IMAGINATIONS
REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE · JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES

IMAGINATIONS
JOURNAL OF CROSS_CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES | REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE

Publication details, including open access policy and instructions for contributors:
http://imaginations.csj.ualberta.ca

"Relationships of Ownership: Art and Theft in Bob Dylan's 1960s Trilogy"

Michael Rodgers

May 21, 2012

To Cite this Article:

Rodgers, Michael. "**Relationships of Ownership: Art and Theft in Bob Dylan's 1960s Trilogy**" Imaginations 3:1 (2011): Web (date accessed) 17-29. DOI: 10.17742/IMAGE.stealimage.3-1.5

To Link to this article:

http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.stealimage.3-1.5

RELATIONSHIPS OF OWNERSHIP: ART AND THEFT IN BOB DYLAN'S 1960S' TRILOGY

MICHAEL RODGERS, UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

Abstract

Bob Dylan's corpus is one continually engaged with appropriation and pilfering. This paper will look, predominantly, at three songs from his 1960s' trilogy – 'She Belongs To Me' from *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965), 'Visions of Johanna' from *Blonde on Blonde* (1966), and 'Desolation Row' from *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965) – arguing that, in these songs, Dylan problematizes the interrelationship between art, theft, and ownership. I argue that, similar to the urban artist Banksy, Dylan challenges, toys with, and appropriates cultural images in order to continually question the concept of proprietorship whilst rescuing cultural images from esoterica and attempting to put them back into the public domain.

Résumé

L'œuvre de Bob Dylan continue à être sujette à l'appropriation et au pillage. Cet article évalue, principalement, trois chansons qui font partie de la trilogie d'albums parue pendant les années 60 – *She Belongs To Me* de l'album *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965), *Visions of Johanna* de *Blonde on Blonde* (1966), et *Desolation Row* de *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965). Je cherche soutenir qu'à travers ces chansons Dylan propose des nouveaux problèmes quant à l'interrelation entre l'art, le vol et la propriété. Mon argument est que, à l'instar de l'artiste urbain Banksy, Dylan joue avec les images culturelles et se les appropries en même temps qu'il les met à l'épreuve afin de mettre en doute le concept de propriété. À travers ses œuvres, Dylan récupère ces images à partir de leur marginalité, pour les replacer dans un espace publique.

In the sleeve note to *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965), Bob Dylan, in his Ginsbergian free-form poem, claims that "the Great books've been written. the Great sayings have all been said" (6). Dylan, however, seems too self-assured an artist to accept this idea, too fertile an artist to accept the finality of artistic output. Instead, Dylan appears to rebel against the notion of closure through interweaving the themes of art and theft—letting (what seem to be) apparent antonyms complement one another as a way of creating new work. This paper will argue that Dylan's corpus challenges, toys with, and appropriates cultural images, in order to continually question the concept of ownership. Rather than be content with letting images set, Dylan seems to avoid allowing artistic icons, images, and rebuses to stagnate or become fixed and, instead, subjects them to radical metamorphoses and proffers phantasmagorical alternatives or adaptations. What is problematic, however, is whether the radically altered forms he presents belong to Dylan himself, act simply as tools for his poetic expression, or are an ensemble of *others*' work. This paper will look, predominantly, at three songs from his 1960s' trilogy ("She Belongs To Me" from *Bringing It All Back Home*, "Visions of Johanna" from *Blonde on Blonde* (1966), and "Desolation Row" from *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965)) arguing that, in these songs, Dylan is theorizing the topics of art, theft, and ownership.In doing so, I argue that Dylan appropriates and rescues cultural images from esoterica and attempts to put them back into the public domain. For Dylan, however, this accessibility does not equate to easiness. Although he asks his listeners to work hard for particular references, importantly, he rewards them if they are prepared to do so. In allowing his listeners to contribute to the songs through their own cultural knowledge, in defamiliarizing and lampooning normal perspectives and preconceptions, and in modifying images, Dylan persistently alludes throughout his works to what he calls "relationships of ownership" in "Gates of Eden" (1965). As Jonathan Lethem argues, "It becomes apparent that appropriation, mimicry, quotation, allusion, and sublimated collaboration consist of a kind of sine qua non of the creative act, cutting across forms and genres in the realm of cultural production" (60). Ultimately, I wish to illustrate the extent to which

Dylan's imagistic lyrics are integral to the ways in which notions of theft and ownership are theorized.

