

The Ballad of Dylan and Bob by Carolyn Sumner

A striking feature of Bob Dylan's art, and one which suggests the possibility of analysis, is the continuity over the years of certain imagery in his lyrics. His songs grow out of a few consistently held concerns which have gathered about them clusters of repeated images. These images, and the themes that grow from them, emerge primarily from the material of his own life, most dramatically from his poor-little-rich-boy position as the most brilliant superstar of the generation that created the troubled magnitude.

Astronomy is not the only dark stage on which the supernova is a death trip. The most far-reaching of Bob Dylan's artistic concerns, therefore, has been the conflict between security and freedom, and the search for a saving balance in which these do not become mutually and suicidally exclusive. The conflict is also crucial to Dylan because of the obvious contradiction between his fragile personality and his demand for a prophetic art. The personality cries for safety, while the art insists on risking everything. Dylan has characteristically found himself caught in a troublesome metamorphosis of freedom into security. Much of the frequently noted impulse to create new and surprising directions in his music has been an attempt at recovering freedom from his own artistic pretensions to it.

The stuff of personal freedom has been endlessly elusive to him, humbling him continually, and reducing him relentlessly to the position of a seeker. He has had it in his hands at times, but only momentarily, the taste more tantalising than fulfilling, the artist able to form an image of freedom just as he loses the substance. Dylan has watched yesterday's pain turn in his art to today's paranoia, and has seen his own heroism become a cruel defense. A cry of pain within six months became a point, which became a position, which became an empire in whose temples the author himself was only "Tom Thumb." He could not find an exodus from the Egypt he had created with the bricks and mortar of his own genius. The function of his art became eventually to devise ways to uncreate itself, to explode and escape its own stolid achievements. The longer Dylan dealt with this dilemma, the more he became convinced that the way to approach freedom was to abandon his effort to shape or understand it as an abstract quality, an ideal, and seek instead to catch its shadows where it revealed

itself as interacting forces in his own personality. Personal freedom, therefore, as it became a more subtly understood quality in Dylan's art, appeared in dialogue and relationship, as the harmony of meaning among the voices of many needs.(1)

The simplest breakdown of personal freedom in Bob Dylan's lyrics is a dualism. Dylan once told an interviewer that he wanted to be invisible as well as famous,(2) and complained to another that the public schools taught security but not obscurity.(3) This basic dualism, which he apparently felt strongly before he fully articulated or understood its significance, appeared in his early poetry as wind or water, rising, blowing, or beating against mountain and stone. In another popular version it was the highway, sinuous and supple, winding around every obstacle set before it; or the motorcycle which carried Bob Dylan on that highway beyond the repressive past. At the time he wrote the early lyrics, Dylan could not have foreseen the degree to which he would be tempted to the same stifling securities he rebuked. Attacked as he was by critic and fanatic alike, by his followers and his own fears, he eventually sought solace for the same wounds that had plagued his civilisation throughout the post-World War II era: paranoia, anxiety, doubt, insecurity. He had the disease, but with one difference. He hoped freedom would cure it.

The achievement of freedom, however, was not so simple as it at first seemed. Finding an exit, running and shouting back to the highway, hopping a motorcycle or a freight train, he could seem to escape on his own metaphors. But the tension between these two forces grew greater and more complex as his success and his fears grew. The exits themselves were to be corrupted, eventually even the exit of truth. The tension between these two forces soon emerged as the primary rhythm of his art. Self-expression struggling with self-protection came to generate the basic energy of his music. Dylan once told his biographer, Anthony Scaduto, that he thought of himself as a true Gemini, "blowing hot and cold." His vision of himself has always been double, and his language and imagery follow suit. Prophecy and protection form the double helix of his art.

Dylan abandoned the vehicular metaphors of escape soon after he invented them. The highway exits were too easy, too obvious. They were almost literal, and Dylan, like all young artists, soon learned that there was

no literal exit from slavery. The dualism, however, continued to haunt him, as did the growing awareness that the struggle was not only social but personal. The conviction that the tension was, in fact, primarily his own and would follow him onto any highway led Dylan to shift the emphasis of his imagery toward character. By the time of *Blonde on Blonde*, when his personal struggle was most intense, he could fill a double album with conversations and metaphors of character.

