

Intersections

After a four year hiatus *Moveable Type* returns as the Graduate Journal of UCL English Department. Previous issues have taken the form of a select proceedings from that year's Graduate Society annual conference, taking the broad term of this event as the topic of each *Moveable Type*. These issues were lost in changes to the English Department's website earlier this year. I'm pleased to say that the files have been found and are being reconfigured by something called the Silva Content Management System. They will appear on the website shortly. *Intersections* as a theme, a bit like the title of the Silva Content Management System, can appear devoid of meaning. Most literature can be, and is, read as a meeting between two genres, people, historical periods, or disciplines. As anyone who has tried to organise such an event knows, this breadth can make finding the ties that bind panels and discussion difficult. I'm pleased to say that the intersections discussed in this issue have not been hampered by the possible problems with the term.

A concrete definition of 'intersection' which avoids any suspicion of irrelevance, and one that the OED calls 'Chiefly *N. Amer.*', is as the meeting of two roads. It is a meaning I wasn't particularly aware of until I spent time in the United States; a difference between the two languages which is perhaps a bit too quotidian to make it on to the many online lists of strangest/ funniest/ worst things about being a Londoner in New York (although I think the fact that 'pawn' and 'porn' are homophones should be). It seems appropriate that in a nation where car is king, which gave us the 'road movie' and the 'road beer', this additional meaning is available. The road is so polyvalent an image in America culture, for Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty crossing the nation eight times in *On The Road* (1957), or the railroad vagabondage evoked by Woody Guthrie, that it can be tempting to reduce everything to it.

The intersection of two roads is a similarly rich symbol. Robert Johnson, the so-called King of the Delta Blues Singers, sings of a journey to a crossroads in his best-known song. Here he

Asked the lord above "Have mercy now
save poor Bob if you please"¹

Despite this appeal for salvation, it is an altogether more diabolical meeting which lasts in the cultural memory: the legend that Johnson met the Devil at a crossroads, in some versions the intersection of Highway 61 and 49 at Clarksdale Miss., and here sold his soul for virtuosic guitar skills. The crossroad provides a visual representation of the Faustian pact; something is lost, the soul and the road he was once on, for a new road available to the skilled musician. All of these itinerant road figures, Kerouac, Guthrie, and Johnson, were influential in the development of Bob Dylan. He alludes to the Johnson myth in an interview when discussing his early development,

Thats when I went to the Crossroads and made that big deal, one night, then I went back to Minneapolis, and they were like, Hey! where's this guy been? You know? He's been to the Crossroads.²

¹ Robert Johnson, 'Cross Road Blues' (1936), track 1 of Robert Johnson, *King of the Delta Blues Singers*, (Columbia: 1961).

² *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan*, dir. Martin Scorsese, (2005).

Dylan's appropriates Johnson's crossroads, and Christ's temptation in the wilderness, to be part of a tradition. Although his answer to Scorsese's questions show an awareness of these myths, it also takes a playful and almost sardonic attitude to them in its casual bar room dialogue; Dylan seems to offer his Faustian pact as too simple an image to describe and identify his development.

This statement could suggest, alongside songs like 'Highway 51 blues', 'Down the Highway', 'Highway 61 Revisited', 'On the Road Again', and 'Dirt Road Blues', that the intersection might be a useful tool with which to analyse Dylan. It is one which opens Greil Marcus' landmark work on Dylan:

Once a singer stood at a world crossroads.³

Marcus is referring to the concert at Newport, Rhode Island, on Sunday July 25, 1965; Dylan stands at a 'world crossroads' on the day he amplified his set at the folk festival. Focusing on the single intersection is not reserved to Newport – it is also used in conjunction with the 'judas' incident, covered in *No Direction Home*, and Dylan's conversion to Christianity in the late 1970's. Marcus' next book, *Like a Rolling Stone – Bob Dylan at the Crossroads*, talks of:

Those moments of rejection, of Bob Dylan clearing his decks or clearing his throat, occur all across his career.⁴

But what does Dylan reject in his career that he doesn't later come back to? Even the staid 50's crooners which he criticises to Scorsese seem to slip their way into work like 'Soon After Midnight' and 'Long and Wasted Years'.⁵

