"We can't dance together"[1]

María Rosa Menocal

> Maybe this small attachment to my past is only another case of what Frank Zappa calls a bunch of old guys sitting around playing rock'n'roll. But as we all know, rock'n'roll will never die, and education too, as Henry Adams always sez, keeps going on forever.
>
> Thomas Pynchon, Introduction to *Slow Learner* xxxiv

Anyone who teaches Petrarch's lyric magnum opus, vulgarly known as the *Canzoniere*, is eventually bound to reveal to his or her students the rather delicious irony that Petrarch actually thought—or at least said, repeatedly—that writing in the vernacular, the language of the masses and the vulgar, was not a particularly worthwhile or dignified enterprise. I, at least, get a somewhat malicious pleasure from pointing out that it is, of course, because of his magnificently "vulgar" collection of love songs that Petrarch is at all remembered—and that he is such an integral part of canonical Western culture. The irony is a double one: first, if his statements can be taken at face value, Petrarch was terribly wrong in his assessments of the relative merits of his vernacular versus his "classical" writings; second, we have now, following his obviously misguided thinking on the matter and in blatant disregard of the historical lesson, "classicized" the love songs—which were so successful precisely because they weren't "classical" in the first place.[2] When one reads Allan Bloom's derisive comments about music in *The Closing of the American Mind*, which are characterized by a remarkably similar disdain for popular love lyrics and the accompanying reverence for the "great tradition," one can't help but wonder, at least for a split second, if Bloom doesn't have a manuscript of rock lyrics stashed away someplace. Well, it was just a split second.

In fact, a first reading of Bloom, of the chapter entitled "Music" in particular, should logically lead one merely to shrug one's shoulders at his stereotypically retrograde views. I spent several months ticking off all the reasons why writing a response to Bloom's book was, is, even on the face of it, a waste of time and a somewhat self-indulgent exercise. It struck me as significant, however, that other reviewers, no matter how negative, rarely mentioned his ravings about music, tending to be concerned with the more "serious" issues about education he raises. Even the witty and intelligent review in *Rolling Stone*, which lays many of Bloom's pretenses bare ("he is peddling fundamentalism for highbrows" [Greider 39]) essentially passes over Bloom's substantive comments about music—in great measure, no doubt, because for anyone reading that journal his comments are too ludicrous even to require a response, their silliness exposed just by their being quoted. But because, as the example of Petrarch so clearly indicates, the multiple and complex issues revolving around the question of "vulgar" love lyrics and the canonical literary tradition are much too important to and central in our profession to be left to the occasional college newspaper refutation by a student music reviewer, I decided to respond.

I do so acknowledging the following limitations. First, I do not pretend to be in any way comprehensive or systematic in my treatment of rock, and the examples I have chosen are idiosyncratic, personal, and relatively random, the music that happened to come to mind. I am not a scholar or an expert in this area, nor is this a research paper on rock.[3] I am a middling to average, at best, connoisseur of the genre. But my examples are not unrepresentative (although they in fact represent a minuscule selection of the full range), and someone else's personal sampling would have comparable validity. Second, I will not address in any great detail the much larger issues Bloom raises, although they are, perforce, the backdrop for the music chapter and, more important, they reflect an ideology within which his rejection of rock must be understood. But those are other reviews.[4] And for the sake of my argument—in sum, that Bloom is, from a scholarly point of view, wrong about what rock and roll is—I will attempt to suspend any sustained rebuttal that involves opinion as to what culture (and thus rock and roll) ought to be.

Bloom's argument about rock has three major elements: (1) that rock music and its lyrics are limited

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to "sex, hate and a smarmy, hypocritical version of brotherly love" (74), with an emphasis on sex: "rock music has one appeal only, a barbaric appeal, to sexual desire—not love, not *eros*, but sexual desire undeveloped and untutored" (73); (2) that rock's values (or lack thereof) are, at worst, antagonistic to fundamental cultural values and, at best, lie well outside other lasting cultural pursuits: "Rock music encourages passions and provides models that have no relation to any life the young people . . . can possibly lead, or to the kinds of admiration encouraged by liberal studies. . . . [A]s long as they have the Walkman on, they cannot hear what the great tradition has to say" (80–81); (3) that rock is a musical-lyrical genre that concerns youth and children overwhelmingly: "Never was there an art form directed so exclusively to children" (74). Let's take these elements in that order.

Rock's classic love songs are about a great deal more—or less—than sex.