The degree to which Dylan's *songs* 'steal', or borrow, can be seen, for example, in the similarities between "I Dreamed I Saw St Augustine" (1975) and Alfred Hayes's poem "I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night" (1930), and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" (1962) and the ballad of "Lord Randall" (Trager 234). Jon Pareles details one particularly alert Dylan fan who noticed numerous references between *Love and Theft* and Junichi Saga's *Confessions of a Yakuza* (1991) (1). The title itself comes from Eric Lott's study of minstrelsy (Lethem 59). However, this topic is not always talked about disparagingly. Often, theft is one equated with humour, justification, delight even. What is interesting is

that the topics of art and theft appear to be completely dichotomous—art is something that one makes, creates, and gives, whereas theft entails taking, stealing, and appropriating. In this respect, Jonathan Lethem argues that:

> The cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange is that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two people, whereas the sale of a commodity leaves no necessary connection…Art that matters to us – which moves the heart, or revives the soul, or delights the senses, or offers courage for living, however we choose to describe the experience – is received as a gift is received. (65)

Art theft is a well-known and not uncommon crime, yet the possibility of art appropriating, or stealing, *other* art is even more contentious. When art starts to thieve (for example, when it harnesses something already existing through pastiche or bricolage such as in 'Pop Art'), it is often viewed negatively (as if its worth is somehow impure or mongrelized). The law of intellectual property may protect a work of art through copyright or patents, yet the cerebral concept itself cannot be subjected to proprietorship. As Pareles argues, "Courts are not the best place for aesthetic distinctions" (2). Indeed, for reader-response criticism, once something is published it can be said to belong to the public domain at large. In light of this, what seems crucial is the interrelationship between art, theft, and ownership. Are there limits to what can be stolen? Should we steal if it has beneficial or aesthetic merit? Are artists exempt from moral law?

Art, Stealing, and Morality

The relationship between art and morality has been an ongoing topic since the time of the ancient Greeks and is still being passionately contended in the present day by critics such as Noël Carroll, Tom Sorell, and Rosalind Hursthouse.[1] There are two arguments. One is that art, in its representation of real life, should be bound by the same moral laws that govern our own world. Novels that present evil figures who wreak havoc only to be thwarted by the protagonist or be subjected to some kind of divine retribution have been pervasive because, essentially, they provide us with some kind of moral lesson ("this will be the result if you act without a moral schema"). Such didactic fiction, however, sits alongside other (predominantly twentieth-century) novels that present ambiguous denouements and "let-offs" for culprits—which is a lot harder for readers to deal with (arguably, because the moral laws that we are governed by do not take effect). Aristotle, espousing the opposing view that literature has a beneficial role to play in our lives, argues that literature allows the temptation in our lives to be alleviated so that we can live out or experience such moral deviance. It can be argued that the realm of art—like that of comedy, say—is exempt from moral law. After all, although we have censorship and bowdlerisation for books that contain questionable material (*Lady Chatterley's Lover* [1928] or *Lolita* [1955] come to mind), we do not have (at least in the West) something resembling the world depicted in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948), where characters, or authors for that matter, are suppressed in what they are allowed to write about; in other words, we have no moral criteria for what a text *should* contain. Such freedom of speech allows writers and musicians to write about, enact even, scenarios that would otherwise be forbidden in the real world.

A Dylan song that amalgamates the themes of art, theft, ownership, and morality is "She Belongs to Me" from *Bringing It All Back Home*. The image on the front of the album cover, containing a distinctive lens-type framed shot of Dylan and a mysterious female, surrounded by a menagerie of magazines, albums, and paintings, serves to immediately articulate the album's concern with recursion or *mise en abyme* (the idea of "pictures within pictures") — something that foregrounds the song's relationship with theft. "She Belongs to Me" is the second song on the album and contains five six-line verses concerning a female artist and another figure (referred to only as "you") who is in complete admiration of her. The lyrics of the first two verses are as follows:

> She's got everything she needs
> She's an artist, she don't look back
> She's got everything she needs
> She's an artist, she don't look back
> She can take the dark out of the nighttime

And paint the daytime black

You will start out standing
Proud to steal her anything she sees
You will start out standing
Proud to steal her anything she sees
But you will wind up peeking through her keyhole
Down upon your knees (Dylan 1965, L1-12)

The use of anaphora in the first verse (repeating the pronoun "she" at the start of the first five lines) is partly due to Dylan's appropriation of the Blues' form and serves to highlight just how much an impact the woman makes on the speaker — which is somewhat ironic given how he or she seems to lampoon the extent to which the *other* figure covets the woman. The fact that 'she' is repeated so often serves to cement her anonymity and also reads as a highly possessive and misogynistic pronoun (an idea strengthened by the song's title). Dylan seems to suggest that, as an artist, the woman appears to have everything she needs; that is, there is not anything in the world that does not belong to her because of her occupation. Given that he tells us "she don't look back", Dylan establishes a relationship between her artistic prowess and a visionary element. It seems that only banal people would be bothered looking at the past or be content with past achievements.[2] It also suggests (but negates) having to "run from the law" — something that adds to this feeling of artistic assuredness and self-possession. Dylan then alludes to the artistic technique of *chiascuro*, given that "she can paint the daytime black" but refers to it in such a way that it simultaneously reads simply as hyperbolic description of her artistic powers in being able to transform night into day and vice versa. The speaker goes on to describe the gradual reduction in height of the other figure (starting off "standing" and ending on his "knees") which may suggest genuflection (an idea that is linked to the "bow" and "salute" in the last verse). This lionizing of the woman is preceded by the line, "proud to steal her anything she sees". What is interesting here is that the only things that could really be stolen (in a traditional context) would be physical objects, yet the "anything" seems to include, literally, *anything* she sees — things such as landscapes, people,

and weather (which cannot literally be stolen). The fact that he "ends up peeking through her keyhole", although suggesting sexual innuendo, seems instead to simply demonstrate his curiosity at what changes or adaptations the woman will make to these things once inside her workroom (which, presumably, he cannot gain access to).

