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**Canonization of a Non-Literary System:
The Case of the Modern American Popular Song
and its Contact with Poetry**

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My discussion of the popular song is intended as a case study in the field of historical poetics. Therefore I shall move away from a close text analysis of lyrics as such, and focus, rather, on general processes concerning the evolution of models of popular songs, and on the socio-cultural context and the preconditions of these processes, paying particular attention to the role played by the contact with poetry.

The popular song provides us with an excellent test case for examining problems of marginality and canonicity which are believed, at least by followers of the Russian Formalist tradition, to constitute indispensable factors in the evolution of literature and of cultural systems in general. According to Even-Zohar's polysystem theory and the theory of literary contacts, which draw heavily on the Formalist tradition, the evolution of the American popular song in the last few decades and its relation to contemporary poetry is to be described as a typical inter-systemic contact, in which a system uncanonized by the culture (i.e. popular song) functions as peripheral in the domain of a canonized one (i.e. poetry). When such a contact is examined, a distinction should be made between two aspects: on the one hand, we are dealing here with an interaction between two separate systems, a literary (canonized) and a non literary (non-canonized) one; on the other hand, this interaction is patterned by the center/periphery relations which, according to the polysystem theory, govern any systemic organization and dynamics. However, discussing such a contact in these terms, the trouble seems to be that there is a tendency to equate "non-canonicity" too rigidly with "marginality." Thus, in our case, since the popular song, as defined by the lyrics, is considered a non-canonized system

chiefly involving a linguistic activity, it is already presupposed to be located in a marginal position within the literary system.

Yet, such relations between systems are by no means determined; we cannot proceed from the simple assumption that the popular song, by its very nature, is a marginal literary genre by definition, since, as we know, not every linguistic activity is also a literary one. That is to say, the claim that the popular song should be regarded as peripheral poetry cannot be justified simply on the basis of the supposedly inherent poetic features of its linguistic texts. As a whole, the popular song constitutes a different cultural phenomenon. This holds true not only in terms of the media of performance, let alone with regard to the means of production, distribution and consumption, but also in terms of the origins and evolution of its poetic models. As a matter of fact, the popular song developed from a larger system of non-canonized activities known as "entertainment" and established itself as an institution in the modern American culture distinctly apart from the official literary tradition. It was not before the 1960's that the linguistic level of popular songs began to be intentionally shaped after concrete literary models. Only in the late 60's, after the lyrics of prominent figures such as Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen had gained the prestige of poetry, did song-writing begin to be seriously discussed and measured in literary terms. By then, as it attracted the attention even of members of the literary establishment — critics, editors, poets — the whole phenomenon was indeed affiliated in a particular way to the literary system. After this period, however, the connection between the two systems was dissipated.

Historically speaking, then, it appears that the contact between the American popular song and poetry was confined to a certain moment in the course of evolution of each system. Nevertheless, as far as the popular song is concerned, it is evident that at this point the link with poetry played a most significant role in its evolution; it constituted an indispensable stage in the process of *canonization* the popular song underwent at that period. Only under such circumstances, however, did popular songs occupy for a while the periphery of poetry. Marginality is thus tied to the process of

canonization and is not merely equivalent to the state of non-canon-
icity.

The process of canonization involves interferences between systems whereby cultural models are both transmitted and transmuted. To begin with, since canonicity requires an official recognition on the part of the cultural establishment in order to attain it, the non-canonized system has to be regarded as a part of a canonized one whose official status is already secured. Thus, by virtue of its linguistic affinities with poetry, which at that moment were being intensively stressed, the popular song could be admitted temporarily into the literary system and canonicity actually conferred upon it. Secondly, such an interaction occurs on the margin of the canonized system, where the models of the non-canonized one enjoy an ambivalent status. The notion of ambivalence, as elaborated primarily by Lotman, implies a mechanism of translation of models: at a given historical moment, a certain corpus which was generated in one system is also interpreted according to models of another system, so that it functions simultaneously, though differently, in both. Whereas from the viewpoint of poetry, the popular song of the 60's could be considered only as secondary and marginal, it created at the same time a canonized center within its own system and thus achieved an official status as "art."

However, if we assume, with Bakhtin, that literature, as well as any other cultural system, is a manifestation of ideological phenomena, we must also take into consideration the socio-cultural context which preconditioned such an occurrence. In order for a system to undergo canonization it has to be legitimized, from the viewpoint of prevailing social norms, in terms of an official ideology. In the case of the popular song, since it emerged in the non-canonized strata of the American culture, it was deeply rooted in local urban folklore, for which stylized models of the Black tradition served as the main source. White middle class audiences at first stigmatized and suppressed such elements as potentially "vulgar," "immoral," or "subversive." As audiences became more clearly defined as peripheral with regard to class, race, or age, the provocative elements in popular song became bolder and more explicit. Sociologists, Frith among others, have already pointed out that this gradual shift

of taste corresponded to the rise of the particular youth sub-culture which in the 50's was labeled "teenage." The more the teenage identity came to be recognized, the more it was provided with a means with which to define the nature of its own texts. As it reacted against the main cultural group, its provocative texts took on the intensified traits of the originally most rejected repertory and defined a new style of popular song, rock'n'roll. However, once it attracted the attention of the authorized culture, it was brought to the verge of canonization. The process of canonization itself involved fulfilling the two conditions mentioned earlier: it required an ideological legitimation of the provocative image of popular song, and an interaction with a canonized system, to which the contact with poetry was one of the main channels.

