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‘The Only Blonde in the World’: Pauline Boty and Dylan’s First London Visit

The Bridge, 2014

John Hughes

Pauline Boty by Michael Seymour, 1962 National Portrait Gallery

When Bob Dylan arrived in London about a week before Christmas 1962, it was Pauline Boty, along with Phillip Saville, who met him off the plane.[1] The link to Boty is an important one and Dylan may even have met her on subsequent visits, and yet she has never figured in books or biographies about Dylan. I first came across a reference to her connection to Dylan in an article by Robin Stummer, in the *Observer* of 28 April 2013, in which he trailed the summer 2013 Wolverhampton Art Gallery retrospective of her work. Stummer intriguingly claims that the young painter had ‘escorted Bob Dylan around

London' during this first, fleeting yet important visit to the snow-bound capital in December to January 1962-63.[2]

Boty was a very significant artist in the burgeoning 60s pop art movement, but was also a sometime actress, dancer, model, and TV presenter, and many other things besides. As Sue Tate wrote:

> Pauline Boty makes an illuminating case study. She was a well- educated, knowing and sophisticated artist who, as a beautiful and sensuous woman, found pleasure in embracing and performing a pop culture identity. She danced on *Ready Steady Go* (a generation-defining pop music TV programme), was an *habituée* of trendy Portobello Road haunts and the satirical club 'The Establishment'. She read Genet, Proust and de Beauvoir and was highly knowledgeable about both New Wave and Hollywood cinema. She was also politically active and highly aware, in a remarkably prescient manner, of issues of sexual politics. After her appearance in *Pop Goes the Easel* she was drawn into acting roles in TV thrillers and on stage: literally performing a mass cultural role she was featured in the popular press as a "starlet" in the mass media.[3]

Boty died, aged twenty-eight, of leukemia on July 1 1966, having refused treatment to safeguard her unborn daughter. In the thirty or so years following her death, many of her vividly expressive paintings, infused with a heady mix of her own effervescence, the insurgent spirit of her times and her bohemian London milieu, languished in a dusty barn on her brother's Kent farm until recovered by the art historian David Alan Mellor ('an extraordinarily moving experience … I cried').[4] Over the last fifteen or so years, though, Boty's important contribution to the British Art scene of the 1960s has been increasingly acknowledged by art historians. Nonetheless, as Stummer described, the whereabouts of several signature canvases are still uncertain, and presumably they remain in the possession of those who bought them.

It is well known that Dylan had been spotted in Tony Pastor's West 4th Street New York Club in late 1962 by Phillip Saville, and it was Saville who as director had succeeded in negotiating with Albert Grossman to bring Dylan over to London to act in

the BBC play, *Madhouse on Castle Street*. Boty and the then-married Saville were lovers at the time of Dylan's visit. They had met at a New Year's Eve ball at the Royal College of Art, where Saville remembered that: 'I saw this startlingly beautiful woman and powered my way through about 15 blokes to talk to her.' Boty was known as the 'Wimbledon Bardot', and the tag well suited her singular combination of rumpled girl-next-door familiarity, early 60s art college bohemianism, heart-flipping beauty, and unabashed sexual assurance. Accounts of her turn on an irresistible, informal vivacity, wholly without misgiving or reserve, that tended to produce breathless admiration among women as well as men. The freest of spirits, she inspired countless anecdotes and seemed to have known everyone (Christopher Logue, Kenneth Tynan, Andy Warhol, Verity Lambert, David Hockney, David Frost, Tariq Ali…), starred in everything (*Alfie*, 'Armchair Theatre', *Maigret*, 'Ready, Steady, Go'…), and done everything (a photo-shot for *Vogue* with David Bailey, a radio interview with *The Beatles* that led George to dub her 'Pauline Botty'…). She features with typical and moving *joie de vivre* in Ken Russell's 1962 *Monitor* film, 'Pop Goes The Easel' (viewable in full on *You Tube*) about four young British pop artists - the others being Peter Blake, Peter Phillips, and Derek Boshier.[5] An oft-repeated remark was that in the early 60s the entire Royal College or Art was in love with Pauline Boty, and Peter Blake made a remark typical of the adoration she provoked: 'her only fault', he memorably said, 'was that she didn't love me back.'[6] Sabine Durrant narrates how Boty's friend Jane Percival 'held a supper party to which Pauline and Philip were invited' (possibly on Dylan's first night according to Tate):

