

Links to Another World

I. So Who Cares About the "Book of Poems from the Thirteenth Century"?

She lit a burner on the stove and offered me a pipe
"I thought you'd never say hello," she said
"You look like the silent type."
Then she opened up a book of poems
And handed it to me
Written by an Italian poet
From the thirteenth century.
And every one of them words rang true
And glowed like burnin' coal
Pourin' off every page
Like it was written in my soul from me to you,
Tangled up in blue.

The copyrighted and printed lyrics of Dylan's "Tangled Up in Blue" include this fifth verse that is the most explicit link in his body of songs to another world of songs and lyrics with which he, and in fact most of rock, has quite extraordinary ties: the revolutionary medieval universe that **invented** the word *troubadour*, and everything that went with that.

But who **really** cares, after all, who the "Italian poet/From the thirteenth century" might really be? Dylan himself, does he remember, let alone care? Those of us who, as naive 20 or 25 year -olds in a rock-centric universe, were overwhelmed by the searing musical and lyrical power of Blood on the Tracks when it first came out? Or those of us who are even more appreciative of it now that, nearly a quarter of a century later, we too are middle aged and capable of understanding more richly and painfully that album's evocation of the varieties of inconsolable pain that come from the destruction of marriages? Dylan's child, and that whole generation, our children, who come to the classic rock of the sixties and early seventies with understandable trepidation, half-awe

and half-distance, for all of whom it really is about "my parents' marriage" (as Jake Dylan said in an interview with Rolling Stone a few years ago), literally or metaphorically? And isn't the proof of the ultimate irrelevance of that particular allusion, whether we know what it is or not, the fact that during Dylan's 1997 tour, when he was regularly performing "Tangled Up in Blue" he regularly left out that verse? So what if some pointy-headed academic who works in the dusty archives of thirteenth-century Italian poetry can say just what she thinks that book of poetry and who that Italian poet are? So what, even, if we can identify one more of Dylan's many charming word games, when perhaps what he is tweaking is that fatuous instinct that not just academics but many others have to identify such things? Doesn't this then make truly academic what is in the end a deeply personal and passionate poetry? Does it have anything to do with the fundamental (rather than superficial) meaning of Dylan's music, of why it moves us, or of what rock was, or is, really about?

Well, in brief, yes. Yes, we should know, and yes we should care. The link that Dylan so strongly establishes in that particular verse and in that particular song and in that particular album is to a vital ancestral universe of love songs. The medieval world (much-maligned and profoundly misunderstood by most in the modern period) created one of the great moments of lyrical-musical revolution of Western culture, a moment that is intimately related to virtually every aspect of classic rock in general. It is from glancing at this turning point in the history of Western song that, among many other things, we have ways of understanding just why it is so perfectly appropriate to have always called Dylan a troubadour. And a rather direct tie like this one in "Tangled up in Blue," or the one in Clapton's perfectly classic "Layla," is in fact really only the tip, and an ornamental tip at that, of the iceberg.

Most of the really significant connections, which are almost-uncanny parallels, are completely unconscious, unknown to either the performers in the rock tradition or to their audiences, and yet no less revealing for that reason. What is at stake, in the end, is not deciphering a handful (in the context of the full body of the rock canon) of allusions that only a medievalist would know, let alone care about, but rather understanding the broadest ties to the most fundamental aspects of the rock revolution, including its subsequent classicization. So many of the things that might seem to us aspects of rock's historical uniqueness and importance actually have revealing historical precedents at the moment in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries when a vernacular song tradition became the powerful cultural form of its moment, the unambiguous symbol of a generation and a time, and ended up radically changing the face of Western culture in its own moment. To understand all of this is not to diminish rock's importance but quite the opposite: to be able to glimpse, in the strong suggestions of a historical repetition, precisely that rock in general, and in particular its most powerful voices, Dylan foremost among them, is far **more** important, historically and culturally, than even most ardent fans are likely to really believe or be able to articulate. Indeed, to understand about that medieval "book of poems" that is a songbook of the original troubadours can give us ways of understanding, and articulating, that mostly-vague sense that most of us have of rock's cultural place being of far more than transient, and in the end nostalgic, importance.

I first began to think and write about rock's place in the "Great Tradition" and its relationship to the canon and to enduring and valuable cultural forms in general when, as an academic, I ended up writing a response to Allan Bloom's infamous Closing of the American Mind, and specifically to what was for me (and many others) the most offensive chapter in it, called simply "Rock." Bloom articulates there a view about rock as a marker of cultural **decline** that is, of course, shared by many. It struck me at the

time, and even more so today, that a defense of rock at this historical juncture is important --although it is not really to convince the Allan Blooms of the world, who may stand for many of our parents or teachers, and who will no doubt go to their graves never understanding what overtook them and transformed the old cultural universe. It is necessary, instead, as a part of the much larger effort of **our** understanding our own history, a history within which moments such as Dylan's performance at Newport (to name one of dozens of such moments seared in our imaginations and memories) are still truly electrifying. As in other cases of lasting cultural revolutions, of turning points in history, these moments are markers, both in their own moments, and especially in retrospect, of very widespread shifts in the cultural landscape. All of which takes us back to that Italian poet of the thirteenth century, and his book of poems, and why when Dylan says about that book and its poetry that "every one of them words rang true" he is, whether he knows it consciously or not, opening up the book of his own, and rock's, powerful, largely unconscious memory of its most important cultural and lyrical and musical ancestry.

For further reading on Dylan's performance at Newport see Greil Marcus' "Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes." New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1997

II. The Invention of the Love Song

When the days are long in May
it's good,
soft birdsong from afar,
and when the melody leaves me
I remember my love afar.
I've been bent and thoughtful with desire until
hawthorn flowers & all that song
mean no more to me than snow in winter.

I believe that the gods know
and want
me to see my love afar:
but for every good coming my way
my bad luck doubles, that she is far.

I'd gladly be a pilgrim, if my
grim cape and staff might fall within the
compass of her eye

Joy'd come to me then, when I cry God's name
begging my shelter afar.
But I don't know when I shall see her
and our lands are wide apart, far.
For though there are roads and trails enough
I am sure of nothing. May't
go as God wills it.

I'll never have joy of Love if it
come not
from this love afar.
Better? Lovelier? I know of none
in any place, either near or far.
Her price so pure, I'd rather be
a captive prince held by the bloody Saracens
to be near her.