Bloom's assertions about the poverty and limitations of rock's themes are perhaps the most excruciating in their simple lack of factualness—and there is such an embarrassment of riches available as counterargument that it is difficult to know where to start. What *is* true, certainly, is that the richest thematic mine is that of love—and more often than not, love that is in some way unsatisfying, unhappy, or unfulfilled. But many, if not most, of rock's classic love songs are about a great deal more—or less—than sex. From the Beatles's basically silly "Michelle, my belle, these are words that go together well" (which reveals the metaliterary preoccupation of rock as well) to Dylan's charming ditty "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go," which includes a refusal of other types of love poetry ("Situations have ended sad / Relationships have all been bad / Kind of been like Verlaine's and Rimbaud's / But there's no way I can compare / All them scenes to this affair / You're gonna make me lonesome when you go"), to the troubled and tortured love of Neil Young's "Now that you've made yourself love me / Do you think I can change it in a day?" there are few, if any, of the variations and variegations of "classical" love poetry that have not found lyrics in the rock canon.

Even if we limit ourselves to the writing of the artists mentioned above, Bloom's generalization not only crumbles but has to be replaced by the realization that rock's obsession with love and with its own expressions of the longing for love are next of kin to those same obsessions in all other lyrical schools. Thus, the Beatles's hymn to enduring, perfect, and as yet unfound love in "I Will" ("Who knows how long I've loved you? / You know I love you still / Will I wait a lonely lifetime? / If you want me to I will / For if I ever saw you / I didn't catch your name / But it never really mattered / I will always feel the same") is neatly counterbalanced by their wistful and hopeful projection about a perhaps nonexistent future in the classic "When I'm Sixty-Four" ("Will you still need me? / Will you still feed me? / When I'm sixty-four"). Dylan's repertoire of love songs (although it is fair to say that he is far from being known as a love lyricist) is scarcely less representative of these ties to lyric antecedents. From the early, bittersweet "Don't Think Twice It's All Right" about the pain of failed love ("Well it ain't no use to sit and wonder why, babe / If you don't know by now . . . When your rooster crows at the break of dawn / Look out your window and I'll be gone / You're the reason that I'm traveling on / But don't think twice, it's all right . . . But I wish there was something you would do or say / To try and make me change my mind and stay . . . ") to the famous "Just like a Woman" (satirized by Woody Allen in *Annie Hall*) to other, much more difficult and hermetic songs such as "Queen Jane Approximately" ("When all the flower girls want back what they have lent you / And the smell of their roses does not remain / And all of your children start to resent you / Won't you come see me, Queen Jane?"), his long and varied career as a lyricist is reminiscent of a poetic ancestry he is quite conscious of following.[5] And the centrality of the broken heart to the lyric tradition is simply and touchingly reflected in Neil Young's "Only Love Can Break Your Heart" ("When you were young and on your own / How did it feel to be alone? . . . But only love can break your heart / Try to be sure right from the start / Yes only love can break your heart / What if your world should fall apart?").

The interesting question, of course, is why and how the preoccupation with love and its expression in rock is so reminiscent of other lyrical traditions, so like other schools and canons that are now studied, by and large, in a more rarefied atmosphere. From twelfth-century Persian courtly poetry to Petrarchism in Renaissance Europe to opera in the last century, love and its many problems—sometimes sexual, sometimes not—are of overwhelming and enduring fascination and are perhaps the ultimate inspiration for poetry and lyrics—an inspiration that all these lyrical schools are also explicitly conscious of and that is often the

focus of metaliterary interest itself. Taken as a whole, rock exhibits, theme for theme, much the same concerns as those of the traditions we have now classicized. In one example, the preoccupation with unsatisfactory love becomes the subject or object of poetry and creates, in turn, the association between the lyricist or singer and the lover. Self-reflection and metalyrical concerns include the glory and fame that will be achieved through the singing or poetry: some examples are "So You Want to Be a Rock 'n' Roll Star," "Do You Believe in Magic," and that early and enduring anthem of rock, "Johnny B. Goode" ("My father told me some day you will be a man / And you will be the leader of a big old band / Many people coming from miles around / To hear you play your music when the sun goes down / Maybe someday your name will be in lights / Saying Johnny B. Goode tonight"). Thus, what is critical is not merely that Bloom (and others) have got it wrong but that ignorance prevents them from seeing that rock is in so many ways like parts of the "great tradition." And one is then, indeed, led to the question of whether rock resembles these traditions because it is descended from them or because some sort of universal parallelism is at work—a question that, because of our Bloom-like prejudices, has scarcely been asked, let alone answered.[6] As for the sexuality, well, indeed, some rock lyrics are sexual, even, perhaps, exclusively and pointedly and vulgarly sexual. But sexuality, too, is far from uniquely modern, and Mick Jagger's "Satisfaction" and "Let's Spend the Night Together" pale, in both vulgarity and explicitness, beside some of the songs of the venerated William of Aquitaine.

