a world of pain and fire and steel"), consists of disjointed quotations from the rest of the song. This is, indeed, a broken verse for a broken wheel.

A broken-wheeled world is an appropriate
description of the postmodern malaise. This song is Cockburn's reflection on our cultural reality from the perspective of the margins, indeed, nothing less than the very margins of the galaxy. Yet it is clear that what goes on at the rim of the galaxy profoundly affects the whole.

"Postmodern", however, is a very slippery term. The way we have used the word in this paper has been to describe an overall cultural mood. Another way to say this would be that by "postmodernity" we are referring to a cultural ethos, indeed, a zeitgeist. It is characterized first of all by a feeling of cultural exhaustion. Postmodernity refers to the crisis of the modern worldview, to a process of cultural dissemination and deconstruction that finds itself disillusioned with modernity and its heroic pretensions.

Furthermore, recognizing that the world in which we live is a cultural construct, postmodernity is a zeitgeist stripped of any sense of being at home in this world. Our constructs are too precarious (and too bent on self-destruction) to provide us with much sense of the security of home. Finally, admitting that worldviews are rooted in human decisions, not in the structure of an objectively realist world, postmodernity finds itself lost in undecidability. As a worldview crisis which de-doxifies that which modernity has naturalized, postmodernity finds itself experiencing a profound and disturbing sense of anomie in which no totalization of truth and no grand narrative can serve to ground and guide any normative stance.

In this paper we have attempted to situate Bruce Cockburn's artistry in the context of this kind of cultural dissolution. So, for example, Cockburn gives voice to what has become the typical provisionality of postmodern affirmation, when he sings:

- all these years of thinking
- ended up like this
- in front of all this beauty
- understanding nothing

(“Understanding Nothing, Big Circumstance, 1988)

In another song on the same album he admits, in good postmodern style:

- The gift
- keeps moving
- never know
- where it's going to land.
- You must stand
- back and let it
- keep on changing hands.

(“The Gift”)

And in his most recent album, Nothing But a Burning Light, Cockburn sings:

- There's roads and there's roads
- And they call, can't you hear it?
- Roads of the earth
- And roads of the spirit
- The best roads of all
- Are the ones that aren't certain
- One of those is where you'll find me
- When they drop the big curtain.


Yet the very affirmation that in this beautiful world the weaver's fingers move too fast, that this world is received as a gift—not a commodity to be owned and exploited or as a merely human construct—and that even the uncertain roads call us, and we can hear
Cockburn goes beyond a paralyzed postmodern anomy by insisting on a radical and liberating normativity. This is not, however, a going beyond that is untouched by the postmodern malaise:

Sometimes I feel like there’s a padlock
on my soul
if you open my heart you’d find a big black hole
but when the feeling comes through, it
comes through strong—
if you think there’s no difference between right
and wrong
just go down where the death
squad lives.

Bruce Cockburn knows postmodern despair. But in the face of the Other, and in the face of radical evil that admits no postmodern deconstruction, he has a feeling—granted it is no absolute moral order, but just a
feeling—that comes on so strong that he cannot deny it. This is a feeling of profound ethical normativity. Cockburn can deconstruct the lies of modernity with the best of them. Yet he goes beyond deconstruction. And this “beyond” is rooted, most fundamentally, in a radical eschatological hope. Here Cockburn is blissfully unpostmodern. Such a hope requires a decision in the face of undecidability, a place to stand in a world that seems to be composed of cultural quicksand. And that decision and that standing seem to us to be inextricably connected to embracing a grand narrative and to being embraced by that narrative. Simply stated, without a metanarrative, without an overarching vision of the story of the world, hope is literally impossible.

“Who tells the world’s story?” Douglas Hall asked. If we listen to Cockburn’s telling, it is clear that his metanarrative and his hope are not naive, blissfully unaware of the fires of cultural decline and personal failure and brokenness. Rather, this is an eschatological hope for a broken-wheeled world. It is a hope, like all biblical hope, born in suffering and tested by fire. It is the hope of a second naiveté. This is a hope that can passionately ask:

so how come history takes such a long,
long time
when you’re waiting for a miracle?
("Waiting for a Miracle," Waiting for a Miracle,
1987)

Cockburn can ask the question honestly and passionately precisely because he has a genuine hope in a God who, beyond modernity and postmodernity, brings life out of death. Such honest questioning and radical hope are indispensable if there is to be Christian faith in a postmodern world.