God, who made all that walk or stir,
and made me
for this love afar,
give me the power of the desire I have
to look on my love afar
truly, and in such fine haven, that a simple room
a simple garden
'll seem a palace seen in dream.

He calls me truly who says I leech
desirous of this love afar.
No other joy could mean so much
as that I have
my love afar.
But what I want so is forbid, spell's thrown
and now I'm bound to love,
to be loved
never.

I'm kept from her I want so much.
And damn for
ever, him who threw the
curse that spells me, bids me love
forever,
loved, never.

(Jaufre Rudel)

For roughly the last two centuries those who have been interested in the evolution of modern Western culture have pinpointed the beginnings of modern European poetry in that area of the Mediterranean coast that is now Southern France, often called Provence. But that phrase "modern European poetry" is too vague and misleading for what was actually invented. First of all it was not "poetry" in the normal modern sense of the word but in fact, and very self-consciously, songs; secondly both the musical and the verbal languages of these songs were aggressively and mutinously vernacular; and, this to have the longest-lasting and most deeply seated influence, the overwhelming subject of these songs was love, and love which is both unsatisfiable and, because it is, in the end, overwhelmingly disruptive and painful, the very source of the songs themselves. In all three respects this song tradition (which is rightly called troubadour after the name those singers gave themselves and which, like rock, has a suggestive if disputed origin) was a revolution vis a vis nearly everything that had come before, and for a period of time, from roughly the end of the eleventh century until the thirteenth century it was the hallmark of a distinctive cultural attitude.

(Insert Image_9)

Few subjects in the history of European literature have been more written about than the apparently out-of-nowhere invention and subsequent explosion of love songs like the famous one about "love from afar" by Jaufre Rudel. What has made this such a fascinating (and often controversial) cultural incident is that it is here that one can see what appears to be the invention of the concept of the necessary (sooner or later) unhappiness (or un-fulfilled-ness) of passionate love that then become the most basic given in our artistic visions and expressions of what love itself is: the root of unhappiness and, as a consequence, of great songs. The very expression in Jaufre's song of love from afar ("amor de longh" in Provençal), as well as dozens of other conceits about love we take for granted, have their roots right here. This is, indeed, what Dylan's line "and every

one of them words rang true...." means, that one opens up such books of songs, perhaps expecting something as distant as the thirteenth century (or eleventh or twelfth, for that matter) suggests and finds instead the freshest statements of such sentiments. In Beyond Good and Evil Nietzsche gives as pointed a statement about all of this, especially about the centrality of a concept of love, as one could want: "...This makes it clear without further ado why **love as passion** is our European specialty....it was, as is well known, invented by the poet knights of Provence, those splendid, inventive men of the 'gai saber' to whom Europe owes so much and, indeed, almost itself."

But it is not just love as passion in some abstract sense that is at stake here. Crucially, it is love as passion as discontent as the source of inspiration as something, in the end, barely distinguishable from songs themselves. Because we have, of course, no recordings of what these songs might have sounded like,

they are today almost invariably read as poems.

But they are unambiguously songs in their form. See, in the song above, the six verses (or stanzas) followed by the refrain "I'm kept from her I want so much" almost certainly repeated after each verse despite its being placed (as it would be in many printed versions of song

lyrics today) at the very end of the piece. But

this is not just some formalist quibble: it is clear in most songs, more directly in some than in others, that the painful paradox about love is that in its blues lies the source of song-making itself. The obsessions are with the persona of the poet/songwriter/singer (revealed, among other things, by the ubiquitous presence of birds in this body of songs, as ubiquitous a trope as it is in rock) and with the inseparability of love's disappointments (whatever may cause them) with artistic inspiration, with the power to sing powerfully.

Modern recordings of troubadour songs are widely available on compact disc today. Although the modern performance of these songs can only be speculative, these two CDs below provide renditions of many popular troubadour songs.

"Douce Dame: Music of Courtly Love from Medieval France and Italy."
Performed by the Waverly Consort.
"Music of the Troubadours"
Performed by the Ensemble Unicorn.

Happiness is not the lot, or even the goal, of the singer and poet, for it is in the misery, in unquenched desire itself, that lies the root of singing itself, the very possibility of making songs. Look, since we cannot really listen, to this song by another famous troubadour, Bernart de Ventadorn (noting, in this case that the verse that is the refrain appears in the manuscript at the beginning, rather than the end, of the song, and in the very last verse the translator has left the Provençal word for song, **canso**, untranslated):

(Insert Image_8)

It is worthless to write a line
if the song proceed not from the heart;
nor can the song come from the heart
if there is no love in it.

Maligning fools, failing all else, brag, but love does not spoil,
but countered by love, fills,
fulfilling grows firm.
A fool's love is like verse poor in the making,
only appearance and the name having,
for it loves nothing except itself, can
take nothing of good,
corrupts the rhyme.

And their singing is not worth a dime
whose song comes not from the heart.
If love has not set his roots there
the song cannot put forth shoots there: so
my song is superior, for I turn to it
mouth
eyes
mind
heart
and there is the joy of love in it.
And the binding glance is food for it
and the barter of sighs is food for it
and if desire is not equal between them
there is no good in it.

God grants me no strictness to counter my desire
yet I wonder if we afford its acceptance,
responsible for what we have of it. Though
each day goes badly for me.
Fine thought at least will I have from it
though no other thing:
for I have not a good heart and I work at it,
a man with nothing.

Yet she has made me rich, a man with nothing.
Beautiful she is and comely, and the more
I see her openness and fresh body, the more

I need her and have smarting.
Yet so seldom her fine eyes look on me
one day must last me a hundred.
Yet her fine body—
when I gaze on it, I
grow like a canso, perfect.
And, if desire is equal between us and the darkness enters my throat?

But at the heart of this is something else, something virtually impossible to perceive from these translations, or without knowing in some detail the nature of the cultural revolution at hand in the language of these songs, which is a language that came very much from the subterranean and often quite vulgar world of popular speech which, until then, had had no place in anything remotely resembling high culture, and in fact had scarcely ever been written in this universe in which Latin was still the language that defined literacy as well as culture. So the revolution that ends up giving us all of our most unconsciously accepted clichés about love itself was in fact at the same time, and inseparably, a social and cultural revolution: it begins as a lowly language, the vernacular of common speech which had no written form and was seen (as it is, technically) as a debased and corrupt form of Latin, the millennium-long language of cultural order and literacy itself. But it becomes, it declares itself, chic and prestigious and eventually fully infiltrates the courts of the upper classes: the troubadours were saying clearly and very loudly "Roll over Beethoven."