The accomplishment of this complex cultural interaction is witnessed perhaps most clearly in the work of Bob Dylan. In fact, Dylan's case seems to be so typically illustrative that I find it worthwhile to take a closer look at it. By acting ambivalently in all three phases of his career, Dylan was actually bringing about an interplay between three different cultural systems. The new model of the popular song he anticipated owed its emergence to his special position as a rock'n'roll star who at the same time enjoyed the background of a folk singer and aspired after the status of a poet.

To begin with, his activity made possible the interpretation of typical rock'n'roll models according to the explicit ideology of the folk movement, so that rock'n'roll finally achieved ideological legitimation. In the framework of the folk stream, the use of the folkloric repertory was ideologically justified: as a consequence of the romantic tradition, folk songs were viewed as truly reflecting the spirit and history of the American people. Thus, in the name of the revival of a "native consciousness," the folk stream could heavily rely on the deliberate tradition of collecting and preserving a canonized repertory of folk songs, among which the ballad was considered a most characteristic type. It appears, then, that the use of so-called folkloric material was differently motivated in each case (folk vs. rock) and created two basically different cultural models. Unlike the rock'n'roll stream, the folk movement carried on a traditional sympathy with an *idealized* folklore. Its repertory

consisted of fixed models of songs which were *not necessarily* connected to authentic modern American folklore in particular and scarcely affected by its fluidity of manifestation. As the canonization of that repertory was originally carried out by intellectuals, its explicit ideology was more accessible to the authorized culture from the beginning. In fact, although this ideology generated a political *protest* movement, it was, in itself, essentially *conservative*, as it actually represented and secured the most elevated values of that American nationalism which pervades a broad spectrum of the cultural strata. In short, whereas rock'n'roll addressed the illegitimate sub-culture, folk actually constituted an institutionalized opposition within the official culture.

However, despite their different positions, motivations and methods, since both streams were rebellious in their attitude towards the political establishment and relied on folkloric material, the combination between them was possible. As manifested by the work of Dylan, this combination was in effect brought about by inserting the most characteristic rock elements into the legitimate canonized folk models — mostly the ballad and the blues — whose basic structures dominated many of Dylan's lyrics. As a rule, both models were manipulated in his work by the tendency to actualize the subject matter and to emphasize its potential for generating social protest. Consequently, the use of the blues model has become even more characteristic of Dylan's lyrics than has his use of ballad, since the blues was more suitable for referring to local American life and for integrating authentic sub-cultural elements, especially of Black origin, which became the symbols of the rock songs (such as slang: idioms, pronunciation, intonation: "immoral" themes: especially violence and sex; or concrete materials of the modern landscape). We find in his lyrics many references to specific modern social problems, together with allusions to traditional folk songs and concretizations of stereotypical themes and characters such as the vagabond or the losing gambler; and very often the fantastic rural dixieland is replaced by elements of the actual industrial scene (cars, highways, etc.).

Paradoxical as it may seem, the more deliberate those non-literary models were exploited in Dylan's lyrics, the more strongly they

could appeal to pioneers of the new trend in contemporary poetry: the emphasis on social involvement in his work created the common ideological ground which he shared with the Beat poets in particular. From the viewpoint of the literary establishment, this younger generation of poets, which was rebelliously threatening the main stream of modernist poetry by provoking, as was believed, a revolution in the very concept of poetry, was still located on the *margin* of the literary system. And this was precisely the place where Dylan's "poetry" could fit in, *retrospectively*. The non-literary background which was indicated by the massive use of Black elements, the simplicity of structure and prosody, the straight-forwardness of argumentation, all of which characterized his lyrics, could be understood as effects of "anti-intellectual," "emotional," "spontaneous" *anti-poetry* at which the Beat poets themselves were explicitly aiming. Seen in these terms, Dylan's work could later be classified as part of the new literary trend and declared an important representative of that younger generation. For instance, in 1968 he was invited to submit his poems to the anthology *The Young American Poets* (though he never did so); and this was a year before the poetry of Allan Ginsberg was included for the first time in the second edition of the anthology *Contemporary Poetry*. A few years later, Ginsberg himself, after his establishment as a revolutionary poet, expressed his sympathy with Dylan's work in several ways, the most impressive of which was the publication of *First Blues* (1975), a collection of songs written and composed by Ginsberg under the inspiration of Dylan and dedicated to him.

