

Bob Dylan: Mystery and Politics

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A few weeks ago I presented a paper at a four-day international conference on Dylan, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where a Bob Dylan Center is being built to house the Dylan archives, and where an Institute for Bob Dylan Studies has been established at the University of Tulsa. There were over 130 presenters at the conference, among about 500 registrees from a dozen countries—the maximum that could be accommodated. One thing the event made clear that Dylan scholarship is not going to run out of ideas soon, if ever, in analyzing his 600 or so songs. The bizarre thing about all this scholarship is, of course, that Dylan works in the field of popular music. A folksinger and rock star wins the Nobel Prize for Literature: it's a unique case. The challenge for a reflective interpreter is to take Dylan's best work seriously, as a body of art worth analysis, without becoming pretentious, or reading into it what isn't there—or forgetting that its meaning is conveyed essentially in performance, through the immediacy, musicality, and phrasing of *song*. Which makes discursive analysis of it slightly ridiculous, as Dylan has often pointed out. But, nevertheless, not worthless.

Despite the sprawling variety of Dylan's half-century of output, there are some consistent through-lines from the early songs to the late: themes like injustice; human suffering and frailty; the importance of personal freedom; the dangers of corruption; the inevitability of change; mortality; final judgment; it's a long list. Recently I've thinking about Dylan's lifelong interest in things mysterious—the attention his songs pay to the uncanny, the impenetrable, and the feeling of being caught up in a story whose meaning the singer can glimpse but can't fully

understand. As I see it, this theme is not unconnected with the character of the politics in Dylan's early work.

Dylan burst into public view as a writer of so-called protest songs, after having absorbed the spirit of the folk song world and the inspiration and mannerisms of Woody Guthrie. The leftist folk song world based in New York City embraced him, and he it—and the topical songs that poured out of him, including those appearing on his second and third albums, recorded when he was 21 and 22, led that community to enthrone him as “their” most gifted artistic spokesperson. He soon came to dislike that role and then abandon it; but those songs were so well-crafted and biting, written with such commitment, and sung with such intelligence and empathy, that his image as a protest singer remains indelible. The songs targeted, among other things, racism, poverty, unthinking militaristic patriotism, the threat of nuclear war, shameful judicial rulings, war profiteering, and oppressions of class and state power.

A number of characteristics raise these songs from the status of topical broadsides to that of solid art. Beyond Dylan's superior skills in poetic technique, and of fitting verse to melody, the songs have a “vitality of concreteness” (Leavis) in their observational precision, their emotional imagination, and their telling peculiarities of phrasing and accentuation, all grounded in Dylan's preternatural capacity for empathy. Listening to these songs, the political realities feel as real as a cut on your hand: institutionalized racism in “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll”; grinding, self-destructive poverty in “The Ballad of Hollis Brown”; helpless victims of global market economics in “North Country Blues.” Animating the songs is anger at injustice, cruelty, greed at the expense of others, and a furious desire to pay witness to the victims. Notably absent from the songs, though, are solutions. Outrage and sorrow don't lead Dylan to describe how political problems are going to be resolved, beyond insisting that the moral debts of

perpetrators will have to some day be paid. The generational wheels revolve, and one day the ship will come in—but meanwhile, injustice and exploitation appear brutally systemic, woven into the fabric of social institutions.

In “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” from his third album, Dylan responds to the murder of Civil Rights leader Medgar Evers. Written just a few weeks after the murder, Dylan’s song, with subtlety and daring, portrays the killer as a victim of social forces beyond his imagining:

The deputy sheriffs, the soldiers, the governors get paid
And the marshals and cops get the same
But the poor white man’s
Used in the hands
Of them all like a tool
He’s taught in his school
From the start by the rule
That the laws are with him
To protect his white skin
To keep up his hate
So he never thinks straight
’Bout the shape that he’s in
But it ain’t him to blame
He’s only a pawn in their game