The basis for this Gemini imagery, this new dualism, was the yin/yang relationship of male and female. Over the years clusters of images have grown up around the male and female Bob Dylan. The raw material for the contrast may have come from the folk song "The Gypsy Davy." In this song a Spanish gypsy passing through town seduces with his music the sensitive young wife of a powerful and wealthy villager. The wronged husband pursues the two and comes upon them in the gypsy's camp. He tries to shame his wife with the responsibilities she had abandoned, and almost succeeds. But she has already put on the gypsy's gloves of Spanish leather, and the act becomes a symbol to the frustrated male that he has lost her forever to the gypsy's freedom. In that song, Bob Dylan must have seen himself looking at the separated parts of his own soul. Around the basic plot of "The Gypsy Davy" he built a cluster of images to describe the nature of his own struggle to be free.

The free soul in Dylan is always female and almost always associated with Spain or something Spanish. She is frequently in flight from a male (often Dylan himself), but if not pursued, she is dancing, usually a Spanish dance. She is also associated with flowers and jewelry, those contributions of human art and of nature that celebrate freedom. Occasionally she is associated with real women in Dylan's life, and is even named in the songs and poems directly (as Sue in "Eleven Outlined Epitaphs," or Johanna in "Visions of Johanna") or indirectly (as "She wears an Egyptian ring" in "She Belongs to Me"). She is sometimes seen in the presence of a moon and/or serene body of water. The latter are old symbols for peace and wholeness, the depth of the tranquil pool reflecting the perfect roundness of the moon. Since in Bob Dylan's lyrics a dark sky and rising, falling or troubled water are always signs of the breakdown of natural order, the old symbols take on a personal meaning for this particular poet. Such clusters of imagery can be traced through many songs, from the early pieces like

"Spanish Harlem" and "Boots of Spanish Leather," through the anguished middle songs in which a woman invites him to watch her without admission price dancing in "her honky-tonk lagoon ..." "Neath her Panamanian moon" ("Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again"); and on to the calypso dancers at the dock to watch the departing of the Titanic in "Desolation Row"; to *Blood on the Tracks* which includes the line, "She might be in Tangier" ("If You See Her, Say Hello").

The title of this last song suggests the other side of the freedom cluster, the trapped and pursuing male of "The Gypsy Davy." This male represents Dylan's own need for success and security, and he is cursed with the worst elements of the chauvinistic character. His life is concerned with acquisition and power, and he is obsessed with jealousy, cruelty, and captivity. The images which surround him are dramatically different from those which surround the female. Like King Midas, he owns everything he touches. He is "Diamond Jim," who "owned the town's only diamond mine" ("Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts"). That image is appropriate to the strength with which our security secures us, and also to the quality of Bob Dylan's own power. Even in the hype and heaped wealth of popular culture, he owns the only diamond mine in town.

The women who relate to this male are always prostitutes, even though they may appear in the guise of respectability and responsibility. The debutante who demands Dylan's soul for her upkeep is an example. The free female in "Stuck Inside of Mobile" reminds him contemptuously that his debutante knows his need for security, and feeds on it, but has no understanding of what he wants. (It is hardly a secret that what Bob Dylan wants is freedom.) Like the forlorn husband in "The Gypsy Davy," these women cannot induce unity by love and so are reduced to heckling freedom with the price it requires and the responsibilities it abandons. These prostituted versions of freedom delude the hungry male with the oldest lie in our society: that success and freedom are the same thing. "Cinderella, she seems so easy" ("Desolation Row"), but "Look out kid, they keep it all hid" ("Subterranean Homesick Blues"). Cinderella inspires an elusive pursuit, changing costume and quality at midnight — the worst hour — and drawing the helpless seeker into endlessly repetitive and compulsive behaviour which is as seductive as it is meaningless. He finds himself trapped in circles, "like a slave in orbit" ("Dirge"), being beaten and

domesticated by his own need for achievement, his only reward "a moment's glory" ("Dirge").