Yet Dylan's position within the literary system was even more complex. For, however ideologically rebellious his *personal* attitude may have been, his poetic model, in contrast to the post-modernists, did *not* actually violate the modernist norms which still held sway at the center of contemporary American poetry. On the contrary, the early recognition of his poetry was in fact possible thanks to his *conformity* with these norms. Indeed, the later association of his writing with the new concept of poetry rescued him from any need seriously to challenge the high standards of modernist criticism, because, as for instance was claimed by Sam Shepard, these standards were irrelevant to the very idea of his poetry. However, such a claim

was not yet possible in the mid-1960's. By then, Dylan's image as a poet was still dependent on the agreement by the critics that his lyrics met with some indisputable literary norms. During this phase of his career, Dylan's lyrics exhibited a skillful adaptation of worn-out modernist conventions. Moreover, this adaptation was often made in a rather simplistic and schematic fashion; his work was praised for its "imaginative power," its use of surrealist imagery, literary allusions, apocalyptic thematics, etc., and especially for being directly influenced by the most valued poets such as T.S. Eliot, in spite of the fact that all these alleged poetic factors, being combined with the rigid models of popular song, were usually restricted to local fragments on the level of the "fictional world" and had no effect on other textual levels. To take one example, in "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowland," dense metaphorical language is presented in the form of mechanical rhythms and rhymes, a stereotypical, implied situation of lover and lady and rigid strophic patterns, as in the four repeated lines of the refrain:

Where the sad-eyed prophet says that no man comes,
My warehouse eyes, my Arabian drums,
Should I leave them by your gate,
Or, sad-eyed lady, should I wait?

It appears, then, that his place among poets was given to Dylan not so much on the basis of the purely literary quality of his work, as for its *social* significance. The question of why Dylan's lyrics were included and canonized by the literary system is not to be answered by saying simply that his activity displayed minimal features normative to this system, so that it was worthy of inclusion in its margin. Indeed, Dylan's poetic model, as such, played hardly any role in the evolution of the *literary* tradition; it neither produced a new literary model, nor did it bring about a change of positions within the literary institution. In fact, by the time Dylan's lyrics were accepted in the literary system, such changes were already being accomplished by the literary avant-garde, but, as I said, Dylan's work did not seem to be affected by these changes in terms of its poetic features. It was perhaps even easier for the literary

establishment to approve of Dylan's "poetry," since, unlike Beat poetry, it was doomed to remain peripheral in the first place. In other words, from the viewpoint of the literary system, the acceptance of Dylan's lyrics was more or less a unique episode; from this viewpoint, the significance of the contact which poetry maintained with the popular song at that period lay not in its inclusion of a certain corpus of literary lyrics in particular, but rather in the very fact that the literary establishment was even willing to acknowledge the poeticity of songwriters and to canonize it. Such democracy was, it seems, a demonstration, by poets as well as by literary scholars, of their desire to reinforce the polemic over the literary boundaries and to establish a shift in literary taste, as is argued, for instance, by Leslie A. Fiedler in his 1971 essay "The Children's Hour, or The Return of the Vanishing Longfellow: Some Reflections on the Future of Poetry," in which he allegedly credited "pop poetry" for opening up the literary canon and redefining the notion and function of "high poetry."

Yet, no matter how marginal and secondary Dylan's model was in the framework of the literary system, it was of great consequence with regard to the development of the popular song as a cultural institution. By applying literary conventions to songwriting, it actually established norms of artistic sophistication which permitted the generation and reception of new corpora of lyrics in terms of canonized artifacts. Thus, we notice the increase of sophistication and irony in Dylan's treatment of the traditional blues song, as, for instance, in "Outlaw Blues," where a self-conscious speaker parodies his situation:

Ain't it hard to stumble
And land in some funny lagoon?
Ain't it hard to stumble
And land in some muddy lagoon?
Especially when it's nine below zero
And three o'clock in the afternoon.

Ain't gonna hang no picture,
Ain't gonna hang no picture frame.
Ain't gonna hang no picture,

Ain't gonna hang no picture frame.
Well, I might look like Robert Ford
But I feel just like a Jesse James.

Once the artistry of songwriting was recognized in literary terms, a canon of popular song began to be reconstructed in various ways, for example by reconsidering antecedent non-literary texts, issuing lyrics in book form, writing the history of the popular song, exploring and documenting its forms and styles, and institutionalizing its own criticism. Consequently, a whole body of cultural elements, which up to that moment were considered trivial, worthless or subversive, came to be regarded as a legitimate repertory available also to avant-gardist songwriters, this time, however, regardless of their initial ideological background or their affiliations with the literary system.