

Bob Dylan and an Initiatory Tradition in Popular Culture

- As delivered in oral presentation to a select group in Paagosa Springs, CO, 3/10/2019

Prefatory remarks

My lifelong delving into the sources of Bob Dylan's Inspirations has only confirmed my estimation of him as, in every sense of the word, a prophet; one with a signature voice and fully realized set of visions working throughout a career in language within a variety of musical forms. What I will be presenting are notes on those Inspirations as they work through Poetry, Culture, and Spiritual Ancestry. All of these exist in Time but have their immediate roots in another time and place, one lurking on the edges of this one, one which has been called by many names but whose nature poets strive to express. My purpose here today is to encourage to you to take him even more seriously than you may already do.

So:

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Part I – Genius in Poetry

In this exploration I will be demonstrating the profound spiritual depth of Bob Dylan's contributions to the desolated glittering world of post-WWII popular American culture: Vargas girls, A-Bombs, TV families and tail fins (disclosure: I do admit a reverence for tailfins!).

And the kind of peculiar influence passed down within it among musicians who craft in a style no less significant in its own fashion than that crafted in the old Templar, Rosicrucian and Druid guilds of yore. I will cite Bob Dylan's own written autobiographical and poetic texts to illustrate this proposition, though I will assemble selections to suit my own cherry-picking. As some may say. That's ok; I won't protest. But what you *can* take at face value is my individual response to it all. Yet any response to this must also address the matter of the similar profound effect that his influence has had on so many of us in this crazy post-WWII generation (you know who you are . . .). In the course of some 50 years of

tracking The Bob's musical and poetic career, I have never been disappointed by any effort to look deeper into what he might be trying to say. I have been educated by researching his references and have been successful in crediting seemingly random associations with profound ancestral resources linked to serious spiritual initiation streams.

Bob Dylan has an authentic voice, with a signature quality of frequently enough prophetic authority.

In 2016 Bob Dylan received the Nobel Prize in Literature “for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition”.

I will, first of all, be reading an extended section of his remarks from what he had to say on that occasion, before sampling his song lyrics:

Nobel Lecture 5 June 2017

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TlcPRLau2Q>,

(also Banquet Speech: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bi3Ws2Qm8ck>)

Note readers' remarks as appended in both links!]

QUOTE: “When I first received this Nobel Prize for Literature, I got to wondering exactly how my songs related to literature. I wanted to reflect on it and see where the connection was. I’m going to try to articulate that to you. And most likely it will go in a roundabout way, but I hope what I say will be worthwhile and purposeful.

“If I was to go back to the dawning of it all, I guess I’d have to start with Buddy Holly. Buddy died when I was about eighteen and he was twenty-two. From the moment I first heard him, I felt akin. I felt related, like he was an older brother. I even thought I resembled him. Buddy played the music that I loved – the music I grew up on: country western, rock ‘n’ roll, and rhythm and blues. Three separate strands of music that he intertwined and infused into one genre. One brand. And Buddy wrote songs – songs that had beautiful melodies and imaginative verses. And he sang great – sang in more than a few voices. He was the archetype. Everything I wasn’t and wanted to be. I saw him only but once, and that was a few days before he was gone. I had to travel a hundred miles to get to see him play, and I wasn’t disappointed.

“He was powerful and electrifying and had a commanding presence. I was only six feet away. He was mesmerizing. I watched his face, his hands, the way he tapped his foot, his big black glasses, the eyes behind the glasses, the way he held his guitar, the way he stood, his neat suit. Everything about him. He looked older than twenty-two. Something about him seemed permanent, and he filled me with conviction. Then, out of the blue, the most uncanny thing happened. He looked me right straight dead in the eye, and he transmitted something. Something I didn’t know what. And it gave me the chills.

“I think it was a day or two after that that his plane went down. And somebody – somebody I’d never seen before – handed me a Leadbelly record with the song “Cottonfields” on it. And that record changed my life right then and there. Transported me into a world I’d never known. It was like an explosion went off. Like I’d been walking in darkness and all of the sudden the darkness was illuminated. It was like somebody laid hands on me.

(With the benefit of 20/20 hindsight and decades of evidence we might venture to take him at his word, at face value, on this and that he has gone a long way towards fulfilling that promise.)

