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ABSTRACT

The use of music in the literature or writing classroom has been attacked for various reasons, including a "mystification" of music which portrays it as ineffable and abstract. Surprisingly, however, three common arguments for using songs in English classes actually help to maintain the same "mystifying" distinction between music and visual representations of it; namely, that: (1) songs constitute a long literary tradition; (2) the musical settings of songs empower students to appreciate better the lyrics; and (3) the difficulty of representing music makes it a useful subject for developing writing skills. Each of these approaches emphasizes the distinction between texts associated with music and the music itself. Some alternative ways of using songs in the classroom, however, counter such mystification. Mystification is combatted by reconceiving the music as itself "textual" in the form of scores, recordings, and performances. The classroom also can act as a forum for the investigation of competing discourses about songs. A course designed along these lines would elicit such discourses from students' experiences. Also, it should prompt the investigation of those discourses from the perspectives of other elicited discourses. Sample assignment descriptions for the course, the second a revision of the first, illustrate these objectives. The revised version presents different conceptions of songs as operating in the students' experiences. The course does not so much bridge the distinction between music and its representations as erase it. (HB)

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Writing Down the Songs

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I use the phrase "Writing Down the Songs" as the title of my talk to refer to a distinction commonly made between music as an acoustic entity and visual representations of it, either in the form of lyrics or scores. It's a distinction Bob Dylan makes in a 1968 Newsweek interview when he says: "I write the songs because I need something to sing. It's the difference between the words on paper and the song. The song disappears into the air, the paper stays. They have little in common."[1] To think of one's task as that of "writing down the songs" is to locate songs themselves in some elevated position distinct from their location "down below" in written representations. To write songs "down" is, presumably, to anchor their floating, spiritual essence to a written text or score.

I point to this distinction because it is one which recurs constantly in discussions about the relationship of English study to the study of songs or music generally. For example, it is regularly offered as an excuse for why people in the field of "English" ought neither to teach nor study songs or music of any kind. If music is so ethereal, any writing on it will misrepresent it. Professionals in English often express admiration for music, but they do not feel they can, as it were, profess it. In a recent study of Renaissance Stuart court culture, for example, the author dismisses the music of that culture from his consideration not because he deems it unimportant but

[1] "Dylan is Back," Newsweek 26 Feb. 1968; rpt. Bob Dylan: A Retrospective, ed. Craig McGregor (New York: Morrow, 1972), 245; quoted in Bowden 7.

because, he explains, "It seems unrewarding to try to evoke what should be heard and not just described" (Graham Parry xi).

Surprisingly, however, this same distinction also obtains in many arguments for the use of music in English. Indeed, music criticism generally is dominated by what Janet Wolff calls an "ideology of autonomous art." According to this ideology, music is in essence non-representational and abstract and, therefore, not susceptible to the kinds of sociological critique which have recently been given to other art forms (Wolff 1). Most of those arguments which are made for including songs or other music in English study are marked by this ideology. My opposition to such arguments is based on the hierarchical relationship which they impose between music and listeners. If music itself is assumed to be ineffable, then access to it is conceptually restricted, and discussion about it is silenced. Understanding music—as opposed to "appreciating" it—will be assumed to require the technical skills of experts—musicologists, say, or practicing composers—people who can translate the meaning of the ineffable to the laity. And so music becomes "mystified" in the sense the art critic John Berger uses this term: it is made remote, its immediacy explained away (Ways of Seeing 11, 15-16). After reviewing arguments in which such mystification occurs, I want to consider some alternative ways of using songs in our classes that might counter such mystification. My suggestions will be based on my experience teaching a lower-level college course on "songs and song criticism." I want to discuss briefly three common arguments for using songs in English classes and how each maintains that mystifying distinction between music and visual representations of it: 1) that songs constitute a long literary tradition; 2) that musical settings of songs inexplicably possess the power to help students better appreciate the lyrics; and 3) that the difficulty of representing music makes it a useful subject for challenging and developing the students' writing skills.

