

CHIMES OF FREEDOM

The Politics of Bob Dylan's Art

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One of the extraordinary things Dylan does in his post-protest songs is to offer a critique of politics itself as a field of human endeavor. In the

midst of a wave of mass political radicalization, he interrogates the political as a category. No song on *Another Side* distressed Dylan's friends in the movement more than "My Back Pages," in which he transmutes the rude incoherence of his ECLC rant into the organized density of art. The lilting refrain—"I was so much older then / I'm younger than that now"—must be one of the most lyrical expressions of political apostasy ever penned. It is a recantation, in every sense of the word. Usually, political apostates justify themselves by invoking the inevitable supersession of youth and rebelliousness by maturity and responsibility. ("He who is not a radical when young has no heart," an old saying goes, "he who remains a radical when old has no head.") Dylan reverses the polarity. The retreat from politics is a retreat from false and stale categories and acquired, secondhand attitudes. The antidote is a proud embrace of innocence and spontaneity. The refrain encapsulates the movement from the pretense of knowing it all to the confession of knowing nothing.

In the song's opening verse, Dylan ridicules his earlier, protest-phase self. With the "crimson flames" of indignation roaring in his head, he had set out on "flaming roads / Using ideas as my maps:"

... "Rip down all hate," I screamed
Lies that life is black and white
Spoke from my skull.

So much for the simplistic love vs. hate duality on which so much of the early civil rights and peace movement rhetoric relied (never much to Dylan's taste). But Dylan now switches from his own erstwhile naïveté to an attack on the dead culture of political activism: "memorizing politics / Of ancient history" (the sagas of the old left). He pours bile on the "self-ordained professor" who

Too serious to fool
Spouted out that liberty
Is just equality in school

The critique here is that the politically engaged lack the humor and playfulness that were always important to Dylan. But the verse also sug-

gests that their definition of liberty/freedom is too abstract—a mere slogan. There is also a reference to the movement's preoccupation with school desegregation and its limitations; there's more to freedom—the kind he'd been singing about in "Chimes of Freedom"—than integrated schools. As so often at this point in Dylan's evolution, his argument with the movement is partly that its definition of the political doesn't go far enough, isn't radical enough, partly that it is in itself a prison, a restraint, and partly that it is pompous and lame and no fun at all.

"Equality," I spoke the word
As if a wedding vow.
Ah, but I was so much older then,
I'm younger than that now.

Although in some way freedom remains, at this moment, within Dylan's lexicon, it seems equality is out. Here he can sound like a reactionary snifflily rejecting egalitarian ideologies, or Blake denouncing "mechanistic Deism," or a streetwise cynic who's wary of abstractions and the people dedicated to them. In the end, most of all, it is the inner cost of political activism that Dylan rejects; its certainties, its Manichaeism, are a betrayal of his own identity and autonomy: "I'd become my enemy / In the instant that I preach." Dylan is alarmed by the discovery of authoritarianism at the heart of the challenge to authority—and within himself. It's not only the repressive self-righteousness of the left that angers Dylan. He's groping after something more:

Yes, my guard stood hard when abstract threats
Too noble to neglect
Deceived me into thinking
I had something to protect

The impersonal demands of politics create the illusion that one has an investment in society—a theme sounded later that year in "Gates of Eden," "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue," and "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)." One is nothing and one owns nothing: recognizing that is the only starting point for real freedom and authenticity, the only way

to escape social control, to recapture yourself. In the final lines Dylan wallows in existential confusion:

Good and bad, I define these terms
Quite clear, no doubt, somehow.

The song ends with Dylan mocking his own incoherence. It's a cry of disorientation—and an acceptance of that condition in defiance of others' expectations. Yet in this song of recantation, there is continuity. The inadequacy of liberal responses to America's growing social crises is the premise here as much as it is in "Hattie Carroll." And the assertion of youth's right to speak out—from "Let Me Die in My Footsteps" to "The Times They Are A-Changin'"—is extended and deepened. Youth must reject the categories inherited from the past and define its own terms. Indeed, youth itself has become the touchstone of authenticity. A tremendously empowering notion for the generation whom it first infected, but also, as it turned out, a cul-de-sac, and less of a revolutionary posture than it seemed at the time.

The antipolitics of "My Back Pages" and "To Ramona" is only one expression of the changing artistic personality revealed on *Another Side*. In "All I Really Want to Do" Dylan assures the object of his erotic pursuit that he does not want to "analyze, categorize" her. In "It Ain't Me, Babe" he rejects a lover because she insists on casting him in a prefabricated mold; she is unwilling to accept his weaknesses (and philandering). "Everything inside is made of stone," he declares, a tremendous line whose power lies in its self-evident untruthfulness. What "It Ain't Me, Babe" poignantly champions is human fallibility, or, rather, Dylan's fallibility. As in the antipolitical songs, his immediate personal needs dovetail with a repudiation of attempts to pigeonhole human desires or reduce individual identities. On this album, it's not only dogmatism but often intellect itself that seems the enemy. "Spanish Harlem Incident" sounds like a good title for a protest song, but in fact it's a hymn to ephemeral sensuality—charged, perhaps naively, with racial implications. As in many white fantasies, the black woman is "too hot for taming." Dylan is self-conscious about his whiteness:

The night is pitch black, come an' make my
Pale face fit into place, ah, please!

The fantasy figure embodies a groping for a reality beyond the stifling categories of social norms: the singer needs to touch the woman "So I can tell if I'm really real."

ences—of the left's bad habit of grabbing on to creative artists and trying to program their output. In that light, Dylan's repudiation of the movement appears as an act of wilful self-liberation, a necessary step in his artistic evolution. But if that's all it had been, if it represented nothing more than a private maneuver, it wouldn't have produced so much in the way of lasting music; it wouldn't have touched and continued to touch others.