But while rock may thus mimic earlier lyric schools in its fascination with the generative power of unhappy love, it has exploited a much fuller range of themes, including the historicopolitical one that Bloom dismisses as "a smarmy, hypocritical version of brotherly love." Once again the generalization alarmingly misrepresents the remarkable range of topics covered and views expressed. Many of rock's earliest masterpieces, written in the late sixties and early seventies, were, in fact, politically committed, and opposition to the war (and the draft) and sympathy for the civil rights movements were major conditioning and influential currents. But as often as not, the lyrics produced in this climate were most conspicuously informed by and interwoven with the other musical and lyrical traditions that are such important components of rock: black, particularly spiritual, music and the sort of folk tradition that Joan Baez's songs rely on so heavily. Remnants of these strains, pervasive in rock even today, explain the centrality of the Talking Heads's "Take Me to the River" and Eric Clapton's (and others') recordings of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." And while there are plenty of examples of virtually unmediated protest (Country Joe and the Fish's "What are we fighting for? / Don't ask me I don't give a damn / Next stop is Viet Nam . . . " is a classic, certainly, as is Dylan's even more famous "The Times They Are A-Changin' "), much of the "political" lyrics of rock are infinitely more complex.

The Band, for example, specialized in songs that reflected back on the Civil War South, and by giving the poet a Confederate voice in "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" they brilliantly underscored, without ever being explicit, the universal tragedy of war. The currently popular U2 plumbs the complex problems and no-win situation of Northern Ireland in equally subtle ways. Finally, many rock lyricists have made their points by merely taking over or only slightly rewriting "classics" from other traditions: Prince sings the Lord's Prayer with remarkable effect; the Byrds sang Ecclesiastes in "Turn, Turn, Turn." If these are smarmy versions of brotherly love, so be it. In fact, what is stunning here is that rock's connections with the "great tradition" are often quite explicit, markedly intertextual, and ultimately impossible to ignore. The extent to which Bloom's second major objection to rock—that it has no cultural ties or links or avenues beyond itself—is simply mistaken comes very much to the fore here.[7]

But above and beyond specific songs that are strictly and obviously tied, intertextually, to any number of classic texts outside the rock tradition, rock's place in contemporary society is a major link to a number of cultural phenomena that we now, from a safe distance, view as canonical. In fact, it is telling that Bloom does acknowledge the great impact of rock: at the outset of the chapter he goes on at some length, and with considerable accuracy, about the unique role rock plays in society and about rock's importance, unparalleled in recent history. He begins the chapter, in fact, noting that "[n]othing is more singular about this generation than its addiction to music. This is the age of music and the states of soul that accompany it. To find a rival to this enthusiasm, one would have to go back at least a century to Germany and the passion for Wagner's operas" (68). And, having remarked that one crucial difference between rock and the German passion of the last century is that rock is much less elitist (i.e., it cuts across class boundaries more), he goes on to note the great change that has occurred in the role music and its lyrics play in this century: "The power

of music in the soul . . . has been recovered after a long period of desuetude" (69). In acknowledging this rather remarkable turn of events, this existence in the late twentieth century of a status for music and its lyrics that did not always exist and when it did was a major cultural institution and a central part of the culture, Bloom is implicitly recognizing what he will explicitly deny later on: the cultural centrality of the rock phenomenon. In fact, Bloom even goes on to note that this is the first generation he has taught that fully understands Plato's opposition to music, something earlier generations, for whom music was "background," were incapable of understanding. And since Bloom explicitly recognizes the enormous impact per se of the phenomenon, his refusal to see its cultural impact is grounded, explicitly, in what he sees as its failure to address issues other than sex—an opinion that, as I have tried to suggest, cannot be substantiated.

Rock is poetry that is aggressively and self-consciously a part of the living tradition.