Even though Latin would fight a long rear-guard action, with notable successes during the Renaissance, in the end that principle of the greater nobility of the vernaculars, first defiantly set out in those rocky Mediterranean shores, triumphed enough to produce many of what we have ended up considering the cornerstones of Western culture. And, most enduringly, most canonically, the troubadours manage to institutionalize the remarkable conceit that the love song **is** what vernacular culture is all about. These are the original troubadours, and the word *trobar* itself, the new word that they use to mean this new thing they do, reveals much of the romantic mystery that has always enveloped it.

What it really meant to them, where it comes from, have been long been argued and to look it up in the OED is to get a miniature snapshot of the problem. Perhaps all that remains clear is that, as Nietzsche said, we can sense it in the bones that lie scattered throughout that place that has no single name, this place as amorphous and romantic as the Delta, this land where troubadours sang new songs. There, with this new language, lies buried the most unlikely flower of European civilization. But there is a bit more: for it is not just the verbal language of the songs that would make Beethoven roll over but also the other language, the most important language, of these songs that are obsessed with their song-ness: the music itself. But this leads down a far less straightforward road, and before going down that road look at just one more

troubadour tru.badu, . [a. Fr. troubadour (16th c. in Godef. Compl.), ad. Prov. trobador (= Cat. trobador, Sp., Pg. trovador, Ital. trovatore), agent-n. f. Prov. trobar, Sp., Pg. trovar, Ital. trovare, Fr. trouver to find, invent, compose in verse; cf. trouvère. The origin of the verb itself is questioned. As it exists in most of the Romanic langs., it is generally held to be late popular L. Diez explained it as formed by metathesis from L. turbare to disturb, through the sense 'turn up'. Cf. for the form Fr. troubler, OFr. trubler, from late L. *turbulare: see Etymol. Wörterbuch ed. 4, s.v.; cf. also the Neapol. controvare from L. conturbare. Another conjecture in Du Cange would take the Romanic forms from med.L. tropus, trope sb. 5, a verse or versicle, whence *tro?are. Both of these, and other conjectures, present difficulties.] One of a class of lyric poets, living in southern France, eastern Spain, and northern Italy, from the 11th to the 13th centuries, who sang in Provençal (langue d'oc), chiefly of chivalry and gallantry, sometimes including wandering minstrels and jongleurs.

example, among the many, many dozens that have survived, of troubadour song, this one
by one Peire Vidal:

One canso I've made murderously,
so much so
I don't know how I did it.
Evening, morning, day or night
I am not master of my thought,
less of my heart.
Another time when great
incertitudes were in the balance-pan,
there came to me from Love so overwhelming a
proof of my luck,
I began to make a canso on the spot.
It went like that.

But why keep me in such a confusion?
She must know that nothing ever pleased me so much.
From that first hour,
the first touch,
I could not split my heart, my love, my mind
away from what I'd found. So
that now if she harms me, it's bound to be
a disaster for me.
But if she gives me token
of accord and friendship, then it's certain
she couldn't offer greater grace or mercy.
And if she need a reason to be right,
let it
be that her love sustains me.

But I don't believe at all in her desire, though
she speak and smile and make me promises. No
woman ever lied more agreeably
or with such cleverness.
But I can't help believing when she speaks,
on such peak
of ecstasy
her words put me.
But if she speak truth,
not France and I the king of all would make
me feel so happy and peaceful,
But no, she has no heart or good will in the wrangle.

No one ever loved so crazily, not even he,
the squire who died at table.
I also die
but me she kills more slowly, and she knows to do it courteously.
She does not strike with lance or cut with knife

but with soft words and pleasant welcome.
There you have the weapons she fights me with,
has,
ever since I've known her,
and will
still,
if she keeps me on.

To complete the inventory of her arsenal
I can't forget
beauty, God-given entirely,
nor has he
taken one whit from her:
intelligence, perfect,
perfectly sincere and always gay.
I get this way
because she
does not permit me her love.
Yet they say
one can get fresh water from the sea, which gives me
hope that genius, say, and mind, and
the fact that she does not reject me wholly
will find me Joy someday.
Nothing else can quell or allay this fire.

Lady cure me, don't stand and watch me die, a Lazarus,
of this sweet sickness.
My running away from it's no good, my eyes play tricks.
When I leave
I see your beauty before me upon all the roads,
can neither go
nor go back.
May I die accursed in hell
if I had the whole world, but lacked
you
and things stood well.

III. The (Secret) History of the Troubadours

What is perhaps the best part of this story I have only very partially told begins not in Provence proper, the legendary home of the troubadours. It is a story that takes place throughout that wide swath of the olive-fragrant land that is now both southern France

and northeastern Spain -- it actually looks more like a crescent, its inside running along the rocky Mediterranean coast, its southern tip somewhere down below Barcelona, its other one somewhere approaching what is now the Italian border --although these very much places without particularly neat borders. And intimately involved in this much-obscured story is the land lying just beyond the southern edge of the heart of the crescent, in those , furthest southern reaches of the Iberian peninsula. But this cannot be properly understood without first stepping back a bit.

In the tenth century most of Europe was what is normally understood to be medieval. The Dark Ages, a term all too often used, inappropriately, to characterize the whole of the period until the Renaissance, is arguably fitting enough to describe the several hundred years after the collapse of the Roman Empire and, crucially, the widespread loss of its language and culture. The story has many layers and many versions, but the best of the narratives understands that the cradle of the remaking of European culture is in that Mediterranean basin and it begins during the centuries after a Muslim army had invaded and then colonized the Iberian peninsula in the eighth century. In many of the older recountings of these crucial events, which begin with the crossing of the Straits of Gibraltar in 711, the "Arabs" or the "Moors" were seen as a species of bad guys, the "Infidel," and their invasion and subsequent dominance of a part of Europe, mostly of what is now southern Spain, as an interlude in the mainstream of European history, especially its cultural history. In fact, from the beginning it is clear (and many more historians and different kinds of cultural historians understand this today) it is a very different kind of history, both more complex in all its cultural dimensions and its impact more lasting: the relatively small Muslim armies, mostly made up of Berbers from western North Africa, not ethnic Arabs at all, cut a very wide swath up the Iberian peninsula and into southern France in a very short time because of the inner decline of the remnants of the old Roman empire, in complete disarray. The end of the expansion came

in 732, a brief twenty-one years later at the famous battle of Tours (or Poitiers, as it is sometimes called), but this is only to describe the purely military and the political, and the most important events, those which have to do with far-reaching cultural reshaping, begin to take place much later, as the end of the first millennium approaches.