Continuing: “It was on a label I’d never heard of with a booklet inside with advertisements for other artists on the label: Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, the New Lost City Ramblers, Jean Ritchie, string bands. I’d never heard of any of them. But I reckoned if they were on this label with Leadbelly, they had to be good, so I needed to hear them. I wanted to know all about it and play that kind of music

“I hadn’t left home yet, but I couldn’t wait to. I wanted to learn this music and meet the people who played it. Eventually, I did leave, and I did learn to play those songs. They were different than the radio songs that I’d been listening to all along [crooners with pretty voices singing idiot sensibilities cf: *How Much Is that Doggie In the Window?*]. They were more vibrant and truthful to life I had a natural feeling for the ancient ballads and country blues, but everything else I had to learn from scratch

“By listening to all the early folk artists and singing the songs yourself, you pick up the vernacular. You internalize it.

“When I started writing my own songs, the folk lingo was the only vocabulary that I knew, and I used it.

“But I had something else as well. I had principles and sensibilities and an informed view of the world. And I had had that for a while. Learned it all in grammar school. *Don Quixote, Ivanhoe, Robinson Crusoe, Gulliver’s Travels, Tale of Two Cities*, (elsewhere he credits the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*), all the rest – typical grammar school reading that gave you a way of looking at life, an understanding of human nature, and a standard to measure things by. I took all that with me when I started composing lyrics. And the themes from those books worked their way into many of my songs, either knowingly or unintentionally. I wanted to write songs unlike anything anybody ever heard, and these themes were fundamental.” UNQUOTE

Additionally, it is not for nothing that his style has been called “Biblical.” We can only allude to that in fragments here.

Many themes, which we will address as we get along here. Each encounter: Buddy Holly – Leadbetter – Jack Dempsey – even the one with Gorgeous George is laden with significance as they indicate his evolving recognized relationship to the Zeitgeist: the Folk-Soul as well as the Time-Spirit as expressed in the terms of Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophical kabbalism. A constant theme of poetry no matter the topic in the “handed down songs” of the oral ancestral lore. Vibrant echoes of Irish Seers, Scottish Healers, English bards and Ovates of noble lineage veined into the bedrock of collective culture, remnants of a pre-technological age escaped into the Appalachian wilderness within bedtime stories and cradle songs, full of Imaginal potency and formative life, living buried latent in the grounding breath of weightless music.

Not for nothing was J. S. Bach called the “Fifth Evangelist”. Similarly, I see Bob Dylan as another prophet in the lineage of Amos, Jeremiah and Elijah, preaching doom to fools and repentance to the faithful, always speaking truth to power as well as to those with the wit to take heed. This is the mission of a bard, heir and custodian to the spiritual legacy of a people.

As he relates in his autobiographical book “Chronicles”:

“I read *The White Goddess* by Robert Graves Invoking the poetic muse was something I didn’t know about yet. Didn’t know enough to start trouble with it, anyway.”

This was c. 1961 and he was off and running.

Get this: Graves himself states in that same book that:

“The function of poetry is the religious invocation of the muse [I will call this the *Education of Imagination*].

Graves goes on to say: “Its use is the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites.

“Faithfulness to this Theme affects the reader with a strange feeling, of which the purely physical effect is that the hair literally stands on end. But nowadays? This was once a warning to man that he must keep in harmony with the family of living creatures among which he was born, by obedience to the lady of the house; it is now a reminder that he has disregarded the warning, turned his house upside down by capricious experiment in philosophy, science and industry, and brought ruin on himself and his family. ‘Nowadays’ is a civilization in which the prime emblems of poetry are dishonoured. In which serpent, lion and eagle belong to the circus tent, ox, salmon and boar to the cannery, racehorse and greyhound to the betting ring, and the sacred grove to the sawmill. In which the Moon is despised as a burned out satellite of earth and woman as a producer of more tax-paying consumers. In which money will buy almost anything but truth and almost anyone but the truth-possessed poet.” (Graves, WG, p. 14)

The book says elsewhere:

“The White Goddess is more than a long-discredited pagan deity. She is still alive and active, and her worship takes many forms, both inside and outside the conventions of public morality. In particular, she continues as the Ninefold Muse, patroness of the white magic of poetry.”

