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# "All Those Words They Seem to Slip Away". How the Intentional Fallacy Prevents Serious Study of The Beatles' Lyrics

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# “All Those Words They Seem to Slip Away.”

## How the Intentional Fallacy Prevents Serious Study of The Beatles’ Lyrics.

by Colin Campbell

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### 1. Introduction

It could hardly be said that academics have neglected to study the Beatles’ songs. For *The Beatles Bibliography* [Brocken and Davis 2012] lists hundreds of articles, as well as a substantial number of books, in which academics from a variety of disciplines deal with various aspects of the Beatles’ *oeuvre*. Yet reading through this body of work is likely to leave one with the feeling that something is missing, and that despite the number of works published and the range of perspectives, or lenses, through which the Beatles’ creative output has been examined, we are still not that much closer to discovering the secret of their genius, or why it is that their songs are among the best loved of all time.

But then this sense that something is missing in the serious literature that deals with the Beatles output, and that the real nature of their genius has somehow slipped through our fingers, is much less true of their music than of their lyrics. Indeed one thing that is noticeable when surveying this body of scholarly material is that, as one would expect, while most of the books and articles encountered discuss their songs, and therefore usually include comments on both words and music, the detailed analysis is more often focused on the latter than the former. Thus Ian MacDonald [1998] for example, in his magisterial study of the Beatles’ recorded songs, never fails to comment on the music for each of those he discusses, although there are several

instances where he makes little or no mention of the lyrics,<sup>1</sup> while even when both are mentioned it is usually the music that is the focus of attention.<sup>2</sup> But then it is more common to encounter specialised and detailed analyses of the music than of the lyrics, as is revealed for example in the works by Mellers [1973], Moore [1997] and Everett [1999; 2001]. That is to say, compared with the books and articles that deal primarily, if not solely, with the music of the Beatles, there are few publications that deal exclusively with their lyrics. In that respect progress in studying the lyrics of some of the most popular songs of all time lags behind the analysis of the music. Interestingly this suggests that the academic world is almost the reverse of the world inhabited by Beatles' fans, given that in the blogosphere, debate and argument about the meaning of their lyrics predominates, while serious discussion of their music is comparatively rare.

## 2. Analyses Undertaken to Date

None of this is to suggest that academics have neglected to consider the lyrical content of these songs. Far from it, for comments on what is assumed to be the general meaning or significance of their lyrics abound. Indeed one can even encounter texts by professors of English who approach their songs as if they were akin to poetry, or who are concerned with placing their artistic output in the Western literary or philosophical tradition [see Womack 2007; Schneider 2008]; or, alternatively, to come across analyses of these songs by scholars working in the fields of cultural studies, or popular culture [Inglis 2000; Womack and Davis 2006]. Rather it is to note that, despite this, it is rare to encounter a discussion in which the lyrics are closely examined; that is to say where the focus is on such details as the precise choice of words, the arrangement of phrases, or the semantic structure of a lyric line. In other words, to come across a study of the lyrics that matches, in its detail and specificity, those that have been undertaken with respect to the music.

Not that there is a complete absence of academics employing a technical language, somewhat akin to that employed by the musicologists, with which to investigate the lyrics, for both discourse and linguistic analysis have been employed for this purpose. One such study is that by Cook and Mercer, whose analysis of such vocabulary and linguistic features as the relative degree of pronoun use in the early

<sup>1</sup> Songs that MacDonald discusses but where he makes no mention of the lyrics include *"Any Time At All"*, *"A Hard Day's Night"*, *"I will"* and *"Wild Honey Pie"*.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly MacDonald identifies *"Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)"* as "the first Beatles song in which the lyric is more important than the music" [MacDonald 1998, 145]. However he fails to analyse the lyric, being content to make the briefest summary of what is taken to be its theme.

and later songs enables them to conclude that the Beatles moved “beyond the conventional vocabulary of rock and roll” [Cook and Mercer 2000, 100], a move that involved a shift, on the part of the song-writers from “involvement and immediacy to observation and detachment” [*Ibidem*, 102].<sup>3</sup> Studies of this kind, reliant as they often are on the use of concordances and generally employing computer analyses, undoubtedly provide insights, [see also Petrie, Pennebaker and Sivertsen 2008], as well as making a welcome change from the more commonly encountered brief impressionistic comments. However it is questionable whether the results obtained differ greatly from those gained through a more intuitive mode of studying the songs in question. In any case such essentially word-quantifying approaches are not really an adequate substitute for detailed textual analysis.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. How Analysis of Lyrics Lags Behind Analysis of Music