A very broad recounting on the ways in which this Arabizing presence in Europe made itself felt, particularly over the next several centuries (from roughly the year 1000 until, equally roughly, 1250), would include many

central areas of culture from the most material (new foods and spices of all sorts, technological innovations such as paper and glass) to the most exclusively intellectual (the translations and commentaries on the Greek philosophers, especially Aristotle, all or most of which had

Ibn Rushd (Averroës) 1126-98 Hispano-Arab philosopher who published influential commentary on Aristotle (as well as many other works) which brought the Philosopher to Western Europe. Ibn Sina (Avicenna) 980-1037 Arabic philosopher who also influenced the interpretation of Aristotle in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

been lost in the collapse of Rome and its cultural foundations). By and large these have been easy to recognize as historical debts because they tend to be unambiguously marked as having come through or from Islamic Spain (called al-Andalus in Arabic) and because they are the kinds of things that require a model of cultural relationship that is not particularly intimate, but rather one that is more like that of merchant (even the translator can be seen as a species of textual merchant) and customer, and in the end all the good stuff Europe gets at that point, a great deal of which is essential for the coming out of the darkness that followed the collapse of Rome, is just merchandise. And you can buy and sell stuff, even Aristotle, without necessarily having any intimacy with the trader, or so it used to be believed. And perhaps under certain circumstances it is true, although on closer analysis it seems a dubious proposition, as any random example from our own universe would illustrate: if I buy bok choy from the Chinese grocer in Chinatown it is fair to say that what I eat is in some way reshaped by that, and with enough small,

incremental cases like that a whole segment of a culture can begin to be redefined; and if Americans sell computer technology to anyone, be it the French or the Malaysians, it comes, at a minimum, with a dollop of American English, and all that trickles down from that; and when cold-war era Soviet kids bought blue jeans, at outrageous black-market prices, it was a great deal more than a functional item of clothing to keep one's legs warm during the long Moscow winters. And during those critical centuries of European history the source of the equivalents of all of those things (the blue jeans, the computers, the new foods) was not northern Europe, as it would later become, but instead that Mediterranean hub where the international language of high culture and trade was Arabic.

The cultural freight and symbolism of all of this is crucial in the various narrations of medieval Europe precisely because it is during this period of time that the cultural landscape of what would become modern Europe is being carved out. The once-unifying culture of Latin was still very much there, but in a state of considerable decadence and weakness: among other things knowledge of much of its classical culture, and almost all of the Greek culture it had carried with it, was either forgotten, or purposefully rejected as pagan. But the vast complication in the story is presented by this new cultural force at hand, and shaking things up in so many ways, being this Infidel thing. At the time, during the tenth through the twelfth centuries, this presented two kinds of problems: it was a period marked by sporadic warfare, both at home and then, during the Crusades, abroad, with one version or another of this enemy that was also the purveyor of so many, and many different kinds, of goods. And the whole of the benefactor culture was, in any case, suspect, or worse, from the point of view of many of the guardians of the older social structures: not only was the religion, Islam, seen as inimical to Christianity (and many, if not most, of the defenders of the status quo, as well as the relatively few literate members of society were the clergy) but, at least as troubling, the material and

intellectual exports, in most cases avidly sought out by those hungry for either Aristotle, or fine foods and fabrics, were seen as highly corrupting. In interesting ways, it can all be seen as something of a reversal, and a rather ironic one, of the situation in much of the world today, and in particular of the situation in orthodox or fundamentalist Islamic countries, where Western values, often inseparable from a range of material and intellectual goods (and rock very much among these) are seen as severe threats to the status quo, to traditional social and religious structures.

The great revolution of the vernacular song culture of the troubadours takes place, as things turn out, in immediate and plentiful and often quite intimate touch with this Arabized, avant-garde European culture. And it just so happens that these are, in fact, circumstances of complex communion between the older Latin-based culture, whose languages, musical and lyrical, were clearly those of the old order, and mostly stood for different kinds of decency and conservatism, and a dangerous Arabic-based culture which happened to be obsessed with its own culture of love songs. In the Arabic tradition that in the tenth and eleventh centuries was flourishing explosively this love-song culture was marked by three different features: first, it was a powerful tradition that went back to pre-Islamic poetry and which saw very little difference between the passionate love of a Beloved and that of a song and its language. More recently, it had in this part of Europe, and in a starkly multi-lingual and culturally mongrel setting, it had invented a whole new song culture, one that would be seen as radical and problematic within orthodox Arabic culture: a way of singing songs so they combined, married, really, the local vernaculars, the vulgar songs of common speech, with the older, classical song structures. And, finally, most remarkably, these songs thrived and were sung as part of a **musical** tradition that had brought to mainland Europe previously unknown, or very

A recording of medieval Hispano-Arabic music has recently been produced by the members of *Altamar*. The two volume series entitled "Iberian Garden," produced by Dorian Discovery, explores this heretofore unappreciated tradition.

little used instruments: all manner of different kinds of percussion instruments, as well as the ancestors of the guitar, the lute, and the original fiddle.