Yet already in 1966, Bob was already hot on the trail of that goddess

In *Visions of Johanna* (1966), Bob Dylan (in the vein of other “crazy wisdom” types such as Trungpa, Gurdjieff, Don Juan and Osho) ventures upon the deconstruction of consensual reality which maintains the psychological black magic of literalism and commodification. *Bob Dylan’s exorcism is attempted not by means of logical analysis or spooky midnight ritual but by placing his audience inside the subjective experience of the cognitive dissonance of a corrupt society expressed though the communal ceremony of revolutionary musical form embodied as a virus within the mass culture.* (I’m going to repeat this)

These are lyrics sampled from *Visions of Johanna*:

Inside the museums, Infinity goes up on trial
Voices echo this is what salvation must be like after a while
But Mona Lisa musta had the highway blues
You can tell by the way she smiles

Oh, jewels and binoculars hang from the head of the mule [Dada mockery]
But these visions of Johanna, they make it all seem so cruel

The peddler now speaks to the countess who’s pretending to care for him
Sayin’, “Name me someone that’s not a parasite and I’ll go out and say a prayer for him”
But like Louise always says
“Ya can’t look at much, can ya man?”
As she, herself, prepares for him
And Madonna, she still has not showed
We see this empty cage now corrode
Where her cape of the stage once had flowed
The fiddler, he now steps to the road
He writes ev’rything’s been returned which was owed
On the back of the fish truck that loads
While my conscience explodes
The harmonicas play the skeleton keys in the rain
And these visions of Johanna are now all that remain

“Museums”: HS, p. 205. “Museums are cemeteries It’s not the Bomb that has to go, man, it’s the museums.”

Who is that Johanna? My proposal is that you consider her a phantom of the eternal feminine, a concept well worked over by others in more respectable fashion. Bob knows as well as anyone that paradox is the nature of reality –

variety raised to a spiritual signature of the endlessly diversifying nature of reality as maintained in the mind of the Goddess muse of poetry.

Such a suggestion might seem to be speculation except that even a cursory examination of Bob Dylan's lifework can support the case for it, as we shall see. This is the theme that we will be pursuing here.

The eternal, endlessly foliating nature of the Feminine is an underlying, recurrent theme that appears in his work right up into the present day, both in his recordings and in his still ongoing live concert tour performances. In *Spirit on the Water* (2006) (and similarly in *Beyond the Horizon* 2007) he combines sacred love of woman (the goddess?) and earthly love of women, here, as usual within the same song without doing injustice to either:

Can't explain
The sources of this hidden pain
You burned your way into my heart
You got the key to my brain
I hear your name
Ringin' up and down the line [what "line" is this?]
I'm saying it plain
These ties are strong enough to bind [thru successive incarnations?]
Your sweet voice
Calls out from some old familiar shrine

But:

When you are near
It's just as plain as it can be
I'm wild about you, gal
You ought to be a fool about me

Also, in *When the Deal Goes Down* (2006):

The moon gives light and shines by night
I scarcely feel the glow
We learn to live and then we forgive
O'er the road we're bound to go
More frail than the flowers, these precious hours
That keep us so tightly bound

You come to my eyes like a vision from the skies
And I'll be with you when the deal goes down

As much as this could be about an actual lover, it could also at the same time be about the poet pledging his fidelity to that poetic muse. Note that this recurrent theme precedes, underlies and continues past his involvement with the gospel forms of salvational Christianity, without rejecting the esoteric essence and import of it.

On a deeper, esoteric level, one known to Bob through his continuing honoring of his Hebraic roots, common to both Hebraic and Christian kabbalahs is the transformational kabbalistic practice of *tikkun olam* – the reintegration of the fractured worlds. With Bob this process is one executed within his own suffering and transforming psyche. Many artists use their personal drama as fuel for their art, but Bob has taken the process to a whole new level, invoking his passage through the stages of a spiritual initiation as a template for a real-time, old-time mystery drama.

We see this exemplified in the lyrics to “*Ain’t Talkin’*” (2006):

As I walked out tonight in the mystic garden
The wounded flowers were dangling from the vines
I was passing by yon cool and crystal fountain
Someone hit me from behind [the Threshold is too close behind]

Ain’t talkin’, just walkin’
Through this weary world of woe
Heart burnin’, still yearnin’
No one on earth would ever know

They say prayer has the power to help
So pray from the mother
In the human heart an evil spirit can dwell
I’m trying to love my neighbor and do good unto others
But oh, mother, things ain’t going well

* * *

All my loyal and much-loved companions
They approve of me and share my code
I practice a faith that’s been long abandoned
Ain’t no altars on this long and lonesome road [cf: the ‘old familiar shrine of “Spirit On
The Water”

Ain't talkin', just walkin'
My mule is sick, my horse is blind
Heart burnin', still yearnin'
Thinkin' 'bout that gal I left behind

It's bright in the heavens and the wheels are flying [cf: Ezekiel 1:4-28]
Fame and honor never seem to fade
The fire's gone out but the light is never dying [cf: No Country For Old Men; the embers
Who says I can't get heavenly aid? In the horn]

Here he is stretched taut between the spiritual and the earthly forms of
love.