What can be substantiated is the perhaps radical-sounding assertion, already implicit in Bloom's comments, that the rock phenomenon is a twentieth-century version, in many if not in most of its details, of what at other times and in other places have been major lyrical schools with resounding impact in the cultures that produced them. Poetry, after all, had long ago ceased to be "lyrical" in the etymological sense of the word, an integral part of music. For most people—and many scholars—poetry is what was and is written down to be read and what is published in poetry journals or in the *New Yorker* or in anthologies. Poetry in that form not only is substantively different from lyrics but is rarely (and then only for a minuscule percentage of the population, now or in any other period of history) a living part of one's cultural or spiritual experience. But rock is much like opera and even more like the phenomenon of the troubadours in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europe, when lyricists started singing in the vernaculars rather than in the long-dead Latin. Rock is poetry that is aggressively and self-consciously a part of the living tradition that, in great measure because it is attached to music, plays a fundamental and vital cultural role for many more people. In this regard, as in various others, Bloom's assertion that rock makes it difficult for young people to have a passionate relationship to the art and thought that are the substance of a liberal education is almost perversely skewed.

The truth is the opposite: the person, young or otherwise, for whom poetry is a living form that resonates daily in the mind and soul is quite capable of appreciating not only the poetry of the troubadours or of Petrarch, so similar in other ways, but, more important, the great lyrical power of poetry in and of itself. Members of this generation, as Bloom likes to put it, are the first in a long time, thanks to rock, to be in a position to understand the impact and repercussions of many earlier lyrical phenomena. They should be able to grasp, for example (particularly if we as mediators can simply point out the parallels), what is moving, rather than dusty and mechanical and arcane, in a previous generation's songs—much more so, I would argue, than people who don't know why tears have been shed at Lennon's "Imagine" or who don't think of love in the haunting structures of "Here, There, and Everywhere," or who might not hear the ecstasy and triumph of the Grateful Dead's "Touch of Grey" ("I will survive"), so often sung last summer by Jerry Garcia, who could have been grandfather to many in the audience. For those whose poetic sensibilities have incubated in the heart and soul and tapping feet, Puccini's sentimental arias can be truly moving and Verdi's triumphal choruses can stir, vicariously if nothing else, the same sentiments stirred at Woodstock.[8] The list of ways in which the experience of rock is enlightening vis-à-vis the "great tradition" is seemingly endless: students who know full well that a strong lyric tradition thrives on the seemingly paradoxical combination of parameters and restraints, and the individual creativity that thrives within the tradition and the repetition of commonplaces, can eventually read the medieval and Renaissance lyric traditions with a fuller appreciation of their astonishing repetitiousness. And those same "students" of rock, because rock has included, and continues to include, a substantial "trobar clus" strain, those students who have learned instinctively to appreciate everything from "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" ("with tangerine trees and marmalade skies") to "Third World Man," by Steely Dan ("When he's crying out / I just think that Ghana Rondo / E l'era del terzo mondo / He's a third world man"), bring an important background to the study of the myriad canonical schools of hermetic lyrics that have produced poets as varied as Arnaut Daniel, the Spanish mystics, Mallarmé, and that fellow splicer of lines from the Italian, Ezra Pound.

Bloom's third major misapprehension is actually

rather touching—or pathetic: that rock's appeal is exclusively to the young, that rock is a phenomenon of a "generation," that it affects his "students," and so on. This notion is belied by the simple facts of chronologies, celebrated every year as one great rock star after another turns forty or fifty and as those who grew up on rock are now bringing up children of their own. Toward the end of this chapter Bloom depicts a pathetic scenario where the poor parents who have struggled to provide a good life and who wish only the best for their child watch on, terrified and helpless, as their thirteen-year-old boy is mesmerized by MTV and its attendant horrors. This is a remarkable fantasy; the parents are, likely as not, especially if they are highbrow and college-educated, the ones who watch MTV and who introduced rock to their child in the first place. And while they may care less for their child's currently preferred groups and lyrics than for their own classics, they are probably not much concerned since it has become clear that their classics are becoming *the* classics and that their child will be listening to the Beatles, as well as to the Beatles's progeny. But more telling than even those fundamentals are columns on contemporary music that now appear regularly in the *New Yorker*, that holy sanctum of haute culture, and articles in academic journals that reflect the extent to which the centrality of rock can no longer be defined in generational terms at all.[9]

In fact, many of Bloom's (and others') misapprehensions about rock and its impact are rooted in remarkably clichéd notions about the general poverty of "youth culture" and a commensurate (and I believe equally illusory) aggrandizement of the degree of "high culture" in earlier societies and generations. Thus, to take but one example, Bloom dismisses the powerful argument that, in fact, there is a significant revival of interest in classical music by saying that even if there is, only five to ten percent of the population is affected. Does he believe that much more than that has ever had a serious interest in classical music? The serious listener does, indeed, listen seriously to all sorts of music. And not only is "Roll Over, Beethoven" tongue-in-cheek, ultimately, but twenty or so years down the line it may well end up on the same shelf as the Ninth. Likewise, it is obvious that, as with all other schools or cultural phenomena, there is a lot of trash out there and a part of the audience at every concert has never heard of Ecclesiastes. So what else is new? Are we to pretend that everyone who listened avidly to Wagner knew all the allusions? Don't we all know that for every Mozart there were hundreds of Salieris? Rock is no better and probably no worse. There is little doubt that many people who listen to much that is marvelously lyrical in rock, that is poetic and moving, never get past the beat, and, also undoubtedly, much of what has been written and will continue to be written will never amount to anything in posterity.

