Love in Vain

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Looking around on-line, I came across a recording of the Robert Johnson blues classic "Love in Vain," made by the Rolling Stones in 1995. When I say "looking around," I mean that I looked up the title and went through each recording there, usually abandoning them after a moment or two as unsatisfactory. How unsatisfactory? Well, herein lies the question. "Love in Vain" is one of Johnson's simplest and most plaintive lyrics. There is only one recording of it by him extant – unlike the two or more takes available of other songs – and he nailed it once, cold, simple and stark – without any of the extra lyrical asides ("Oh Willie May") that support his treatment of other lyrics. Such asides in this case appear only at the end of the song, when the lyric is over. He trusts the words to do their work.

I refer to "his treatment" deliberately. The author of a song does not necessarily give it its most effective treatment. Janis Joplin indisputably gave the most memorable rendering so far of Kris Kristofferson's "Me and Bobby McGee" – though he and many other men and women recorded it before and after her. The Byrds famously sold many more records of "Mr. Tambourine Man" than the Midwestern born bard who penned it. A word is like a hammer – whoever throws it furthest, with greatest accuracy, will plant it in the language. But the question remains, what makes Robert Johnson's version superior to nearly all others?

A clue is in an earlier recording made by the Stones, in 1972

and also on-line. Also perhaps in one made in that same era by Rod Stewart. In case of any suggestion that the difference was instrumental rather than one of phrasing, it must be noted that with the exception of Eric Clapton, who can aspire to play the guitar as well as Johnson did, neither the older nor the younger Jagger do, nor does Rod Stewart, and most pertinently to this comparison, the singer was in both these cases supported by the same master instrumentalist, Ronnie Wood (who actually did the playing). So what's the difference? The Jagger version of 1972, like the Rod Stewart version, lacks authority.

What is that?

Larry McMurtry remarks in a review of Garrison Keillor that he himself, like Keillor, comes from "a small town with one traffic light"[1] and that much as he'd like to write about the big wide world, he finds that "my authority as an author diminishes with each step I take away from that one traffic light."

Does that mean "write what you know"? Not exactly. Peter Hall, the first major director of Harold Pinter's plays, remarked that the way Pinter's characters speak is the way Pinter speaks. He also recounts a tale of Pinter taking him for a walk in his old neighbourhood while Hall was preparing to direct "The Homecoming" and walking him into a house which appeared to be occupied by the very living family depicted in the play.

How is this not "write what you know"? Well, it's not, because Pinter wrote equally well about things he knew little about directly. His monologue "One for the Road," for instance, which he performs himself with relish, brings the same pressure of authority to the role of the torturer that he brought to the roles of the family he knew. What is the source of authority? And how can it be extended beyond what is known?

In 1972 Mick Jagger was about the age Robert Johnson was, 27, when he recorded the song. Why does he sound so callow next to Johnson? Jagger in '72 skulks next to the microphone and sings the opening verse:

"I followed her to the station

[1] "Leaving the Lake," *New York Review of Books,* November 3, 2003.

with a *suitcase* in my hand"

laying stress on the word "suitcase," as if it were a violent object, using the word to strut for credibility, a lad boasting among men. There is a toast tradition in African American oral culture – the culture of the street corner, where the heroic talker wins kudos. This is not the register used in this song. Jagger cannot pull it off at 27, the age of the original performer, because he's trying the wrong register, because it's *not his voice*. Much the same can be said of Rod Stewart's version, which is also strutting and also fails to bring the requisite authority to face down this lyric. (As a comparison, in a recording also available on-line, when Sting attempts Bruce Springsteen's "The River" in the presence of its author he starts off singing instinctively in a Geordie (Newcastle) accent: "I come from down in the *valley*" – his own valley – and thereby stakes a claim on the song which is his own, and authentic to his own experience. That done he relaxes into the American accent the lyric is written in. But Sting knows. When establishing his authority, his right to own the song, he reaches into himself, into the ground under his feet, not into the role. The authority lies within *him*. His experience.)

In 1995 Jagger approaches the microphone like a withered lothario, not a pretend gang member. He treats the lyric like a lovely piece of lace and works his hands around the air of the microphone as if caressing a feather, or working the threads. He is, in short, a showman, and an expert one – he is, by now, himself. Not only does he not stress "suitcase" as if the prop made him appear tough (he throws that line away in this version) – but when he gets to the final line and its crucial image, he has the nerve and the self-knowledge to change it.

Johnson sings:

When the train it left the station/with two lights on behind
The blue light was my blues/the red light was my mind.

Jagger sings:

When the train it left the station/with two lights on behind
The blue light was my baby/the red light was my mind."

Does Jagger in 1995 not know the words? Is senility starting to stalk the strut of Jumping Jack Flash? I don't think so. Jagger's authority is in knowing what he is not. He is not a bluesman. He is not in

jail, talking to cons. He is a noted twentieth century playboy, more famous for his marriages, divorces and dalliances than his dance. So he does not commit the pretension of singing "the blue light was my blues." He knows himself and he knows we know. He sings, "the blue light was my baby," and in that, we believe he sings whereof he knows. Is he singing what he knows about? No – he *believes* he knows, the rest does not matter.

The failed attempts at authority are just that – attempts. Self-conscious, insincere – they are about the singer and not the song. Which brings us to Eliot's remark: "Immature poets imitate, mature poets steal."[2] By stealing, the mature artist makes it his own.

How does the singer (or writer) make the song about itself? Ironically, by making it about him. But, crucially, the movement is one of pulling the song in to him, not trying to fill himself out to it. The suit must be cut down, so it does not flap. If Jagger cannot sing of blues, he'll sing of babes, and that will make him comfortable.

What makes for authority in art? Avoidance of artifice? Hardly. Authority is the ability to act in harmony with one's surroundings and without doubting one's ability to get it right. It is knowing who one is and what one can do. If you know that – you can do anything. There isn't anything at all the world of words does not speak – if you listen and are confident of who listens along with you. And if you sing a song without that confidence your love, alas, will be in vain.

[2] "Philip Massinger," *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism.*