It is this absence of any really detailed examination of lyrics that is the most striking conclusion to be drawn from a survey of the current extant body of serious literature that deals with the Beatles’ songs, and as such constitutes such a marked contrast with the treatment of their music. Thus while the musicological examination of their songs typically involves discussing their component parts, such as the verse and refrain, the melodic and rhythmic structure, including key changes and the nature of the vocal line, in addition to such matters as the contribution made by different instruments, discussion of the lyrics rarely goes much further than the identification of a general theme or mood, plus – in those songs where the lyric has the appearance of a narrative – a brief resume of what is assumed to be the scenario so described. Consequently while the former may typically take up several paragraphs [see, for example, Alan F. Moore’s discussion of the songs on the *Sergeant Pepper* album, 1997], the latter is frequently no more than a single sentence, or even just a phrase. Thus MacDonald summarizes the lyric to “*She Said She Said*” by referring to it as a “song of tormented self-doubt” [MacDonald 1998, 186], while “*Drive My Car*” is dubbed

<sup>3</sup> Significantly they were able to show how the indeterminacy of pronoun use in the early songs worked to facilitate the identification by teenagers with the song’s message; thereby at least helping to provide a partial explanation for the success of these songs. However, when it comes to explaining the success of the later songs Cook and Mercer [2000, 104] fall back on the familiar – if generally unsubstantiated – claim about the content of their songs reflecting Lennon and McCartney’s (George is not mentioned) “sensitivity to social change.”

<sup>4</sup> One possible reason for this state of affairs is the considerable restriction imposed on authors by the stringent regulations concerning copyright, a restriction that stops writers from actually reproducing the lyrics they might wish to discuss because of the cost involved. This is clearly a factor that inhibits potential authors from undertaking detailed line-by-line discussion of the lyrics.

Campbell, *"All Those Words They Seem to Slip Away."*

"a comedy song" [*Ibidem*, 147], and *"Paperback Writer"* "a jokey lyric reflecting its era of classless ambition" [*Ibidem*, 173]. Wilfrid Mellers similarly tags the songs on the albums *Beatles For Sale* and *Help!* with one or two word labels. Thus *"No Reply"* is "about betrayal", *"Baby's In Black"* "deals with loss" [Mellers 1973, 49-50], while *"Tell Me What You See,"* is about "communication" [*Ibidem*, 54]. David Pichaske also tags songs in this way, calling *"Taxman"* "a timeless topical song", *"Nowhere Man"* "a social protest song", while *"Dr Robert"* and *"Tomorrow Never Knows"* are "drug songs" [Pichaske 2010, 43]. Stephen Valdez does the same, placing *"Eleanor Rigby,"* *"Piggies"* and *"I Me Mine"* together under the common heading of "thoughts on the human condition", while *"Revolution"* is a "song of protest", and *"In My Life"* a song that "deals with nostalgia and past friendships" [Valdez 2010, 164]. By contrast, songs like *"Eleanor Rigby"* and *"Penny Lane,"* although often tagged in a similar fashion (Mellers labels the former "a lament for lonely people," and the latter as "relat(ing) the LSD experience to childhood memory" [Mellers 1973, 82]), are also, given their narrative style, often briefly summarized. Thus *"Eleanor Rigby"* is referred to as "the story of a lonely old woman whose funeral is unattended by the crowds of 'lonely people' for whom she had fretted all her lonely life" [Northcutt 2006, 132], while *"She's Leaving Home"* is described as "a poignant story of a young girl who runs away from home" [Spiegel 2006, 56].

Clearly none of these comments could really be said to go much beyond a short general description of a lyric, and they certainly do not constitute the kind of detailed examination comparable to that undertaken by musicologists in relation to the Beatles' music. Indeed if the musicological analysis were undertaken in the same manner then it would amount to little more than similarly attaching a brief descriptive tag to a song, so that an investigation of *"Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da"* for example would not proceed beyond noting that it was a "Jamaican ska type song," or that *"Cry Baby Cry,"* "resembled a children's nursery rhyme." Not that all lyric analysis necessarily stops at this simple process of tagging a song with a label, or providing a brief summary of its "story." For there is one further feature of the manner in which the lyric analysis of Beatles' songs typically proceeds, one in which it contrasts sharply with the musicological approach; and this is with respect to the occasion of its composition and especially its connection with the life and experience of the lyricist.

#### **4. Focusing on the Story Behind the Creation of the Lyric**

By far the most significant difference between the manner in which the study of the Beatles' lyrics is normally approached compared with that of their music is that