In Soon After Midnight (2013) is the sly but explicit acknowledgement of
what his Jewish, then Christian kabbalism has led him to the Shekinah and the
Daughters of the Earth as represented by both the lusty Magdalene and the fertile
ever-virgin Mother:

I'm searching for phrases to sing your praises
I need to tell someone
It's soon after midnight and my day has just begun [cf: reversal of attention]

A gal named Honey took my money
She was passing by
It's soon after midnight and the moon is in my eye [the Moon is the Sun of the Night]

My heart is cheerful, it's never fearful
I been down on the killing floors
I'm in no great hurry, I'm not afraid of your fury
I've faced stronger walls than yours [cf: the kabbalist World of Assiyah]

Charlotte's a harlot, dresses in scarlet
Mary dresses in green
It's soon after midnight and I've got a date with a fairy queen

* * * *

It's now or never, more than ever
When I met you I didn't think you would do
It's soon after midnight and I don't want nobody but you [but which "you"?]

In many persisting sly indications like these, Bob Dylan indicates what can legitimately be named a professional level of spiritual training and accomplishment.

And, always, love of the Land and Place, at peace with the span between sacred and profane love (*Duquesne Whistle*, 2013). Listen for the overtones of Tom Sawyer and Becky Thatcher, Woody Guthrie, Hank Williams and everyone else who ever wrote songs about trains, the lonesome whistle and the tracks converging on infinity:

Listen to that Duquesne whistle blowin'
Blowin' like it's gonna sweep my world away
I'm gonna stop in Carbondale and keep on going
That Duquesne train gonna ride me night and day

You say I'm a gambler, you say I'm a pimp
But I ain't neither one
Listen to that Duquesne whistle blowin'
Sound like it's on a final run

Listen to that Duquesne whistle blowin'
Blowin' like she never blowed before
Blue light blinking, red light glowin'
Blowin' like she's at my chamber door

You smiling through the fence at me
Just like you always smiled before
Listen to that Duquesne whistle blowin'
Blowin' like she ain't gonna blow no more

Can't you hear that Duquesne whistle blowin'
Blowin' like the sky's gonna blow apart
You're the only thing alive that keeps me goin'
You're like a time bomb in my heart

I can hear a sweet voice gently calling
Must be the Mother of our Lord
Listen to that Duquesne whistle blowin'
Blowin' like my woman's on board

.....

The lights of my native land are glowin'
I wonder if they'll know me next time around

I wonder if that old oak tree's still standing
That old oak tree, the one we used to climb

Listen to that Duquesne whistle blowin'
Blowin' like she's blowin' right on time

Still a Christian in Spirit – *Pay in Blood* (2012):

. . . .

Low cards are what I've got
But I'll play this hand whether I like it or not
I'm sworn to uphold the laws of God
You could put me out in front of a firing squad

I've been out and around with the rising men
Just like you, my handsome friend
My head's so hard, must be made of stone
I pay in blood, but not my own

So

Poetry, like scripture, is, above all, a symbolic language, with symbols which encode a potency which cannot be incarcerated by utilitarian language and which extend down from creative forces generating infinite variety of living forms and, ultimately, actual existences. Language is the ash of that fire, which ash poets mix with their blood and tears to scribble images pointing back to origins. Fitfully perhaps, but sometimes raising the hair in the back of your neck. **In this, you know that 'something else' has just passed by.** [cf: Keats' nightingale, p. 12]

II – Links in culture

What do we find when we look for Bob's actual link with culture's ancestry, something more substantial than a momentary Rock n Roll shaktipat? Where does it ground out?

Enter Harry Smith: avant-garde filmmaker, ethnologist with very strong connections to native culture (*how I wish I had time to get into that . . .*), print-maker extraordinaire, kabbalist and, most relevantly to our theme, the compiler of the seminal 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music*: the so-called “secret text” for what Greil Marcus called the “old, weird America”, gothic and asymmetrical. On which all the musical folklorists and performers of the era cut their teeth. Primarily for which during the 1991 Grammy Award ceremonies he received – quote - “for his ongoing insight into the relationship between artistry and society, his deep commitment to presenting folk music as a vehicle for social change, the Chairman’s Merit Award”, at which occasion Smith said:

“I’m glad to say my dreams came true, that I lived to see America changed through music.”

Consider that!