(Image on PC disk)

But it was not merely the instruments that were at the heart of the matter, although the centrality and variety of musical instruments coming through Islamic Spain into Europe was such that by the beginning of the modern period, as historians of musical instruments freely acknowledge, Europe possessed almost exclusively instruments of Near Eastern descent. It was, of course, the sound of those instruments, the musical beats and timbres that went with them, that reshaped the musical landscape and that, like the language and the expressions of love in the troubadour songs, was rightly considered severely threatening to both older values and to a certain moral order in society. Indeed, one of the ways we know how profoundly influential it was, and how much it came to be seen as the opposite(in every way) of sacred or church music, is through the regular condemnations and prohibitions of it, as a morally corrupting practice, that emerged from religious authorities from time to time. It was music associated with every other aspect of the new vernacular culture that lay at the heart of the troubadour revolution, including dancing (and other sexually suggestive rhythms, pounded out on a remarkable range of percussion instruments; songs that worshipped the language that stood in opposition to Latin (and, in the Hispano-Arabic world, the parallel, the introduction of vernacular forms into songs where only classical Arabic had previously existed); and a heterodox vision of the very best kind of love as being one that was, one way or another, hopelessly doomed, and often sung about in harsh and explicitly sexualized ways. All of which might be tantamount to saying, in effect, that the troubadours were very like the first white rockers singing black, playing electric guitar, singing the blues, making white parents fear for the virtue of their teenage daughters.....

(Image_6)

IV. "New is the Voice that Maketh Loud My Grief"

"Than Guido Cavalcanti no psychologist of the emotions is more keen in his understanding, more precise in his expression; we have in him no rhetoric, but always a true description, whether it be of pain itself, or of the apathy that comes when the emotions and possibilities of emotion are exhausted, or of that stranger state when the feeling by its intensity surpasses our powers of bearing and we seem to stand aside and watch it surging across some thing or being with whom we are no longer identified." Ezra Pound, 1910

Even though the nineteenth century saw the beginnings of the rediscovery and study of modern (i.e. not classical) literature, and even though the astonishing poetry of the troubadours was at the center of this literary universe which was seen as the big break into the modern world, and even though men like Nietzsche understood such things, in fact the poetry, the songs themselves remained pretty much in the relatively arcane and hidden away universe of scholarship, known only to those few who could read Old Provençal. Until Ezra Pound came along. Pound began his career as a student of medieval languages and literatures but abandoned the academic path as he would in his poetry abandon the models of English poetry he found oppressive and stilted and overly formalized. What he had discovered in his studies, however, he took with him and made central to his own creation of a new language for poetry in the twentieth century, and this a project in which his principal collaborator for a while was T. S. Eliot.

For Pound the moment in European poetic history that he felt most kinship with was the troubadour revolution (and he did appreciate it very much as a revolution) and he spent many years translating, and making widely available in inexpensive New Directions paperbacks, many of the poems of the Provençal troubadours, as well as those of their direct heirs, the Italian poets of the thirteenth century. Pound himself and, through his extraordinary influence,

Pound's translation of Cavalcanti is available in a critical edition "Pound's Cavalcanti: an edition of the translation." Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983. However the old New Direction editions can still be found. "Ezra Pound's Cavalcanti Poems." New York: New Directions, 1966.

many of the other American and British poets of the first part of the twentieth century, rebelled successfully against what he saw as the impossibly dead and deadening literary tradition he had inherited. And he saw the medieval troubadour tradition as an intimate partner in this enterprise: all these fellow poets who had done the same thing seven hundred years before. One of the curiosities of the creation and impact of the sort of avant-garde poetry of the twentieth century (one that will certainly surprise many, since the word medieval usually conjures the opposite of modern) is that it went hand in hand with, and arguably could not have existed without, the powerful presence of Pound's body of translations of medieval songs and sonnets. Even though Pound's own translations, now nearly a century old, seem themselves quaint and antiquated, a more modern translation of one of Pound's favorite troubadours, Arnaut Daniel, gives us a clear sense of the poetic audacity that so appealed to him:

En cest sonet coind'a leri

On this gay and slender tune
I put and polish words and plane
and when I've passed the file they'll be
 precise and firm.
For Love himself pares down and gilds my song
 which moves from her whose glances are
the firm light rails that guide all excellence.

I tell you frankly, she I adore and serve
's the loveliest in the world.
Because I'm hers from head to toe
I cleanse myself, and though wind blow in winter
the love flowing within my heart keeps ice
out of the stream the coldest weather.

I burn oil lamps, wax tapers, no pretense I
hear a thousand masses out for my intention,
that God grant me by his intervention
good success with her against
whom all resistance is useless.
And when I think of her auburn hair, her
merry body, svelte and lissom,
I love her better than if they gave me Lusena.

I love her with fire
 seek her with such
excess of desire
 I feel I float.
Loving without stint one loses weight.
Her heart submerges mine in a great flood that nothing
 will evaporate.
She takes such usury of love she'll end

by owning tavern and bartender.

I do not want the Roman Empire
nor to be elected pope
if I can't

turn toward her
where my heart
is kindled to a blaze nothing can quell.
The meat
browns and catches fire, flames, cracks and splits,
and if she doesn't heal me with a kiss
before New Year's she destroys me, she
damns me to hell. And I

cannot turn from loving her too well.
The pain I put up with's hard, this
solitude wraps me round and is my theme.
On this cover
I embroider
words for rhymes.
My fate is worse than his who plows a field, for
though my field's a little bit of earth, I love,
I love it better than Mondis loved Audierna.

I am Arnaut
who gathers the wind
who hunts with an ox
to chase a hare
forever, and swims against the current.

But Pound was interested at least as much in what had happened to the language of songs when it had become poetry in the modern sense (and in the sense in which he was urging his own contemporaries to "make it new"), **after** the troubadour moment had been quite destroyed, as it was in the twelfth century. Indeed, Provence and its remarkable and openly heretical culture (heretical in its embrace of everything from the sexually provocative music of Arabized Spain to the heterodox doctrines of all sorts of religious oddballs, including Kabbalists) was the object of a destructive crusade, called the Crusade against the Albigensians, backed by the Pope himself, and in the end it was, in fact, destroyed. And the most important place of refuge, for both people and all sorts of cultural forms, was Italy: first in Sicily which became a place of refuge for many troubadours and the home of the first school of Italian vernacular poets and then, in the

last half of the thirteenth century in northern Italy, especially Tuscany. So much so, indeed, that to evoke the poetry of Italy, especially the love songs of Italy in the thirteenth century, is to evoke what was salvaged from the brutal rear-guard crusade that made the troubadour tradition a memory rather than a living thing.

