

Bob Dylan, Creativity and Plagiarism

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Introduction

Creativity and plagiarism appear to be inversely related, just as originality and influence are standardly taken to be mutually exclusive. Bob Dylan's career and work, however, lend themselves to ways of thinking about plagiarism, creativity, influence and originality, which go against the grain of received opinion. Dylan is a creative artist, who resists received ways of doing things, traditional formulas and the pressure to conform to audience expectations. He has consistently adopted new styles and confounded critics and fans alike (See Browning, 2009, 157-184). Famously, Dylan turned his back on acoustic traditional folk music and his fans' expectations to play electric music (See Jones, 2009, 75-104). His memoir, *Chronicles Volume One*, sets out his own revulsion against the weight of expectations. He relates how he reacted against the invocations of fans and those who demanded that he lead the contemporary counterculture movement by retreating to his home and family (Dylan, 2004, 118). Dylan found the influence of audience and cultural expectations too intense and retreated so as to retain a sense of his own identity and creativity. However, alongside his undoubted originality and fearlessness in making his own way and his moral courage in ignoring cultural expectations and popular formulas, he has been the subject of continuous criticism for his drawing upon the tunes, words and songs of others. His girlfriend of the early

1960s, Suze Rotolo, in her memoir, *A Freewheelin' Time* observes, 'Accusations of plagiarism would always be a ball and chain on Dylan's career as a songwriter, but especially in the early years, as his fame was growing. He was so openly and nakedly searching for interesting music on albums, on the radio, in performance in a club that plagiarism was an easy gibe to make about him (Rotolo, 2009, 135).

Rotolo maintains that Dylan's assiduousness in searching for sources to enrich his creativity should not be counted against him as his use of influences and sources does not deny creative genius. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines plagiarism as 'the taking and using as one's own of the thoughts, writings or inventions of another' (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1973, 1596). Certainly, in his early years of performing Dylan was like blotting paper, soaking up influences and adapting words and music to frame new songs. Is his capacity to absorb influences, rehearsing bits and pieces drawn from others and adapting them to fit new ideas and songs to be condemned as inauthentic or plagiaristic? Should his creativity be emphasised instead? Insofar as Dylan does draw upon the thoughts and writings of others without acknowledging the sources of influence then the charge of plagiarism against him has some purchase. On the other hand, Dylan rarely merely recycles source material. He is invariably inventive in using the material and it can be said that the conventions of traditional forms of music and song-writing allow for the use of preceding material and that the patterns of popular song tend to be repeated and the repetition is a way of keeping familiar forms of music alive rather than allowing them to disappear.

Dylan himself has commented upon his use of others' material in distinctive and contrasting ways. In an interview in *Rolling Stone* he is adamant that he should not be hidebound by rules that are imposed upon him from the outside. He maintains, 'I'm not going to limit what I can say. I have to be true to the song. It's a particular art form that has its own rules' (Gilmore, 2012, 81). He fulminates against critics, who demand that he restrict his art so as to observe external protocols. He dismisses critics by saying, 'Wussies and pussies complain about that stuff' (Gilmore 2012: 81). The exasperation that Dylan conveys in the interview is a reminder of the frustration that ensues from having to justify his style and creativity. He was booed in the mid-1960s for moving away from traditional folk music and playing rock music and he was critiqued in the early 1980s for playing gospel music. Subsequently critics tend to find his rock music of the 1960s and the gospel music of the 1980s interesting and inventive. Dylan in these quotations from the *Rolling Stone* interview of 2012 appears to be seeing accusations of plagiarism as another form of imposing restriction on his creativity. He imagines that song-writing demands using a variety of sources, personal experience, traditional songs, bits and pieces from the newspapers, films and novels and if he is to be true to his trade he has to do what the form seems to demand. In the interview Dylan also implies that he is not always conscious of taking material from elsewhere (Gilmore, 2012, 81). He also highlights how in folk and jazz music, drawing on sources is part of the traditional way of doing things.' Oh yeah, in folk and jazz, quotation is a rich and enriching tradition. That's certainly true. It's true for everybody, but not me. There are different rules for everybody but me. I mean, everyone else can do it but not me' (Gilmore, 2012, 81). Dylan is certainly accurate in observing that citing other work is prevalent in traditional

forms of music. It is also true that the conventions of traditional popular forms of music allow for this form of quotation. Justification for this use might derive from the fact that in these musical forms the use of material is not standardly taken as passing off another's work as one's own. There is a cultural expectation that the writer or performer of the form of popular music will be using such material and it does not need express acknowledgement. This argument is less convincing when lines from a little known song or novel are drawn upon. In these cases it might not be reasonable to expect the listeners to recognize how originality goes along with drawing upon preceding material.

