

Immaterialism in Music Lyrics and Poetry through the "Words" of Bob Dylan and Percy Shelley

Scott Levin

Louisiana Tech University, the United States

Abstract

Ever since Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize for Literature, there has been a growing interest in the “literary” merits of music lyrics. Yet, what are we to do with a lyric that actually lacks “words” such as Dylan’s “I’m Not There,” which was recorded with The Band in 1967 only to be released in 2007 in conjunction with the Todd Haynes’ film of the same name? Indeed, on the official Bob Dylan website “I’m Not There” is the only song of Dylan’s catalogue that does not include certified lyrics, nor has Dylan ever played the song live, which says a lot for someone who has been touring for over five decades. There are numerous online attempts to unpack the sonically complicated lyricism (owing mostly to Dylan’s vocals), yet there is no clear agreement on the exactitude of his "words" or lack thereof. Hence, it might be “words” themselves that are the problem.

My paper attempts to alleviate this lyrical incongruity by using Percy Shelley’s “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” a poem that locates significance and “meaning” not necessarily in the concrete but the immaterial ambiguity that surrounds us (and our “words”) on a daily basis. Shelley’s poem problematizes the absolute signification that words seemingly offer, instead focusing on the importance of ambiguity and lack of meaning. Taken in conjunction with the Dylan “lyric” we come to see the importance of absence and lack of univocal ends. Finally, this scholarly/pop-culture hybrid read results in a surprising political turn that displays not only the significance of looking at poetry and music lyrics together, but also the cultural implications of such a reading.

Keywords: Percy Shelley; Bob Dylan; poetry; music lyrics; immaterialism