Who or what is going to eliminate this “game” of class, wealth, and power, in which entrenched privilege serves its own interests by manipulating the masses? The song offers no hint of an answer. The young Dylan fully embraced the principles and values of the political left, and admired the courage of its front-line activists, but he was soon uncomfortable with its refusal to accept human complexities and with its self-righteousness. Before long he concluded that the political community he had adopted was, like the political culture it opposed, governed by ideologists—that is, by people with unrealistic goals and promises, expressed dictatorially. At the end of 1963, still only 22 years old, he inebriatedly told the well-heeled liberals at the annual Bill of Rights dinner held by the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, who had awarded him

its annual Tom Paine Award for his contribution to the movement, “there’s no black and white, left and right to me anymore.”¹ He meant he was becoming disillusioned with politics altogether.

But without the guiding compass of a political commitment, how would he and his songs take their moral bearings? In a poem published along with his third album, he writes: “there is no right wing / or left wing . . . / there is only up wing / an’ down wing.”² His songs from then on would make clear what Dylan meant by “up wing”: honesty; compassion; and commitment to the value of his own and anyone else’s struggle for personal freedom and authentic creativity.

Dylan’s disillusionment with politics had another source too. He was passionately moral; but he happened to be one of those (like Kierkegaard or Dostoevsky, to put it in a philosophical frame) for whom moral passion has no more than ephemeral meaning unless there is, somehow, in some mysterious way, a genuine *ultimate* moral resolution—a final balance of justice, beyond anything attainable in worldly affairs. How else will evildoing be truly paid, and the victims of injustice find their mercy? Political steps toward social justice and peace are of indisputable value; but they cannot be the last moral word. If they *were* the last word, then the nothingness inherent in the perishability of physical things would triumph; and Dylan has never been a nihilist.

So from the beginning his songs contain imagery of a judgment beyond human comprehension. A typical protest song of the folk revival era might have announced, “The answer, my friend, is right around the bend.” For Dylan, the answer as to when peace and justice will come is famously “blowin’ in the wind”: you might feel it, but you can’t grab it. In his first major composition, “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall,” written at age 21 and released on Dylan’s second album, this promise is shaped as an apocalyptic prediction. The “hard rain” that *must*

¹ Quoted in Mike Marqusee, *Chimes of Freedom: The Politics of Bob Dylan’s Art* (New York: The New Press, 2003), 88.

² Bob Dylan, “11 Outlined Epitaphs,” liner notes and insert with *The Times They Are A-Changin’* (1964).

come—because of pain and cruelty, social injustice, destroyed hopes, and “guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children”— but also because of the love and beauty that give these their measure—is mysterious. “Hard rain” is no more an allegorical reference to revolution or nuclear fallout than to a literal deluge: it is a symbol. Who knows the what and when of that retributive event?

For his fourth album, recorded just after he turned 23, Dylan recorded a song, “My Back Pages,” explicitly distancing himself from the “finger-pointing songs” on his previous two albums that had so endeared him to the political left. Its lyrics infuriated many who had seen him as a champion. Linking his own maturing to disillusionment with judgments that too easily divide the moral world into obvious friends and enemies, and to a recovery of the openness and spontaneities of youth, Dylan sang a recantation of his earlier embrace of political certainties:

In a soldier’s stance, I aimed my hand at the mongrel dogs who teach
Fearing not I’d become my enemy in the instant that I preach . . .