Even when this female is acknowledged to be a prostitute, she has style. Her English is perfect, even in Juarez, as "she invites you up into her room" ("Just like Tom Thumb's Blues"). In spite of the appearance of speaking the same language as the artist, however, she offers nothing up in her room but a view from the Tower of Babel. She takes from Dylan the only thing that matters, his voice, and leaves him "howling at the moon." Without his voice, the male is no more than a beast, a performer in a mindless act, babbling meaningless words beneath an image of his own former perfection.

Occasionally Dylan presents the destructive male in the full dress of success, trying to masquerade as the free female. Then he becomes "Just like a Woman" or "Queen Jane Approximately" (the latter plays on the dual meaning of queen: a sovereign and a man dressed as a woman). In this disguise, the male is most vulnerable and ludicrous. He/she "breaks just like a little girl" ("Just like a Woman") or is warned that the critics will eventually turn against him, and the creations they praised will become boring, leaving the achievement meaningless ("Queen Jane Approximately").

When the hungry male becomes attached to this "fairest damsel that ever did walk in chains" ("As I Went Out One Morning"), he finds himself trapped in his own success. He has won, but it is with a "soulful bounding leap" ("The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest") that he dies in the arms of his own success. The deep ambivalence of Bob Dylan's feelings about success is evident from his frequent use of double language to describe it. "Soulful" suggests the slang and success of popular culture, yet the loss of a soul; "bounding" indicates action, yet paralysis. In the act of singing freedom, he surrenders his soul; in the moment of achievement, he inhibits his liberty absolutely. Corrupted by fear, his prophecy becomes rain, or judgment, which falls on his shoes and turns the road he cannot leave into "mud" ("Shelter from the Storm"), and eventually into "quicksand." (4)

Sold on his own message that poetry is the slave of pain, and encouraged to capitalise on the lie by the profiteers of his industry, he becomes "lost," a theological word, in that rain ("Tom Thumb's Blues"). The rainman in

Mobile — all the advisers around him and fears inside him — offers him two cures for his pain. One is "Texas medicine," after which a man never thirsts again, and the other is "just railroad gin" ("Stuck inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again"). Railroad gin suggests commitment to travel and with it the compulsive search that is the source of the pain, not the solution to it. But by this time the male is too confused to tell one from the other. He mixes them and turns his own truth to alienation. Eventually his mind is strangled as much as his body on this poison drink, this half-truth, with the result that he becomes alienated and compulsive. People, he complains, grow uglier to him, and he sighs wearily that one act is so like another that he can no longer distinguish the passing of time.

The male can now speak of himself only in terms of falls, prisons, slavery, and rooms with no doorknobs or cities with no exits. Some of Dylan's most moving music and some of his most inventive imagery serve the purpose of conveying the depths of horror into which this character falls. The songs are twisted with a grotesque irony and form, grieving over the fact that at the heart of this prophetic singer lies such a deep commitment and persistent compulsion toward safety. In "I Shall Be Released" the compulsion takes on attributes of the fall from grace, protection being the poison apple in the garden of freedom. "Ev'ry man needs protection," and as a result, "ev'ry man must fall." In his fallen state this man finds himself in a prison that is as much of this world yet of hell as the hotel room in Sartre's *No Exit*.

Most of Dylan's compulsion imagery, in fact, is possessed of the sense of place and space common to existentialist writing. The resemblance, however, is in form only. For though the emotional impact and choice of metaphor in this music resembles that of existentialism, the thought and purpose of Dylan's art is actually the reverse. Existentialism seeks freedom from belief through the affirmation of man's right and ability to create his own reality and values. Dylan has experienced the heights of human power, the ultimate in human security, and found it only a fall from innocence and an empty shell of freedom. Perhaps it would always be better to ask a superstar about power, rather than a philosopher. Dylan has been lavished with money and power, he has been praised and adored, he has created reality and values, prophesied and seen the truth. But all of the magnificence has been corrupted into self-protection without the warmth

and integrative power of deep belief, the "shelter from the storm." Dylan has seen a large irony in the existentialists' combat with the universe outside themselves. For though the storm is certainly the fans and critics, the success and other temptations to unfreedom around him, the real danger is what lies inside him, his own fear and alienation, his own corrupted and defensive prophecy, his own rain. A line like "shelter from the storm," therefore, must include the personal dimension and be set in the context of lines like "I stand inside the rain" ("Just like a Woman").

