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Bob Dylan Ain't Talking: One Man's Vast Comic Adventure in American Music, Dramaturgy, and Mysticism

Peter Murphy

Sam Shepard: Have you ever felt like a couple?

Bob Dylan: You mean two? Yeah. All the time. Sometimes I feel like ten couples.¹

Jokerman: the American Picaro and his Idiot Audience

Bob Dylan has spent a life time despising the nineteen-sixties—all the while being held up everywhere as its avatar.² This comic tale of mistaken identity is the story of his life. No matter what he says—let alone what he sings—it seems to make no difference. When he wrote a percussive-pulsating one chord rant-chant against living in a *'Political World'* in 1989, it was dismissed by critics—sub-standard Dylan, they said. What they were really saying was: *no, we don't believe you*. You are a protest singer at heart. You don't really loath politics, whatever you might say or do. So books continue to be written about him as if he was a nineteen sixties political radical playing loquacious-hipster king to Joan Baez's platitudinous-remonstrating queen. No matter how much he might excoriate this notion in his marvelous biography, *Chronicles, Volume One*—one of the great pieces of American literature, on a par with Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*—it changes nothing. Left-liberal writers still compulsively lionize him in their own image—and their feckless children, who populate the modern media machines, regurgitate the same risible clichés about him.

How ironic that an artist who, throughout his life, has variously invented, hidden, concocted, and reinvented his identity should fall foul of mistaken identity. But also how fitting this is. For Bob Dylan's art is a comic art—and is it not proper that a comic artist should be misunderstood? Is that not the point of the comic worldview? Isn't the double-meaning of things—the gap between the artist's meaning and the understanding of their audience—the essence of comedy? In tragedy the artist and the audience knows that a terrible thing will befall the character on stage. Oedipus wanders in confusion, yet Sophocles' audience grasps what is going on. The central character is condemned by fate. There is a knowing consensus about this between artist and audience. They share the foreknowledge of horrible things to come. In comedy, in contrast, the artist pulls the leg of the audience. The comic artist is a tease—and, like Aristophanes, openly debunks and hounds the audience. Bob Dylan is a masterful exponent of this reprobate art. He has spent a life-time tormenting his audience—confounding them, annoying them, ignoring them, playing tricks on them—dissembling his own character on stage to fool them, clowning with that character, impersonating his own self, and making it appear and disappear.

Comic characters occur in pairs: for example, battling pairs like Charlie Citrine and Von Humboldt Fleisher in Saul Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift* or adventure-bound pairs like Huck Finn and Jim. Dylan is a bit of both. He is a picaro whose adventure in music is at the same time a mock-serious battle with his audience—or rather with his first audience, his Ur-audience, who loves him as much as he despises them (which is a lot) and who can love him only because they misunderstand him. His Ur-audience is like an idiot side-kick—a collective bumbling fool who follows him, much to his ever-so-slight disgust, through life. This audience has all the comic intellectual vices—pomposity, obsession, zeal, and so on. As the picaro moves on down the road, you can see him vicariously hitting these numskulls

around the head—telling them: don't think twice, it's alright, but you've wasted my precious time. Occasionally they yelp in complaint—yet they come back for more, because he is their hero—and they really do not understand who he is. They are clueless.

Their collective bottom lip dropped in disappointment when their idol—tired of his audiences' half-witted political demands—produced the soft-toned post-68 albums *New Morning* (1969) and *Nashville Skyline* (1970), which were filled with country waltz tunes. Yet the irony of this is that so many of the older songs that his audience adored were in fact spiced-up country songs. Listen to the brilliant banjo-driven version of 1963's 'Don't Think Twice' that Dylan did at the Bonnaroo Music Festival in Tennessee in 2004. As in the case of every great comic picaresque hero, deception, deceit, and misidentification—the losing and finding, reversing and inverting, hiding and confusing, masking and revealing of identity—is essential to the comedy. Bob Dylan is the quintessential joker man. He is a very funny individual—lyrically,³ in interview,⁴ in his ear for witty musical quotation, his spontaneous bursts of wry talking-rapping-versifying,⁵ or in his Chaplinesque behavior on stage.⁶ But he is also comic in a larger deeper cultural sense. His art is comic in the same sense that the art of that other great American master, Charles Ives (1874-1954), was comic. In his *Fourth Symphony* (1910-1916) Ives created a musical human comedy—a symphonic rendering of a picaresque journey—akin to a pilgrim's progress or a Don Quixote style adventure in sonic incongruity. He created a transcendent world—one of discordance and yet of deep wondrous mysterious concordance at the same time.

Like Ives, Dylan has an encyclopedic knowledge of American musics—and his own music is littered with tiny rippling echoes of this giant national storehouse of folk ballads, hymns, Civil War songs, country folk blues, urban electric blues, country and western, bluegrass, dust-bowl folk, tin-pan alley, Broadway, gospel, jazz-beat, crooning, Tex-Mex,

big band, rhythm and blues, pop music, reggae, rap—and all the rest.⁷ Listening to Dylan, you hear endless teasing skipping reels of rhyme—almost imperceptible fragments of sounds that are dimly familiar yet seem to belong to an unknown allusive past or an inscrutable mythical realm. In this Dylan, again, is like Ives. Both are magpies. Both pick the eyes out of the demotic music that they like, and both weave the pilfered, gorgeous off-cuts of their culture into unutterably original, fiercely great, creations.

