

Rosemarie Rowley:

Tools of the Sacred, Techniques of the Secular: Session X: Friday 7 May 2010

**MYSTICAL DREAMS, PORTENTS AND PROPHECIES IN THE WORK OF
BOB DYLAN**

“I’ll let you be in my dream if I can be in your dream.”

I said that.

Bob Dylan, 1963

This was said tongue-in-cheek after singing a song about a nightmare about World War III. It is also can be read as an endearing and serious invitation given to a spellbound audience in Newport in 1963 to share this and other dreams. The fact that the import of these dreams takes the form of songs is specifically of interest in a post-modern age, of which Bob Dylan is the popular precursor and exponential artist.

This was at a time in history, itself portentous, the post-apocalyptic world after the cataclysm of World War II and the explosion of the first nuclear bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki with the coming of age of the first generation to grow up after the war. This generation answered back to the wars of their ancestors in a flowering of the spirit and a fertile imagination to deal with a new world as they came to consciousness in the sixties. For a poet like Bob Dylan in making this new world he was aware of the old one, too much aware of it at times. From the beginning there is an atmosphere of age-old weariness and ennui especially in the dream references and

titles – in the first album, eponymously titled *Bob Dylan*, he sings of the time *after my dreams have been dreamed out/after all my thoughts have been think* in the song *All over You* and his voice throughout is that of an old man as if the weight of history has descended on him. As early as this first album there are references to Jesus, in *Long Away*, yet Dylan disclaims the prophetic role, in *Long Time Gone*, when he says, he “*ain’t no prophet, or ain’t no prophet’s son.*” Although he did not like to be seen as a protest poet, he might on this occasion and other occasions be protesting too much. It was clear from the beginning his audience thought he was some kind of prophet, and he wanted to disarm them to make his message more effective.

In *Talkin World War 3 Blues* the young poet and songwriter tells us he had dreamt of World War III, and the doctor “said it was a bad dream” – the humour arising from the vast difference in concept between the possibility of cosmic destruction and the people-pleasing prescriptions of analyst who deals with dreams, a doctor who is paid to soothe the patient. Bob Dylan sings laconically and with deadpan humour, of the world ending in quarter of an hour, with the remark that it was “a normal” day.

In his second album *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* the world-weary tone is again heard, as in *ancient empty streets too dead for dreamin’* which occurs in the opening verses of *Mr Tambourine Man*. In this album, we see the development of Dylan’s visionary powers in *A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall*. The images are astonishingly surreal and still resonate – *I saw a newborn baby with wild wolves all around it, I saw a highway of diamonds with nobody on it*, and the song has been widely interpreted as a serious warning of apocalyptic events – as portent of nuclear fallout, whereas in recent years some commentators have seen it as a foretelling of acid rain and ecological disaster.

In his third album *The Times They are A-Changin* there is explicit reference to Biblical events, to Pharaoh and the Israelites in the song *When The Ship Comes In*, but on the whole this album is of political intention, for which Bob Dylan was hailed as “spokesman of a generation” Although his vision of a more equal world was articulated in this album in songs such as *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll* and other songs of equality, and his audience grew to see these dreams – and of others such as Martin Luther King – realised, Bob Dylan at this very point began to move away from politics and its limitations. He seemed at times as if he disallowed himself any leadership role, especially in the political sphere, for example, in *My Back Pages – Equality I spoke the word, just like a wedding vow,/ but I was so much older then, I’m younger than that now*. In a later interview he explains that he “couldn’t relate to being spokesman for a generation”. Some commentators have faulted him for not taking responsibility, but the general consensus is that Dylan was always ahead of his audience.

However, as he eschewed politics, he spoke always from the standpoint of a visionary, from a purveyor of mystical dreams, with words of portents and prophecies which had become part of the cultural landscape, both creating it and describing it at the same time. He is aware that there is a greater and more lasting reality than that immediately conceived of in the present.

From the beginning, although alternatively world-weary and visionary, his songs are rooted in dreams, in the sense of being a quest, or a dreamed-of ambition, from the modern hegira to New York to see his mentor Woody Guthrie to a foreteller of stories that concern the whole project of human beings and their role and life in the cosmos. These dreams have been various, from the sentimental wish that he would be united with his friends (*Bob Dylan’s Dream*) to the title of one of his poems, *Bob*

Dylan's 115th dream - another kind of dream, a more peaceable one, in which he revisits the pioneering days of America, when he sings of riding on the Mayflower along with the early pilgrims. In his second album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, I have remarked that the songs relate to the more complex surreal visions, where, I would suggest that at times his audience has understood the work to take on the mystical portent of what would seem to have been prophetic in the new media age.

