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"All Those Words Seem To Slip Away": How the Intentional Fallacy Prevents Serious Study of the Beatles' Lyrics. A Response to Comments

(doi: 10.2383/83881)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2016

Ente di afferenza:

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“All Those Words Seem To Slip Away”: How the Intentional Fallacy Prevents Serious Study of the Beatles’ Lyrics.

A Response to Comments.

by Colin Campbell

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I should like to start by thanking both Professors Trondman and Regev for taking the time to read and comment on my paper, and also say how much I appreciate Professor Trondman’s suggestions concerning the manner in which the analysis of the Beatles lyrics might be taken forward along the lines I suggested [Trondman 2016]. Reading their comments has however made me realize that there are a few things that I should have mentioned, or at least made more explicit, in my paper. So I will do so here, whilst also responding to their more critical comments. But first I should come clean and confess that the paper, “*All Those Words Seem To Slip Away: How The Intentional Fallacy Prevents Serious Study of the Beatles’ Lyrics*,” is actually taken from a draft manuscript, one in which I do indeed attempt to identify the Beatles’ genius as exemplified in precisely that artistic use of language, or “elementary forms of eloquence,” to which Professor Trondman refers. So, as it happens, I have already embarked on the programme he advocates. Indeed, I was already aware of the particular example he gives, which is the polyptoton (I would have said that this is an example of antanaclasis) represented by the Beatles’ use of “Please, Please.”

This, as he notes, is an example of a rhetorical device in which the same word is repeated but with a different sense. For although the first “please” is clearly a request, it is difficult to see the second “please” as a repeat of this initial request as that would mean there was no verb in the clause, and so it is more realistic to understand this to mean please in the sense of “to give pleasure.” Now Professor Trondman points out that Mark Forsyth wasn’t sure whether the song was about oral sex or not. However it

would seem that some people were quite sure that it was, for Capitol records, the US arm of EMI, refused to release this record on the grounds that the lyrics constituted an exhortation to perform fellatio [MacDonald 1998, 56; Davies 2014, 36].¹

But what is significant here, in the light of the suggestion that light could be shed on the nature of the Beatles’ lyrics by comparing them with those of other groups, is that repeating words is a common practice in the lyrics of popular songs, even in titles. One thinks for example of the Mamas and Papas “*Monday, Monday*” or Abba’s “*Money, Money, Money*” and “*Honey, Honey.*” However in none of these cases does the repeat constitute a rhetorical device. Not that antanaclasis is the only example of a rhetorical device to be found in the Beatles lyrics as one can also find examples of anaphora, epiphora, homeoteleuton, antimetabole, chiasmus and anadiplosis among others, not to mention paranomasia.

Another thing that I should have made clear is that whilst I do believe that, in studying the Beatles’ lyrics, it is important to focus on such matters as the choice of words and the construction of phrases and sentences, I did not mean to suggest that the study of form should be at the expense of content. That is to say of, “the meanings,” or “meaning-carrying complexities” that these same lyrics could be said to contain. Indeed I have attempted elsewhere to identify [Campbell 2010] one central motif that runs through the Beatles’ work, connecting their early “pop songs” with the later more “artistic” output. I should also perhaps have made it clear that, in emphasising the importance of focusing on the text, one is necessarily considering at least one crucial reality that lies outside the text. That of course is language. Lyrics are composed of words (or at least of sounds made with the voice, see below) and words derive their meanings from the language of which they are a part, whilst each language is itself the possession of a specific community. Indeed, as Professor Trondman says, quoting Toye,

the “meaning” of a given set of words cannot be derived purely from an analysis of the text, in isolation from an examination of the circumstances in which the text was delivered, mediated, and received [Toye 2013, 4].

Thus any study of the Beatles’ lyrics needs to be located in an understanding of the communities to which they belonged, and to whom, in many instances, their lyrics were addressed. To assume that this is merely a matter of understanding the language of the English people is too simplistic. For one would also need to appreciate Scouse, the distinctive dialect of Liverpool that the Beatles absorbed as they were growing up. However of more importance is the necessity of understanding the argot of the

¹ Hunter Davies [2014] says that if there was a deliberate sexual connotation here it was well hidden.

counter culture with which, in the mid 1960s, the Beatles came to identify. In that respect any study of the lyrics to the Beatles' songs would not be possible without reference to a hippie dictionary.