As one commentator said: “The voices of the Anthology, like the Keats’ nightingale and its song, are after all only visitors from another place – the faery lands forlorn’ from which, as for the poet, only the sound of a living voice, our own, can deliver us. . . . Listening to the Anthology, we are, like Keats, wondering whether we are asleep or awake, seeing or dreaming, wondering whether it is ever possible to know the difference, or whether it makes any difference whether we can or cannot.”

- Robert S. Cantwell, *Darkling I Listen*, HS, p. 200.

His acquaintance Owen Karlenzig remembered:

“He told me Anthology of American Folk Music was intended as a last gasp of oral tradition, just as mass-marketed recordings, radio and movies changed America.”

As Harry’s friend Ed Sanders of the Fugs stated:

QUOTE “Harry’s Anthology was a deliberate act of anthropologic magic. He said: ‘I felt social changes would result from it. I’d been reading Plato’s Republic He’s jabbering on about music, how you have to be careful about changing the music because it might upset or destroy the government.’

The benevolent social concerns, for instance, that were implicit in the American folk music surge of the 1960's grew, at least in part from this quest of his youth." UNQUOTE

Harry was also responsible for orchestrating the ritual for the magical attempt to exorcise the demons from the Pentagon as part of 1967's big antiwar demonstrations.

As Bob says about his own estimation of the pre-corporate musical culture:

"My songs, what makes them different is that there's a foundation to them They don't fall into the commercial category; they're not written to be performed by other people ['crooners']. But they're standing on a strong foundation, and subliminally that's what people are hearing. Those old songs are my lexicon and prayer book."

- HS, p. 220.

Bob is also remembered as disavowing himself of the mantle of "protest singer" and this is frequently cited in the sanitized mass-market version of "Dylan". However, the other half of the original statement was to the effect that his songs were not *protest* songs, they were *rebellion* songs. This is four-square in the folksong tradition and he did his part to move it along when he went "electric."

III – Roots in Our Shared Spiritual Tradition

Bob Dylan's personal spiritual foundation for the entire arc of his career may well be the kabbalah of his own Jewish heritage, one the he continues to maintain through his Lubitcher Hassidism, one of the most traditionally as well as kabbalistically oriented variants of observant Jewish religious life.

We have mentioned kabbalah several times. Even throughout and continuing after his so-called "Christian period" – which, even so, was of a sort which strongly valued Old Testament Mosaic values - are archetypal kabbalistic themes, no more explicit than in *Forever Young* of 1974, written for his son Jacob's Bar Mitzvah:

May God bless and keep you always
May your wishes all come true
May you always do for others
And let others do for you
May you build a ladder to the stars
And climb on every rung
May you stay forever young

May you grow up to be righteous
May you grow up to be true
May you always know the truth
And see the lights surrounding you
May you always be courageous
Stand upright and be strong
May you stay forever young

May your hands always be busy
May your feet always be swift
May you have a strong foundation
When the winds of changes shift
May your heart always be joyful
May your song always be sung
May you stay forever young

It is too much to get into in this brief presentation, but these verses tick off the traditional attributions of the Sephiroth on the kabbalist's glyph of the Tree of Life (as well as very apt references to several of the Tarot Trumps, particularly as they relate to specific pathways between those Sephira), a representation now almost a thousand years old, with antecedent forms going back millenia before that, all the way back into the Genesis of Biblical and Torah oral tradition. In Genesis 26:10-12 it is related that:

“Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.”

This remains Jacob's as well as young Jacob Dylan's and every kabbalists' ladder to the stars, the taproot for the "Foundation" of his songs.

That's tradition for you! As a staunch traditionalist, Bob Dylan knows his kabbalah and knows it in its higher forms of activating transformation on the level of sacred magic. Thus his musical forms can shift and morph without losing their connection with their sources. The case can be made for this solely on the basis of results achieved, as we all recognize by instinctive response, forget the intellectual superstructure.

To wrap this up, William Faulkner remarked, perhaps – or perhaps not - referring to the persistency of spiritual roots:

“The Past is not over; it's not even the past.”

And there is this last; Bob Dylan closing his Nobel Prize address:

“I return once again to Homer, who says: “Sing in me, O Muse, and through me tell the story.”

Thank you.

* * * *

Misc. Notes

A Living Tradition is like one of those plants that live mostly in the root system: you can shear, rototill, blight, or pave over the above-ground growth but the organism persists and will assert itself and reemerge when conditions allow, even if it remain dormant for long periods of time.

I suggest that it's not so much what he says, it's who's talking.