With his fourth album, issued in 1964, *Another Side of Bob Dylan* we have the first intimation that the dream is of love, with songs such as *All I Really Want to Do*, which for the first time in popular music connects friendship and romantic love.

The other person is treated as an equal, so it is a foretelling of the advance of equality for women, the lover is “not categorised, or crucified” – all he wanted was to be friends, who are always, simply or complicatedly “You” – the other.

In the fifth album, *Bringing it All Back Home* he gets close to the bone of the young men of his own generation with his song *It's All Right, Ma, I'm Only Bleeding*, when he sings *If my thought dreams could be seen/they'd probably put my head in a guillotine*.

It is this awareness of the nightmare of history, that gave depth to his songs, but in the 7th album, *Blonde on Blonde* what becomes apparent as his song-writing progressed from the articulation of an ancient sensibility to a young man's nightmare is that the quest for love begins to be more and more important. This dream of the beloved developed into the key motif of his songs. It is a dream which permeates his entire oeuvre - one of the songs on *Blonde on Blonde*, *I Want You*, is mystical in its yearning, with its link to death and love in generations past, which remind us of those authors of the Bible who have written of the relationship of Yahweh to Israel, so he is singing of a very ancient dream indeed.

All my fathers they've gone down

True love they've been without it

And all their daughters put me down

Cos I don't think about it

Another song on the album, *Just like a Woman* is also a love song, but it could just as easily be about a Jew, standing outside the wider culture, and longing for acceptance, even though the wrong has not been on his side.

Nobody feels any pain .

and

Your long time curse

hurts,

but what's worse,

is the pain in here,

Ain't it clear

I just can't fit

When we meet again

Introduced as friends

Please don't let on

That you knew me when

I was hungry

And it was your world

- Just Like a Woman

This sense of being an outcast and prophet is to the fore in Bob Dylan's work. The Other, who is always addressed as you, is also the audience listening to him, young people whose parents perhaps had lived in the time of the Holocaust, who may have been enemies in World War II. What I want to draw attention to is how few have remarked on how brave and courageous he was to want to be friends with the people who had persecuted systematically people of his own Jewish heritage. It seems that Bob Dylan in this luminous work is reminding us of the another ancient dream, that of Israel being a light to the Gentiles, as written in Isaiah Chapter 60, Verse 1.

Indeed, if we look at it in the context of where Bob Dylan was coming from, this act of communication is an extraordinary statement of love and forgiveness. He had probably had grown up with stories of the Holocaust. To all observers, when he came to New York in 1961, his origins were obscure, embellished with the tall tales of running away to a circus and travelling with pop musicians. What seemed to be going on, in retrospect, that he was running away from his Jewish identity, or else keeping it very private indeed. However, truth may be, that he very consciously came as a prophet into the camp of the Gentiles to warn them and to tell them his dreams. And he chose the persona of a song-and-dance man to do that.

In Bob Dylan's work, this sense of being an outsider, yet inviting others to a dialogue, is fully explored in a song *Positively Fourth street*, released in 1965 but written about his early days in Greenwich Village. It was released as a single but not included in his albums of those years:

You've got a lot of nerve

To say you are my friend

But he is rebuffed and feels the hurt on a personal level:

When you know as well as me

You'd rather see me paralysed

Why don't you just come out once

And scream it?

- Positively 4th street

He continues with:

Do you take me for such a fool

To think I'd make contact

With one who tries to hide

What he don't know to begin with

- one of his glorious put-downs.

The song continues, with modern idiom, but with age-old knowledge:

And now I know you're dissatisfied

With your position and your place

Don't you understand

It's not my problem

Dylan is speaking to people here who have serious misunderstandings with his own heritage and destiny as a maker of songs both sacred and secular. He must have

known from his traditional upbringing that his own people were quite sure they had a place and position in keeping with their being chosen by God, and their destiny which was to build a New Jerusalem, a new Heaven and a new Earth.

It was interesting that this song was not included in his seminal earlier work, which most people had classified as protest or political. The confusion felt by people as to the complexity of his vision is that he was always both, a conscious artist in a time of crisis when cultural boundaries were shifting, yet one who wrote of themes which have been with us since the beginning of time. However, with *Blonde on Blonde*, although his reputation had grown to formidable heights, by people anxious to cast him as being the quintessential poet of the modern and post-modern age, Bob Dylan's work carries always the mark of dream, portent and symbolism.