To consider Dylan as a plagiarist is to ask questions about how we regard plagiarism in distinct contexts. A student essay in which the student is being asked to draw upon sources intelligently and to acknowledge the use in appropriate ways and to avoid gaining by passing off the writing of another as their own is different from taking part in a musical tradition where there are no clear conventions on how to acknowledge dependence upon preceding singers, writers and stylists. Perhaps it is part of the tradition of popular forms of music for themes and ideas to be passed on. Certainly Pete Seeger in the film on Bob Dylan by Scorsese commented that it was the essence of folk music for it to be a continuous process whereby successive singers and writers draw upon earlier songs and performers. tunes and words to be passed on (Scorsese, 2005). In the succeeding sections of this paper I will focus on two Dylan albums, his first album, *Bob Dylan* and his late album "*Love and Theft*", for they are particularly relevant to the theme of influence and plagiarism. His first album set the pattern for his style of combining originality with drawing upon a variety of sources and "*Love and Theft*" is an album that is

dedicated to the question of how we relate to influences, and Dylan's answer appears to be that we cherish influences while stealing from them and that perhaps theft and love are related ways of paying homage. In considering how Dylan uses sources and influences on these albums I will draw upon theorists of intellectual history, such as Derrida and Foucault to highlight how Dylan's practice might be regarded.

Bob Dylan: The First Album

From the outset of his career Dylan was taking from others. Not long before making this album in 1962 Dylan assumed the name 'Dylan', which even if Dylan himself cannot recall its inspiration, probably reflects its association with Dylan Thomas, whose romanticism is rehearsed in Dylan's songs (See Scorsese, 2005 and Shelton, 1986, 45). Dylan's first album sets down a marker on how his reputation, integrity and style are developed from blues and folk music influences. Some of the sources for his songs on the album are acknowledged, while others are unacknowledged, which will prove to be a continuing pattern through his career. 'Song to Woody' is an original poignant song, perhaps his first significant creative work, and yet it uses a Woody Guthrie tune, which itself sprang from a traditional one (See Guthrie, 1941). Although 'Song to Woody' seems a straightforward homage to Woody Guthrie, it is not a simple eulogy. It's evocation of Guthrie is complicated by its use of the tune of a Guthrie song and by its referencing another Guthrie song, 'Hard Travelin' in affirming ambiguously, 'the very last thing that I'd want to do, is to say that I've been hitti'

some hard travelin' too'. (Dylan 1962, Guthrie, 1941 and 1944). It is a song of respect, yet it steals from the respected figure and asserts the singer's own credentials reluctantly as following in the footsteps of Guthrie. Bloom in his study of literary influence, *The Anxiety of Influence*, makes the point that literary figures, and he invokes Romantic poets of the 19th Century, tend to misconstrue predecessors so as to draw upon them while denying their influence (Bloom, 1999, 1-35). Bloom's Freudian reading of the awkwardness involved in combining originality and influence is exhibited in Dylan's determination to be highly respectful to his influential father-figure, Guthrie, while asserting originality and creativity at the same time.

Dylan and the album, *Bob Dylan* were part of the contemporary folk music revival of the early 1960s, which revered the folk tradition and its progressive political attitudes that were symbolized in Guthrie. On the album, though, Dylan assumes a variety of attitudes to that folk tradition. He plays fast and loose with many of its traditional songs. Dylan turns the traditional 'Freight Train Blues' upside down by playing it with a rock and roll attitude, and he lampoons the New York folk music scene in 'Talkin' New York.' He name checks Eric von Schmidt for his influence on his interpretation of 'Baby Let me Follow You Down.' However, Dylan performs a version of 'House of the Rising Sun', which draws on the chord changes that were devised by Dave Van Ronk, the legendary Greenwich Village performer, in his distinctive version of the song. In recording the song, Dylan fails to acknowledge his reliance on Van Ronk. Now, Dylan's singing of 'House of the Rising Sun' might be seen as unexceptional. There were lots of contemporary versions of this powerful traditional song and rehearsing traditional

songs was standard for folk singers of the time. Moreover, Van Ronk's version was not copyrighted. However, if Dylan name checked Von Schmidt then why not refer to Van Ronk as a source. Van Ronk was annoyed by the failure to reference his role in Dylan's performance of the song. He complains about it in his autobiography and in his relaxed interview about Dylan in Scorsese's excellent documentary on Dylan's early years.(Van Ronk: 175-8: Scorsese, 2005). Dylan's first album reveals an original innovative performer in singing, creating songs and playing tunes in his own way. Yet he also takes from other performers and adapts traditional material and a case can be made for express acknowledgement of his use of Van Ronk's version of 'House of the Risin' Sun.' His use of traditional songs and styles fits with the conventions of the folk music revival and his adaptation of a Guthrie tune to perform an original song dedicated to Guthrie shows Dylan's creativity in acknowledging his influences..