Much of the substance of the compulsion metaphors does, however, adhere in the place, the nature of their setting. In "Desolation Row" the compulsion appears as alienation, a room in which the doorknob has been broken. In "Visions of Johanna" it appears as emptiness, the singer backed up against the wall and stranded in a lonely room where nothing has meaning (not even the country music on the radio), and no one really knows or touches anyone else. Often this compulsive Dylan finds himself abandoned in a strategically metaphorical city. Reminiscent of the great city myths of the Old Testament, these city metaphors represent power, wealth, and success coupled with idolatry, degradation and despair. Mobile is one of the cities. It is a logical choice for a man whose life and work involve him with country music and culture. But he is "stuck inside of Mobile with the Memphis blues again." The last word suggests the repetitiveness and hopelessness of the trap, and Memphis suggests there is still a vision of something better. But the name of the city he is stuck in is the chief irony, for it means motion, but suggests circles. Indeed, he is "stuck" there, as the whole meaningless environment is stuck, performing the ritual tasks of success like a revolving golden record, or like the "slave in orbit" in "Dirge." In Juarez, Dylan cannot find his way for his own rain; there is no healing, not even from the doctor, and no exit, even at Easter. Most especially, however, Dylan meets his destiny in Rome, where the most dramatic tests of idolatry in our civilisation were made, and where Bob Dylan sees that history repeated interminably amid the rubble of fallen gods and the dust of great age ("When I Paint My Masterpiece"). In Rome there is no way out of the "ancient footsteps," as there is no way to distinguish time in Mobile. In Rome there is a colosseum full of adoring crowds, while in Mobile he is treated with kindness and given tape for his recordings, knowing every day that he is entrenching himself deeper in a city from which there is no escape. Success and hopelessness seem to be blood brothers, and the only

future possible is to hold out for the golden calf to fall from its altar and shatter the hard hopelessness below, offering an exodus. In Juarez the prostitutes steal Dylan's voice, while in Mobile revelation has ceased and the circular behaviour becomes, because of that, more intolerable.

The first character to appear in "Memphis Blues Again," a ragman (rags are sometimes associated with the prophetic Dylan, as in "Like a Rolling Stone") is busy drawing circles, but will not tell why, will not give the act meaning, because he cannot speak. When the trapped singer tries to find a way to get information in or out of the city, he discovers that someone has stolen the post office (and with it his own freedom and truth) and locked the mailbox. The acquisitive male has finally lodged himself in Babylon and Sodom-Gomorra, "a concrete world full of souls" ("Three Angels"), where everything living has been sealed in concrete, and there is no exit short of an apocalypse. "Outside in the distance the wind began to howl" ("All along the Watchtower").

The apocalypse, happily, is in the wings, and it introduces into the drama a fourth character. This fourth figure is named "Dylan." Because Dylan is a name, it is easy to forget that it is also a metaphor, that it is, in fact, the most pervasive metaphor this poet created. "Dylan" is the gypsy Davy with his song and call to escape. He is the artist, the voice within the anguished and separated soul that makes truth out of the conflict and works to reunite the fragmented personality. When "Dylan" appears in the lyrics, he is almost always in the first-person pronoun, either conversing with another character ("Won't you come see me, Queen Jane?") or narrating the tale of his involvement with other characters. He emerges from the alienated psyche and from its concrete captivity like an Old Testament earthquake, destroying the cities, the myths and idols of his own making. It is this healing and redeeming Dylan who confronts the alienation and who faces the "howling beast," the corrupted singer, which divides his soul, and screams from the "borderline that separated you from me" ("Idiot Wind"). Like Ariel, he is restricted by a human landlord who can be a tyrannical, if sometimes magic, master. But "Dylan," alone of all the four characters in this cast, argues with Bob, the human landlord, for the rights of the free tenant within. "Dear Landlord," he pleads, "please don't put a price on my soul" ("Dear Landlord"). He sings to celebrate the freedom he is continually in peril of losing, and he sings that song like a bird on a fence, either side of

which is the loss of what he sings ("You're a Big Girl Now"). When the earthquake of distress sends the idols and securities falling, and the forlorn free female into flight, only "Dylan" escapes to continue "like a bird that flew" ("Tangled Up in Blue"). Only "Dylan" survives to bring the fragments together again.