He was also the first poet of the media age, and the advance of communications meant that the words and works of the 20th century met with unparalleled and multiple interpretations in a time when the written text, has suffered downgrading. His was a call to a unified vision, at times religious, underlying the cold facts of science and the archetypal dreams of mankind as they faced the first global crisis together. That he created these songs in the modern idiom, with music as their basis and signature, explains both his popularity and also his exclusion in some sense from the academy.

Bob Dylan's preoccupation of relationship with the beloved, becomes, in his work, the figurehead and touchstone of all dreams, in the sense that union with the beloved becomes the highest meaning and destiny for all those who believe in alternative realities. Through the songs, the listener can achieve the coherence of that vision of the beloved which is now both accessible in dreams and purveyed in the media.

The underlying dream of fulfilment in love was always there in his work. However, this possibility between the dream of love and the realisation of it took place within a very short time frame, and became a dichotomy all too soon, as economic forces began to bear down on creativity. Market forces became dominant and the audience began to believe dreams could be bought and sold- his songs were prophetic about the following decades where everything had a monetary price as he pleases in *John Wesley Harding*

Dear Landlord

Please don't put a price on my soul

My burden is heavy

My dreams are beyond control.

- issued in 1968

In the same album, Dylan writes of

Businessmen, they drink my wine, plowmen dig my earth

None of them along the line know what any of it is worth

- this may be a reference to the dream of ages past, the Promised Land, and how that dream has not been achieved fully. These are the same dreams as those which have a religious or prophetic import, creating on earth what was prophesied before down the ages, including warnings, difficulty in realisation of dreams, and the ongoing creation of possibility inherent in dreams. Some of these dreams carry premonitions, as in

Down in the Flood of the Basement tapes, composed with musician friends after his motor-cycle accident, and their very mundane style indicates that these have almost become pedestrian – whether the audience indeed can be alive to his dream. With mid-seventies album *Desire*, there is a return to form, which is also a return to the visionary, as in *Romance in Durango*

Soon the desert will be gone

Soon you will be dancing the Fandango

And

The face of God will appear

With His serpent eyes of obsidian

But Dylan warns:

We may not make it through the night

In *Black Diamond Bay* on this album there is a return to the surreal, where the imagery seems to be borrowed from the movies. Again with there are visions of holocaust

It happens every day

As the stars fall down and the fields burn away

And the songs on this album remind us of his earlier astonishing effects:

I see the trembling lion with the lotus flower tail. (Golden Loom)

In the next album, *Street Legal*, issued in 1978, there are again indications of the portentous times we live in, the song *Changing of the Guard* is a virtuoso piece

and a tour de force, enfolding image after image to leave us with a mythical and mystical vision to which we can tie our dreams and our lives, while, in *Senor* he asks once again

Senor, senor, do you know where we're headin

Lincoln County Road or Armageddon?

Bob Dylan's next album proved a turning point, as one night he picked up a cross on the stage – it was the beginning of his conversion to Christianity, a period of three Christian albums - *Slow Train Coming*, *Saved*, and *Shot of Love* - where there is explicit reference to the Christian redemption – for example, *Saved by the Blood of the Lamb* and *When He Returns*,; the songs detailing the life of Jesus, when *They Came for Him in the Garden*; along with songs of eschatological import such as *Gotta Serve Somebody*; and other songs, in which he sees a way out of Egypt; or when he speaks of spiritual warfare as in *Precious Angel*, and the songs hint at the Arab/Free World conflict which is to come,

Sheiks walking around like kings

And there are references to Creation and Biblical stories which he refers to in *Solid Rock* .

In *Shot of Love* and *Property of Jesus* he makes his confession that he “didn't increase his worth at someone else's expense”. Biblical references mix with modern references, as in *Watered Down Love* he quotes Saint Paul, while in *The Groom's Still Waiting at the Altar* he sings that the “walls deteriorated” which shows the influence of Polanski's movie “Repulsion” and Dylan's use of surreal imagery to carry the import of his dreams and desires.

But perhaps the most visionary poem in this cycle of albums is the song *City of Gold* when he foresees a city built on light, love, grace, peace and hope. In these

Christian albums, his vision expands towards the universal hope, and begins to focus on the eternal values behind the stage show of the political, to develop into millenarianism in the return of Jesus, and to find his place in the line of Jewish prophecy, when he sees that “The first will be last, and the last will be first.”

When He Returns

But this is the part of his work which is the least popular, and has met the most resistance.