Dylan freely appropriates other people's melodies, chord changes, rhythm patterns, and tonal and textual phrases.⁸ These pepper his works.⁹ He gleefully points out where he has taken stuff from.¹⁰ He loves to play the traditional comic game—'*am I the author of this work or not?*'¹¹ This is a very sophisticated, teasing game about the nature of creation. What it says—more or less—is that creation is both original and mimetic, and the two cannot be untangled. What it also implies is that such double coding is the source of creation. The line that divides the magpie-mimic from the mercurial-pacesetter is the inescapable paradoxical edge of the act of creation. *Note:* this edge is razor sharp, and most artists get cut when they try and traverse it. They end up either as limp imitators or pretentious innovators. Dylan is neither of these. He adopts musical masks, styles, and personas. He is a great mimic. But he is also unmistakably Mr. Dylan whatever he does. Not, mind you, Robert Zimmerman, a persona that long ago disappeared, overtaken by a life-time of touring, play-acting and tall story telling.¹² But it is notable that the stories he made up about himself when he was a young artist on the make—many of them hilariously improbable—turned out to be true. In these stories he always cast himself as the orphaned hobo, the rolling stone, on the road forever—the picaro that in fact he became.

Comedy, Not Tragedy

Bob Dylan is the Augie March of American music. He is a Bellovian character engaged in an endless relentless picaresque journey through that country's vast landscape of music, adopting and readopting one musical character type after another, a wanted man pursued by his original fans, the egregious sixties protest generation, whose idolatry he reviles—a musical chameleon, an evasive, shape-shifting, identity-changing, metamorphosing character.¹³ To understand why one of a thousand musical masks that Dylan has worn over the decades stuck so persistently in the minds of his original audience and was passed down so insistently to their progeny is to understand the difference between two Americas.

One America is faux-tragic, the other is comic. Forever the twain shall not meet. Dylan's original audience—his first champions—were existential-romantic believers in cheap tragedy without consequence. They were members of the original black arm-band generation who came of age after 1945 in the easy time of post-war affluence. For this audience, tragedy meant that the world had gone wrong and that ordinary people were doomed without knowing it—victims of their own false consciousness. The audience, in sharp contrast, was a knowing, elect, exempt bunch—well, at least in their own eyes they were. Their election was measured by their insiders' insight into world tragedy—and their exemption, by virtue of their self-proclaimed freedom, from that tragedy and its bleak unfolding. Their presumptive election underwrote an overweening sense of entitlement. The elect, it turned out, were entitled *not* to suffer—lucky them!—the obverse lesson of normal tragedy.¹⁴ Theirs was a world view that transformed the tragic outlook of Calvin and Aeschylus inside out. Dylan's audience thought that they shared with their artist-hero an omniscient knowledge of a black-fated world which was approaching a sticky end. But

their artist-hero was not a tragedian, not even a hokey one. His art was comic—as indeed the larger part of American art, or for that matter American society, is.

When I say that the artist is comic, or that his own society is comic, I do not mean that everything is played for laughs—though laughter and joking is part of the deal. Not everything comic is funny. I mean rather that a particular kind of truth lies at the heart of this art—and the society that produces it. Our artist-hero illustrates the difference between the American comic and mock-tragic modes perfectly. Take the example of Dylan’s encounter, in the late nineteen-sixties, with the American playwright, poet, and Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard, Archibald MacLeish (1893-1982). MacLeish approached Dylan to write music for his stage play *Scratch*. The collaboration didn’t jell. Even so, it was typical Dylan. His principal composing partners over the decades have been theatre-makers—notably Sam Shephard and Jacques Levy. Dylan acknowledges his strong interest in theatre.¹⁵ In spite of this, he felt uneasy about MacLeish’s script. Dylan recounts the MacLeish encounter at length in his autobiography—how he talked with the playwright, considered the proposal, and eventually said no. Some songs written with the play in mind though ended up on Dylan’s 1970 album *New Morning*. There is a telling passage in Dylan’s autobiography that explains his equivocation about MacLeish’s overture. ‘The play... was conveying some devastating truth,’ Dylan writes, ‘but I was going to stay far away from that. Truth was the last thing on my mind, and even if there was such a thing, I didn’t want it in my house. Oedipus went looking for truth and when he found it, it ruined him.’¹⁶ Dylan the non-tragic—the comic—artist was intuitively repelled by devastating truth—by tragic truth.

It is difficult to explain why but the dominant tenor of American art is comic, not tragic. The same is true also of American society. Its greatest political figure, Abraham

Lincoln, who presided over vast and terrible political agonies, was a comic figure. Lincoln was the butt of incessant nasty jokes through most of his Presidency.¹⁷ He was also an immensely witty, droll man who told endless funny stories, especially in the most harrowing of times.¹⁸ Now, again, *please*, do not misunderstand this—I am not saying that the comic mode of American society or art is disinterested in seriousness, truth or necessity. On the contrary, it is *very* interested in those things. You will find fate, pain, death, and destiny all essayed immaculately—whether it is in the case of Abraham Lincoln or Bob Dylan. But it is equally clear that comic truth is not tragic truth, and that comic destiny is not tragic destiny.

Comic truth unlike tragic truth is ambidextrous. It is a truth that is a lie at the same time. Thus it is unlike the truth of Archibald MacLeish who traded in the kind of tragic truth that so infatuated Dylan's original audience. 'So much for [that] truth,' Dylan says. 'I was going to talk out of both sides of my mouth and what you heard depended on which side you were standing.' Elsewhere in *Chronicles*, he makes the almost identical point—first, with an allusion to lines from T.S Eliot about people walking to and fro—everyone taking the opposite direction, and running away from each other.¹⁹ Dylan then quotes a line from Nietzsche about how the philosopher felt old at the beginning of his life. Dylan's own lyric variation on that theme—'Ah, but I was so much older then/I'm younger than that now'—conveys immaculately and precisely the sense of truth as contradiction that pervades the comic mode.²⁰