the former, unlike the latter, typically focuses on what we could call “the story behind the lyric.”<sup>5</sup> That is to say while the musicological analysis focuses on the music, the lyric analysis rarely focuses on the lyric as such but rather on the circumstances surrounding its composition. Indeed this has become so marked a feature of the discussion of the lyrics to the Beatles’ songs that many of these stories have become part of what now passes for common knowledge. Thus one does not have to be an expert on the Beatles and their music to know (or believe that one knows) that the title for “*Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds*” came from a painting by John’s son Julian, or that “*A Day In the Life*” was inspired by a story in *The Daily Mail*, that “*Sexy Sadie*” refers to the Beatles’ disillusionment with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, that “*Hey Jude*” was originally entitled “*Hey Jules*,” or indeed that “*Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)*” is a song about an affair that John Lennon was keen to keep from his wife Cynthia. It is of course an approach that, in focusing on discovering the source of inspiration for a lyric, necessarily leads directly into an investigation of the lives of the Beatles themselves. Thus it is that commentaries on the lyrics of Beatles’ songs and exploring their personalities and experiences effectively becomes one and the same activity, with comments on the former either incorporating or even equating to remarks about the latter; with the result that the story *in* the lyric becomes largely indistinguishable from the story *behind* the lyric. Hence MacDonald comments on the lyric to the song “*She Said She Said*” by observing that it can be seen as yet “another of his (Lennon’s) creative admissions of spiritual disorientation” [MacDonald 1998, 187], while “*You Won’t See Me*” is judged to “mark [...] McCartney’s disenchantment with Jane Asher” [*Ibidem*, 160]; finally, “*Don’t Bother Me*” is identified as “an authentic expression of Harrison’s deep-seated need for privacy” [*Ibidem*, 87]. Not that MacDonald is the only commentator to equate an analysis of a song’s lyrics with an exploration of the state of mind, current feelings, or experience of the lyricist. Kenneth Womack does exactly the same, describing “*And Your Bird Can Sing*,” as “witness(ing) Lennon at his acerbic best- reacting, with devastating honesty and venom, to his marital failures” [Womack 2007, 143], while Lennon’s “*Julia*” “memorializes the songwriter’s late mother while simultaneously addressing his spiritual deliverance at the hand of ‘ocean child’ Yoko Ono, his newfound soul mate” [*Ibidem*, 188]. As one can see from these examples the exploration of a lyric becomes effectively equated with an exploration of the lyricist to such an extent that lyric analysis could be said to begin to resemble nothing so much as psycho-analysis.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly there are books devoted to precisely this topic, that is, the stories behind the Beatles’ songs. See for example Turner [2005].

<sup>6</sup> One obvious consequence of this “personalizing tendency” is that the critic is likely to end up assessing the artist when what ought to be assessed is the work of art.

This is in sharp contrast to the approach adopted by most musicologists whose analysis of the music is typically undertaken through the employment of a technical language that does not require them to make any observations concerning either the personality or the personal circumstances of the composer. Thus Wilfrid Mellers can observe of the song "*For No One*," that

The bass descends evenly down the scale from tonic to subdominant, but then rises to the flat seventh to approach the cadence [Mellers 1973, 77].

Similarly, Alan F. Moore can say of "*She's Leaving Home*" that

The song alternates thirty-two-bar (four strain) verses with nineteen-bar refrains (made up of 8 + 4 + 7) except that the final verse is only sixteen bars in length, and the final refrain stretches to 12 + 16, giving an air of completion that is supported by the novel plagal cadence [Moore 1997, 37].

Finally, we can note that MacDonald employs a similar musical language, one that enables him to describe "*You Can't Do That*" as containing "an eight-bar section [...] given a bitter pentatonic twist" [MacDonald 1998, 95], and "*Cry Baby Cry*" as having "an ominously recurring blues B flat which belongs in neither the chorus's G major nor its related minor" [*Ibidem*, 260].

We can see from this that while the musicological analysis actually tells us something about how the music "works," or at least how it is structured, the typical approach adopted to the study of the lyrics tells us nothing of the kind. Instead, we are informed of the incident, experience or event that prompted its composition. Thus, the lyric for the song, "*For No One*," mentioned above, is first of all described as capturing "the dawning realization that someone's feelings of love have disappeared" [Turner 2005, 113], or simply an "account of the end of an affair" [MacDonald 1998, 182]. So far, so good, for although one would hardly describe these comments as constituting a penetrating analysis of the lyric they do at least constitute an attempt to describe its content. However, brief summary descriptions of this kind quickly turn into accounts of the circumstances of the song's composition. Thus in this case we are told that Paul McCartney wrote "*For No One*" when on holiday with Jane Asher in the Swiss ski resort of Klosters in March 1966, and that it was therefore "probably written 'about another argument' with Jane" [Turner 2005, 113]. Similarly, MacDonald says of "*Every Little Thing*" that, "If this is a love-song to Jane Asher, it corrects the impression of disharmony given in other numbers" [MacDonald 1998, 115]. So, in these examples, we have classic examples of lyrics being read so as to shed light on the personal affairs of the lyricist, an approach that is a long way from anything resembling a proper investigation of the lyric.

What is so significant about these different forms of analysis, apart that is from the contrast in the detail provided, is that the musicological approach can be employed successfully to shed light on a piece of music without the need to make any reference to either the composer or the circumstances of its composition. Indeed this form of analysis would still be possible even if the identity of the composer, together with the time and place of its composition, were unknown.<sup>7</sup> By contrast the manner in which analyzing the lyrics to Beatles' songs is characteristically approached – if indeed it actually goes any further than a brief summary of what is taken to be its general meaning – is to focus on the identity of the author, in conjunction with the circumstances surrounding the song's composition. In this respect lyric analysis is almost exclusively focused on how, and at whose hands, a particular lyric came into being, with a specific focus on eliciting the composer's intentions or purposes. And this is not a contrast that simply follows from the fact that musicologists, because they have a special technical language to fall back on, do not need to refer to the identity of the composer or the context of its composition when discussing a song, while those who analyse the lyrics have no such language available to them and are therefore forced to focus on other matters. In fact, not only do musicologists sometimes mention these factors but lyric analysts could, if they chose, focus on such matters as word choice, phrasing and the semantic structure of a lyric. Rather the contrast would appear to be principally the result of a difference in the assumptions concerning how artistic products should be studied, and as such hark back to a famous controversy in literary criticism, one that concerns a concept known as "the intentional fallacy."