The third verse strengthens the woman's seeming assuredness but also raises the issue of consequence:

She never stumbles
She's got no place to fall
She never stumbles
She's got no place to fall
She's nobody's child
The Law can't touch her at all
(Dylan 1965, L13-18)

The suggestion that "she's got no place to fall" might appear to be foreboding whereby the need for poise, and a lack of safety (suggestive of tightrope walking), may impede her ability or, alternatively, suggest an element of hubris. Apparently birthless ("She"s nobody's child"), and otherworldly as a consequence of her lack of ties, alongside being outside the law, this female artist seems to have an empyrean status. The fact that Dylan gives her immunity from the "Law" (something important enough to deserve a capital letter) furthers the extent to which she appears to be of a higher order than the other figure, yet, ultimately, she is still possessed by Dylan himself through the creative act. Presumably, the other figure, governed by society's virtuous Christian morality (where "Thou Shalt Not Steal" has been imbibed), will have consequences to deal with at a later date because of his actions. An element of self-reflexivity emerges as we progress through the song, since the idea that art is situated outside the moral realm sits alongside the suggestion that art may be thought of as recursive ownership (the addressee who steals for the woman and whom she "collects", the speaker who claims to possess the woman, Dylan's creation of the speaker).[3] The toing and froing between different claims to ownership, of course, even extends to the listener, who is in doubt as to whether he or she can be said to lay claim to their own imaginative conception of the woman. The idea of the buck of ownership stopping at Dylan is a curious one, something forever problematized through both cover versions and creative reimagining.

A similar song that interweaves the themes of art, theft and morality is "4th Time Around" from *Blonde on Blonde*, a song which is notable for the speaker's inability to understand reciprocal exchange or the acts of giving and receiving. The idea that "4th Time Around" might be a parody or homage to The Beatles' "Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown" (1965), given their similar melody and lyrical quality, is suggested by Trager (195) and Wilentz (118). If true, it continues the tradition of Dylan borrowing when comprising his own songs.

"4th Time Around" contains five nine-line verses that again focus on an unnamed woman but, this time, includes the 'I' of the speaker. Concerning an anonymous trio's love triangle — a speaker's remembrance of a break-up with a past lover (of which this is perhaps the fourth occurrence) — the song is notable for its vitriol and how much the speaker acts the clown:

> When she said
> "Don't waste your words, they're just lies"
> I cried she was deaf
> And she worked on my face until breaking my eyes
> Then said, "What else you got left?"
> It was then that I got up to leave
> But she said, "Don't forget
> Everybody must give something back
> For something they get"
>
> I stood there and hummed
> I tapped on her drum and asked her how come
> And she buttoned her boot
> And straightened her suit
> Then she said, "Don't get cute"
> So I forced my hands in my pockets
> And felt with my thumbs
> And gallantly handed her
> My very last piece of gum (Dylan 1966, L1-18)

In the first verse, we are told that the speaker "got up to leave" in the midst of their argument, hums, taps on her drum and asks "How come?" after being told that "Everybody must give something back/For something they get." These childish responses are amplified when the speaker tells us that he "gallantly handed her [his] last piece of gum" (Dylan 1966, 6, 10, 11, 17-18) in response to her assertion about exchange. The speaker's offering acts as a cruel reply that illustrates the extent to which he thinks he will solve the reciprocal conundrum, but instead, it only serves to infuriate her. Indeed, it is specifically this lack of understanding reciprocal exchange that, ostensibly, makes the speaker morally reprehensible. As a result, we can perhaps infer that what the speaker has received far outweighs *his* paltry gift. After the woman chokes on the gum and falls to the floor, the speaker decides to cover her up, looking through her drawer, "filling up [his] shoe" and bringing

it to the addressee, presumably female, again referred to only as "you." The last verse, dwelling on the speaker's relationship with this new woman, mentions that he "never took much." Again, the speaker seems to suggest that he is one who continually pilfers, conveying an image of someone completely reprehensible. However, this image is also one heavily distorted by boyish naiveté and Socratic irony and actually works in such a way as to make the whole affair extremely humorous.