Dylan's work is filled with truth as contradiction—the brilliant mercurial talking out of both sides of his mouth. His music overflows with ambivalent ambidextrous antithetical constructions. This ambidextrousness applies to all aspects of his music—tonal, lyrical, instrumental, and vocal. Vocally, he half sings, half talks. Oftentimes this approximates

something that is neither speech nor singing strictly speaking but rather a mordant creaky growl—a rasping, scratching hoarse vocal rumble. John Updike described it memorably as a ‘Voice You Could Scour a Skillet With’.²¹ And it is not just the timbre of the voice that makes us sit up and pay attention. It is also the phrasing—the odd emphases that Dylan gives to words or syllables—emphases placed where you’d least expect them. And then there is the way he elongates vowels—stretching conventional short sounds into long elastic unexpected elocutions.²²

‘*What you would least expect*’ is the comic desideratum. The comic mode is built on exquisite sharp-edged double coding. Arthur Koestler called it bi-sociation.²³ Kenneth Burke called it incongruity.²⁴ No matter what it is called, Dylan does it effortlessly.²⁵ He was born to it. And its effect, at its best, is a kind of ecstatic commotion. A long time ago—in the nineteen-sixties—when, with witty aforethought, he announced ‘*I embrace chaos*’, Dylan was not declaring his love for social transgression or political anarchy but rather for comic pandemonium. Actually what he said was ‘*I embrace chaos though I am not so sure it accepts me*’. Comic mayhem is carried out in the service of a larger sense of order, one that is stripped of pomposity and rigidity of prosaic kinds of order. Dylan was well aware that his talent for comically setting the world upside down created great angst amongst his audience. Most memorably, his switch from acoustic to electric instrumentation caused near riot. Dylan provoked one of the two great musical fracas of the twentieth century. The first one—in 1913, in Paris—happened at the inaugural performance of Igor Stravinsky’s rhythmically pungent ballet *The Rite of Spring*. The second was on the occasion of Dylan’s third appearance at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965 when he used electric instrumentation for the first time. In each case, in 1913 and 1965, the audience was split between supporters and opponents of the artist—the performance was booed loudly,

arguments and shouting broke out, and an opinionated part of the audience was offended by the music. It is curious, in Dylan's case, how an apparently simple switch between acoustic and electric instruments could cause such an upset. But it did, and on Dylan's part, much of it I am sure he intended—for that is what a comic artist does. The comic artist plays with the expectations of the audience. He winds them up with calculated uncertainty. If you do this really well, what follows is pandemonium—as smug, senile and simpering judgments are turned upside down.

Comic chaos is achieved not by simple-minded assertions or sure-minded questioning but rather by the artist making affirmations and denials in the same breath. This is a quantum effect. It is like Erwin Schrödinger's cat, both dead and alive at the same time. Possibly the most significant thing that Dylan did at Newport in 1965 was to return to the stage and play an acoustic coda. This was not a concession to the grumblers off stage but a sly re-statement of what caused the fuss in the first place—the unsettling thought of an acoustic-cum-electric quantum coexistence, unsettling at least if you are a prosaic soul who thinks that something cannot be alive and dead at the same time.

Mind you, it was not just the quantum confusion of acoustic and electric performance that ignited the Newport audience. The booing of Dylan began a few bars into the first song of his set—'Maggie's Farm'. That song was its own incitement to mayhem. 'Maggie's Farm' deviously took the piss out of his audience. The sanctimonious sandal-wearing Newport crowd thought of Dylan as a 'protest' singer. That was one of the many ways his audience misunderstood him. Forgive the double negative—but I *don't* mean that he *wasn't* a protest singer. He was. Bob Dylan is always what he is not.²⁶ Conversely, if not perversely, he is also always not what he is. He is a great impersonator—always two people at one time, a double act.²⁷ An endlessly deliciously wickedly bifurcated identity is the

nature of a great comic character—and a niggling intuition of that, I am suggesting, also raised the ire of his Newport audience. Yes he *was* a protest singer, but a singer of comic protest songs. ‘Maggie’s Farm’ is a classic of the type. Such songs can have a very serious edge. But they are not serious in an earnest, faux-tragic way. They are not solemn or serious in that thin-skinned, moralizing, pompous way that invites, indeed positively demands, satire.

Satire is where Dylan began. His first compositions were topical songs laced with aw-shucks humor and surreal wit—low absurdity essentially. Then he gradually upped the ante, moving into ever-more sophisticated terrain. The great impersonator began to use his enormous empathetic powers to create extraordinary songs about individual souls cruelly treated: ‘The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll’ and ‘Hurricane’ notable among them.²⁸ Their themes are poignant—even magisterial—but their template is comic. They are not songs sung for a pedant’s cause. There is no ideology in them. They are inspired rather by that most classic of comic ideas: the protestation against cruelty. There is seriousness in this, but also sly humor as Dylan reminds us when he sings in exactly the same manner about the fate of that nice neighborly New York gangster Joey Gallo—‘what made them want to come and blow you away?’

The comic artist is always an impostor. The impostor, of necessity, despises engagement. Comedy is a function of distance—of seeing things one step removed. It is not surprising, then, when, in 1963, hundred-dollar-a-plate liberals presented him with the Tom Paine award, Dylan made an acceptance speech explaining how he understood the mind of John F. Kennedy’s killer. We see both the comic tease and the great impersonator at work here. By all accounts, Dylan is a man with an ultra-sensitive nature. He can imitate any soul—mafia boss, poor black woman, or presidential killer. But even when it is at its most

serious and stately, the comic mode is always double coded. It always distances the artist from himself, and us from our own selves. Comic art is not an art of engagement. The latter is for black-shirted unhappy people.