Perhaps the most common approach to including songs in English study is the first, in which songs are included as part of a literary tradition, their music being altogether bypassed. Teachers include songs in their syllabi or study the lyrics of particular songwriters while excluding or dismissing from consideration the musical settings of those songs, pleading ignorance of music

as an excuse. For example, Maria Rosa Menocal, in a critique of Allan Bloom's castigation of rock music in his book The Closing of the American Mind, defends rock. But she defends it not as music but as part of a long tradition of lyric poetry. She argues that the study of rock helps students appreciate earlier lyrics part of that tradition. "Rock," she asserts, "is poetry that is aggressively and self-consciously a part of the living tradition that, in great measure because it is attached to music, plays a fundamental and vital cultural role for many more people" (56, emphasis mine). A student familiar with rock is thus "quite capable of appreciating not only the poetry of the troubadours or of Petrarch so similar in other ways, but, more important, the great lyrical power of poetry in and of itself" (56). Quoting liberally from rock lyrics, Menocal argues for their inclusion in a canon of literature rather than music according to their poetic quality and the access they give students to the aesthetic value of other poetry.

A second common argument made for using songs in English classes is to emphasize the musical settings as catalytic agents in creating poetic experiences. Douglas Murray, for example, arguing that English teachers make insufficient use of the "resource" of music in "interpreting English poetry for students," claims that musical settings of poetry "provide teachers with a fine means of intensifying the poetic experiences of good readers and of communicating the effects of poetry to those students for whom the written word alone is insufficient" (176). In a move similar to Menocal's, he reminds his readers that there exists "a long tradition, extending from medieval times to the present, of fine composers setting to melody the best works of the best authors. The song writers become critics: they expertly elucidate and interpret nuance and tone" (176). For Murray, music operates as a kind of pedagogical drug. It has the power to intensify the experience which good students have of poetry or, for the duller students (those ordinarily unmoved by poetry), at least communicate its effects. Note, however, for Murray, as for Menocal, songs are primarily verbal entities. Music remains a mysterious, powerful, but secondary, detachable, added force. The traditions of which both speak are poetic, not musical, traditions.

This same sense of music as in itself ineffable and mysterious is also used to support the third argument for the inclusion of music in writing courses. Robert DiYanni, in describing an

upper-level course called "Writing About Music," makes this argument when he claims that although writing about music is difficult because "the sound of music is not readily translatable into the sound of sense" (62), that very difficulty, along with students' interest in music, makes it suitable as a subject for a writing course, especially if the aim of the course is to focus on and improve students' control of matters of style. As DiYanni explains,

> Both sentence control and analogical writing are especially important for describing what it's like to hear a particular piece of music and for giving a sense of the music itself. . . . [W]riting about music requires, even more fully than writing about other disciplines, controlled and imaginative use of syntax and metaphor.

Like the subject of love, say, or God, the very abstract, non-representational quality attributed to music is argued as making it an ideal subject matter on which students can hone their stylistic skills as writers.

Note that all the approaches discussed so far maintain the distinction between texts associated with music and something identified as the music itself. DiYanni distinguishes between music and writing about music. Murray and Menocal distinguish between song lyrics and their musical settings. Music itself is imagined as something untranslatable, ineffable, powerful, but finally distinct from and not contained by the logic and sense of verbal language.

One way of combatting the mystifying effects of such a distinction is to reconceive the music as itself "textual"—not simply in the sense of musical scores but in its presence in a variety of "texts"—in scores and lyrics, certainly, but also in its various performances and recordings. The benefit of this strategy seems to be that it calls into question the canonization of certain texts, or types of texts, to the exclusion of others. Mary Poovey has argued that given students' experience of the multiple representations that constitute rock—a seemingly endless intertextual web of cds, videos, live performances, posters, commercials, etc.—it is no longer tenable to "teach only close readings of texts that we present as static and centered." To ignore such experiences, Poovey argues, is to risk "making institutionalized education seem . . . irrelevant to our students' past experiences and extra-curricular lives" (616).