His conversion to a Christian ethic took place at the height of the cold war when the world battled with materialist values. To anyone who lived through the sixties and its dreams, what followed, especially in the eighties and nineties was an arid, barren period, because the advent of monetarism as advocated by Reagan and Thatcher put a price on everything, as the poet had foretold. The Albums which followed in the ‘eighties, *Infidels*, *Empire Burlesque*, *Knocked Out Loaded*, and *Down in the Groove*, have in general, being critically panned, as the language of the dream became more and more simplified, as the poet in Bob Dylan tried to get away from stereotyped images of the beloved, to seek a resonance in age-old strategies and tropes, only to find that the love itself had almost become commoditized.

Therefore Aristotle’s vision of the thing which is of value in itself and that which has commodity value are conflated in that period, and now, in the way they reach the public, through the highly sophisticated marketing dreams of advanced capitalism. This means that in the end, the manner and means of making these dreams conscious becomes the way they become unrealisable.

The dreams, which were already ancient began to fade, even though at times it was not easy to separate the portentous from the mundane. Yet they did not entirely lose their resonance.

Dylan making a return to form in *Oh Mercy* in 1989, when dreams again begin to feature, as in the song *Ring Them Bells*, when it refers to the “city that dreams”. In a song not featured on this album, but issued with the publication of *Lyrics* in 2004, comes the title *Series of Dreams*, which show that the dream world is in danger of collapse.

Where nothing comes to the top

Everything stays down where it's wounded

And comes to a permanent stop.

The later Albums, *Under the Red Sky*, *Time out of Mind*, and *Love and Theft*, gradually show the erosion even of personal dreams of love as the poet ages, perhaps felt most in his song *Born in Time*, when he sings of the lovers outside of time,

When we were made of dreams

and he declares *You can have what's left of me*,

finally confessing what had happened to his dreams in later albums in *Love and Theft* in the song *Floater*, when, along with Christmas, he had

Left all my dreams and hopes

Buried under tobacco leaves.

He is more explicit in the interview for his latest album, “Together Through Life” found on his website, www.bobdylan.com

In answer to a question: “Are you a mystical person?” he answers.

“Absolutely”

But "Dreams never did work for me anyway."

And yet Bob Dylan is still haunted by dreams – in this most recent album, "Together Through Life" which has been well received, he sings:

all I have is/ this dream of you is

And in this interview, he goes on to elaborate why he is still connected to dreams:

Dreams can lead us up a blind alley. Everybody has dreams. We go to sleep and we dream. I've always thought of them as coming out of the subconscious. I guess you can interpret them. Dreams can tell us a lot about ourselves, if we can remember them. We can see what's coming around the corner sometimes without actually going to the corner.

The interviewer asks: *Can't dreams also mean hopes about the future?*

Oh sure. It's about how we use the word, I guess. Hopes for the future? I've always connected them up with fears about the future. Hopes and fears go together like a comedy team. But I know what you are talking about. Like in the Everly Brothers song, ALL I HAVE TO DO IS DREAM. If they said, "All I have to do is hope," it wouldn't be saying the same thing. It wouldn't be as strong.

So dreams are even stronger than hope. And that may be why Bob Dylan has put dreams at the centre of his work, risking communication, making contact, even if he does not want to be taken for a fool. Perhaps he is in the tradition of mystics, a Holy Fool, to bring us to a realisation of the distance between our realities, which we make for ourselves, and dreams, or what we were made *for*. And we also share in listening to the songs, the dream that we can build a heaven, here below on earth. In fact, we find the dream underlying all the dreams is the dream of a New Jerusalem, as foretold in the apocalypse of St. John - it is the template of desire, the price he pays,

and the disappointment when it hasn't materialised - yet the underlying reality is that this dream is attainable. He has made contact with us, after all. And we can still dream of the "City of Gold" when he foresees a city built on light, love, grace, peace and hope. There the hope and the dream become one.

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QUOTE MAY BE ADDED BY READER

- from the book of the Apocalypse

I, John, saw a new heaven and a new earth; the first heaven and the first earth had disappeared now, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the holy city, and the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, as beautiful as a bride all dressed for her husband. Then I heard a loud voice call from the throne: You see this city? Here god lives among men. He will make his home among them; they shall be his people, and he will be their God; his name is God-with-them. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death and no more mourning or sadness. The word of the past has gone.'
Then the One sitting on the throne spoke: I am making the whole of creation new.

Apocalypse: 21. 1-5

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