It may be that the speaker is acting as *raisonneur* for Dylan's peculiar relationship to ownership and artistic licence. In the song, the speaker realises that he has left his shirt and goes back to retrieve it (has this been *given* and then thought better of or is the realization post-coital?). He asks for some expensive rum, is refused, but then steals from the woman's drawer. In the final verse, when he returns to the new lover, the speaker appears to give this new woman the previous lover's money ("I filled up my shoe and brought it to you"). He then details never "taking much," not asking for her help, and chastising the new lover for wanting support from him. The idea of the new lover's image being "supported" by the previous lover (albeit by "Jamaican rum"), something that the elliptical silence seems to suggest ("I tried to make sense"), demonstrates a lack of understanding related to receiving and giving.

As previously mentioned, the speaker's feigned naiveté has worked well in being able to mask just how morally reprehensible he appears to be and in avoiding having to lose what is his. However, this feigning does not mask the seeming epiphany he has when he sees the picture of his new lover. His silence, his 'trying to make sense' of the picture, amalgamates the themes of art, theft, reciprocity, and morality. What must be kept in mind, however, is that the song itself, something that moves us as a piece of art, can be thought of as *Dylan*'s gift (related to what Lethem calls "gift economy"). In this light, Dylan escapes accusations of siding wholeheartedly with a suspect speaker given that the song acts as artistic compensation for the kleptomania of the speaker.

Appropriating the Image

Dylan's concern with theft extends not only to issues of belonging and possessiveness but also to the artistic image itself. "Visions of Johanna," the third song from *Blonde on Blonde*, is arguably Dylan's most poetic composition, referred to by the former British Poet Laureate Andrew Motion as "the best lyric song ever written" (Burns 23), and is distinctive for Dylan's nasal, sibilant delivery which serves as a kind of musical impasto. Indeed, the song's relationship with the artistic image, and its cryptic lyrics, evokes Horace's idea of *ut pictura poesis*. In the fourth verse, the speaker refers to the image of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1503-1506):

> Inside the museums, Infinity goes up on trial
> Voices echo this is what salvation must be like after a while
> But Mona Lisa musta had the highway blues
> You can tell by the way she smiles
> See the primitive wallflower freeze
> When the jelly-faced women all sneeze
> Hear the one with the mustache say, "Jeeze
> I can't find my knees"
> Oh, jewels and binoculars hang from the head of the mule
> But these visions of Johanna, they make it all seem so cruel (Dylan 1966, L29-38)

Having lamented the inside quiddity of museums—places that, for the speaker, serve only as static compendiums of life—he quickly conjures up the image of a gallery (another quiet place for solemn reflection) by introducing the *Mona Lisa*.[4] Having introduced this well-known image, Dylan then seems to go off tangentially, referring to moustaches and knees. However, with the image of the *Mona Lisa* only recently given to us, listeners may be able to make the connection to Marcel Duchamp's painting *L.H.O.O.Q* (1919), which is simply a replica (or "ready-made") of the *Mona Lisa* adorned by a child-like moustache and goatee-beard. The Duchamp reference, therefore, can be seen as an example of the kind of appropriation and reworking of an iconic image that Dylan perpetrates.[5] Further, the apparent nonsensicality of the "one with the mustache" not being

able to find her knees is again lessened if we remember that the *Mona Lisa* canvas extends to just below the waist. Thus, Dylan has not only introduced the realm of art explicitly by referring to the *Mona Lisa*, he has also subtly alluded to another artist whose preoccupation was with changing and challenging ubiquitous cultural images. The fact that Dylan does this so obliquely, almost at a third degree of separation from the initial image, allows this new reference to the *Mona Lisa* to be seen as yet another reworking of an already appropriated image — allowing Dylan's *own* objective to be articulated through hybridizing or adopting two existing cultural markers and making something new. In this respect, it could be said that Dylan avoids any accusations of theft given the obliqueness of the allusions. Dylan's allusion to Duchamp here is subtle, yet if the listener is prepared to work for it, he or she is rewarded a rich bounty of meaning. For example, in referring to Duchamp and the Surrealists, artists who "believed that objects in the world possess a certain but unspecifiable intensity…dulled by everyday use and utility" (Lethem 62), we can perhaps determine what this verse of "Visions of Johanna" is "getting at" is the ability to look at the world differently and defamiliarise, critique even, our normal reactions to it. In the line succeeding the Duchamp reference — "Oh, jewels and binoculars hang from the head of the mule" - it again appears cryptic enough to suggest oblique meaning. The situation that the verse places us in — looking at art in some kind of gallery inhabited where women are being critiqued — evokes T.S Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915), specifically the refrain in which Prufrock refers to the "women [who] come and go/Talking of Michelangelo" (Eliot 11). Just like the cruel lampooning of these women's assumed or ostensible knowledge in "Prufrock," Dylan seems to appropriate Eliot's well-known image yet appears to use it briefly before hybridizing Duchamp and Eliot's images into his *own* acerbic account of the folly of these particular spectators. As a result, Dylan harnesses people's pre-existing thoughts of these cultural markers, but asks them to couple, or reconcile, them in a literal blending of art and theft.