In "As I Went Out One Morning," "Dylan" resists the temptations of the enslaved female by commanding her to depart from him. He gives the command in what at first seems a redundant phrase: "with my voice." When the woman resists in a perverse but seductive line, the narrator responds with the same subdued determination that she has "no choice." The rhyme on voice and choice is what the metaphor "Dylan" is all about. It is his voice which has always given Dylan a choice in his own fate, even in the days when his success was warmest and his confusion coldest, even when the voice sounded like a "howling beast" with "raging glory" ("Idiot Wind") or was "howling at the moon" ("Tom Thumb's Blues"). The ultimate threat to the safety and sanity of the artist is the loss of that voice. If he loses "Dylan," then no diamond mine on the planet can buy a cure for his mortal wound. He may be too weak to take a shot in Juarez (where shots are dangerous), but if his prophecy is also corrupted, the weakness becomes devastating. When the prostitute takes his voice and leaves him howling at the moon, he is dragged to the deepest degradation of "Dylan." Yet, "blame it on a simple twist of fate" ("Simple Twist of Fate"), or of faith, "Dylan" has, to this point at least, always returned.

The four actors in Dylan's character study of his own personality recur in many masks in many songs. They argue and converse together, they are enraged or in love with each other. Over the years they have grown, as he has grown, and their relationship has become more complex and subtle. In *Blood on the Tracks*, these characters appear together as a pair in "Idiot Wind," as a trio in "Tangled Up in Blue," and in the full four-part cast in "Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts." In the first of these songs, "Dylan" is in the first person arguing in his notoriously biting style and bitter sarcasm with another character. The argument and the anger, however, are not rejecting, for the other character lives very near, on the other side of a "borderline." Dylan cannot reject half of himself, and the compulsive and fear-driven Dylan has, the song tells us, his own holiness and way of loving. The argument between the two, however, concerns the fact (and with it

the warning) that as the quantities in Dylan's life have increased, the qualities have changed. Everything is now reversed and turned upside down. What had seemed to be the top is now the bottom, and what had seemed to be good has become bad. The prophecy is a lie, the images are corrupted ("Blowin' in the Wind" to "Idiot Wind"), the language is reversed (bad for good, top for bottom), and even common clichés like "making me see stars" take on ominous double meanings. In the ambivalent and treacherous language of this apparently simple conversation the full terror of the fallen world appears. In the storms of "Idiot Wind," where there seems to be no shelter, truth has become deceptive and elusive, success is illusory, and the full impact of the separation and tension in Dylan's own soul is manifest.

In "Tangled Up in Blue," "Dylan" is again the first-person narrator, in love with a beautiful and free woman he has once lost and later recovered. (Loss and recovery of freedom is the basic rhythm of Dylan's music, as the tension between the two is its basic energy.) In the song, the narrator is taken in by this woman to live with her and another man. He watches the relationship of these lovers fall victim to harsh and painful times, becoming more troubled as the revolution and music in the cafés above their apartment demand more from the two. How demanding and harsh must Dylan remember those difficult days of the sixties to have been on the fragile psychological balances inside him. As the lovers become more preoccupied with the commands from the culture above and more alienated from each other, "Dylan" gradually detaches from his love and identification with either of them. The male becomes a slave-dealer, an occupation which kills something important inside him. The female is forced to sell "everything she owned," which brings on emotional frigidity. Dealing, selling and slavery are rich images for Dylan, as well as old fears. His security has always threatened to become slavish and suffocating, as his freedom has threatened to become alienated and isolating. The point at which these two qualities become destructive, however, is the point at which they separate and struggle against each other. The male is seduced by security, and he forces in the process the merchandising of the only thing the female owns, her free spirit.