From the template of ‘Hattie Carroll’, Dylan moved on to create songs of abstract comic protest, landmarks among them ‘Maggie’s Farm’ and later ‘Dear Landlord’, and then songs of abstract comic relief.²⁹ The former are addressed to universal types—wry protestations against the miser or the slave driver. The latter—like the surrealist epic ‘The Chimes of Freedom’—capture immaculately the intangible sense of the generalized human striving for freedom and release. These songs are universal in spirit. They are tied to no particular cause or circumstance. The yearning for release animates the greatest comic works. It echoes deeply in Dylan masterpieces like ‘I Shall Be Released’, ‘Knockin’ On Heaven’s Door’, ‘Blind Willie McTell’, and ‘Waiting to Get to Heaven’. In each of these cases, the promised release is paradoxical. While there is much outwardly that is soaring and majestic in these songs, nobody makes it to heaven. Release, rather, lies in the uncanny stoic ‘dignity of suffering’ of the songs’ protagonists—underscored by the paradox of the music. The cadence of these songs is contained in their peculiar stately static progression—a progression in which time invariably seems to have been suspended. This music paradox epitomizes an artist who chafes at the idea of having been born in time.

In this and in many other ways Dylan’s music is comically quantum. The greatest of his songs are peppered with quantum tonal effects—tones that are one thing and another at the same time. Bob Dylan will tell you that his songs are simple, but of course he is an aw-shucks kidder.³⁰ In fact, his songs masterfully exploit the resources of tonic-dominant harmony—with their endless modulations, shifts back and forth, between keys and major and minor triads.³¹ He also often mischievously undermines the tonic in favor of tonal

ambiguity.³² He'll oscillate harmony between the tonic and the subdominant, or start (say) a stanza with the submediant rather than the tonic, or engineer inconclusive cadences because he approaches them indirectly (say by way of the subdominant of the subdominant).

Harmonic modulation and various kinds of harmonic equivocation lend his music its characteristic spooky timeless mythic quality. Dylan also utilizes the quantum resource of indeterminate pitch. He will often deploy tonal wobbles—notes that equivocate—by fusing the sharpened notes of the tempered scale with the flatter notes of pre-Renaissance or non-European modal scales—creating false relations. This is the musical version of talking out of both sides of your mouth—little quantum leaps in which sharper and flatter versions of the same notes coexist in the same music space or at least their coexistence is implied.

To have a modal melody floating over a conventional chord pattern is akin to the melisma of Dylan's voice in 'Joey' or 'Forever Young' where the pitch of the syllable is changed while being sung—or the vocal glissando in 'Idiot Wind' or the sliding guitar pitches of 'Highway 61 Revisited'.³³ The techniques vary, but the effect is singular. It produces an enigmatic fusion of opposing qualities. Whether the miraculous identity is between a sharp and flat tone or else a live and dead cat—from the point of view of culture what is created in such portamento-style acts is an astonishingly resonant form of meaning. The false relation of tempered and un-tempered notes is the exquisite point in which the antitheses of ecstasy and agony, trust and betrayal, faith and doubt are all unified musically into one singular powerful thing. Dylan has many ways of pulling this off. He counterposes lyrics that are grim, dim, caustic and biting with music that is jaunty, exuberant, perky and bouncy. His lyrical imagination is filled with dark paradox and witty contrast. His lyrics assay the 'contradiction in terms' of human relationships—the ambivalent 'I hate myself for lovin' you',³⁴ the paradoxical self-recrimination of the unfaithful husband to his

mistress, or the howling lesson learnt by the divorcing husband about the failure of success ('What's good is bad, what's bad is good/you'll find out when you reach the top/You're on the bottom.'³⁵). Even his titles contradict themselves—'Workingman's Blues #2' is, yes you guessed it, not a blues song.³⁶

Epic Myth: From Lincoln County Road to Armageddon

In the great Dylan songs, everything teeters between one thing and the opposite. Musically there is a lot of straying, blurring, evading, wobbling, wavering, not to forget rocking, rolling, and jangling—typified by the ominous rattling percussion that opens 'Señor'.³⁷ The ambivalences of Dylan's musical textures induce in the listener uncanny sensations. His symbolic world floats outside of time—it is hallucinatory, haunting, mysterious, and enigmatic. His music conveys a mythic sense, a sense of displacement—of being out of time. This accounts for the epic quality of many of his songs—the feeling not only that they could go on forever, but also that, through them, the listener enters a time outside of time.³⁸ The time of his long-form songs—from 'Desolation Row' to 'Brownsville Girl', from 'Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands' to 'Highlands'—is the time of eternal return, the mesmerizing, mystical, mythic, non-progressive time of culture.³⁹

In a manner of speaking, this is Augustine's City of God set against the background of the profane City of Man—and yet Dylan's time out of mind is neither this-worldly nor other-worldly. Rather it is the epic time of the picaresque hero, the comic Odysseus, who is in the world but not of the world. In Bob Dylan's case, it is as if Cervantes had spent his life time playing Don Quixote. Comedy it might be, light entertainment it is not. This picaro knows death and destiny. He is the wandering Jew become the Augustinian Jew

haunted by a Calvinist sense of necessity. ‘It was gravity which pulled us down and destiny which broke us apart./ You tamed the lion in my cage but it just wasn’t enough to change my heart.’⁴⁰ While this implacable force of gravity shatters, it doesn’t completely crush. Dylan’s songs are filled with apocalyptic images, with rattling rumbling mysterious sounds of doom, and forward-rushing momentum into deep dark secret places and across vast arcane landscapes. ‘All Along the Watch Tower’, ‘Caribbean Wind’, and ‘Changing of the Guard’ are classic examples.⁴¹ But, even in these cases, the sense of dread and doom—the portent of the rider approaching—is comic not tragic. For the end-times never arrive. While oblivion and desolation haunt the singer, Dylan waits stoically like Godot or his hero Abraham Lincoln—waiting, waiting in the devastated wasted zone, waiting comically for the end-time that never arrives, waiting, waiting, like Lincoln, passively, with wry dignity, with his funny stories to tell, in the face of dreadful fate.