## 5. The Intentional Fallacy

The term "intentional fallacy" was coined in Twentieth Century literary criticism to describe the problem inherent in trying to judge a work of art by focusing on the intent or purpose of the artist who created it, an approach that, as we have just seen, has to date tended to characterize the study of the Beatles' lyrics. Those who coined this term, and espoused what was known as "The New Criticism," believed that it was a "fallacy" in the sense that it was unnecessary for the author's intentions, purposes or circumstances to be known for either the reader to enjoy, or the critic to interpret, a work of literature, emphasising that the text itself was the only source of

<sup>7</sup> For another similarly primarily musicological treatment of the Beatles' lyrics see Mann. He identifies "major tonic sevenths and ninths", as the trademarks of the Beatles' music, specifically the "submediant switches from C major into A-flat major, and to a lesser extent mediant ones" [Mann 2006, 46].



meaning. Now one could say that the most significant difference between the prevailing mode of music and lyric analysis with respect to the Beatles' canon is that while the former does indeed generally avoid committing the intentional fallacy, albeit with qualifications,<sup>8</sup> the latter effectively adopts it. The obvious question that then arises is whether this stance is justified.

Interestingly, most commentators on the lyrics of the Beatles' songs – including those, like MacDonald and Turner cited above – seem to feel no need to justify their rejection of this fallacy. Indeed it is not clear that they are even aware that what this is what they are doing. However, there are those who do know that this is what they are doing, and consequently attempt to justify their position. Steve Hamelman is one of these. He explicitly rejects the intentional fallacy, claiming that

the Beatles (sic) music of 1969 shatters the new Critic's argument that private intentions matter not at all in the analysis of texts made public,

continuing,

In fact, there can be little intelligent discussion of *Abbey Road* and *Let It Be* without awareness of their biographical background [Hamelman 2009, 127].

He then justifies this position by observing that

Many tracks from 1969 teem with melancholy and nostalgia, some drip with sarcasm, and others sound the depths of insecurity, loneliness and desire [...] Since few if any of the tunes from 1969 lack biographical overtones or reference points, the critic is obliged to throw the precepts of postmodern aesthetics to the wind [...] [*Ibidem*].

Now this has to be judged a strange argument in favour of rejecting the claim that focusing on the artist's intentions is a mistake given that the New Criticism's position was never that the critic should disregard the origins of a literary work because it was unlikely to contain any "biographical overtones or reference points." On the contrary, the point emphasised was that the text should be judged on its own merits *irrespective* of the extent to which links could or could not be made between it and the biography of its creator. Indeed Wimsatt and Beardsley, in their famous essay outlining the fallacy, specifically stress that "The thoughts and feelings expressed in a poem (lyric is just as applicable here) should be imputed to "the dramatic speaker," and not to "the author" [Wimsatt and Beardsley 1954, 10]. In other words, analysis of the lyric should proceed, under all circumstances, without reference to the identity of the lyricist. But then Hamelman, in an accompanying sentence, goes on to reveal

<sup>8</sup> Musicologists generally do make reference to authorship as well as, occasionally, the events surrounding the composition of a work. It remains the case however, as noted, that this is not essential to their mode of analysis.

the real reason for his rejection of the fallacy and indeed New Criticism in general, when he says that

the songs that ended up on these two discs (*Abbey Road* and *Let It Be*) [...] *illuminate the Beatles' personal affairs* in ways that “*Do You Want To Know A Secret*,” “*I want to Hold Your Hand*,” “*When I Get Home*” [...] and dozens more do not [Hamelman 2009, 127; italics added].

In other words his reason for rejecting the intentional fallacy is not because it is necessary to understand the personal circumstances and intentions of the artist in order to understand the work of art, but rather because this would prevent the analyst from learning about the life of the artist. An argument that rather suggests that Beatle-ology, or the study of the Beatles and their lives, has trumped the study of the lyrics of their songs.

Unfortunately this is not an isolated example. Indeed, there are a number of studies that purport to be investigations of the lyrics of the Beatles' songs that, on examination, prove to be closer in character to investigations of their lives. Or at least, as in Hamelman's case, the former quickly becomes transformed into the latter. One of the principal reasons for this is not hard to find, and it is revealed by David Pichaske who, after pointedly noting that the grounds for upholding the intentional fallacy are that

telling us how a work of art came into being and who brought that work into being does not necessarily explain what that work of art is (or what it means to its audience) [Pichaske 2010, 45],

then proceeds to reject this self-evident truth by asserting that

the story of *Sgt. Pepper's* origins is fascinating and validates some of the themes that I find in the album [*Ibidem*].