The moralism of the American left in these years—embodied in both the civil rights and peace movements—was indeed wearing. The stern challenge to bear witness against injustice, whose echoes fill “Blowin’ in the Wind,” seemed to leave little room for private indulgence. Dylan's response should be seen as part of a political battle to clear space for the personal, a battle fought as much within as against the left.* Like other young people, Dylan had been alerted by a dramatically shifting social environment to the greater richness of his own inner life, and, like others, he wanted the freedom to explore that mysterious and enticing landscape.

Dylan's political disillusionment resonates with historical parallels. His spiritual kin can be found among artists and intellectuals from other generations scorched by the flames of social revolt, from Wordsworth and Coleridge to Koestler and *The God That Failed*. You can hear something of “My Back Pages” in Yeats's “Meditation in Time of Civil War:”

We had fed the heart on fantasies
The heart's grown brutal from the fare
More substance in our enmities than in our loves

* About the same time Dylan was writing “My Back Pages” and “To Ramona,” a group of SNCC women activists issued a historic challenge to sexist practices within SNCC itself—and came up against a barrage of male mockery. Many of the criticisms made by the SNCC women echo Dylan's grievances against the movement: it did not practice what it preached, it exploited its adherents, its leaders were trapped within their own egos. Like Dylan, but with different purposes and to different effect, the SNCC women were redrawing the boundaries between the personal and the political. The moment that produced Dylan's apostasy also contained the seeds of the women's movement that was to stride boldly forward at the very end of the decade.

Of course, many on the left saw Dylan's turn from politics as little more than opportunism. They were reeling from an abrupt and painful repudiation. After all, Dylan hadn't put that much time or energy into trying to change things before he decided it wasn't worth the effort. And this recantation hadn't been forced upon him by any inquisition. So was it “just for a handful of silver he left us? / Just for a ribbon to stick in his coat?,” as Browning asked of Wordsworth. Was it, as suspected by some on the left, Albert Grossman's appetite for the big time? Or Dylan's narcissistic vanity?

Clearly, the ambitious artist that was stirring inside Dylan feared being stereotyped as a protest singer and servant of good causes. And he would have been aware—if only through Woody Guthrie's experi-

In Dylan's case, the trajectory that yields this perspective is extraordinarily telescoped. He makes a huge amount out of what was, by historic standards, a brief, largely secondhand experience. The point, however, is not the depth or detail of his personal political commitment, but its grip on his imagination; the emotional violence of Dylan's reaction against the movement was a measure of the importance it once held for him.

Dylan's turn away from politics was to become a recurring motif of the era, as wave after wave of young people engaged in and were scorched by political activity. Strange as it may sound when speaking of such a politically polarized era, this shift from the public to the personal was to prove a defining moment in the American sixties. In reaction to the sheer velocity of events, the agonizing ebb and flow of struggle, an anti-authoritarian anti-politics emerged. It's remarkable that the sense of futility should be so widely felt and expressed in what is viewed, in retrospect, as an era of inexorable progress. Of course, at the time there seemed nothing inexorable about it. In light of the obstacles thrown in their way, the forces of change seemed puny and inadequate. Dylan's songs trace a familiar movement from messianic expectation to cynical defeatism. However, as in many of his love songs, the sense of futility seems to set in even as the note of conquest is sounded.

In retrospect, Dylan's premature political disillusionment reflected not only the stresses of revolt and reaction, but also the relentless packaging of experience and identity in a consumer society. For Dylan and many others, one level of consciousness seemed to be quickly superseded by another; if you stayed at one level too long you risked being as obsolescent—and as inauthentic—as last year's fashions. Thus, Dylan helped make activism cool, and he helped make it uncool.

The songs of Dylan's apostasy belong especially to those who have remained politically engaged. They'll resonate with any activist who's ever been fed up to the back teeth with "the corpse evangelists," or feared that he or she was becoming one of them; with anyone exhausted by the posturing, dogmatism, and millennial self-confidence to which the left is prone; with anyone who has felt used and abused in the struggle; anyone who has wondered about his or her own motives and the

motives of his or her comrades; anyone reeling from the disappointment of a strike or a campaign or a grand strategy (the failure of the revolution to arrive or the realization that the would-be leaders of the revolution are no better than the rest); anyone who has ever yearned for some release from the demanding effort to match action to belief. In many years of political activism, I've more than once binged on the Dylan of this period, and relished his emotive attack on a movement that so rarely lives up to its claims.

Political engagement requires a degree of certainty—about public realities and the impact of public actions—and there are times when sustaining that degree of certainty is difficult in the extreme. Yet, as Dylan himself had pointed out in his earlier songs, our rulers thrive on our uncertainties ("the words that are used for to get the ship confused . . ."); we have to work constantly to reestablish our own right to speak and act. (That's why many are drawn to political sects; people need reenforcement to go against the grain.) And while it's an error to make a religion of struggle and sacrifice, it's an illusion to think the world can be improved without them. Sadly, Dylan's apostasy did prove a forerunner of much that was to come—a flood tide of post-sixties political recantations and personal reinventions.

Within a year of writing "Chimes of Freedom," Dylan no longer wanted any part of the storms of social change. In the dryly mournful "Farewell Angelina" (recorded during the *Bringing It All Back Home* sessions of January 1965 but left off the album), he openly declares his desire to escape from a society in crisis:

The machine guns are roaring
The puppets heave rocks
The fiends nail time bombs
To the hands of the clocks
Call me any name you like
I will never deny it
Farewell Angelina
The sky is erupting
I must go where it's quiet.

The political drama being played out around Dylan is the necessary and compelling context for the endless dreams of escape that fill the songs that followed his protest period. Throughout the sixties, Dylan is writing both within the historical tide and against it.