At that point the relationship becomes dramatically unbalanced; both characters lose their essential qualities, and "Dylan," still down in the

basement, is threatened with loss of his life. When the relationship breaks up, "Dylan" comments, "I became withdrawn." Shortly thereafter comes the apocalypse and the beginning again. If "Dylan" does not escape with freedom always, he at least knows how to survive. He leaves the scene like a bird, not in joyous flight perhaps, but in flight from joylessness. If he cannot fly free, he can fly away, he can "keep on."

In "Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts" the full cast of characters appears. Big Jim is the powerful male, feared, admired and patronised by those who love and those who hate him, the owner of the only diamond mine in town. Two women relate to this male. The first is Lily, an innocent and abused woman, hurt already by several men in her past (hurt by that chauvinistic and domesticating force of security), and about to become the new bride and victim of Big Jim. She is not thinking about the latter, however, but about another male, her father. This father she seldom sees, and this is the source of her sadness and her vulnerability. Her father is the rightful male, the real king (Lily is a "princess"), the force which infuses Big Jim's diamonds and which parents and protects Lily and her freedom. The other woman involved is Rosemary, the prostituted female, masked by false eyelashes and manner, but grown from the earlier music. She is now claimed as Jim's wife, and though she resembles Queen Jane ("looking like a queen without a crown"), she has become a tragic rather than a camp character. Rosemary is a flower of remembrance, and the memories of this album and of this theme in Dylan's art are always pain, always "Blood on the Tracks." Consequently, Rosemary is revealed to have done many evil deeds in her life, but the most evil was a suicide attempt. (More than once, Dylan has understood his own search for freedom or security to be suicidal.) She is the other side of Big Jim's cruelty and sadism, the masochistic mask of the real female, freedom. With these characters in dramatic distress, unable to make connections among themselves or meaning from their misery, the Jack of Hearts appears on the scene. He is a roving actor and someone's royal son, bringing the game of chance, the opportunity for freedom and a new deal, back into the endless rounds of sad success. When he enters the cabaret, he causes a stir among the patrons. Hereafter, the major characters relate by their response to the Jack of Hearts. All of them are fascinated by this new arrival and either follow him with their eyes, or fail to get him off their mind, or remember him from the past. Perhaps the most relevant comment to this argument is Big Jim's

remark that he may once have known the Jack of Hearts in Mexico. The sensation which is so profound for the major characters, however, creates no real change in the balance and reality of the other characters in the cabaret. They return almost immediately to their diversions. The Jack of Hearts, in spite of his cleverness, is just a temporary oddity, and they quietly and quickly take up the games they were playing before he interrupted their lives. So the artist discovers again that he faces the domesticating slave-whips of fame for only "a moment's glory," and the real meaning of his art is the dialogue and healing of his own soul, not the pleasing of an audience. Rosemary is a performer in the cabaret which is the song's setting. Restless with the meaninglessness of her life and falseness of her attachment to Big Jim (pretending to be a wife and finding herself only a prostitute of power), she begins to plan an apocalyptical break in the sado-masochistic embrace. By this point in Bob Dylan's history, all these images and associations are rich in accumulated meaning. In this mature song, however, there is a complex resolution of the forces at play in the images. The resolution is appropriately violent, to fit its ballad form, and is carefully calculated to introduce another complicating force in Dylan's life and art: law, society and the "hanging judge." At the end of the song there are two sudden and violent crimes, the murder of Big Jim and the robbery of the bank safe. Rosemary is the murderer and the Jack of Hearts is the thief. The weapon is a penknife, an instrument in which Rosemary sees her own reflection clearly, perhaps for the first time, perhaps for the last.

If it is true that Bob Dylan has often gone home with all the profits, it is also true that he has killed his own myths and illusions with a pen as dangerous to himself as to his audience. He has also always committed both the thieving and murdering on a stage before us when the houselights go down and the clear light of performance reveals the truth. The lights go out suddenly in this song, but in the dark come the stabbing strobe lights of self-discovery and self-revelation that are Dylan's profession and his destiny. It is true, further, that Bob Dylan has stolen our own securities from us, and has a history of attacking all the gods and hanging judges of our society. That murder is a dangerous act, and when the artist escapes not only with his life, but with the treasure in his hands, it is only by way of the sacrifice of Rosemary, who somehow recognises this is her destiny and the only redemptive way to end her life. To see her face clearly with the penknife is to destroy Big Jim's hold on Lily and set her free for her real

mate, the playful and performing Jack of Hearts. (The Jack is a prince, and Lily is a princess.)