The allegory of leaving a path for a new road fails to describe Dylan as it cannot carry the schism that it does for Johnson. Dylan's music and persona are constantly redefined and turning back on themselves, but these changes don't act as crossroads, of leaving one road behind and taking another, of the twice repeated 'clearing' which Marcus suggests. Dylan discusses his own close-readings of Johnson's songs in his autobiography *Chronicles* and praises their 'sparkling allegories' and 'big-ass truths'.⁶ But when Dylan trades in the sparkling allegory of the crossroad you get the sense of either being sent up, as in his blasé response to Scorsese, or, in songs like 'One Too Many Mornings' that the schism is too big-ass a truth to deal with complex situations. It is a denial of the neatness of intersections which opens 'Mama, You Been on My Mind',

Perhaps it's the color of the sun cut flat
An' cov'rin' the crossroads I'm standing at
Or maybe it's the weather or something like that
But mama, you been on my mind.⁷

3 Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic - Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes*, (London: Picador 1997) p.ix.

4 Greil Marcus, *Like a Rolling Stone - Bob Dylan at the Crossroads*, Greil Marcus, (London: Faber and Faber, 2005) p.25.

5 Track 2 and 4 respectively of Dylan's latest album, *Tempest* (Columbia: 2012).

6 Bob Dylan, *Chronicles vol.1* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2004), p.285.

7 Available as Track 4 on *The Bootleg Series vol.IV* (Columbia, 1991); Track 4 on *The Bootleg Series vol.VI* (Columbia, 2004); and Track 10 of *The Rolling Thunder Review* (Columbia, 1975).

The opening stanza is equivocal through the choice of 'perhaps', 'maybe', and 'or', as the narrator moves uncertainly between the possible reasons for his restlessness. In recordings there is usually a pause after 'an cov'rin' which allows the crossroad, bathed in sunlight, to offer itself as a neat answer to his grief. The next line displays Dylan's attitude to this 'sparkling allegory'; maybe the crossroad isn't the right answer, maybe it's something as mundane as the weather, or, the ostensibly useless 'something like that', which reveals the narrator's reluctance to approaching his grief.

Phillip Larkin had a clearer conception of how the crossroad functioned in his work. In a letter to Anthony Thwaite he claims,

... a poem is the crossroads of my thoughts, my feelings, my imaginings, my wishes and my verbal sense.⁸

The idea that an individual poem can be a meeting for a number of disparate forces is one of the subjects of Julia Tejblum's essay on Shelley. The endings to a number of poems are analysed for how they deal with the new path the poem has put them upon – either as a confident melding which Larkin outlines or the more difficult instability of 'The Triumph of Life'. As Tejblum suggests, in Shelley's endings we rarely find a neat schism, a consolation or a resolution; no poem has the power to articulate a single resolved change, it must, whether through linguistic or formal allusion intersect with a number of other texts and traditions. It is this circuit, rather than crossroad, in and out of texts which Hazel Wilkinson explores in her essay on *Paradise Lost* and encyclopedias. Her essay shows that Milton employed encyclopedic discourse to open up and probe the intersection between biblical truths and errors.

Michael Sayeau's discussion of *Disgrace* focuses on an intersection drawn by Coetzee, between the protagonist's daughter and Wordsworth's Lucy, and shows that because this comparison is so tangled up in literary, colonial, and personal experience, that it functions as a way inside David Lurie. That Lurie is a man out of kilter with his own time, shown in the value he places on European learning and concepts of fairness, are drawn out by Sayeau's reading of Wordsworth's poetry in the context of post-Apartheid South Africa. It is this manner of juxtaposition which provides the most fertile ground in the study of intersections, through literary representations of historical periods. Roberta Klimt offers a reading of one of the most successful forms of this intersection between the past and present, in her piece on the period drama *Mad Men*. Klimt's subtle reading of the crises of office life – its claustrophobia, sexual politics, and fantasies – reveal that *Mad Men* deals with many of the wider political issues of American post-war life which critics have claimed it shirks.

This editorial started on the odd course of defending itself from the vapidness of its own title. As I hope my brief remarks on the complexity and dangers of the intersection suggest, which is born out more thoroughly in the articles and reviews themselves, it wasn't such a bad choice after all. It just leaves me to say that the journal wouldn't have been possible without the design skill of Hazel Wilkinson, to whom I am very grateful.

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⁸ *Selected Letters of Phillip Larkin*, ed. Anthony Thwaite, (London: Faber and Faber, 1992) p.173.