When Confederate forces defeated the Union army at Manassas Junction in Virginia in 1862, Lincoln wrote that: *The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time.* While all his contemporaries in New York City in the early nineteen sixties were befriending the Cuban dictator Fidel Castro, Dylan was boning up on Lincoln in the New York Public Library. Dylan’s great song ‘With God on our Side’ almost directly paraphrases Lincoln’s ‘Meditation on Divine Will’.⁴² Both reflect on the unutterable antinomies of culture. Both point, in a sparse unsparing manner, to the deepest source of social meaning forged under the most intense and lacerating conditions of cultural antinomy. This is the moment when one sense of right—or God—conflicts directly with another. Dylan’s conclusion: ‘did Judas Iscariot have God on his side?’ runs its finger unflinchingly along the razor-edge of human meaning. Dylan

never blinks. Yet this meditation on an impossible conundrum is set to a jaunty country waltz—almost to remind us subliminally that this is not tragedy. It is not the conflict between Creon and Antigone. For, as Lincoln put it, *it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party.*⁴³ This is a comic vision par excellence.

Thus, unlike in tragedy, Armageddon—the horrible end—never arrives. The comic Odysseus continues on, down Lincoln County Road, even if doom echoes in the distance. For Dylan—Jew, Christian, and pantheist amongst his many masks—God is music.⁴⁴ And the music of God is silent. This view he had already concluded at the beginning of his quixotic odyssey. In 1964 he advised the coterie of folk singers who were drawn to him to *Lay down your weary tune, lay down/ Lay down the song you strum/And rest yourself 'neath the strength of strings/No voice can hope to hum.*⁴⁵ Doubtless most of his camp followers paid absolutely no attention to this admonition—but Dylan himself, we see, from early days, squarely belongs to the great mystic current in American culture. This current extends back to the Deism of the American Founders—and flows on through the Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the music of Emerson's admirer, Charles Ives, into the late great work of John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934).⁴⁶ One of the most interesting exponents of this tradition, the impish John Cage, turned a mystical paradox—the noisy silence of his composition *4'33"* (1952)—into one of the great philosophical lessons-cum-puzzles about the nature of music.

Silence is an enduring motif of Dylan's life and work. His late-career masterpiece *Ain't Talkin'* (2006) culminates a life time of doing exactly that: of *not* talking—either to his musicians, his band members, his producers, or even his friends.⁴⁷ The typical descriptions of him by those who fall into his company are: with-drawn, awkward,

secretive, introverted, painfully shy, and bashful.⁴⁸ This is, in part, the function of a super-sensitive nature—the nature of an impersonator-chameleon who can adopt all personas. Withdrawal is necessary in order for such an impressionable—that is to say, Lockean or Humean—nature to survive. But withdrawal is also a condition of the possibility of thinking. Thinking is neither articulate nor dialogical. It is silent, awkward, and secretive. It is not an inner conversation but a mute background hum—contemplation as we used to say, before modern times.

In Dylan's case, more often than not a thoughtful *hhhhmmmmm* replaces conversation—a vague guttural murmur, a mur-mur, more physiological than anything. *Ain't talkin', just walkin' / Through this weary world of woe*, he croaks, as he muses on the mystic garden and its wounded flowers, and yon cool and crystal fountain.⁴⁹ The sly internal rhymes of *flower* and *fountain* point toward a comic mystic universe filled with astonishing structural qualities—like the assonance and alliteration of Dylan's surrealist masterpieces, with the chimes of freedom 'tolling for the aching ones whose wounds cannot be nursed / For the countless confused, accused, misused, strung-out ones an' worse'.⁵⁰ This is exactly the kind of mystical vision that comes to Dean Albert Corde in Saul Bellow's *The Dean's December*.⁵¹ Corde rises above the wreckage caused by nineteen-sixties Faustian romanticism to discover, on the heights of Mount Palomar, a pantheistic vision of a vast universe contained in the crystalline structure of a single human blood cell—Dylan's every grain of sand.⁵²

The chimes of freedom is the dissonant concord of Charles Ives' *Fourth Symphony* with its incredible architecture of poly-rhythms, interlaced musical threads, quotations from popular songs that spark the mystic chords of memory, polytonal, agonal and fugal passages, and, best of all, the haunting finale of the wordless choir. Ives' finale is Dylan's

beginning. It is the wild ocean of Dylan's youthful ecstatic-mystical-pantheistic vision—the wild ocean that plays like an organ, the crashing waves that clash like cymbals, and the crying rain that sings like a trumpet.⁵³ This is the music of the spheres. It is the silent music of the universe—the music that remains when all of our weary tunes have been laid to rest—and when there only remains the music of strings that no voice can hope to hum. These might be the strings of Pythagoras. They might be the strings of contemporary string theorists. They might refer to the golden ratio of nature's sonority or to creation's Big Bang. It makes no difference. Either way: these strings are the building blocks of our universe—and the God of that universe is music.⁵⁴

Notes

¹ Sam Shepard, "A Short Life of Trouble", *Esquire*, 1987 reprinted in Jonathan Cott (ed.) *Dylan on Dylan*, London, Hodder, 2006, p. 360.

² "You know, everybody makes a big deal about the Sixties. The Sixties, it's like the Civil War days. But, I mean, you're talking to a person who owns the Sixties. Did I ever want to acquire the Sixties? No. But I own the Sixties—who's going to argue with me?" ... "I'll give 'em to you if you want 'em. You can have 'em." Johnathan Lethem, "The Genius of Bob Dylan", *Rolling Stone*, September, 2006.

http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/11216877/the_modern_times_of_bob_dylan_a_legend_comes_to_gr_ips_with_his_iconic_status/print Accessed 4 October 2009.

³

...
Then she says, "you don't read women authors, do you?"
Least that's what I think I hear her say,
"Well", I say, "how would you know and what would it matter anyway?"