What good is truth, finally, if it cannot stand between freedom and the law, if it cannot leave an exit for the former and satisfaction for the latter. It is only by recovering his free female soul from Rosemary's masks and pretenses and opening that soul to the ultimate threats by which it is tested, that Dylan recovers his voice and with it his choice to be free. The artist has bought his survival again, at the cost of his security and at the price of a painful public look at the truth about himself.

But the nature of his freedom is never artistry alone. In watching these characters relate, we can catch brief and elusive glimpses of the great and formless qualities which make up the material of Bob Dylan's freedom. Harmony and balance, respect and protest, grief and guilt, risk and sacrifice, sin and song are all part of the mix. They reveal themselves to us not as pure qualities but as conflicts and desires, as shadowy suggestions and twists of character. They unmask themselves suddenly in the simple wink of a false eyelash or the subtle turn of a head. But the totality of these acts adds up to the complex whole of psychological freedom as Bob Dylan experiences it. Most of all, we hear in the songs the drivenness of truth to survive. We can't blame him for being lucky, Dylan tells us, half with mockery, half with pride. He lives a dangerous profession and destiny, so we must agree and meet with joy the ultimate amoral trickiness of that deeply moral metaphor, "Dylan."

Tracing this complex of images does not exhaust the meaning of any of the songs in which any of these images appear. Other dimensions obviously coexist with the personal. Grief is closely associated with freedom in *Blood on the Tracks*, and it is well known by now that the whole album was inspired by the threatened breakup of a profound relationship in his life. In the same act that sets him free, Dylan has often recognised the possibility of that kind of death. He has sacrificed characters in his art and perhaps persons in his life to the greedy Big Jim inside him and the amoral Ariel always needing breath. For all the clever and wilful games of the Jack of Hearts, he does jack around the hearts to which he sings so passionately and prophetically. The character Dylan reveals in his lyrics can be both smothering and depriving. He can deal in slavish success until something

dies inside, and he can sell his freedom to alienation and distance. He has a history of grieving broken relationships, dating back at least to "Boots of Spanish Leather." The line from "Tangled Up in Blue" which tells that the relationship split up on [a dark, sad night] echoes other breakups in his music: "I'm sailing away, my own true love" ("Boots of Spanish Leather"), or his mid-sixties farewell to Joan Baez and protest, "a table standing empty by the edge of the sea" ("Farewell Angelina").

That interpersonal dimension is strikingly apparent in all the songs. Likewise, the inception of this whole series of images in a simple folk ballad, its conclusion in a more complex but similar form, and the references (common in Dylan's lyrics) to mythical or historical names and events like Big Jim, or the revolution and music mentioned in "Tangled Up in Blue" suggest the universality and socio-political dimension of the drama. The four characters struggle together like a Bicentennial America in the wealth of its cabaret existence, "tangled up" in the wiretaps of its paranoid insecurity, and trying to recover its prophetic and singing soul. All of Dylan's best poetry operates consistently on all three of these levels.

But the ripple reaching farthest from the rock songs Dylan has cast into the well of art is that which moves through his own soul, seeking only its own wholeness, and mirroring only the basic truth of all art, the eternal fascination of one man with his own heart.

Notes

(1) See Dylan's comment: "I discovered that when I used words like 'he' and 'it' and 'they' and putting down all sorts of people, I was really talking about no one but me. I went into *John Wesley Harding* with that knowledge about all the stuff I was writing before then." Quoted in Anthony Scaduto, *Bob Dylan* (New York: New American Library, 1973), p. 332.

(2) Jules Siegel, "Well, What Have We Here?" *Saturday Evening Post* (July 30, 1966), p. 34.

(3) Bob Dylan to Nat Hentoff, "Playboy Interview: Bob Dylan," *Playboy* (March 1966), p. 140.

(4) *Ibid.*, p. 139.