Dylan and Theft

The title of Dylan's album "*Love and Theft*" (2001) was characteristically lifted from Eric Lott's study of black-faced minstrelsy, and it is dedicated to exploring the theme of influence. Lott's *Love and Theft* reveals how the white working class audience for black-faced minstrelsy maintains ambivalent attitudes to black people, mixing fear, desire, envy and dismissal in ways that its white devotees do not disentangle (Lott, 1995). Likewise, Dylan's album, "*Love and Theft.*" expresses multiple attitudes to the blues and folk traditions to which the songs on the album are related. Dylan dedicates a song on the album to Charlie Patton, one of the first of the Delta Bluesmen and

he name checks the bluesman, Big Joe Turner, while at the same time lifting lines from old blues and folk songs, and recreating a sound that conjures up these old blues musicians. There can be no denying the love that is felt for these old musicians in that the album as a whole is an evocative and creative piece of reconstruction, and yet material is lifted directly from old blues and folk songs, and phrases are taken, without acknowledgement, from a contemporary Japanese novel.

Just as Eric Lott in his book, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, recognized that the white working class harbored a multitude of jarring attitudes to black people, so Dylan advertises his own diverse attitudes to the music that has gone before. Simultaneously, he reveres its riches and yet he also takes from its lyrical and musical forms to create his own singular creative celebration of what these old traditions represent (Lott, 1995 and see also Lott, 2009). "*Love and Theft*" (Dylan 2001), as its title suggests, is an album that is expressly about influences and how they are to be assessed and used. Lott suggests how blackface minstrelsy provoked ambivalent responses from its white working-class audience, observing, '...there were in fact contradictory racial impulses at work, impulses based in the everyday lives and racial negotiations of the minstrel show's working-class partisans' (Lott, 1995, 4). This sort of multiplicity and ambivalence is evident in the songs on Dylan's "*Love and Theft*." In a preceding album, *World Gone Wrong* (1993), Dylan faithfully recorded old blues and folk songs, such as 'Stack A Lee' and 'Blood in My Eyes', and in the sleeve notes to the album he testified to the significance of these songs, which teem with multiple

meanings, observing that modern conditions of life are destroying the possibility of such songs (Dylan 1993). Dylan's love for these old blues and folk songs is evident in the care with which he took to perform them on *World Gone Wrong* and on the preceding album of traditional songs, *Good As I Been To You* (1992).

Dylan delivers an empathetic respectful set of performances for "*Love and Theft*", on which he evokes a variety of preceding musical forms including blues, folk, country, jazz and swing. His respect for these musical idioms is evident in his name checking Charley Patton and his song 'High Water Everywhere' in his own reworked 'High Water (for Charley Patton).' Yet at the same time he incorporates into the latter song, without express acknowledgement, phrases from old songs such as, 'dust my broom ' and 'the cuckoo is a pretty bird she warbles as she flies,' from the blues standard, 'Dust My Broom' and the traditional English folk song, 'The Cuckoo'. (Dylan, 1993) Again in his song, 'Sugar Baby' Dylan takes, without reference, the words, 'Look up, Look up—seek your maker—'fore Gabriel blows his horn', from the Gene Austin song of 1927, 'Lonesome Road.' (Austin, 1927). On the song, 'Floater', Dylan used the words, 'My Old Man he's like a Feudal Lord', which were later revealed to be an echo of the opening words of the novel, *Confessions of a Yakuza* by Junichi Saga, 'My Old Man sits there like a Feudal Lord' (1991), and an article in the *Wall Street Journal* traced a series of phrases in the song that linked to words in Saga's novel.