In other words, even though the New Criticism's prohibition about embracing the intentional fallacy is recognised, it is dismissed; partly because what the author discovers about the Beatles themselves is judged to be “fascinating,” and partly because referring to their preoccupations and intentions is seen as “validat(ing)” the themes that the analyst claims to have discerned in their work.

What is disturbing about these remarks is not simply that they reveal the extent to which, for some academics at least, the study of the Beatles' lives and careers and the study of their artistic output is viewed as one and the same activity, but that, in an inverted interpretation of the intentional fallacy, a careful and detailed study of their artistic output is seen as important because it serves to shed light on their personalities and careers. Now this position is not of course that different from the majority of

Beatles' fans who, while similarly "fascinated" by every detail of the lives of the "Fab Four," also search their lyrics for clues concerning the nature of their lives.<sup>9</sup> What is worrying about this parallel between the interest shown in the Beatles by academics and that shown by ordinary fans is not that the former should, like the latter, find them "fascinating," but that this fascination serves to deflect them from a proper study of their lyrics; that is to say it deflects them by encouraging them to embrace, rather than reject, the intentional fallacy.<sup>10</sup> For, as Tim Riley correctly observes,

In order to understand what it was the Beatles had to say to the world, and why their message was so powerful and convincing, their work, both words and music, deserves more attention than their marriages [Riley 2002, 9].

## 6. Why the Intentional Fallacy Should Be Rejected

The obvious objection to the intentional fallacy can be stated clearly enough. It is that understanding the origin of a lyric is one thing: understanding the lyric itself quite another. In other words discovering the nature of the lyricist's thoughts, feelings and intentions when engaged in composing the lyric does not help in assessing how it works and especially not in determining whether it is a good lyric. No doubt it is of interest to discover that in composing *"Tomorrow Never Knows"* John Lennon chose to include lines taken from Timothy Leary's book *The Psychedelic Experience* [1964], which was itself a poetic reinterpretation of *The Tibetan Book of The Dead*, or that George Harrison decided to delve into the *I Ching* to find inspiration for the song that became *"While My Guitar Gently Weeps,"* but such knowledge is largely irrelevant to an examination of the meanings that can be found in these lyrics, let alone to any judgment of their quality. For John Lennon could have written any number of different lyrics as a result of reading sections of Leary's book, just as George Harrison could easily have found inspiration in any number of different sources other than the *I Ching*. In that respect discovering the source of an artist's inspiration is of little consequence when it comes to an understanding of either the nature or the appeal of the resultant lyric. It follows that the work has to be examined, and indeed judged, against something other than the author's experience, biography or intentions.

But then there are other logical, and indeed practical, objections to succumbing to the intentional fallacy. The logical objection is simply that if the lyricist's intention

<sup>9</sup> The most famous example being the way material from their song lyrics has been used to demonstrate that Paul died, and was replaced by a look-alike, in 1966.

<sup>10</sup> It is of course pertinent to observe that most academics who study the Beatles are also very likely to be fans, or to employ what is perhaps a more appropriate term, aficionados of their work, otherwise it is unlikely that they would have chosen to study their music.

or purpose in composing the lyric is successfully expressed in the lyric then there is no need to look anywhere other than the lyric itself in order to discern it. If on the other hand it is not successfully expressed in the lyric then there is little point in trying to establish what it might have been. The practical objection concerns the fact that no one can actually access the intentions of the individual Beatles in composing their lyrics, only the reports of those intentions (where they exist), while they themselves, like all artists, will not necessarily have been aware of the intentions that prompted them to create their works of art. Nor indeed are these likely to be the result of a single, clearly formulated, intention. Indeed the process of lyric revision necessarily implies that intention is piled on top of intention, as when one word or phrase is replaced by another, or indeed phrases that have been composed at different times are eventually joined together to constitute one completed lyric.<sup>11</sup> But then, equally, it is important to stress that even where it is known that a work of art was created by the artist with the specific and conscious intention of representing or embodying a personal experience, feeling or mood – or even of conveying a specific message to a target audience – its representation in an art form it is still not equatable with that experience or intention, let alone explicable in terms of it.<sup>12</sup> Finally, it would clearly be a serious mistake to confuse what artists intend with what they produce. All of these arguments are greatly strengthened in the case of the Beatles given what is known about their frequently casual or “accidental” mode of lyric composition,<sup>13</sup> a mode that would strongly suggest that on many occasions no other intention was present in the mind of the composer than that of simply creating a song.<sup>14</sup> Finally, an obvious objection to this taken-for-granted equation of the content of a lyric with the direct life experience of the lyricist is that it makes no allowance for what would normally be called poetic or artistic licence; that is to say the desire to select words to create an effect rather than provide a true-to-life account of an experience. So not only is this practice somewhat insulting to the Beatles themselves (who quite clearly deserve to be credited with the title of “artists”) but it is also at odds with what we

<sup>11</sup> One wonders, for example, precisely what Paul McCartney’s intentions might have been in changing the phrase “Ola Na Tungee” [<http://www.beatlesbible.com/songs/eleanor-rigby/>], into “Dazzie-de-da-zu” [Royle 2000], before finally settling on the name Eleanor Rigby?