Half-wracked prejudice leaped forth, “Rip down all hate,” I screamed
Lies that life is black and white spoke from my skull. I dreamed
Romantic facts of musketeers foundationed deep somehow
Ah, but I was so much older then, I’m younger than that now

This is not, though, a recantation of sympathy for those who suffer. The same album features “Chimes of Freedom,” which distills the spirit of all Dylan’s earlier protest songs into a declaration of solidarity with victims of every kind, and does so with a new level of poetic craft. The premise of the song is Dylan and a lover seeking shelter from a night storm in the doorway of a cathedral. The situation becomes the occasion of an epiphany, in which lightning and thunder become church bells tolling out a promise of redemptive freedom for every sufferer, with each verse presenting a litany of various types of oppressed, alienated, hurt, and damaged souls. Verse four:

In the wild cathedral evening the rain unraveled tales
For the disrobed faceless forms of no position
Tolling for the tongues with no place to bring their thoughts
All down in taken-for-granted situations
Tolling for the deaf and blind, tolling for the mute
For the mistreated mateless mother, the mistitled prostitute
For the misdemeanor outlaw, chained and cheated by pursuit
And we gazed upon the chimes of freedom flashing

So it continues, until the song becomes a witness to all of suffering humankind. But what is the freedom that the chimes promise? What *kind* of freedom redeems not only the “refugees on their . . . road of flight,” the “underdog soldiers in the night,” and the “aching ones whose wounds cannot be nursed,” but also the “gentle” and the “kind,” the “lonesome-hearted lovers with too personal a tale,” the “rebel,” and even the “rake”? It can only be a freedom from all suffering. But that means freedom from the toils and pain of the human condition itself. This is some kind of ultimate, not merely political, deliverance—one that Dylan sings about, with intense conviction, as a corollary, or ballast, to the facts of human pain and yearning. In “My Back Pages” and “Chimes of Freedom” together, Dylan declares that his devotion will be to each individual in his or her struggle for dignity, and not to movements or institutions. “I’m not an activist,” he said some years later. “I’m not politically inclined. I’m for people, people who are suffering . . .”³

Politics doesn’t just disappear from Dylan’s work after his fourth album. He returns to it, sometimes head-on and sometimes glancingly. Songs like “George Jackson” from 1971, “Hurricane” from 1975, “Union Sundown” from 1983, and “Workingman’s Blues #2” from 2006 are political songs. All of them, though, remain attempts to speak for what Dylan sees as the underdog, whatever the presumptive politics. And in the end, it is the mystery of ultimate moral redemption that most intrigues him: the mystery of history.

³ Quoted in Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home: the Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1986), 448. (From an interview of November 10, 1975, for *People* magazine.)

Then again, there are a lot of other kinds of mystery, and Dylan's songs show he is attracted to all of them.

There's mystery a-plenty in the songs of his fifth, sixth, and seventh albums, the great triad that appeared in 1965-66 and changed what popular music could be: *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, and *Blonde on Blonde*. But *these* incomprehensibilities are all mysteries of the labyrinth of inwardness and of the social absurdities and freakish amusements of modern urban life in the plenitude of postwar America, evoked using techniques of modernism that Dylan absorbed from Symbolist and Beat poets, Surrealist artists, avant-garde films, and other sources: fragmented imagery replacing narrative logic; prolific allusion; juxtapositions of highbrow and lowbrow language; collages of historical and literary references; and intentional obscurity. The turn away from political causes on these albums is complete. Not that Dylan abandons his attacks on social and political hypocrisy, abuses of authority, and the stifling oppressions of social expectation and conformism. There is a great deal of social criticism on the first two of these albums, in songs famous for their scathing wit and literary inventiveness ("It's Alright, Ma," "Desolation Row," "Gates of Eden," "Ballad of a Thin Man," "Maggie's Farm," "Subterranean Homesick Blues," and others). But here the attacks and put-downs always serve the struggle to keep the self free and open and perceptive. And one fact the open self perceives is that there is more going on than can be understood, and that the life of true imagination, always in danger of defending itself against unknowns by becoming lifeless, requires continual acceptance of the paradoxical and the insoluble. For which, Dylan shows, a sense of humor is indispensable.

The album *Highway 61 Revisited* is constantly both funny and sinister, carnivalesque and shadowy with foreboding, where the bemused singer is immersed in an all-at-once history.