"Well", she says, "you just don't seem like you do!"
I said, "you're way wrong."
She says, "which ones have you read then?" I say, "I read Erica Jong!"
She goes away for a minute and I slide up out of my chair
I step outside back to the busy street, but nobody's going anywhere.
Bob Dylan, "Highlands" (Special Rider Music, 1997).

Someone's got it in for me, they're planting stories in the press
Whoever it is I wish they'd cut it out but when they will I can only guess.
They say I shot a man named Gray and took his wife to Italy,
She inherited a million bucks and when she died it came to me.
I can't help it if I'm lucky.
Bob Dylan, "Idiot Wind" (Ram's Horn Music, 1974)

⁴ Asked by some idiot at a Heathrow Airport press conference in 1965 what his message was Dylan replied: “Keep a good head and always carry a light bulb!” D.A. Pennebaker director, *Dont Look Back* (Leacock-Pennebaker, 1967).

⁵ Dylan’s capacity to assert and deny at the same time are beautifully captured in the following exchange, in which he manages somehow to agree with, disagree with, prove through practice, and disavow with the shadow of Shakespeare the tired old question of whether Bob Dylan is a great poet or not:

ST: Van Morrison said that you are our greatest living poet. Do you think of yourself in those terms?

Dylan: [Pause] Sometimes. It’s within me. It’s within me to put myself up and be a poet. But it’s a dedication. [Softly] It’s a big dedication. [Pause] Poets don’t drive cars. [Laughs] Poets don’t go to the supermarket. Poets don’t empty the garbage. Poets aren’t on the PTA. Poets, you know, they don’t go picket the Better Housing Bureau, or whatever. Poets don’t... Poets don’t even speak on the telephone. Poets don’t even talk to anybody. Poets do a lot of listening and... and usually they know why they’re poets! [Laughs] Yeah, there are... what can you say? The world don’t need any more poems, it’s got Shakespeare.

Interview with Paul Zollo, *Song Talk*, 1991 reprinted in Jonathan Cott (ed.) *Dylan on Dylan*, London, Hodder, 2006, pp. 373-374.

Dylan’s capacity for spontaneous creation, evident in the preceding answer, is also observed by Howard Sounes. Around the time of the *Infidels* album in the early 1980s, Dylan invited some young Los Angeles musicians to his private estate to play old obscure songs. “...if they played the song twice, the lyric would often be different and the musicians began to understand that Bob was making up songs as he went along.” Sounes, *Down the Highway: The Life of Bob Dylan*, London: Black Swan, 2002, p. 417.

⁶ “He could even make a comic act out of tuning his guitar, get up on stage and fiddle with the guitars strings and pretend he wasn’t able to get it right and cursing under his breath... And I’ll never forget the thing he did with his harmonica... pulling out one... and pulling out another, and not being able to find it. And saying ‘Whose got that damned harmonica?’ And it broke us all up. It was so Chaplin-like.” Miki Issacson interviewed by Anthony Scaduto, *Bob Dylan*, New York, Grosset and Dunlap, 1971.

⁷ Tiny samples of this vast storehouse are laid bare by Dylan in *Bob Dylan* (1962), *Self-Portrait* (1970), *Down in the Groove* (1988), *World Gone Wrong* (1992), and *Good as I’ve Been to You* (1993). To the casual listener, these are the “worst” of Dylan—examples either of the neophyte earnestly learning his art or the mature artist who periodically has lost touch with his muse. These are the albums where he sings other people’s songs. The effect often is more the bemusement rather than amusement of his audience. Yet, in truth, what he does in these cases is to reveal a tiny fraction of the sources he draws on.

⁸ There are complex reasons for this related to the artistic act of creation. As the English philosopher Roger Scruton notes, creation is most potent where the artist aims not at something new but rather works to do something surprising with what is old. Scruton observes that so many of the great artists of the twentieth century (Stravinsky, Moore, Matisse, and so on), and we can happily add Dylan to the list, were traditionalists. What makes something original, Scruton suggests, is not defiance of the past or a rude assault on settled expectations, but the element of surprise that a given work invests the forms and repertoire of tradition. See Roger Scruton, *Modern Culture*, London: Continuum, 2007, pp. 45, 82-83. Dylan is self-reflexive about his relation to musical tradition. In the 1987 *Esquire* interview with Sam Shepard, this exchange is carried on:

Shepard: Nineteen. And what kind of stuff were you listening to back then?

Dylan: Oh, Bill Monroe, New Lost City Ramblers, Big Mama Thornton, People like that. Peggy Seeger, Jean Ritchie.

Shepard: Hank Snow?

Dylan: I’d always listened to Hank Snow. “Golden Rocket”.

Shepard: At the time you were fishin’ around for a form?

Dylan: Well, you can’t catch a fish, ‘les you trow de line, mon.

Shepard: This is true.

Dylan: Naw, I’ve always been real content with old forms. I know my place by now.

Sam Shepard, “A Short Life of Trouble”, *Esquire*, 1987 reprinted in Jonathan Cott (ed.) *Dylan on Dylan*, London, Hodder, 2006, pp. 356-357.

To Scruton’s observation about creation, one additional point needs to be added. The dialectic of old and new that Dylan so beautifully enacts is also at the same time a way of stepping outside of time such that, to the extent that this is possible in art, the new and the old, which are temporal categories, blend into something that is timeless, an intimation of being “born out of time”. The greatest works of art precisely

communicate the sense of being out of time. A Dylan song like “Beyond Here Lies Nothin’” (2009)—whose title quotes Ovid—echoes the cadences of American music forms of the 1940s and 1950s, yet when it was released in 2009 it was contemporary in an uncomplicated manner and even served as an episode theme in the television vampire series *True Blood*. The way in which the old and the new are super-positioned in such a song serves to underscore the metaphysical power of the work, rendering it timeless, the kind of uncanny category that provides the mythic basis of culture and the aesthetic shaping of societies.

⁹ Howard Sounes, *Down the Highway*, pp. 90, 145, 205.