<sup>12</sup> See Allan F. Moore’s insightful discussion of this issue [Moore 2012, 210-211].

<sup>13</sup> There is ample evidence that words and phrases were included in lyrics on a random or accidental basis or alternatively that words were chosen because of their sound rather than their meaning. See, for example, John Lennon’s comments on “*This Boy*” [MacDonald 1998, 92] and “*Hey Bulldog*” [*Ibidem*, 124].

<sup>14</sup> Accepting the intentional fallacy necessarily creates problems when it is recognised that a lyric may be the result of collaboration between two or more lyricists, something that was true of the Beatles for the majority of their career. For in these situations analysis of the lyric cannot really proceed until the matter of who contributed which lines has been resolved.

know about their method of composition. For this was one in which the actual sound of the words chosen for a lyric was as important – if not more important – than their meaning. While these could be said to be among the more obvious objections to falling victim to the intentional fallacy giving in to it does also have other rather unfortunate consequences.

Two in particular deserve specific mention. The first is the tendency to assume that there is one particular, singular meaning to be discerned in a lyric; an assumption that naturally follows from the equating of the incident, feeling or experience that "occasioned" the lyric with its meaning. Now although one suspects that most serious commentators on the Beatles' lyrics would deny that their intention, in discussing a lyric's meaning, is to imply that there is only one, it follows from accepting the intentional fallacy that this is likely to be the case. Only if there is a suggestion that more than one source of inspiration was involved is it possible that the question of alternative meanings will be raised, as MacDonald does for example when commenting on the lyric to "*Girl*." Here he suggests that, when writing it, John Lennon was thinking of his "dream girl," and that he had found her in Yoko Ono, and that she resembled his ideal in being an enigmatic bohemian artist *a la* Juliet Greco. However MacDonald continues by noting that this ideal

may (also) have been partly fulfilled by his friend Stuart Sutcliffe's German girlfriend Astrid Kirchherr [MacDonald 1998, 161].

However, interpretations of this kind, which involve acknowledging that more than one experience or intention may have served to inspire a lyric, are comparatively rare.

But then, second, the assumption that 'the meaning' to be found in a lyric is equatable with the source of the lyricist's inspiration also has the unfortunate effect of identifying the dramatic speaker or authorial voice that one hears in the lyric with that of the composer, a temptation made all the more appealing by the fact that, in the majority of instances, the lyricist is also the singer. This then leads to the interpretation of the lyric as if it were indeed a direct autobiographical statement of some kind. Consequently analysis now slips from the mere suggestion that an experience of the lyricist served as an inspiration for the lyric to the assumption that the resultant lyric is a direct expression of that experience. It is therefore unsurprising to find examples of lyric analysis in which this equation is made quite explicit, as for example Tim Riley does when he says of the lyric to "*And Your Bird Can Sing*" that

The song's subject possesses everything she wants, but she doesn't "get" (i.e. understand) Lennon; she's seen the seven wonders, but she can't "see" (or empathize with)

him; finally, she can hear every sound there is, but she can't hear (or communicate with) John [Riley 2002, 192].

This quite unjustified equating of the authorial voice articulated in the lyric with that of the lyricist himself could be said to come dangerously close to reducing lyric analysis to little more than a matter of biography.

## 7. Mistaking the Trees for the Forest

There is one final reason why it is important not to commit the intentional fallacy, and this is that falling victim to it means that it becomes almost impossible to study the Beatles' lyrics. The reason for saying this is that only individuals can truly be said to have intentions, and although groups of people, or collectives, can indeed formulate intentions, this is a necessarily a more complex and difficult process, one that normally requires special institutions, such as committees, or boards of management of some kind, in order that they can be given concrete expression.

Consequently, in view of this difficulty, studying the lyrics of the Beatles' songs is a process typically undertaken by relating them to the intentions or purposes of individual members of the group, rather than the group itself. Thus adopting the intentional fallacy means that the study of the Beatles' lyrics becomes, of necessity, a study of John Lennon's lyrics, or of Paul McCartney's lyrics (or since many were the result of their collaboration those portions of a lyric that each contributed, or are assumed to have contributed), as well as – less commonly – those composed by George Harrison. Then, when the emphasis is also placed on understanding the content of these lyrics in relation to the changing circumstances and experiences of each member of the group over their career, the result is a process in which the Beatles' total artistic output is repeatedly sub-divided and fragmented either by lyricist, chronologically, or indeed both. It also leads, somewhat inevitably, to a specific form of cross-textual analysis, one in which lyrics by the same author are inter-related while those by different authors are contrasted. So we get later Lennon-inspired lyrics compared with early Lennon lyrics, while his lyrical style is compared with McCartney's, or Lennon and McCartney's contrasted with Harrison's, all of which – once again – directs attention away from a close analysis of the text of any individual lyric. Indeed comparisons of this kind then become substitutes for such analysis, as is the case with MacDonald's comments on Harrison's "*If I Needed Someone*," which he judges

gauche beside McCartney's urbanity and anaemic next to the boldness of Lennon [MacDonald 1998, 150].