It is in connection with this issue of the language that the Beatles' might or might not share with their audience that Prof Regev points to as a possible problem when it comes to the claim that their lyrics were crucial to the Beatles' world-wide success [Regev 2016]. For he suggests that any appreciation of the Beatles' lyrics would surely be dependent of the listeners having some knowledge of the English language. It is a fair point to make, although it should be noted that, in the post-war world, English was rapidly becoming the language of pop and rock music, just as Italian was for a long time the language of opera. But then, just as in the latter case this didn't, and apparently still doesn't, seem to prevent people for whom Italian is not their first language from enjoying operas with an Italian *libretto*, so in the former case there seems to be no reason to assume it prevents people for whom English is not their first language from enjoying songs where the lyrics are in English. Indeed Professor Trondman is a case in point, as he says that he fell in love with the Beatles at a time when he didn't know a single word of English. Of course when individuals listen to songs that have lyrics in a language other than their own this can mean that they misunderstand what they hear; as in the phenomena of mondegreens and soramimi. But then if one assumes that the sound of the words matters at least as much as the meaning then this is less of a problem than it might seem. After all, as Paul McCartney himself observed, not understanding the words that are being sung doesn't necessarily mean that one can't enjoy the lyric. For as he said,

everyone listens and puts their own thing on it, which is great. I mean, when I was young I never knew what "gilly gilly elsa feffer cats [...]" was all about, but I still enjoyed singing it.² You put your own meaning at your own level to our songs, and that's what's great about them [Marchbank 1978, 88].

But then Professor Regev himself emphasises that the way a lyric sounds may be as important as the meaning of the words used. In this respect he is correct to point out that song lyrics should not be treated as if they were written texts, comprised only of words, but rather as consisting of vocal utterances, although the example he provides, that of the long draw-out "yeah" in "*I Want You (She's So Heavy)*" is of course a proper word. But then sounds made with the voice that are not themselves recognisable words have been a crucial part of the lyrics of rock and pop music

² Paul is referring to the song "*Gilly, Gilly Ossenfeffer, Katzenellen Bogen by the Sea.*" This popular song, written by Al Hoffman and Dick Manning, was a hit for Max Bygraves in 1954. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilly,_Gilly,_Ossenfeffer,_Katzenellen_Bogen_by_the_Sea

from the very beginning. One only has to consider "Tutti, frutti," "Be-bob-a-lula," "Awopbopalooop Alopbamboom," or "shooby-do-wop-do-wop-wop-wop-wop"; and unsurprisingly one can find similar nonsense sounds in the Beatles' lyrics. Hence in saying that the focus is on the study of the Beatles' lyrics it is not suggested that the focus is only on recognisable words. It would be more accurate to say that the focus is on vocalised sounds and hence on syllables, both those that make up recognised words and those that do not.

But Professor Regev's concern with the manner in which John Lennon sang a long drawn-out "yeahhhhhheee" in "I Want You (She's So Heavy)" is because he feels that one should restrict study to the songs as they appear on the original records, which is to say in their "canonical" version. Now I wouldn't want to suggest that there is no point in studying the original records, for many thousands of people all round the world clearly gain great pleasure from listening to them, but I would reject the suggestion that the particular manner in which a lyric is sung on the original recording is a crucial consideration when it comes to a study of their lyrics. For not only does this extend any study of the lyric to embrace the person of the singer, thereby blurring the distinction between the performer and the authorial voice, but it fails to recognise the extent to which the Beatles' songs have long since broken free of their original context. It is not just that they now exist in numerous different compilations, and indeed various restored, remixed and re-mastered versions, but they have also now been sung by every kind of singer, with every kind of accent and emphasis. Consequently to focus exclusively on the canonical version – whichever one this is considered to be³ – is unjustifiable, given that even the Beatles themselves, after the break up, were not averse to varying the manner in which they sang their own songs.

Professor Trondman makes an important point when he observes that although my paper focuses on the need to reject the intentional fallacy I do not reject the affective fallacy. Indeed he goes so far as to suggest that in attempting to explain the popularity of the Beatles in terms of their genius I actually embrace it, which is to say that I make "the error of judging or evaluating a work on the basis of its emotional effects on the listener".⁴ Now this is considered to be a fallacy because it involves confusing a subjective response to a work of art with a quality intrinsic to the work.⁵

³ There is also a problem about which version of a given song should be considered "canonical." See <http://www.columbia.edu/~brennan/beatles/var-intro.html>

⁴ "Affective fallacy," Wikipedia.