> 'They turned up with some musician in tow,' Percival recalls, 'and Pauline said, "Look, I'm terribly sorry, Jane, we can't come in, we've got to go to a reception, but will you look after this guy for the evening? He's over to do a play for Philip." The play was Evan Jones's *The Madhouse on Castle Street*, which Saville produced for the BBC. The musician was Bob Dylan. He sat in the corner and played "Blowin' in the Wind"'.

In conversation with me, Jane Percival remembered that the gathering at her Blenheim Crescent studio flat that night numbered about seventeen guests, and that Dylan sat and played all evening. Later, he would be put up overnight by another artist, Joanna Carrington, who lived downstairs, but returned the following morning to say goodbye,

and thanks.

Dylan's London visit has inspired some highly detailed (Heylin) and highly evocative (Hajdu) research, but accounts still appear selective, and full of gaps. Heylin tends to concentrate on Dylan's immensely colourful – sometimes productive, sometimes conflictual - encounters with the London folk scene ("What's all this fuckin' shit?" he shouted repeatedly through Nigel Denver's no-longer-deeply-moving rendition of a solo Scottish ballad in the *King & Queen*).[7] Differently, Hajdu highlights Dylan's often obnoxious behavior, as well as his marijuana use (perpetually stoned) and all-night partying and parlaying with Richard Fariña:

> Then more music, alcohol, and pot at singer Jon Shear's flat. "Still more grass," Fariña wrote, "and Dylan & me getting into a Thing of story-telling and everyone laughing hard, almost cackling, falling on the floor and suddenly it was nine o'clock [in the] morning.[8]

Hajdu narrates too the Richard Fariña and Eric von Schmidt recording to which Dylan contributed energetic harmonica and backing vocals as 'Blind Boy Grunt' in the basement of Dobells. And yet, if Boty is passed over in books and pieces about Dylan, he certainly does figure in accounts about Boty, and in ways that make the connection appear an interesting one. According to some accounts, the pair remained friends, and even met up during later visits. (Though Tate remains understandably suspicious of the temptation to mythologize and overblow what may have been a very passing connection, it is also that case that Joyce Kariuki are respectively, two of several who claim that Dylan visited after the marriage of Boty and Clive Goodwin in 1965:

> The couples' flat became a hangout spot for many celebrities like Bob Dylan, John McGrath, Dennis Potter and Kennedy Martins among many others.[9]

> …the hostess of pot- and alcohol-laced parties that featured Bob Dylan and her husband's New Left milieu.[10])

At first, Grossman had Dylan ensconced at *The Mayfair*, before he had to leave after complaints about his guitar playing and his marijuana use, to be rehoused in the downbeat gentility of *The Cumberland* (where Jimi Hendrix would often stay). At some point, probably between the two hotels, he stayed in a spare room at Saville's house,

where he sang for the *au pairs* from the top of the stairs.[11] On another occasion he spent an evening or night at Carthy's Belsize Park flat where the two young musicians, born a few days apart, chopped up a piano for firewood with a Samurai sword. Snow is a recurrent motif in the second part of the visit, since from Boxing Day onwards, the cold gave way to snow and blizzards that led to drifts of six feet in places. Extreme cold in January then left most of the country snow-bound, with icicles a metre long hanging from many roofs, and postmen making their deliveries on skis, before more snow in February.[12]