Poovey's argument is an argument for cultural studies and for its "leveling" influence on questions of what is and is not to be read, viewed, listened to, and studied as texts in classrooms. It is, furthermore, an argument for honoring the particular ways of "reading" which students may bring with them to the classroom. I'm in favor of both of these gestures. But there is something peculiar about the picture Poovey gives of those students, one which doesn't mesh with my own classroom experience. According to Poovey, students bring greater sophistication, or a more "postmodern" style, to their reading of culture than most teachers have. I'm willing to grant that students bring to class strategies of reading cultural texts that differ significantly from the reading strategies of teachers and that, insofar as they've grown up in a "postmodern" age, they've had access to the "postmodern" experience. But I see them as neither particularly sophisticated nor postmodern in the reading strategies they bring to the classroom. They have post-modern experiences. They don't have training in post-modern reading and writing. And so their responses to music, and songs specifically, largely conform to the conventions of non-postmodern hegemonic discourses. Indeed, if we recall the definition of hegemony, it would be very surprising if they didn't.

But if we can't, then, count on students to bring counter-hegemonic, post-modern notions of texts to bear on their readings of music in class, we might try to introduce such notions through our teaching. Indeed, given the multiple representations of songs in lyrics, scores, different performances and recordings, a course on songs would seem to provide an admirable forum to teach students to question notions of the authority of authors and the stability of texts. But though this seems a simple and an obvious enough strategy, and therefore an attractive one, I believe it is not a strategy which finally works in the ways I think we would like it to. The problem with such a strategy is that it replaces one privileged, and mystifying, way of explaining or responding to songs with another. Instead of talking about the mysterious power of songs to sway emotions, say, we would end up trying to talk about them as a web of intersecting "texts." But what would remain in place, in such a scenario, is an unquestioned hierarchical relationship between the songs and the listeners, with the teacher as high priest teaching students a privileged ritual discourse. I

don't mean to suggest that the hierarchy of the classroom, the authority of teachers over students, ought to be or can be abolished. That hierarchy does not, however, mean that I can or should do no more than attempt to reproduce in my students one particular discourse about songs. Nor do I need to introduce them to several competing discourses in order somehow to teach them the "conflicts," as Gerald Graff has proposed.[2] To the extent that such conflicting discourses are prevalent, students already have access to them. What they do not have, and what the classroom can provide, is a forum for the investigation of those discourses. In my position as teacher, I can make the class a site for the investigation of competing discourses about songs: their conventions, assumptions governing them, their strengths and limitations. Such a course ought to do two things: first, it should elicit such discourses from students' experience, and second, it should prompt the investigation of those discourses from the perspectives of other elicited discourses.

To better illustrate what I'm proposing, I want to look at two versions of an assignment for such a course. The assignment is one that might be given early in a course on song. Here's the first version:

> By now you've read a number of statements and explorations on song as a genre. Use this assignment as a chance to sort out for yourself the approaches towards song that the readings represent. You could begin by identifying what you see as the most prominent issues or questions to which the critics address themselves and then what you see as the most significant or distinctive ways the critics have of responding to those issues or questions.
>
> End your paper with a discussion of the position, if any, you're inclined to take in relation to the approaches you've identified, and why. Use the listening examples to explain the position you take and/or the problems in adopting one position over another.

Though this assignment might well have value in giving students a chance to sort out a variety of critical approaches to songs, and to work out a position of their own towards those approaches, I'd argue that, at least as a first assignment, it is problematic. What I find problematic about this

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[2] Joseph Harris, responding to Graff's arguments in both Professing Literature and "Teach the Conflicts," points out that "the most interesting conflicts to teach might be those that students experience in our classrooms, . . . we might center our courses not simply on the various arguments the big boys in the profession have had with one another, but on the conflicts between students' ways of reading and our own, or between their sense of their culture and the image of it offered by university reading lists" ("Is There a Theory in This Classroom?"). My argument is indebted to Harris's.

assignment, and the context of the course implicit in it, is, first, that it positions students not as participants in and investigators of discourses about songs but rather as spectators. The first two sentences imply that it is only through the course that students have gained any access to or familiarity with "approaches to songs as a genre," and that the only approaches worth considering are those to be found in canonized or scholarly literature. The issues or questions which the student is asked to identify are those of the critics represented in the readings and do not include those which students themselves or others might have addressed elsewhere. So although the assignment does give students the opportunity to respond to those approaches, it fails to recognize students' participation and implication in particular approaches to songs. In this assignment, students themselves remain, at least by implication, outside the sphere of song criticism.