Thirteenth century Italy is important for many things, but from the point of view of the history of the lyric (the lyric being the word that can include both "songs" and "poems", the first sung and variable, the second written and fixed) it is crucial because it is there and then that the memories of the revolution of the troubadours is gathered together, to preserve it and have it serve as inspiration for the present and future. Like the process of classicization in rock, it is a double-edged sword, and there will be quarrels about it: you trade the thrills and dangers and ultimate instability of performance for the permanence of recording, you move from a world of variants and covers to one of "poems" fixed inside their songbooks (or "books of poems") thus saving them but also freezing them, you move from a world in which the challenge is to make the sound of the blues respectable and high-culture into one in which, that battle won, the language is itself now respectable and far from revolutionary. Depending on your political point of view this is either the sign of a revolution having sold out or of its success. As Dylan would himself put it, everyone ends up shouting "which side are you on?"

Italy in the thirteenth century is the place where a tradition of songbooks saves a whole body of love songs that had once reshaped the face of musical and lyrical culture in Europe. The songbooks of the thirteenth century came in various languages and types: the first were the gatherings of the old, the collections, in written form, of songs whose very life-blood had been in performance and intimately tied to music. But which would not have survived at all had those collections not been made. And then there were the new songbooks, Dylan's book in "Tangled Up in Blue, " that were made by the Italian poets

who saw themselves as the true heirs of the tradition, keepers of the flame in their own way. They had understood that what would not survive as performed and living songs would survive as love poetry in a language that had to become the new classical language --that the present and future of the revolutionary song culture that had reshaped Europe would only survive if it was turned into books of love poetry that would, finally, make the troubadours part of the Great Tradition.

The names of the Italians who made of those collections, and of that cultural legacy, something that we remember powerfully and reflexively and largely unconsciously to this day include some of

Petrarch, the most famous of Italian lyrical poets and great influence on subsequent poets, has many English translations. The current standard for Petrarch's "Canzoniere" comes from Robert Durling. "Petrarch's Lyric Poems:" Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1976.

the most eminent figures in the pantheon of Dead White European Males, and most famously Dante, author also of the Divine Comedy and Petrarch, who would make the love sonnet the form of the love song par excellence, in a collection whose enduring short title is the "Canzoniere" (the songbook or album) and whose long and formal Latin title was "Rerum vulgaria fragmenta," which in the rock context seems to cry out to be translated as "Assorted Love Songs," as if it were an uncanny allusion to the subtitle of the Derek and the Dominoes album.

And one other, less famous than these two, but most likely the medieval poet that Dylan did indeed read, and whose poetry of desperate desire and searing love-pain rings so true to him: Guido Cavalcanti, Dante's contemporary who died tragically young, having been the premier poet of his generation and Dante's own inspiration and rival. Dylan would have known him for the simple reason that of all the medieval poets and troubadours that Pound dragged very squarely into the quarrels about modernism and the shape of modern poetry, none was more important than Guido Cavalcanti. That Dylan understood that Pound was crucial to the modernist poetic revolution in the twentieth century seems

rather clearly evoked in "Desolation Row" in the argument in the Captain's Tower. That Dylan would have known about the Italian poets of the thirteenth century through Pound seems equally clear: as I have suggested, for Pound the authentic roots of modernism in the same revolution I have described, in the stark new "vulgar" languages of the medieval period. And sometimes the line between Pound's own poetry and his translations and evocations of the medieval poets, is difficult to draw too definitively. And no poet was closer to him than Guido Cavalcanti, and in 1954 New Directions (a press whose project was certainly not the publication of obscure medieval poetry but rather of what was then radical modern literature) brought out an edition of Pound's Cavalcanti, his volume of translations of most of Cavalcanti's poetry. Guido Cavalcanti, until then (and since then, too) known mostly to academics becomes, for a period of time, part of the hip literary scene of the fifties: the volume of his love poetry, redone in the voice of Pound himself, a powerful bookmark to a universe of stark love songs that is at once remote and profoundly familiar.

You, who do breech mine eyes and touch the heart,
And start the mid from her brief reveries,
Might pluck my life and agony apart,
Saw you how love assaileth her with sighs,

And lays about him with so brute a might
That all my wounded senses turn to flight.
There's a new face upon the signiory,
And new is the voice that maketh loud my grief.

Love, who hath drawn me down through devious ways,
Hath from your noble eyes so swiftly come!
'Tis he hath hurled the dart, wherefrom my pain,

First shot's resultant! and in flanked amaze
See how my affrighted soul recoileth from
That sinister side wherein the heart lies slain.

Guido Cavalcanti, translated Ezra Pound

V. The Cult of Variation: Is It the Thirteenth --or the Fifteenth Century?

If the printed, official, and fixed lyrics of "Tangled Up in Blue" say that it is a poet of the "Thirteenth" century, the canonical recording of the song has Dylan actually singing it is the "Fifteenth" century, and perhaps there have even been performances in which it has been the "Fourteenth" century, just as in some of Dylan's recent tours, where the song is something of a regular on the playlist, he took to dropping the whole stanza from the song altogether.* This kind of variation is not only perfectly normal --it is the very stuff of which song traditions are made and on which they thrive. Oddly enough, one of the most significant features of the medieval tradition (mostly the song tradition but it is true in all literary and intellectual traditions that survive) is that there is endless variation. It was once thought, in the scholarly tradition, that most if not all the variation was the result of the inevitable errors that crept into manuscripts, in other words that it was the byproduct of a technological deficiency that would eventually for the most part be remedied by the advent of the printing press and all of the ethics of correct and fixed texts that would come with that. And the job of the modern editors, beginning mostly from the nineteenth century on, was perceived to be the establishment of what they call correct and authentic and original texts. Indeed, many of the things about medieval culture that long seemed to the modern world to make it primitive and hopelessly pre-modern, backwards, are actually aspects of a value system that can perhaps be best seen in the rock-like culture of the troubadours. And if these variants in the lyrics to Dylan's "Tangled Up in Blue" were a textual-editing problem presented to a medievalist, or, let us pretend, to a twentieth-centuryist in several hundred years, the first impulse would be,

* November 10, 1999 Dylan at the New Haven Coliseum did sing the verse --albeit in the third rather than the first person --and he did sing it as "thirteenth".

and has traditionally been, to assume that one is correct and authentic, and the other variants errors.