The geometry of innocent flesh on the bone
Causes Galileo's math book to get thrown
At Delilah, who's sitting worthlessly alone
But the tears on her cheeks are from laughter

Oh God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son"
Abe says, "Man you must be puttin' me on" . . .
Well Abe says, "Where you want this killin' done?"
God says, "Out on Highway 61"

This is Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* rewritten by the Marx Brothers. The follow-up, *Blonde on Blonde*, takes the circus to the middle of the night and stays there. Even social critique has by now mostly disappeared in a prolonged journey into inwardness, into intricate adventures of desire and longing.

One of the most striking characteristics of the songs on these three albums, though, is that for all their avant-garde imagery and their intimacy, they feel mythic. They fascinated a huge number of listeners, far more than the disgruntled folkies for whom Dylan's abandonment of topical songwriting was an act of political betrayal. These were the albums that raised Dylan to the status of "voice of a generation." Why?

One reason, among many, is that Dylan's modernist artistic inventiveness—drawing from increasingly wide literary reading, along with deep acquaintance with songs of all kinds, including not only folk songs, but early blues, country music, rock 'n' roll, mountain music, white and black gospel music, union songs, Tex-Mex borderlands music, hokum, and more—served a desire to convey, with shocking emotional honesty, what it felt like to live in that culture at that time. Another reason, though—the one that I want to dwell on—is that Dylan infuses these songs with a certain existential grandeur by somehow intimating that the singer is involved in stories whose uncertainties are not hints of meaninglessness, but surpluses of

meaning that elude insight. Among hidden social interests, impenetrable motives, absurd situations, and abrupt changes of fortune, the self's journey of perpetually "being born," Dylan suggests, has nobility and purpose. There is, in fact, a continuity between the songs of the protest period and the revolutionary electric songs: they all situate the listener in both an intensely perceived world and in an ambience that feels timeless, or mythic.

What makes a work of art or a ritual feel timeless, always immediately relevant to those in its spell—think of someone watching *Hamlet* for the tenth time, or participating in a religious ceremony—is its being charged with the experience of communicating, mediating in some way, a supervening meaning that encompasses and ultimately defines us, a surplus of significance and momentousness that can only be a mystery to us, and more mysterious the more we face it authentically. That Dylan wanted to imbue his best songs with a mythic flavor is something he was always clear about. And there are two things especially that enabled him to accomplish this.

One was his deep familiarity with old folk songs of every kind, the weird love tales, the adventures with a hint of the supernatural, with their suggestions of the uncanny and edgeless. What had first attracted Dylan to this "traditional music," in his telling, was that—as he put it—"the main body of it is just based on myth and the Bible and plague and famine and all kinds of things like that which are nothing but mystery and you can see it in all the songs."⁴ "All these songs about roses growing out of people's brains and lovers who are really geese and swans that turn into angels . . . I mean, you'd think that the traditional music people could gather from their songs that mystery [is] a fact, a traditional fact."⁵ When Dylan shaped his own folk music he did so with these traits in mind; and when his songs later erupted into expressionist visions of

⁴ Quoted in Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 30.

⁵ Jonathan Cott, ed., *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews* (New York: Wenner Books, 2006), 98. (Interview with Nat Hentoff, *Playboy*, 1966).

modernist consciousness they were, as Sean Wilentz says, “every bit as mythic and mysterious as the old traditional music.”⁶ That’s why Dylan said of his music of 1965-66—an astonishing comment—“I have to think of all this as traditional music.”⁷ He meant that the songs were as weird as the old ballads, blues, and hymns in their allusive richness, and as wild in their evoking of wonder and mystery.

And a second means by which Dylan’s songs gain a flavor of the mythic is through his recurrent use of imagery of disaster and apocalypse and redemption, of living on Desolation Row and longing for Eden, of feeling lost and judged, and imagining sanctuary.