When, in the succeeding, and final, verse, the speaker refers to a "fiddler" who "now steps to the road/He writes everything's been returned which was owed," it is as if Dylan is also returning the images he has "borrowed" in the song. In this respect, we could argue that the song itself does the opposite of the museum it criticises by collecting, or collating, fresh things in a state of continual flux, rather than putting them in a place where dust settles on antediluvian exhibits. As Pareles argues, "Ideas aren't meant to be carved in stone and left inviolate; they're meant to stimulate the next idea and the next" (Pareles 1). One important feature, in this respect, of the *Blonde on Blonde* album is a photograph of Dylan with a pair of pliers in one hand and a painting in the other that appears both on its back cover and in the sleeve note:

Fig. 1: Photograph from back cover, and inside sleeve note, of *Blonde on Blonde*, 1966.

The photograph seems to suggest that Dylan is about to change, through creative force, the original image and therefore serves as a pictorial metaphor for Dylan's objective to appropriate, and modify, cultural images and return them to the public domain to allow people to look at them in a different light.[6] When Nicholas Roe talks of Dylan's hunger being for "another's world and others' words", referring to him as a "cultural ragman," (Corcoran 86), it strengthens the view that Dylan's ulterior artistic motive is in hybridizing art and theft in creating anew.

Changing the Image

One particular song that seems perpetually preoccupied with the appropriation, defamiliarization, and modification, of cultural images is that of "Desolation Row" from *Highway 61 Revisited*. Where "Visions of Johanna" can be seen as a song that touches upon the idea of appropriating images, "Desolation Row," which is also keen to avoid stasis and the idea of images setting, is a song seemingly devoted to it. The final song on *Highway 61 Revisited*, "Desolation Row" is highly unusual in its length and particularly distinctive in its harmonic coupling of Dylan's acoustic playing and Mike Bloomfield's electric improvisation. It is a song where Dylan continually mixes the "image-cement" of the past and present, always offering new takes on what seem omnipresent cultural references. Frank Kermode and Stephen Spender argue that, in "Desolation Row," "history [is] seen flat, without depth, culture heroes of all kinds known only by their names, their attributes lost by intergenerational erosion" (qtd. in Corcoran 34). "Desolation Row" has ten twelve-line verses that contain what seem "a deliberate cultural jumble" (Corcoran 34) — something equivalent almost to the technique of *horror vacuii* employed by painters such as Hieronymus Bosch. John Burns, making another connection to Eliot (who appears in the song alongside Ezra Pound), observes that "With its lovely, beguiling melody and its seemingly endless parade of bizarre characters, it is one of Dylan's most memorable songs, presenting perhaps his most sustained and complex evocation of a phantasmagorical modern wasteland of the soul" (36).

The song's opening lines act to introduce listeners to the strange world they are about to enter: "They're selling postcards of the hanging/They're painting the passports brown."[7] This macabre defamiliarization of normal activity sets the mood of a song in which numerous references to familiar activities take on sinister new forms. What seems extraordinary, however, is the number of allusions and references that the song makes to mix high art and popular culture:

'Cinderella' - title character from classic folk-tale about recognition after oppression.
'Bette Davis' - American actress famed for playing cold characters.
'Romeo' - one of the two 'star-crossed lovers' in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1597).
'Cain & Abel' - the two sons of Adam and Eve (in the Hebrew Bible). 'Hunchback of Notre Dame' - novel by Victor Hugo (1831).
'Good Samaritan' - biblical reference, connotes 'loving thy neighbour'.
'Ophelia' - character in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603), potential wife of the eponymous hero.
'Noah' - biblical figure
'Einstein' - theoretical physicist and intellectual.
'Robin Hood' - heroic rebel in English folklore.

'Phantom of the Opera' - novel by Gaston Leroux (published serially between 1909 and 1910).
'Casanova' - Venetian adventurer and author synonymous with womanizing.
'Titanic' - doomed steamship that sank in 1912.
'Nero' - Roman emperor.
'Neptune' - Greek god of the seas.
'Ezra Pound' - major poet/figure of the modernist movement.
'T.S Eliot' - major poet/figure of the modernist movement, famed for *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915) and *The Waste Land* (1922).

What is notable is that these references are not simply given in a list fashion as provided above. Instead, characters adorn costumes, cloaks, and disguises, often of other cultural figures (Cinderella puts her hands into her back pockets "Bette Davis style." Einstein is disguised as Robin Hood. The Phantom of the Opera is in a "perfect image of a priest"). The effect is one that hybridizes these disparate dramatic personae in ways that are both hugely entertaining and particularly defamiliarizing.[8] As with the passages discussed from "Visions of Johanna," it is as if Dylan once again commandeers existing preconceptions of cultural figures and transmogrifies them into *new* characters (but with all their precedent meaning). As Kermode and Spender note, it seems to be only their names that have currency in this apocalyptic world, perhaps testament to the persistence of cultural icons in the public psyche.[9] One particularly interesting scenario related to this appears in the second verse:

Cinderella, she seems so easy
"It takes one to know one," she smiles
And puts her hands in her back pockets
Bette Davis style
And in comes Romeo, he's moaning
"You Belong to Me I Believe"
And someone says, "You're in the wrong place my friend
You better leave"
And the only sound that's left
After the ambulances go
Is Cinderella sweeping up
On Desolation Row (Dylan 1965, L13-24)

When Romeo enters the scene and proclaims "You Belong to Me" to Cinderella, he seems to be conforming not to the title character from *Romeo and Juliet* but to the braggadocio image of our modern-day conceptions of a "Romeo" (very close to the lustful, licentious Casanova figure who enters in the seventh verse). The meeting of these two cultural sources (Shakespeare and fairytale) is wonderfully apt given the romantic theme of both texts. However, when the Romeo of Dylan's song makes his possessive claim, it seems that the sentiment is not acceptable to others in the song given that the ambulances soon come to collect the wounded character. The fact that this "someone" tells Romeo that he is in the "wrong place" is laden with dramatic irony: does the "someone" know who Romeo is (and the play from which he comes), or is he simply asking him to leave this peculiar place, one where ownership and possessing simply do not exist, because of what he has said? The paradox suggested in this verse is reminiscent of "She Belongs To Me" not only through Romeo's assertion "You Belong to Me I Believe" (note the capitalization), but also through the themes of theft and art: is possession impossible in this realm, or is it that everything belongs to everyone, therefore making private ownership defunct?

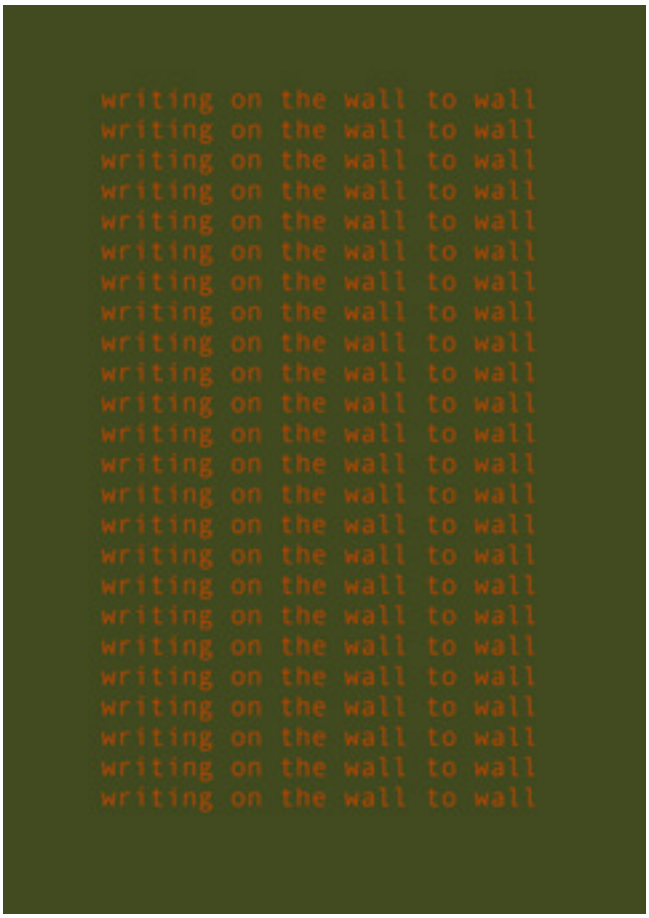
The theme of ownership is also evoked in the penultimate verse:

Praise be to Nero's Neptune
The Titanic sails at dawn
And everybody's shouting
"Which Side Are You On?"
And Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot
Fighting in the captain's tower
While calypso singers laugh at them
And fishermen hold flowers
Between the windows of the sea
Where lovely mermaids flow
And nobody has to think too much
About Desolation Row (Dylan 1965, L97-108)

The above verse opens with an allusion to "Nero's Neptune" and refers to the two major poets of the Modernist movement fighting it out in the captain's tower, perhaps for control over the direction of Modernism. The explicit reference to Eliot is accompanied by a series of references to the sea and seagoing, including one that appears to allude to the conclusion of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

> I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.
> I do not think that they will sing to me.
>
> I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
> Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
> When the wind blows the water white and black.
>
> We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
> By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
> Till human voices wake us, and we drown. (Eliot L124-131)