Purely biographical interest aside, the references of Stummer and others to Boty's meeting Dylan suggested further interesting possibilities, particularly about the genesis of the mysterious song, 'Liverpool Gal', which is about a London visit, and which was possibly written during it, or at least shortly after. The song is a particularly fascinating one. In the first place, it is shrouded in a certain and unusual obscurity. Dylan uncharacteristically made no attempt to record or copyright it, and it remains all but unheard, aside from one recording - at Tony Glover's Minneapolis home in 1963 - which remains in Glover's possession. The lyrics too (available on the internet and reproduced in full at the end of this piece) are somewhat elliptical, even cryptic. However, the song comes into sharp focus when it describes the snowy London of the time, the girl herself,

the house they stayed in, and the parting of the couple. Clinton Heylin remarked on its 'ring of authentic experience' and the 'ineluctable question' raised by it, as to 'whether there really was "a Liverpool gal / who lived in London town," with whom the singer spent the night, only to feel the following morning, "Of her love I know not much"'.[13]

Pauline Boty in costume for Armchair Theatre: 'North City Traffic Straight Ahead' in 1962. Photograph: Fremantle Media Ltd/Rex : taken from Guardian website

Whether Boty, or anyone else, was the Liverpool Gal, the song is an important one for other reasons. Above all, it indisputably owes its genesis to the London visit, with its descriptions of the wintry town. Further, Clinton Heylin claims that it 'appears to have been written during Dylan's last few days in London … or shortly after his return to New York'.[14] Thus it can be directly associated with the decisive shift in Dylan's song-writing over the next year following the London visit. From now on (though he had done it piecemeal before) for about a year, Dylan would model his lyrics and melodies on British and Irish songs, and in this respect at least, as Martin Carthy put it in 1991, 'his time in England was actually crucial to his development'.[15] There are countless cases of this

prevalent practice in the next year up until ‘Restless Farewell’ in October 1963 (based on the Clancy’s Brothers’ version of ‘The Parting Glass’) at the end of the third album. Specifically, a few years ago, I hazarded a connection between ‘Liverpool Gal’ and ‘The Lakes of Pontchartrain’, and this is corroborated by Eyolf Østrem on his website. He claims the song shares the melody (presumably on the basis that Dylan usually takes the melody of a song whose lyrics he is using as a model). Clearly, the two songs are narratively, structurally, and emotionally very close to each other.[16] In both, a tale of migration yields a deeper sense of emotional dislocation. Each depicts a lonely traveller who is taken in by a beautiful girl, whose tenderness and hospitality he remembers, and whose memory he still holds in his mind at the close of the song, though he has now left her behind. This chain of events compounds his sense of displacement and yearning: he starts the song homesick, and ends it unable to forget the girl he has encountered on his travels.

The song’s motifs of snow, travel, and of emotions that belong in the wrong place and time, make it also reminiscent of ‘Girl From the North Country’, and it is one of a number of such songs of emotional dislocation and uncertainty that will become key early love songs in Dylan’s career: songs like ‘Mama, You’ve Been On My Mind’, ‘One Two Many Mornings’, and ‘Don’t Think Twice, It’s Alright’. Certainly, Carthy remembers Dylan having written ‘Girl From the North Country’ on his return to London from visiting Italy in January 1963. Of course, it is based on Carthy’s ‘Scarborough Fair’:

> ‘It was at the Troubadour and he started to play and he had that little guitar thing that I play in ‘Scarborough Fair’. He was singing the song and he went into this figure and he just burst out laughing … and he wouldn’t do the rest of it. He went all red.’ (Heylin, *Revolution in the Air*, 119).

On New Year’s Eve at the *King and Queen*, Carthy registered another eloquent (if obscure) moment of discomfort (or self-reproach?) on Dylan’s part (as if he were suddenly brought up short to remember an ‘auld acquaintance’):

> At midnight they joined the crowd in song, although Dylan stopped singing after the

> opening bars, " 'Should auld acquaintance be forgot,'" he sang, " 'and never brought to mind…' " Carthy saw Dylan shrink for a moment; his eyes receded, as if something had just been brought to mind, and he turned away. Carthy wondered if his new acquaintance might be thinking of old ones he had forgotten, but Carthy would never ask him. (Hajdu, *Positively 4th Street*, 127)

Turning to 'Liverpool Gal' itself, the singer remembers coming to London town as a 'stranger', and meeting the 'London gal so fair' by the Thames with 'the wind blowing through my hair'. Though the writing is often formulaic and elliptical, it becomes rapt and detailed whenever describing the girl:

Lyrics removed for copyright reasons, see item 23 in the references below.