⁵ The observation that is so often made in attacking those who are deemed guilty of committing the affective fallacy is that one might as well study the properties of wine by getting drunk. But of course the fact that one gets drunk does tell one something about a property of the wine. This is

And yet, as Professor Trondman correctly observes, the emotional effect or effects that the Beatles' songs have on those who listen to them is unknown, and I certainly make no assumptions concerning what these might be. While judging their songs to be popular does not involve subscribing to the affective fallacy given that popularity is not a subjective impression but an objective fact. On the other hand suggesting that their popularity is indicative of genius is clearly more problematic, especially given the difficulty of deciding quite what constitutes "genius." Yet the fact that a work of art appeals to a large number of different sorts of people over a long period of time is routinely advanced in support of the claim of genius, as it is for example with respect to such figures as Shakespeare, Bach and Mozart. Given that this is not the same as claiming that consumers of a given artistic product experience a specific emotional response, I would suggest that this does not involve falling victim to the affective fallacy.

But then Professor Trondman goes on to ask the intriguing question of whether those musicologists who examine the Beatles' songs could be said to be guilty of falling victim to this fallacy; the answer to which I would suggest is that some certainly are. For although they have an objective set of concepts with which to describe the Beatles' music, a set that includes such terms as "*plagal cadence*," "*mixolydian mode*," "*arpeggio*," "*da capo*," "*sequential seventh*" and the like, their analysis is not always limited to the use of such terms. On the contrary, identification of phenomena of this kind is sometimes just the first stage, one that is then followed by comments of a different kind. Thus Mellers [1973, 57], for example, when discussing the violin obligato in the song "*Yesterday*," refers to this as, "inducing a wide-eyed wonder, with a tinge of apprehension." Then subsequently, when discussing the song "*When I'm Sixty-Four*," he notes that its "middle section [...] reveals a pathos that is disturbing as well as wistful" [*Ibidem*, 96], while he judges the song, "*Goodnight*," to be "tenderly beautiful" [*Ibidem*, 135]. What these comments suggest is that Mellers believes there to be an intrinsic connection between particular musical forms and specific emotional responses, ones he assumes will be experienced by anyone listening to these songs. In other words that the affective fallacy is not really a fallacy at all, for the pleasure the Beatles' songs bring is inherent in the forms they take.⁶ In which case one wonders if it might not be possible to make similar claims in relation to the Beatles' lyrics.

A final point I should have made in the original article concerns the issue, as Professor Trondman puts it, of the need to know of something outside of the

that it is intoxicating. One might similarly argue that because so many people enjoy listening to the Beatles' songs this also tells you something about these. Which is that they are enjoyable.

⁶ This issue is, unsurprisingly, a matter of fierce debate within music criticism. The different positions reflecting whether musical meaning lies exclusively within the context of the work itself or whether it refers to an extra-musical world that includes emotional states.

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lyrics. Now I have already conceded the importance of studying the language of those communities with which either the Beatles identified or wished to communicate, but there is also the question of how four young lads from Liverpool became serious artists. For while the main focus must be of necessity on their artistry as expressed in their lyrics, the question of how they came to develop this skill must also be of interest. In that respect an investigation into the lives of the Beatles may well be warranted, not in order to shed light on individual songs, but in order to understand how they developed the ability to embed "elementary forms of eloquence" in their lyrics. In other words one would want to know what it was about their experience, background or education that caused them to turn what was initially essentially a craft, that of song-writing, into what it became in their hands, which was an art-form; the answer to which is likely to lead to an examination of issues of identity and ambition [see, in this connection, Campbell forth.].

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A Response to Comments.

Abstract: The author replies to the comments by Motti Regev and Mats Trondman, explicating some arguments of the original article.

Keywords: The Beatles; Lyric Analysis; Intentional Fallacy.

Colin Campbell is an Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of York. He is the author of half a dozen books and over one hundred articles dealing with issues in the sociology of religion, consumerism, cultural change, and sociological theory. He is probably best-known as the author of *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* [Macmillan, 1987; Alcuin Academic edition, 2005], *The Myth of Social Action* [Cambridge University Press, 1996] and *The Easternization of the West* [Paradigm Publishers, 2007]. The author of several articles on the Beatles, he is also the co-author (with Allan Murphy) of *Things We Said Today: The Complete Lyrics and a Concordance to The Beatles' Songs, 1962-1970* [Pierian Press, 1980].