This, in fact, is one of the many things that rock can teach students of the medieval world, rather than the other way around: a vibrant, living, song tradition is precisely that while it is alive it is not only prone to variation but positively obsessed by it, the variations themselves, by the possibility of always doing the same song differently. This is the hallmark of a culture that prizes performance rather than authenticity and that defines originality not at all in the way that the culture of print does (the originality and immutability of a novel, for example) but as something quite different which to the untrained eye may look simply like errors and lack of originality: covers of older songs, "fifteenth" century in one manuscript as opposed to "thirteenth" in the original. And one of the crucial struggles of the rock tradition that the survivors of the Golden Age of the late sixties and early seventies have had to face squarely is precisely that presented by the powerful impulse to classicize or fix. It is a phenomenon that we can recognize clearly in that desire most audiences have to hear the same song performed in exactly the same way, and usually in the same way that it is heard in canonical version of any given song, nearly always the studio version.

Recording technology allows us to record performances as well as the highly crafted songs of studios –but mostly it has helped canonize these definitive studio versions. Only in fairly rare cases, in fact, has it helped preserve the vitality of a performance and variation ethos, which is certainly what defined rock in its period of runaway success and originality. Breakthrough moments were in performances and in their subtleties, not in the fixed texts that would (or could) be remotely represented in a fixed, surviving, form that would transcend and survive a given performance. From the sound of the Stones singing a Robert Johnson song to the electric (and southern-Blues inspired) sound The

Band provided for Dylan after 1965, to the Grateful Dead's acoustic sets and covers of the music that would be canonized in American Beauty, the profound originalities and transformations of rock, and with all possible certainty of the troubadour tradition, is found precisely in the variations of already known songs. The vitality of the tradition is precisely in that ability to perform what to posterity (and to the print culture, including collections of copyrighted and published rock music and lyrics) may look like a song, as something radically different, which is, in terms of the real tradition, rooted in the variations of performance, not at all the same song.

Troubadour songs were often written to be performed by others. Jongleurs (from which we have the English word "juggler") traveled alone or with troubadours and entertained with physical comedy and performed troubadour songs, often changing, or adapting, the song to a specific context.

The notorious dilemma of the last twenty years in the rock tradition has been in crucial ways exacerbated, rather than relieved, by the existence of recording: the concert becoming the occasion to reproduce, as faithfully as possible, the sound of recorded songs. And in the case of the surviving performers, who were originally responsible for creating the sounds of the Golden Age of rock, the pressure was redoubled: to do the same (old) songs, in the same (classic) sound: Clapton (to take only one example from the many available) until the unexpected success of the "unplugged" "Layla" could scarcely give a concert without offering a "Layla" that sounded as close as possible to the one on his Derek and the Dominoes studio album to the audience. It is no coincidence, of course, that the Beatles' turn to highly sophisticated studio recording techniques, and their production of that already highly-classicized and virtually un-performable and un-variable music that is "Sgt. Pepper" dovetails exactly with their abandonment of performance. Nor, to look at the other side of the coin, is it surprising that the cult of the Grateful Dead, the group that most aggressively, and successfully, fought this tendency to fix, is squarely based on what amounted to a denial of the studio recording, a

fetishizing instead of the dozens or hundreds of individual variations of performance. The result of this is quite visible in the overwhelming minutiae of the Dead Base, as well as in the fact that for posterity (and for most people who are not fairly hard-core Dead fans) there are virtually no canonical recordings of their songs, and those that do exist (or that will be known to the many who are not, in effect, Dead scholars) bear little or no relationship to the virtually infinite and always surprising performances that were their real contribution to rock.

The hard lesson here, the one reflected in equal measures by the remnants of the medieval lyric tradition and the already considerable record of classic rock, is a painful one: if you cast your lot with the creativity of performance and variation it will largely blow away in the wind; but if you choose (or have thrust on you) classicization, which requires a limited corpus of fixed forms, and the values of unique authenticity and immutability that come with it, you will survive in the canon, an influential Dead White Male. There is virtually no doubt that the very rock-like innovations that shook the culture of Western Europe during the troubadour revolution lay in its cultivation of a style of musical performance that made white the sounds, both voice and instrumental, of previously subterranean cultures: the speech and accents of vulgarity, of the Common Speech (as Pound would call it in his translation of Dante's important essay on the subject, the "De Vulgari Eloquentia") combined, intoxicatingly, sexually, threateningly, with the percussion-and-lute rhythms and sounds of that distinctly black and blues musical tradition that can still be heard throughout North Africa. (If one happens to know this it is particularly uncanny to listed to the 1994 Page and Plant performance variant of their own "Kashmir," played with full medieval-Arabic instrumentation.) And yet what survives of all of this is what could be canonized and classicized, both technically and ideologically.

If we had only the medieval song example we would be tempted to say that it is a historical accident, that if there had been recording we would have preserved for us the true and detailed record of the revolution. And if we had only the rock example we would be tempted to say, perhaps with some optimism, that it is only because of the post-classical, post-sixties angst, that there are all those signs of only classic (and mostly studio) recordings that most people hear and know, or that people would worry about whether the real century in "Tangled Up in Blue" was the fifteenth or the thirteenth. But contemplating the congruent dynamics of both traditions, even when they are at such temporal distance from each other, suggests that it is not a purely technical matter but something altogether more powerful that ends up discarding, or at least thinning out and correcting the infinite variety of performed variation and thus instability; and preserving, with all attendant influence on subsequent artists, what is then, by definition, the classic fixed form.

Dylan plays a virtually unique and very troubadour-like role in this universe of complex struggle between that evanescent living quality of performance and variation (where there is, in effect, neither originality nor errors) and the urge to immortalize by fixing (through and by definitive texts, either in print or in recording). Part of his singularity lies in the fact that he has played quite different seminal roles with equal conviction and dedication, and in this he is much like the most famous and ultimately influential of the troubadours, Arnaut Daniel, the original "miglior fabbro". He is, on the one hand, virtually unrivaled in the roles of original songwriter and thus highest lyricist and poet of rock, and it is even true (as much as some Dylan fans might want to perish the thought) that the most enduring and canonical versions of some Dylan compositions are their versions done by others. (A few years ago I taught a course at the University of California at Santa Cruz on this subject and was amused, but not surprised, to discover that in a class of about fifty students aged around 20 the vast majority believed "All Along the Watchtower" was a

Hendrix song, and when they heard the Dylan cover, most for the first time in my class, they found it what they considered a betrayal of the sound of the authentic song!).