¹⁰ “Going through the tracks on ‘Time Out of Mind,’ he points out what he borrowed: among other things, a jug-band guitar line in ‘Not Dark Yet,’ an inverted rockabilly lick in ‘Dirt Road Blues,’ and a riff and a country-blues lilt from Charley Patton in ‘Highlands.’” Interview with Jon Pareles, *New York Times*, September 28, 1997 reprinted in Jonathan Cott (ed.) *Dylan on Dylan*, London, Hodder, 2006, p. 396.

¹¹ “No reason to get excited,” the thief, he kindly spoke.

¹² Hegel observed that, in comedy, the mask worn by the actor falls away. Thus the comic self “plays with the mask which it once put on in order to act its part; but it as quickly breaks out from this illusory character and stands forth in its own nakedness and ordinariness, which it shows to be not distinct from the genuine self, the actor, or from the spectator.” (*Phenomenology of the Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 450.) Note the ambiguity in what is revealed by the comic actor when the mask does fall away. What we see is a self that is not distinct from the real self, the actor or the spectator, which is to say that it is also none of these either but rather a strange conflation of all of them. It may be our expectation that when the mask is stripped off, we will see “the real you at last”, but, as the example of Dylan-the-artist strongly suggests, in the case of the comic persona, “the real you” at most is only ever tangentially present and, in the spirit of Hegel’s suggestion, what is revealed in the act of dispensing with the mask is a genuine self that has become spliced with the personas of the actor and the spectator simultaneously. Whatever this is, it is very difficult to describe. Even Hegel, who was no stranger to difficulty, puts it in the negative (“not distinct from”). What kind of self is real, acted, and viewed at the same time? In the end, the comic persona is a mystery, an enigma.

¹³ “It’s not tangible to me,” he says. “I don’t think I’m tangible to myself. I mean, I think one thing today and I think another thing tomorrow. I change during the course of a day. I wake and I’m one person, and when I go to sleep I know for certain I’m somebody else. I don’t know who I am most of the time. It doesn’t even matter to me.” Interview with David Gates, *Newsweek*, October 6, 1997

¹⁴ Their utopia was a pharmatopia. In their youth they took copious quantities of illegal drugs. In their old age they craved universal health insurance and free prescription drugs.

¹⁵ “I’d always liked the stage and even more so, the theatre. It seemed like the most supreme craft of all craft. Whatever the environment, a ballroom or a sidewalk, the dirt of a country road, the action always took place in the eternal ‘now’.” Bob Dylan, *Chronicles Volume One*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2004, p. 124.

¹⁶ Bob Dylan, *Chronicles Volume One*, p. 125.

¹⁷ “Lincoln comes into the picture in the late 1850s. He is referred to in the Northern press as a baboon or giraffe, and there were a lot of caricatures of him. Nobody takes him seriously. It’s impossible to conceive that he would become the father figure he is today.” Bob Dylan, *Chronicles Volume One*, p. 85.

¹⁸ “Odd that mankind’s benefactors should be amusing people. In America at least this is often the case. Anyone who wants to govern the country has to entertain it. During the Civil War people complained about Lincoln’s funny stories. Perhaps he sensed that strict seriousness was far more dangerous than any joke. But critics said that he was frivolous and his own Secretary of War referred to him as an ape.” Saul Bellow, *Ravelstein*, London, Penguin, 2001, p. 1.

¹⁹ Bob Dylan, *Chronicles Volume One*, p. 72.

²⁰ Bob Dylan, “My Back Pages” (1964; renewed 1992 Special Rider Music).

²¹ John Updike, *Concerts at Castle Hill: Middle Initial Reviews Local Music in Ipswich, MA 1961-1965*, Northridge, Lord John Press, 1993, p. 39.

²² “Ee-ee-dee-ioot wee-ind, babe” is a classic example.

²³ Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, New York, Dell, 1964.

²⁴ Kenneth Burke, *On Symbols and Society*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989.

²⁵ For examples of Dylan’s comic ability, see Howard Sounes, *Down the Highway*, pp. 76, 81, 119, 122, 142, 265

²⁶ Bob Dylan can barely sit still. He pulls at his curly hair, fidgets with his black T-shirt, constantly shifts position on a comfortable couch... “That’s just the nature of my personality,” he says. “I can be jubilant one moment and pensive the next, and a cloud could go by and make that happen. I’m inconsistent, even to myself.” Interview with Jon Pareles, *The New York Times*, September 28, 1997 reprinted in Jonathan Cott (ed.) *Dylan on Dylan*, London, Hodder, 2006, p. 391.

²⁷ Sam Shepard: Have you ever felt like a couple?

Bob Dylan: You mean two? Yeah. All the time. Sometimes I feel like ten couples.

Sam Shepard, “A Short Life of Trouble”, *Esquire*, 1987 reprinted in Jonathan Cott (ed.) *Dylan on Dylan*, London, Hodder, 2006, p. 360.

²⁸ Bob Dylan, “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” (1964; renewed 1992 Special Rider Music); Bob Dylan and Jacques Levy, “Hurricane” (Ram’s Horn Music, 1975).

²⁹ Bob Dylan, “Maggie’s Farm” (1965; renewed 1993 Special Rider Music), “Dear Landlord” (1968; renewed 1996 Dwarf Music).

³⁰ Even when he says his songs are simple, he immediately confutes that by alluding, for example as he does in the following interview, to their late Renaissance origin, in the same world of paradox that produced Shakespeare and the double coding of modal and tempered scales that echo through Dylan’s music: “The melodies in my mind are very simple, they’re very simple, they’re just based on music we’ve all heard growing up. And that and music which went beyond that, which went back further, Elizabethan ballads and what not... To me, it’s old. [Laughs] It’s old.” Interview with Paul Zollo in Cott (ed.) *Dylan on Dylan*, pp. 371-372.