Eliot's poem, like "Desolation Row," is a dramatic monologue: "A kind of poem in which a single fictional or historical character other than the poet speaks to a silent audience of one or more persons. Such poems reveal not the poet's own thoughts but the mind of the impersonated character, whose personality is revealed unwittingly" (Baldick 72). Arguably the most famous exponent of the genre was Robert Browning and, given the reference to "Nero's Neptune," the theme of ownership (through the genitive case), and the genre of "Desolation Row," "My Last Duchess" (1842), Browning's most famous dramatic monologue, may also be evoked. In Browning's poem, the Duke of Ferrara, who is in pursuit of a new duchess, tells the story of his last duchess, whose portrait is hidden behind a curtain, to an emissary (presumably of the prospective duchess). His possessive nature, shown as a result of the poem's genre (as well as its content), reaches its peak at the poem's denouement where he points to one of his prized art objects: a bronze statue of Neptune taming a seahorse (could the duke's Neptune be equated to "Nero's Neptune"?). "Desolation Row," then, might be said to make a set of generic and imagistic allusions to



"My Last Duchess." The song's literary allusions to Eliot and Browning once again indicate how Dylan seems to appropriate literary images and characters, only to subject them to the same distortion and doctoring as the other popular or mythological figures. Eliot, for example, is being laughed at as he struggles with Ezra Pound (figures presumably unknown to the calypso singers). Once more then, figures from high art are mixed with, and undermined by, purveyors of popular culture.[10]

The theme of ownership evoked by the Browning allusion is continued in the final verse, one that brings the song to a climax:

Yes, I received your letter yesterday
(About the time the doorknob broke)
When you asked how I was doing
Was that some kind of joke?
All these people that you mention
Yes, I know them, they're quite lame
I had to rearrange their faces
And give them all another name
Right now I can't read too good
Don't send me no more letters, no
Not unless you mail them
From Desolation Row (Dylan 1965, L109-120)

This verse serves to articulate just how despondent the speaker has become and chastises the letter-sender for his or her question because of how obvious the answer seems to be. More interesting is the fact that the speaker says that he knows the people that the letter-sender refers to (arguably all the people that the listeners have heard about in the previous eleven verses) and that they are all "quite lame" (banal or worthless) and that to spice them up he had to rearrange their faces and give them all another name. What is important, however, is that, by having the ability to change their faces, personalities, and names, Dylan foregrounds his own artistic prerogative of reworking and re-enlivening cultural images of the past.[11] The fact that these people have been metaphorically brought into Dylan's own workshop and subjected to rigorous mannequin-work, suggests that Dylan (and/or the speaker) now lays claim to *owning* the reworked images. His frustration at how stagnant these cultural figures of yore have become (before the reworking) acts as a precursor to the final two lines of the song, "Not unless you mail them/From Desolation Row." Given the second-person address, it may be that Dylan is now referring to the listeners of the song and, thus, it suddenly changes their position from casual spectators to involved inhabitants of "Desolation Row." In doing so, Dylan not only changes the images we thought we knew but also ends the song by suggesting that his listeners, given their new proximity to the aforementioned figures, may be subjected to the very same metamorphosis, making the delayed inversion all the more powerful and terrifying.

In the free-form poem included in the sleeve note to *Bringing It All Back Home*, Dylan includes a question supposedly asked by his recording engineer: "i'm here t' pick up you and your latest works of art. do you need any help with anything?" (3). There follows a "pause," a page of Dylan's thoughts poured onto paper where he tells us that "I am about t' sketch You a picture of what goes on around here sometimes," and an "end of pause" which is then followed by Dylan's response "yes. well i could use some help in getting this wall on the plane" (6). Dylan alludes to the fact that everything he has just talked about, the subject matter of his songs, have been splattered, Jackson Pollock-style, on a cement canvas that he now wants to transport. Thus, this apparently static object, a hunk of wall, is being loaded onto a plane bound for an unknown destination, and arguably acts as a metaphor for how his images have been collected and are in perpetual motion.[12] Dylan has appropriated these images and references and leaves it up to the reader to guess where they will be dropped again and, if so, what they will look or sound like. When, in "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" (1965), Dylan sings "he not busy being born is busy dying," he seems to mean that things must be constantly reinvented in order to escape decay. It seems to perfectly summate his artistic practices and intentions: a predilection for appropriating images, subjecting them to cultural reworkings, and in perpetually challenging the concept of artistic ownership.

Notes

1. See Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) and "Art and the Moral Realm" in Peter Kivy, *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Tom Sorell, *Moral Theory and Anomaly*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001); and Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999).

2. D.A Pennebaker's documentary about Dylan's 1965 tour of Britain, was entitled "Don't Look Back" (1967). Also, in the sleeve note to *Bringing It All Back Home*, Dylan talks about not wanting "t' be bach. mozart. tol-

stoy. joe hill. gertrude stein or james dean/[as]they are all dead" (6), yet his proclivity for looking at the past for inspiration is unquestionable.

3. A similar kind of meta-appropriation occurs in the narration of Vladimir Nabokov's short story "Recruiting" (1935).

4.The fact that "Mona Lisa musta had the highway blues" establishes a relationship between da Vinci's painting and the stretch of highway that runs from Louisiana to Minnesota, known also as "U.S Route 61." It appears a pun is being made here given the tradition of blues music to appropriate.

5.The irony is that Duchamp's "ready-made" work is being used again. His other most famous "ready-made" is *Fountain* (1917).