I offer the second version as a possible revision to this first assignment, and one obviously requiring emendation in accordance with class discussions preceding it.

> In previous discussions, we've noted a number of places where one might find, or hear, songs. And we've noted some meanings related to these places which seem commonly to be given to the term "song," meanings invoked by some of the critics we've read. What sense do you make out of these meanings and the differences between them? And why, or to whom, might they matter? Why, or to whom, might they seem irrelevant?
>
> For this assignment, write an essay in which you work out your position in relation to these different meanings. Begin your essay by explaining, first, what you would say you usually think of when you hear the term "song"—perhaps the sense you had of it that led you to register for this course. What examples of "songs" usually come to mind, what occasions, what attractions? And how, ordinarily, would you say you'd describe them?
>
> Secondly, explain how you would compare that sense of "songs" with the other senses we've discussed and encountered. How would you account for why you don't typically think of these other meanings when you hear the term? How would you account for why others do?
>
> Finally, explain the conclusions you might draw about what seems to determine which sense one has or uses. Given its different meanings, what sense would you now say it makes to call something a "song"? How might you describe the subject matter of a course on "song"?

Let me point to what I see as the significant differences between the two versions. Rather than restricting students' focus to conceptions contained by those offered in canonized or scholarly literature to which the course has introduced students, the revision presents different conceptions of songs as operating in the students' experiences. It does not exclude that other literature from

consideration, but presents conceptions presented in that literature as invocations of particular conceptions of song already seen as operating in students' experiences. They're posited as specific articulations or questionings of already extant meanings rather than as the originators and sole repositories of meanings. More importantly, by asking students to articulate their own positions in relation to those meanings, the revision positions them as participants in the process of making sense of songs, and as already implicated in particular, if as yet unacknowledged and unarticulated, conceptions of song. By so doing, it counters two prevalent and problematic tendencies both students and teachers have towards the issue of how to write about music. It disallows the tendency to pretend ignorance, to claim that one doesn't know how to write about songs, lacks training, is not a music major. And it also disallows the tendency common among students to retreat to a stance of arrogant isolationism, a stance in which one says, in effect, "I write about songs the way I want to, I know what I like and don't like, these are my feelings/my tastes/how I write, and no one can deny them. And anyway, after all, everyone is entitled to their own opinion." The revised assignment treats the meaning of songs as neither fixed nor free-floating but as in contest, and asks students to acknowledge and participate more fully in that contest.

To return to the phrase with which I opened, such an approach does not exactly resolve the distinction between songs and their representations. It can be argued that we inevitably write songs, and music generally, "down," even if we do not employ pen and paper or, more likely nowadays, keystrokes and software. Indeed, any (acoustic) performance of music represents a fixing, however momentary, of that music. The course of study I am recommending does not so much bridge the distinction between music and its representations as erase it. Music, to be music, exists nowhere outside writing. The questions then become: at what location, by what means, by whom, and for what reasons it is written. In asking students to write about songs, a course can enable students to explore the ways in which they and others have been already writing, or written, as listeners and can thus encourage their on-going participation in the current conflicts between alternative discourses in music criticism. By taking their ways of talking and writing about music seriously, we don't so much bring the "controversy" of criticism to students as recognize and get

students to recognize their and our ongoing complicity in that controversy. In so doing, students can come to recognize themselves, in their encounters with songs, as writers, with all the difficulties, responsibilities, and pleasures which writing entails.

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