Consequently, in place of an examination of the Beatles' lyrics viewed as a total body of work one encounters analyses of their material either on an individual song-by-song basis, [see MacDonald 1998; Turner 2005], or through a focus on specific albums [see for example Reising 2006; Moore 1997]. Occasionally a simple modification of this tactic is adopted whereby the songs are grouped into blocks of a period of years, to constitute what is, in effect, a periodizing approach [see Cook and Mercer 2000; Murphy 2006]. Not that these alternative ways of breaking up the Beatles' overall artistic output are necessarily employed in lieu of a person-by-person breakdown of authorship. On the contrary, the attribution of authorship still remains the central feature of all these discussions, even where song-by-song, album specialization or periodization is also employed. To summarize one could say that personalization (i.e. breaking the lyrics down into those composed by Lennon or McCartney or – less frequently – Harrison), together with contextualization (i.e. identifying the events associated with the lyric's creation), and periodization (i.e. grouping songs together on an album or chronological basis), constitute the most common tactics adopted by those writers with an interest in studying the Beatles' lyrics. The consequence of the prevalence of this fragmented intentional-fallacy-based form of analysis is that we know far more about how particular lyrics reflect the personal experiences, personalities and interests of John Lennon, Paul McCartney, and George Harrison, at different stages in their careers, and indeed about the internal dynamics within the group, than we do about what it is that makes the Beatles' lyrics so special. So much, it appears, is now known, or at least has been written about, these four individuals, that an understanding of that unique collective phenomenon known as "The Beatles" has somehow been lost. Indeed one could say that such an approach involves failing to see the forest for the trees, that is to say that it results in downplaying, or even overlooking, those distinctive features of their songs that were typical of the Beatles as a collective entity, as well as those that were constant throughout the band's career.

We can see one consequence of this in the virtual absence of studies that involve a comparison of the lyrics of the Beatles' songs with those of other composer-performers – either groups or individuals – who could be considered their equals. Once again there is a noticeable contrast with the academic study of their music, in which comparisons of this kind abound. Thus Mellers' musicological form of analysis enables him to compare their songs with the output of other composers, and indeed other genres of music. Consequently he likens elements in their songs to, *inter alia*, tribal African music, the music of the Renaissance, and the Maori songs of New Zealand, as well as with such individual composers as Ravel, Elgar or Michael Tippett. Moore [1997], Everett [1999; 2001] and MacDonald [1998], do something

similar, if to a varying degree. But one looks in vain for similar detailed comparisons of the Beatles' lyrics with those of other composer-performers. Yet it is obvious that the particular genius of their lyrical skill is far more likely to be uncovered through studies of this kind than by comparisons of the "internal" nature, noted above.

## **8. How the Intentional Fallacy Hampers the Study of the Beatles' Lyrics**

By endorsing the intentional fallacy and hence failing to acknowledge the real possibility of alternative readings of a lyric commentators are denying a simple truth, which is that the lyric does not belong to the lyricist. Once the song has been recorded and then issued it "belongs" to the public, to those who listen to the song, and consequently the lyricist has no more right to say what it "means" than anyone else. Its lyric is embodied in language, which is a public possession, and as such it is open to the public to make of it what they will. What is more lyrics, since they are composed of words and phrases, necessarily carry the potential for multiple interpretations, including ones that the author did not, and could not, anticipate, as well as ones that have no connection with the events surrounding the composition of the song. In that respect R.A. Peterson, writing in response to Geoffrey's Marshall's plea for an accurate and authoritative canon of the Beatles' lyrics,<sup>15</sup> was very much to the point when he observed that

the meaning of lyrics depends as much on what the audience hears as on what the lyricist intends [Peterson 1971, 592].

Given this simple truth the question that has to be posed is why should those interpretations of the lyrics that depend on knowledge of the intentions and purposes, as well as the prevailing circumstances, of the composer, be accorded special status? To which of course the only possible answer is that given above. Which is that the critic finds these facts "interesting."

The position adopted here, in accord with a recognition of the truth of the intentional fallacy, is that understanding how a lyric came to take the form it did, or identifying the occasion that prompted its creation, is a different exercise from analysing how it works, that is to say, how it provides pleasure to those who hear it. Indeed, given that thousands of people, all around the world, have for the past fifty

<sup>15</sup> Back in 1969 Geoffrey Marshall complained that it was impossible to obtain accurate versions of the Beatles' lyrics, suggesting that "carefully prepared text of the lyric which had the approval of the authors," was what was needed [Marshall 1969, 29].



years, found immense pleasure in listening to the Beatles records, while the majority probably have little idea of the circumstances surrounding their composition, and indeed even confuse a song composed by Paul McCartney with one composed by John Lennon (not to mention crediting George Harrison's compositions to Lennon and McCartney) it necessarily follows that the intentional fallacy needs to be upheld, and the focus placed clearly on the words themselves.