Given these facts, it’s not so surprising that the album that followed *Blonde on Blonde*, after a year and a half during which Dylan grounded himself in raising a young family, studiously re-visiting ancient songs, and inventing new, weird short fables that echoed them, was a principally acoustic set of stripped-down parables and ballads, intentionally mythlike and drenched in biblical allusions. The most famous of these is “All Along the Watchtower,” Dylan’s most haunting apocalyptic fable.

For another four and a half decades of recording, up through 2012’s *Tempest*, images of a mystery of judgment inflect Dylan’s lyrics. For three years starting in 1979, during Dylan’s so-called “born-again Christian phase,” allusive suggestiveness is replaced by a literalist, scripture-based gospel-song preaching. Drove of Dylan admirers fled. But after that come 40 more years of recordings, and in all that prolific time, through the troughs and the heights, when Dylan’s eschatological sense comes to the fore it finds expression in open-ended symbolism: in multi-layered imagery of diffuse narratives that blur at the edges, or in dream scenarios, or in lightning visions, always suffused with a mood of mystery and inevitability. “False-hearted judges dying

⁶ Sean Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 334.

⁷ Quoted in Marcus, *Invisible Republic*, 113.

in the webs that they spin / Only a matter of time 'til night comes stepping in.” [“Jokerman”].
“Seen the arrow on the doorpost / Saying this land is condemned / All the way from New
Orleans / To Jerusalem.” [“Blind Willie McTell”]. “I see pieces of men marching, trying to take
Heaven by force / I can see the unknown rider, I can see the pale white horse.” [“Angelina”]. “As
I walked out in the mystic garden / On a hot summer day, hot summer lawn / Excuse me, ma’am,
I beg your pardon / There’s no one here, the gardener is gone.” [“Ain’t Talkin’”].

These last sorts of lyrics appear in songs of a specific kind that Dylan has worked at since *Blood On the Tracks* in 1974. Beginning then, Dylan’s ambition at times turned to crafting songs that intentionally and carefully—rather than spontaneously and intuitively, as his mid-1960s albums—have to do, as he put it, “with the break-up of time,”⁸ or have the “quality of no-time,”⁹ where a song’s imagery and diction and narrative, or quasi-narrative, locate the singer in multiple eras at once: perhaps the western frontier *and* the modern city; biblical times *and* the present; the American Civil War *and* our own times—songs like “Isis,” “Blind Willie McTell,” “Shelter From the Storm,” “Changing of the Guards,” “Jokerman,” “Ain’t Talkin’,” and many others. About these deliberate “songs as myth” Dylan once said: “You’ve got yesterday, today, and tomorrow all in the same room, and there’s very little that you can’t imagine happening.”¹⁰ Whether or not one enjoys these mythlike songs of his later career depends most, I think, on whether one feels as Dylan does that there is a dimension of meaning that encompasses and takes up into itself, somehow, the entire history of human struggle, choices for good and evil, and yearning for redemption.

⁸ Quoted in Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*, 136.

⁹ Cott, ed. *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*, 261 (Interview with Jonathan Cott, Rolling Stone, November 16, 1978).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 260.

Where is the political in Dylan's last 50 years of songwriting, then? It's probably fair to say that, mostly, he looks askance at political institutions, movements, and causes. When, on occasion, he has had a political comment to make, in song or interview, it has sometimes been of a patriotic or nationalistic character. But only one of Dylan's eyes is on the world; the other is always on a timeless or sacred "something more" that he has always felt to be real. The key word here is "felt." Dylan is very intelligent, but he has no interest at all in systematic explanation. He's no more a political philosopher than he is a chemist. When he was still only 22 years old, he was being told, "You are the most important artistic voice of your generation speaking for the Civil Rights Movement, and against war and social injustice. You have a *responsibility* to use your talent for these causes, and to keep thinking about them." By the time he was 23, Dylan was already saying: "Don't tell me what my responsibility is. I'm an artist. My responsibility is to write songs that express what I *feel*. I don't work for you, I don't think for you, and I don't belong to anybody."