The iterations of 'Her eyes … her hair … Her face' mimic a memory still consumed by the expansive ways that her beauty, gentleness and kindness had impressed themselves on him, eclipsing memories and loyalties of home. The song goes on to describe how they 'lay round on a worn-out rug', while the room was so cold, talking 'for hours by the inside fire'. Bonded by youth, they mused on this world 'so old', as the 'night passed on with the drizzling rain'. He is resistant, though, to her desire to change him in some one obscure way. The next day, in a now snowy London, he realizes that he has to go:

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Lyrics removed for copyright reasons, see item 23 in the references below.

The lovely last two lines (‘But she smiled a smile I’d never seen / To say she understood’) are the heart of the song, and suggest a strange, singular kind of comprehending acceptance on the girl’s part. Her words are auguries perhaps of changing times, since her acknowledgment of his freedom appears inseparable from her assertion of her own. Their intimacy is real but transitory, yielding to a new kind of personal dislocation: though he will leave her and London behind, her memory will keep revisiting him:

Lyrics removed for copyright reasons, see item 23 in the references below.

Taken as a whole, for most people the song probably suggests a fleeting liaison, so that its obscurities can be taken as tactful reticence, or as the mark of a lingering, unresolved emotional investment. However, one might read it as narrating a youthful encounter in which their loyalty to others - sexual and emotional – becomes entangled or tested by a real intimacy and affinity, but without being finally broken (‘All through our sweet conversation’…). Equally, it is also possible, of course, that Boty or some other British girl merely triggered a youthful romantic fantasy that took ‘The Lakes of Pontchartrain’
as a template.

Linking the song to what we know, though, what connection might be made between Boty and the ‘Liverpool Gal’? (Even if we immediately add the proviso about how notoriously resistant Dylan’s works are to this kind of biographical mapping: *“‘Sara’ or ‘Ballad in Plain D’ are the only Dylan songs with clearly identifiable, real-*

life referents." Discuss…) To begin with, it is neither here nor there that Boty did not come from the north country, or from Liverpool since 'Liverpool' can be taken as misdirection, and/or as generic early 60s code for all the irresistible forces of modernity and talent that Dylan might have associated with the girl in the song, or with Boty herself (who we see twisting away with both *élan* and a feather boa in Russell's film). Further, the narrative, as I have suggested, is marked by a combination of deftness, exactitude and opacity that give it an air of real inwardness, and vivid yet unresolved experience. Again, brief and bitty as is the portrait of the girl, there is much in the depiction of her independent-mindedness, modernity, refinement, and beauty to suggest strongly that Boty might have been the model for this 'London gal' (as she is first called). Words like 'gentle', 'kind' and 'sweet', suggest a *portrait* of a very personal kind, involving a powerful response and intimate connection.

And at this point, too, one inevitably speculates. Perhaps the room at the top of the stairs was based on Boty's actual room? So perhaps the 'inside fire' is her paraffin cooker or free-standing paraffin room-heater? And perhaps the 'old rug' is the patterned wool blanket on her bed? And perhaps they 'lay' on the rug because Boty's room was small and had no armchairs? And perhaps the 'window' he looks through is her huge sash window? Each of these things figures in the single studio-cum- bed-sit - with the big iron bedstead, and bare floorboards - that she occupies in the 1962 *Monitor* film, and that features in many photographs, such as the eight sheets of prints taken by John Ashton in what seems to have been the summer of 1962.[17] And perhaps the drizzling rain, giving away to night-time snow, identifies the song with the overnight Boxing Day blizzard? Finally, a possible clincher (if trustworthy) is that several accounts identify Dylan as having actually stayed with Boty during the trip. Bill Smith writes that she let Dylan 'stay at her flat',[18] while a text accompanying the Wolverhampton retrospective asserts that 'it was Boty who put him up' for some of the time,[19] while another claims that he stayed at 'Pauline's flat for four days'.[20] One reflects too on Phillip Saville's intriguing remark that Dylan 'spent a lot of time in art galleries' on the trip (a comment which can also leave one joining the dots somewhat...)[21]