After all people do not need to know that *"I'm Looking Through You"* "records a hiatus in McCartney's affair with Jane Asher [MacDonald 1998, 155], or that *"Sexy Sadie"* refers to "the altercation which (sic) concluded the Beatles' stay (at Rishikesh)" [Ibidem, 262], or indeed that *"Get Back"* had its origins in a national debate about immigration and Enoch Powell's infamous rivers of blood speech [Ibidem, 292], in order to enjoy listening to these songs, any more than the enjoyment that people derive from listening to *"Yesterday"* is dependent on their realising that the provisional title of this song was *"Scrambled Eggs."* Indeed one could go so far as to suggest that knowing the artist's intention – or at least their articulated intention – in composing a particular song, or equally knowing the circumstances that led to its creation, may actually interfere with the listener's pleasure on hearing it. For this information could well serve to act as a straight-jacket for listeners, imposing a meaning, or at least a framework for thinking about the meaning of a song, when it might be more pleasurable for them to create their own.

So the question that needs answering is how is it that people who know little or nothing about the Beatles or about the manner in which their songs were composed can nonetheless be entranced by their music – or more specifically in this case – their lyrics? What is of interest here is that while many listeners are actually unable to distinguish a Lennon-inspired lyric from a McCartney one they usually have little difficulty in identifying a Beatle's song, rarely confusing these with songs by the Rolling Stones for example, or Bob Dylan. Now one can say that this is largely because of the distinctiveness of the sound that they produced, which is of course true. But it could equally be due to the distinctive nature of the lyrics.

What this suggests is that gaining an understanding of their genius clearly involves more than a close examination of the lyric of each and every Beatles' song, necessary though that is. For there must be something that transcends each particular lyric, something that is a characteristic feature of their oeuvre as a whole and consequently marks their songs off from those of other, comparable, song-writers and performers of their era. For it is not as if it is only some of the Beatles' songs that have captured the public imagination, even though naturally enough some are better-known and liked than others. Consequently it is the total body of work that needs to be examined – the total opus – so that the distinctive marks of genius can

be identified. Yet this is not, as we have seen, the way that most academics have approached the Beatles' material, which is characteristically broken up for examination. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that an interest in the Beatles themselves has overshadowed a concern with what they are actually famous for, which is their songs, or perhaps more specifically, their records.

Indeed the real danger is that identifying the circumstances surrounding the birth of a lyric, or relating its content to the biography of the lyricist, can give the impression that the lyric itself is being investigated, or even analysed, and may thus, when completed, lead others to believe that there is little more that needs to be said on the subject. In other words, by demonstrating that a song was based on a particular incident, or was inspired by a particular idea, the impression is given that the lyric has, in some way, been "explained," an impression that can easily deter others from seeking whatever possible meanings or interpretations it actually contains. In this way adopting the fallacy can easily have the effect of closing down the study of the Beatles' lyrics, rather than opening it up. In fact accepting the intentional fallacy has much the same effect as the fans obsessive search for "hidden meanings." This is that it diverts analysis away from its proper target, which is the range of meanings that are actually present in a lyric and how it is that they result in generating its appeal.

## 9. Conclusion

If progress is to be made in unravelling the secret of the Beatles' phenomenal success; that is to say in understanding why their songs have such a powerful and universal appeal, then the answer must be found in the songs themselves, and not in the circumstances surrounding their composition. This is not to deny that a study of the author's intentions – in so far as they have been articulated, together with knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the creation of the work – may be of interest, as well possibly shedding some light on the nature of the lyric itself. It is merely to assert that this information cannot be sufficient in itself to help us to understand the genius of the Beatles.

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Campbell, *"All Those Words They Seem to Slip Away."*

## **"All Those Words They Seem to Slip Away."**

### How the Intentional Fallacy Prevents Serious Study of the Beatles' Lyrics

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Abstract: Serious academic study of the Beatles' lyrics lags behind that undertaken with respect to their music. While the latter, when undertaken by professional musicologists, characteristically involves a close technical examination, the former is all too often limited to no more than a single descriptive phrase or sentence. But then, where analysis proceeds further than this, it generally takes the form of an inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the creation of the lyric, rather than an examination of the lyric. This reveals the extent to which commentators have fallen victim to 'the intentional fallacy,' that is the mistake of trying to judge a work of art by focusing on the intent or purpose of the artist who created it. Only if this fallacy is recognised and firmly rejected is it possible for progress to be made in the study of the Beatles' lyrics.

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*Keywords: The Beatles; Lyric Analysis; Intentional Fallacy.*

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