But it is nonsense—or wishful thinking—to say, as Bloom does, that when we take the Walkmans off after years of listening to rock there will be nothing left. *Au contraire.* It is a pity Bloom has listened so little, for, given the great concern for culture and the educational tradition he claims to be championing, he is thus almost perversely depriving himself of access to a richly variegated and (in the very cultural terms he wishes to see the "liberal tradition") an enormously influential phenomenon. We cannot afford to ignore Bloom's misapprehensions about music, because the nature of his misunderstanding is so intimately tied with the debates now raging, not just at Stanford but nearly everywhere, about what constitutes the canon of "Western civilization." And the educator, particularly in the field of literature and literary culture, who like Bloom walks about deaf to our living lyric tradition is a less able explicator and mediator of the literary traditions and canonized poets that are the fundamental intertexts for the troubadours of our own time. It might alter both the tenor and the substance of these discussions considerably if we were to recognize that a great deal of what is being listened to on the Walkmans is the great tradition very much alive and well—and as Pynchon sez, rock 'n' roll will never die, and education keeps going on forever.

Notes

[1] "Hey nineteen / That's 'Retha Franklin / She don't remember / The Queen of Soul / It's hard times befallen / The sole survivors / She thinks I'm crazy / But I'm just growing old. . . . Hey nineteen / No we can't dance together / No we can't talk at all . . . " (Steely Dan, "Hey Nineteen").

This paper is written in memory of Clifton Cherpack, who did not quite make it to sixty-four.

[2] See Vickers's extraordinary article for a much fuller discussion of these issues. Her appreciation of the parallels between Petrarch's work and that of one rock group, Survivor, as well as her detailed and sensitive exploration of the complexities of the relationship between popular and "classical" culture is exemplary. I am indebted to her for allowing me to read a prepublication version of the article.

[3] Nevertheless, I have been asked to provide scholarly documentation for the songs and lyrics I quote. This is both perfectly reasonable and appropriate, given that I am, in part,

claiming that much of rock and its lyrics is a cultural phenomenon to be treated like any other—and thus a song should be quoted as we would quote a poem. It is also true, however, and also part of my argument, that "everyone" knows that, for example, "When I'm Sixty-Four" is on the Beatles's *Sgt. Pepper* that came out in 1967 and that the lyrics of a remarkable body of rock are part of the active memory of many people. Thus the citations and quotations that follow are representative of the communal knowledge and memory of rock—a reflection of the living lyrical tradition. The "Works Cited" listings reflect ex post facto documentation, in some cases incomplete. Note that many artists avoid putting dates on their albums.

[4] See especially David Rieff's scathing comments about Bloom's cultural-ideological posture.

[5] Dylan, who changed his name from Robert Zimmerman to one that linked him explicitly with the great tradition, has written dozens of songs whose lyrics explicitly harken back to all manner of poetic schools, from the Bible ("God said to Abraham give me a son / Abe said, 'Man, you must be putting me on'" ["Highway 61 Revisited"]) to Petrarch ("Then she opened up a book of poems / And handed it to me / Written by an Italian poet / From the fourteenth century" ["Tangled Up in Blue"]) to the great poetic struggle of modernism ("Everybody's shouting: / Which side are you on? / Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot / Fighting in the captain's tower . . . " ["Desolation Row"]).

[6] The one exception I know of is Vickers's article.

[7] The British punk tradition, which I know scarcely at all and thus do not discuss more fully, includes a number of "singings" of important texts. I am grateful to a student, Kirsten Thorne, for bringing to my attention "The Wasteland," by The Mission U.K., and "*In Dulce Decorum*," by The Damned, where the text is a speech of Winston Churchill's.

[8] Lest the connection appear farfetched I note that in the movie *The Killing Fields* the two most emotionally wrenching scenes are accompanied by Puccini's "Nessun dorma" and Lennon's "Imagine."

[9] A recent issue of *Stanford French Review* contains an article entitled "The Grateful Dead: Corneille's Tragedy and the Illusion of History."

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