But he has also played the role of performer, and as a performer who, like the Grateful Dead, thrives not on the ability to reproduce the sound of the classical recording that his audience knows (and at some level is really dying to hear), but on the very risky business of playing it differently, unexpectedly. His influence on the development of rock in this sphere of variant, and sometimes even shocking performance I need hardly detail very much here: it's what makes Newport Newport, but that of course is only the most notorious of moments in rock history, and Dylan's performance career, as opposed to his work as a song writer or in the recording studio, could certainly be seen as one long series of surprises for his audience. Some better received than others, but all directed, consciously or unconsciously or some measure of both, at resisting that strong impulse, which appears to be a hard-wired part of the dynamics between artist and audience, to love what is known, to want what is familiar, to crave the classic. We may all look down our noses now, with some sense of superiority, or even contempt, at the poor benighted folkies who booed Dylan at Newport and on many other stages in the subsequent year: it is difficult to read Grail Marcus' "Invisible Republic" without being washed over by a wave of incredulity as we read his marvelous recounting and recreation of the stark dangers and hostilities that were a part of that remarkable moment. But the truth is that most of us would do something very similar under comparable circumstances, the truth is that Dylan does not attract audiences for his performances anywhere like the size of the public that lives and dies by the classic recordings of his classic songs (because everyone knows he isn't going to do his songs the way they are supposed to sound). Be honest: how many of us would not, deep in our hearts, long to hear him perform "Just Like a Woman" just **exactly** like it sounds on Blonde on Blonde? Just once?

But Dylan, in the end, has been able, through sheer genius and versatility, and perhaps through understanding that both of these contradictory impulses are crucial, to have his cake and eat it too. The Dead, on the one hand, cast their lot with performance, and precisely because they so actively conspired in the vast recording of their thousands of variants, giving priority to none, essentially rejecting studio recordings, denying at every turn the canon's need to fix forms in order to have enduring masterpieces, their unrivaled importance in their own time will almost undoubtedly prove to be evanescent and of minimal canonical importance in the long run. As someone who profited personally from the true possibility for ecstasy that this kind of performance cult provided, I say this with some sadness, because I know that the moments of musical transcendence and revelation they provided will last only in my own memory, and is by definition not able to be passed down, either to my own children, or to the canon of lyrics and music of future generations that will be influenced only by what does survive, canonically and classically. Of course (people argue this with me all the time) that vast archive of virtually every performance over decades is there. But the point is that major-league long-term impact is not made from archives known, after a few generations, only to fanatical scholars, which is why most people reading this know nothing or virtually nothing about the troubadour revolution and the lyrical transformation of Europe it precipitated.

The Beatles, on the other hand, and to take the other extreme end of the possibilities, cast their lot with recording and classicization, and with song writing as a poetic art, and Sgt. Pepper **already** sounds like a concert to be played in a concert hall as it was, indeed, intended to sound in the first place. With no one dancing in the aisles or singing along, with the clapping saved for the end. And it will be heard, and be influential in its being held up as the great lyrical-musical achievement of its period, for a very long time. And exactly as it sounded the day it was released. And its staggering impact will be

measurable in part precisely because --this the virtue of the canon --it is the same single and singular form, enchanted with its own inimitable originality, available (as is any novel, or poems from the post-medieval period when poems are no longer the lyrics of variable songs) for generations thereafter in the same form. It is true, of course, that the meaning and interpretation and sound of such fixed canonical forms can and do change over time because the audience and its background and knowledge have changed, and historians thus worry a great deal about the question of original intent and reception. But even if, as is quite likely the case, my son takes away a very different meaning from Sgt. Pepper when he listens to it at the age of sixteen than I did when I was sixteen, the fact is he can and will listen to it, and if he were to become a songwriter or musician might well be influenced by it and thus further ensure its continuity in the tradition. But I will never again be able to take him to a Dead concert, and the recordings he might hear of any performance of theirs will capture only in the most abstract of ways what was fundamentally an irrecoverable experience, in part because its thrill and value and beauty lay in the difference of that evening's improvisation.

Dylan, almost miraculously, has both given and gotten both of these, and in complexly intertwined ways. He can manage to get out of all of this having it be both the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries. Although an important part of his own perception of his role lies in the sphere of performance variations, and in the sometimes ineffable originality that comes out of the transformations of popular music into canonical music (not least among these that near-fanatical preservation and revival of earlier American music that is the essence of the "Basement Tapes") it is as a highly original and individualistic lyricist-poet that his influence is already most pervasive. Hendrix's immortal recording of "All Along the Watchtower" is but the tip of the iceberg: his centrality as a songwriter is everywhere visible, from the Byrds' "Mr. Tambourine Man" to elevator-muzak versions of "The Times They Are A' Changing." Dylan's vast and vastly varied repertoire of

compositions, many of whose lyrics follow more the verbal contours of Pound-like and Arnaut Daniel-like poetry than of conventional songs, has provided texts that are fixed and classical in multiple ways: from the published versions of the verbal texts that are already studied as written poetry (and were almost from the outset) to recordings by others, Hendrix and the Byrds among them, that became for all but Dylan purists the standard and socially, as well as musically, influential recordings. The traces of his central importance as a songwriter are and will remain everywhere, in virtually every corner, of the recorded and classicized rock tradition.

But this has not come for him, this access to a certain kind of immortality, at the expense of renouncing any aspect of the risky and ever-mutating performance ethos, for either himself or his songs. His powerful sense of the separability of song from performance is what has made him so important a composer and poet and lyricist in the rock tradition, such a gold-mine of texts for others: his songs aren't written (or recorded, when he records them) so that they exude an aura of definitiveness of interpretation, his own least of all. So that, even if you believe that his "All Along the Watchtower" on John Wesley Harding is a marvelous rendition, there is nothing about the quality of the composition itself, let alone the palpable openness of his performance of it, that makes Hendrix's version of it inferior, or less authentic, let alone less powerful. Despite the widely recognized genius of Lennon and McCartney as songwriters, there are in fact relatively few versions of any of their songs (and there are of course hundreds of covers of many of their songs and no doubt always will be) that are not palpably inferior to their own versions of the same song, which will always be the true originals. An exception such as Joe Cocker's performance of "A Little Help From My Friends" is memorable precisely because it is such an exception. Dylan as covered songwriter is at least as influential, but the crucial difference is that even when his own recorded versions are magisterial they rarely preclude other canonical, classical versions from being performed and recorded.