³¹ For example, “Absolutely Sweet Marie” (1966; renewed 1994 Dwarf Music), “Tangled Up In Blue” (1974 Ram’s Horn Music), “I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine” (1968; renewed 1996 Dwarf Music), “One More Cup of Coffee (Valley Below)” (1975 Ram’s Horn Music), “True Love Tends to Forget” (1978 Special Rider Music).

³² For example, “No Time to Think” (1978 Special Rider Music), “Wedding Song” (1973 Ram’s Horn Music), “Time Passes Slowly” (1970 Big Sky Music), “Sign on the Window” (1970 Big Sky Music), “Mr. Tambourine Man” (1964; renewed 1992 Special Rider Music).

³³ Bob Dylan and Jacques Levy, “Joey” (Ram’s Horn Music, 1975); Bob Dylan, “Forever Young” (Ram’s Horn Music, 1973), “Highway 61 Revisited” (1965; renewed 1993 Special Rider Music).

³⁴ Bob Dylan, “Dirge” (Ram’s Horn Music, 1973).

³⁵ Bob Dylan, “Idiot Wind” (Ram’s Horn Music, 1974).

³⁶ Bob Dylan, “Workingman’s Blues #2” (Special Rider Music, 2006).

³⁷ Bob Dylan, “Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)” (Special Rider Music, 1978),

³⁸ The hypnotically-performed version of “Marchin’ to the City” on CD1 of *Tell Tale Signs* (Columbia Records, 2008)) is a case in point. The epic vastness of time is signified by musical repetition that slowly swells in intensity and loudness. This is a multi-dimensional repetition. Piano, organ, guitar and drum—each have their own differently-phased rhythmic accents. The result is a multiplicity of repetition. It is this that lends the song an enigmatic character of an endless profane march in time to the holy city that stands outside of time.

³⁹ Bob Dylan and Sam Shepard, “Brownsville Girl” (1986 Special Rider Music), Bob Dylan, “Desolation Row” (1965; renewed 1993 Special Rider Music), “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands” (1966; renewed 1994 Dwarf Music), “Highlands” (1997 Special Rider Music).

⁴⁰ Bob Dylan, “Idiot Wind” (Ram’s Horn Music, 1974).

⁴¹ Bob Dylan, “All Along the Watchtower” (1968; renewed 1996 Dwarf Music), “Changing of the Guards” (Special Rider Music, 1978), “Caribbean Wind” (Special Rider Music, 1985).

⁴² Bob Dylan, “With God on our Side” (1963; renewed 1991 Special Rider Music).

⁴³ This is Adam Smith’s hidden hand of God.

⁴⁴ “There’s a lot of clever people around who write songs,” Dylan says. “My songs, what makes them different is that there’s a foundation to them. That’s why they’re still around, that’s why my songs are still being performed. It’s not because they’re such great songs. They don’t fall into the commercial category. They’re not written to be performed by other people. But they’re standing on a strong foundation, and subliminally that’s what people are hearing.” Interview with Jon Pareles, *The New York Times*, September 28, 1997 reprinted in Jonathan Cott (ed.) *Dylan on Dylan*, London, Hodder, 2006, p. 396.

⁴⁵ Bob Dylan, “Lay Down Your Weary Tune” (1964; renewed 1992 Special Rider Music).

⁴⁶ On Ives and Emerson, see Peter Murphy, "Metropolitan Rhythms: A Preface to a Musical Philosophy for the New World," *Thesis Eleven* 56, 1999, pp. 81-105; 'Nature's God: Emerson and the Greeks', *Thesis Eleven: Critical Theory and Historical Sociology* 93, 2008, pp. 64-71.

⁴⁷ Two of many examples:

(a) "Rob Stoner stood slightly behind Bob so he could watch the back of Bob's left hand for the chord changes and see the tapping of his boot heel for the beat. "You can anticipate when the chord is going to change by watching the [hand] muscles relax," says Stoner, who assumed the role of bandleader. "Then you can see which way the hand shifts, seeing what chord it is going to go to." Howard Sounes, *Down the Highway*, pp. 340-341.

(b) "Bob was pleased with the new version of "Idiot Wind". He told engineer Martinson quietly: "You have a nice way of picking things up here." It was the most he had said to anybody, apart from his brother, since he had entered the studio." Howard Sounes, *Down the Highway*, pp. 333.

⁴⁸ Howard Sounes, *Down the Highway*, pp. 46, 72, 75, 81, 179, 187, 217, 223, 234, 244, 247, 281, 349, 350, 447, 450, 452, 454.

⁴⁹ Bob Dylan, "Ain't talkin'" (Special Rider Music, 2006).

⁵⁰ Bob Dylan, "Chimes of Freedom" (1964; renewed 1992 Special Rider Music).

⁵¹ Saul Bellow, *The Dean's December*, New York, Penguin, 1998.

⁵² "In the fury of the moment I can see the Master's hand/In every leaf that trembles, in every grain of sand." Bob Dylan, "Every Grain of Sand" (Special Rider Music, 1981).

⁵³ Bob Dylan, "Lay Down Your Weary Tune" (1964; renewed 1992 Special Rider Music).

⁵⁴ "Those old songs are my lexicon and my prayer book," he adds. "All my beliefs come out of those old songs, literally, anything from 'Let Me Rest on That Peaceful Mountain' to 'Keep on the Sunny Side.' You can find all my philosophy in those old songs. I believe in a God of time and space, but if people ask me about that, my impulse is to point them back toward those songs. I believe in Hank Williams singing 'I Saw the Light.' I've seen the light, too." Dylan says he now subscribes to no organized religion." Interview with Jon Pareles, *New York Times*, September 28, 1997 reprinted in Jonathan Cott (ed.) *Dylan on Dylan*, London, Hodder, 2006, p. 396.