What are we to make of Dylan's borrowings from old blues, jazz and folk songs and his employment of slightly modified phrases from Saga's novel? Dylan can be

seen as in part self-consciously aiming to work within a tradition, a tradition of blues and folk music where the convention is that phrases and riffs and tunes are passed on without express acknowledgement save through the continuity of the tradition itself. The very title, *“Love and Theft”*, signals that Dylan is stealing from others and he expressly signposts his reliance on Charley Patton. Similarly he might legitimately expect his audience to be familiar with the old English folk tale, ‘The Cuckoo is a Pretty Bird’ and the blues song ‘Dust My Broom’, which can be traced back further than Elmore James’ recording of the song. He might even anticipate that his audience might know ‘Lonesome Road, and he alludes to his sampling of that song in ‘Sugar Baby by entitling another song on *“Love and Theft”* ‘Lonesome Day Blues.’ At least, Dylan might expect his audience to pick up on a theme of the album, the evocation of traditional forms of music. Insofar as Dylan on this album is working within the traditions and conventions of idioms of folk, blues and jazz music, it might be said that his work reflects Foucault’s highlighting of the way texts and ideas reflect discursive practices. Folk and blues singers do not acquaint themselves with the fine print of referencing strategies to identify the provenance of their work. They openly borrow from the past, adapting tunes and words to add to them and to render them relevant to the present, and in so doing they are being true to the conventions of the music. Hence, in using phrases from traditional songs, Dylan is rehearsing phrases and themes from the past but he is not merely repeating or if he is repeating aspects of preceding work, he is still being original. In ‘What is An Author?’ Foucault highlights how the status of an author changes over time. Whereas in pre-modern times, works of literature were seen as belonging to traditions, in modern times the creativity of individual authors is emphasized. Hence conventions change and are various and arguably Dylan is

being true to the conventions of the folk and blues traditions in taking from past songs to create new forms that attest to the force of the traditions (Foucault 1984: 101-21).

As Derrida observed, meanings are multiple so that when a song is changed and the context for its delivery changes, it acquires a new meaning (Derrida, 2002). When Dylan sings evocatively of the Mississippi flood recorded in Charley Patton's memorable song, 'High Water Everywhere', he is relating it to the present. Dylan is enabled to convey powerful sentiments about what he takes to be present-day catastrophe by evoking the plaintive lament of a blues singer for the disaster of the great Mississippi flood, which in turn alludes to the biblical flood and the wrath of God. Dylan's evocative use of old blues songs resonates also with an old man's sense of the past and his fragmentary grip on past episodes, which is mediated by his own development as a singer of blues and folk tunes. (See Brake 2009: 194-7). Part of the force of Dylan's songs on the album is the way they evoke images of the past via phrases that are connected allusively. Just as fragments of old songs picture a poignant past so odd phrases connect memories of childhood and loss. On 'Lonesome Day Blues' he connects the nostalgic fertility of listening to songs on the radio with the loss of his mother, the ultimate source of individual creativity, '...settin' my dial on the radio, I wish my mother was still alive...' (Dylan, 2001). But if there is mitigation and indeed explanation for Dylan's alluding to past songs, a practice, which is a part of the musical tradition on which he draws, there seems less justification for an unacknowledged drawing upon Saga's words. While the use of Saga's words fits with, 'Floater', Dylan's tough-minded song about rural

poverty, it would seem that Dylan is using material that his audience could not be expected to know, and it would have been useful and respectful to have provided a reference to the book on the CD sleeve.

Conclusion

The title of this paper refers to Dylan, creativity and plagiarism. How are we to put these things together? Dylan certainly takes from a variety of sources, mining traditional musical idioms to redevelop themes and musical forms in new original settings. In so doing he combines theft with love, reworking and creatively reframing sources in innovative ways that can be traced in his earliest album and is evident in his late album, *“Love and Theft”*. To imagine creativity operating in isolation from contexts, discursive settings and sources of inspiration is to misconceive creativity and to inflate the role of the individual at the expense of a wider frame of meaning (See Gadamer, 1975). Foucault identifies the focus upon the individual author in modern literary analysis to be a feature of modern literary discourse rather than an inherent feature of literary creativity. Dylan himself recognizes the power and force of traditional songs, and he has never sought to downplay the influence exerted upon his work by the traditions of popular song (Dylan, 1993). He sees himself as part of a tradition and he has done much to recognize and promote appreciation of historic folk, blues, country and gospel forms. He has recorded albums of traditional material in which he handles recondite traditional material with care and love. He has also produced albums of songs by and dedicated to the late Jimmie Rodgers and Hank Williams, significant if recessive figures in the popular musical imagination (Various Artists, 1997,