6."Tombstone Blues" (1965) is similar in this inversion of perspective and sense ("The sun's not yellow it's chicken") and its inclusion of cultural figures (such as Paul Revere, John the Baptist, Cecil B. DeMille). Also, the line "bent out of shape by society's pliers" from "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" seems similar to figure 1's sentiment; however, the song is concerned with the stifling, negative effect of society rather than a creative reworking.

7. These lines may refer to, respectively, the Duluth hangings of the 1920s and that US government agents' passports at this time were brown.

8. This switching of cloaks and disguises, reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* [1601-1603], also occurs in "Lily, Rosemary, and the Jack of Hearts" (1975).

9. In *Bob Dylan: Chronicles Vol 1* (2004), Dylan observes: "I'd been raised in a cultural spectrum that had left my mind as black as soot. Brando. James Dean. Milton Berle. Marilyn Monroe. Lucy. Earl Warren and Krushchev, Castro. Little Rock and Peyton Place. Tennessee Williams and Joe DiMaggio" (35-36).

10. Dylan's cultural jumble of creative output can be thought of as analogous to William Burroughs and his "cut-up" technique — a figure who "was interrogating the universe with scissors and a paste pot, and the least imitative of authors was no plagiarist at all" (Lethem 60).

11. The idea of Dylan not allowing images or words to stagnate can be seen in several instances, such as in "Subterranean Homesick Blues" (1965), where the words that appear in the video differ from the published lyrics (for example, "20 dollar bills," "suckcess," "man whole," "It don't matter," "It's hard," "Watch it!," "Here they come!," "Dig yourself"). In the difference between live performance and the published lyrics (for example, specific words and emphasis in his performance of "Desolation Row" in *Live 1966: The "Royal Albert Hall" Concert*; and in "Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts" (1975) where the idea of "drillin' in the wall" (verse one), keeps pace with the narrative through verse eight ("drillin in the wall kept up") until the very end of the song ("and cleaned out the bank safe, it's said they got off with quite a haul").

12. A literal re-enactment of this scenario has taken place now on numerous occasions in relation to Banksy's work, where people whose walls have been painted on have cut out the wall in question (see Works Cited).

Works Cited

Baldick, Chris. *The Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001.

"Bansky Graffiti Removed from Wall." *BBC News Online* 11th Feb 2008. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/bristol/7238555.stm>. Web 12th August 2010.

Burns, John. *Series of Dreams: The Vision Songs of Bob Dylan*. Kirkcudbright: Glen Murray Publishing, 2008.

Corcoran, Neil. *'Do You, Mr Jones?' Bob Dylan with the Poets and Professors*. London: Chatto and Windus, 2002.

Dylan, Bob. *Bob Dylan: Chronicles (Vol 1)*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004.

--- *Blonde on Blonde*, Columbia, 1966. CD.

--- *Bringing It All Back Home*. Columbia, 1965. CD.

--- *Highway 61 Revisited*, Columbia, 1965. CD.

Eliot, T.S. *Selected Poems*. London: Harcourt Brace, 1964.

Lethem, Jonathan, "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism." Harper's Magazine, Feb 2007, 59-71.

Pareles, Jon. "Plagiarism in Dylan, or a Cultural Collage?" *New York Times*, July 12th, 2003. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/12/arts/music/12DYLA.html>. Web. 7 August 2010.

Trager, Oliver. *Keys to the Rain: The Definitive Bob Dylan Encyclopedia*. New York: Billboard Books, 2004.

Wiletz, Sean. *Bob Dylan in America*. London: The Bodley Head, 2010.

BIO
Michael Rodgers is in the final stages of his PhD undertaking a Nietzschean analysis of Vladimir Nabokov's writings. He works as a Graduate Teaching Assistant at the University of Strathclyde and is currently editing a volume on 'Nabokov and Morality' derived from a conference that he organized last year. His article '*Lolita*'s Nietzschean Morality' was published in *Philosophy and Literature* in 2011 and he has another forthcoming on the topic of Nabokov's posthumous novel *The Original of Laura*. He is a contributor to *The Literary Encyclopedia*, the *Slavonic and East European Review* and the *Nabokov Online Journal*.

BIO
Michael Rodgers est sur le point d'obtenir son doctorat avec une analyse nietzschéenne des œuvres de Vladimir Nabokov. Il occupe un poste d'auxiliaire d'enseignement à l'Université de Strathclyde, où il édite actuellement un volume dérivé d'un colloque qu'il a organisé l'année portait de» by «s'intitulait de « Nabokov et la moralité ». Il a publié un article intitulé *Lolita's Nietzschean Morality* dans *Philosophy and Literature* en 2011, et il attend la publication d'un autre texte sur le livre posthume de Nabokov *L'original de Laura*. Il est contributeur à *The Literary Encyclopedia*, *Slavonic and East European Review* et au *Nabokov Online Journal*.