Turning from London, one notes also the physical and personal comparisons also between Boty and another pulchritudinous female artist with back-combed, leonine hair, and impeccable bohemian and radical credentials. Suze Rotolo had recently sailed back

to New York in December after her stay in Italy (ironically enough they crossed, with Dylan's flying to England, and then on to Italy at the same time). Nonetheless, it might also be noted that 'Liverpool Gal' did not surface until Dylan was away from New York, in May 1963, and on a visit to Minneapolis. At this point the lines of speculation that the song was too autobiographical to acknowledge yet too personal to forget, begin to converge again: one wonders if perhaps this time away from New York was the only time the song could surface, since he could avoid the inevitable questions on Suze's part that the song would have raised?

Whatever the truth about the speculative connection to Boty, one can note the moving affinities between these two very charismatic people, at the beginning of this decade where their youth and talent appear inextricable from huge forces of cultural and ethical renewal. So it is poignant that the song, like Boty's own works, should have remained obscure for so long (and still all but unheard). Like Dylan himself, Boty appears as someone who seemed to pass through the 60s as if herself radiating and embodying forces of change, and somehow immune to all the normative paraphernalia and proscriptions of the time. There is a dream sequence in the *Monitor* film where she is chased down an endlessly circling corridor by repressive, quasi-robotic, German-speaking figures, one in a wheel-chair and dark glasses. They embody Kafkaesque forces of denial, and the sequence can appear an epitome of her attitude, as well as close to the conflicts of murderous oppression and forward-stepping autonomy that are figured in Dylan's early 60s work.

'Colour Her Gone' 1962 Wolverhampton Art Gallery

What do the works give us of Boty herself? The paintings and collages are of their

time, but her vivid air of utterly unapologetic, humorous, self-affirmation still gusts through them. This is an assurance that does not so much contest restrictive and normative masculine clichés about women, as simply go past them, consigning them to irrelevance. This is evident in two paintings from 1962 and 1963 that characteristically convey powerfully intimate images of female pleasure and sensuality, while contesting the restrictive sterility and norms of the culture. In 'Colour Her Gone', a 1962 painting of Marilyn Monroe, bought in time for the Wolverhampton exhibition, Monroe is depicted in the middle third of the canvas. Her expression is rapt and exuberant, and though her eyes are half closed her gaze takes in the viewer who is party to her pleasure. Above her head several gorgeous roses bloom. The impression of physical joy and beauty is given a temporal dynamism by the triptych altar-piece lay-out. However, the worshipful, other-worldly iconography of religious art is displaced by the vibrantly coloured panels of deep green and waved pink that come before and after the central image, so that the whole painting conveys the vitality that inheres in the rhythmic intensity of this ecstatic moment.

'The Only Blonde in the World' 1963 Liverpool Tate

Perhaps unsurprisingly, as Tate points out, 'Boty herself deeply identified with Monroe', and she was eloquent too in a 1963 radio broadcast about the way in stars serve as a repository for 'our fears, hopes, frustrations and dreams'. In what is a mini-manifesto for an important aspect of her own art, Boty claims that 'we can pin' such fears and hopes 'on a star who shows them to millions, and if we can do that we're no longer alone'.[22] Another painting associated with Monroe, 'The Only Blonde in the

World', painted in 1963, similarly refuses to have any truck with morbidity over her death, or to produce any kind of composed artistic effigy or icon of the star. Instead, it represents her with a jubilant sense of energy, beauty, and power. The canvas is radiant with a pulsating life, colour and movement that passes out of it and sweeps up the viewer. This is a painting that affirms the singularity of this moment in life, where the woman before you, if but for a brief time, is indeed 'the only blonde in the world'. The painting was bought by Tate Liverpool in 1999.