2011). He name checks preceding musical figures in his own songs, for instance in 'New Pony' on *Street Legal* and, in *Workingman's Blues*2* on *Modern Times*, and in 'Highwater (for Charley Patton)' on "Love and Theft" (Dylan, 1978, 2001 and 2005). Dylan has responded to critics, who condemn him for alleged plagiarism, by observing the distinctiveness of folk and jazz forms (See Gilmore, 2012). Moreover, as Ricks observes, Dylan's style is to be suggestive, often implying or allowing a multitude of meanings to show through his lyrics (Ricks, 2003). The incorporation, conscious or unconscious, of phrases and riffs from the resources of traditional songs allows for this multiplicity of meanings. Scobie comments on how Dylan's work reflects Derrida's perception of the plurality of meanings to which texts of and speech are subject (Scobie, 1991, 15).. Certainly Dylan, simultaneously, is a traditional and innovative artist. In an interview with John Pareles of *The New York Times* (1997) Dylan attested to his appreciation of old traditional songs, precisely because of their depth and multiplicity of meaning (Dylan, 2006). Arguably, the power of Dylan's own creations, such as 'Desolation Row' and 'Visions of Johanna' is that they evoke the mystery and depth of traditional songs.

Dylan's engagement with the folk tradition and his creative adaption of traditional songs is not unusual and folk singers commonly recognize how they are part of a tradition rather than singular artists. Pete Seeger, for instance, in his interview in the Scorsese documentary on Dylan, *No Direction Home*, explains how folk music is precisely an on-going tradition and a continuous process of adaptation (Scorsese, 2005). Forms of popular music such as folk, jazz and blues are very different from the disciplines of academic study and scholarship, and the

conventions by which sources are recognized are different. In writing scholarly essays a premium is rightly placed on citations, for the exercise of scholarship in academic writing involves the precise use of sources. Moreover, enforcing the discipline of formal rules of citation fits with the generally top-down, hierarchical nature of the education process. In folk and blues music, however, formal referencing gives way to a relaxed attitude to past sources given that the traditions of the music involve drawing upon old songs in diverse ways, sampling bits and pieces of the past to create something new. When Dylan creates the song 'Rollin and Tumblin' on *Modern Times* there cannot be many listeners, who are unaware of the Muddy Waters song of the same name, which in turn developed out of earlier versions of the song (Dylan, 2005 and Muddy Waters, 1950). Likewise Dylan's eulogy of John Lennon, 'Roll on John' on the recent album, *Tempest* does not need formal acknowledgement of Beatles' songs from *Abbey Road* and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (Dylan, 2012 and the Beatles, 1967 and 1969). It would have been against the spirit of John Lennon to acknowledge his songs formally rather than informally via incorporation of fragments in Dylan's homily.

If Dylan's is a thief, then his theft is for the most part justifiable as it testifies to love. However, there are occasions when his use of sources is questionable. In cases where sources are not easily discernible or traceable, it would be helpful for a reference to be given in the liner notes to Dylan's albums. There are at least two reasons for this. First, it would help his listeners to understand the creative process better, and to be able to align creativity with its provenance in traditional or recondite musical and literary forms. Second, it would allow some justifiable

credit to be assigned to little-known authors and performers. Even if incorporating a fragment of a text possibly testifies more the artistry of the author who incorporates the fragment than that of the author of the original fragment, it appears just to acknowledge the source. For instance Dylan's use of Saga's novel involves an act of mediated creativity, which it would be useful to be specified and acknowledged. Most listeners to "*Love and Theft*" would not have guessed the provenance of some of its material. In reviewing Dylan's use of sources, one or two points can be made of general interest for students of plagiarism. There is little doubt that Dylan is creative and a creator of powerful songs and that his creativity is not stifled by his use of sources. His case reinforces the general truth that profound creative energy is not inversely related to influence. Dylan has a wide and insightful knowledge of popular music, which he shows by incorporating elements of popular songs into his own creative energy. His songs reflect his influences and it is part of the tradition of popular music for influence to be reflected by innovative adaptation of traditional material. Dylan's use of fragments of traditional songs and his modification of phrases drawn from literature do not entail that he should be disparaged as a plagiarist rather than celebrated as a creative force. Perhaps Dylan's creativity would have been trammled if he had to account for his use of sources in a disciplined and thorough fashion. However, Dave Van Ronk's belated fame as the model for the protagonist of the Coen Brothers' film, *Inside Llewyn Davis* might not have been his only claim to fame if Dylan had recognized his part in the development of a powerful song on his first album (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2013). While it is tempting to urge that Van Ronk's belated fame owes much to Dylan's use of his song, more formal recognition of Van Ronk might well have issued in more attention being devoted to an

interesting figure.

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