'Liverpool Gal'

Lyrics removed for copyright reasons, see item 23 in the references below.

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[1] 'Phillip and Pauline picked Dylan up from London Airport and he stayed at Pauline's flat for four days'. 'Pauline Boty, the Anti-Uglies and Bowater House in Knightsbridge': http://www.nickelinthemachine.com/2013/02/pauline-boty-the-anti-uglies-and-bowater-house-in-knightsbridge-2/

[2] Robin Stummer, 'Mystery of Missing Art of Pauline Boty', *Guardian* 27 April 2013. http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2013/apr/27/pauline-boty-hunt-lost-art

[3] Sue Tate, "Forward via a Female Past": Pauline Boty and the Historiographic Promise of The Woman Pop Artist, in *Feminism Reframed*, ed. Alexandra M. Kokoli (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 182-83.

[4] Stummer. http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2013/apr/27/pauline-boty-hunt-lost-art

[5] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tbVTEW7wS8

[6] Sabine Durrant, 'The Darling of Her Generation', *Independent*, March 7 1993.

http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/the-darling-of-her-generation-pauline-boty-was-the-heartbreaker-of-the-sixties-art-scene-talented-and-outspoken-she-was-loved-by-countless-men-including-the-painter-peter-blake-with-a-revival-of-interest-in-her-paintings-they-are-growing-mistyeyed-again-1496166.html

[7] Clinton Heylin, *Dylan: Behind the Shades* (London: Viking, 1991), 63.

[8] David Hadju, *Positively 4th Street* (London: Bloomsbury 2001), 135.

[9] Joyce Keriuki, 'Biography: Pauline Boty', Helium. http://www.helium.com/items/2397408-biography-pauline-boty. See also: http://www.missomnimedia.com/2010/12/art-herstory-pauline-boty/

[10] Kalliopi Minioudaki, 'Pop's Ladies and Bad Girls: Axell, Pauline Boty and Rosalyn Drexler', *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 30, 3 (2007), 413.

[11] Heylin dates this stay at Saville's as taking place during 20-22 December, but also adds a question mark (Heylin, *Stolen Moments*, 36)

[12] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winter_of_1962–63_in_the_United_Kingdom

[13] Clinton Heylin, *Revolution in the Air* (London: Constable, 2009), 143.

[14] Clinton Heylin, *A Life in Stolen Moments* (London: Schirmer, 1995), 39.

[15] Carthy, *The Telegraph*, 1992, p. 96. I have a much more developed account of this English connection in my recent book, *Invisible Now* (Ashgate, 2013).

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[16] They are also close to 'Lily of the West', which under the title 'Flora' would in time serve as the B-side to Peter, Paul and Mary's 'Blowin' in the Wind' in 1963.

[17] See John Ashton's photographs and contact sheets, at Colin Robinson's Pauline Boty gallery: http://www.colinrobinson.com/BotyContacts72.pdf

[18] Bill Smith, 'The Only Blonde in the World', *Latest Art*, Autumn 2006, 10.

[19] http://www.artfund.org/what-to-see/exhibitions/2013/06/01/pauline-boty-pop-artist-and-woman-exhibition

[20] http://www.nickelinthemachine.com/2013/02/pauline-boty-the-anti-uglies-and-bowater-house-in-knightsbridge-2/

[21] Robert Chalmers, Icon: Bob Dylan, GQ (May 2011): http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/comment/articles/2011-05/3/gq-comment-bob-dylan-icon-robert-chalmers/page/4

[22] 'The Public Ear', broadcast 17 November 1963 (unpublished transcript). Cited by Tate,

[23] http://dylanchords.info/00_misc/liverpool_gal.htm