A DARKER SHADE OF PALE

A Backdrop to Bob Dylan

WILFRID MELLERS

New York
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1985

2

Protest and Affirmation

Dylan's main sources we have seen to be North American (Yankee) transformations of British ballads, southern Poor White (Appalachian) metamorphoses of them, cowboy or hillbilly songs, Negro hollers and blues, and gospel music both black and white. But it is important to recognize that influences with Dylan are never more than skin deep: they mean no more than that he was alive in a world where other things happen. Everything is re-created in his performance, which is also composition; and in his composition, which is also performance. What matters is what Dylan does, not what he absorbs; and this is true even of his initial album, issued under the basic title of *Bob Dylan* in 1962, when he was a lank stripling of 20. By that time he was living penuriously in New York, singing at folk clubs in the Village, mostly at Mike Porco's on West Fourth Street. He told New Yorkers that he was an orphan from New Mexico!

Hardly any of the music on this first, 1962 disc is original Dylan. Significantly, he finds his material impartially in models white and black. 'Pretty Peggy O' is based on a traditional Scots folk song, 'The bonnie lass o'Pyvie' though–despite the Scots hoots that Dylan farcically injects into his Texan country version–that would be difficult to realize. He almost certainly picked it up not in its original form but in a modification sung by Joan Baez and published in a song book. He turns it into a white American march, whitely euphoric in its bouncing beat, tipsily chattering in its virtuosic harmonica interludes–which are funny, yet on tenterhooks. The raspy voice–especially on 'died'–provides a disturbing edge to the guitar's and

harmonica's low comedy. 'Man of constant sorrow', on the other hand, is unambiguously sorrowful, as it is when this southern American mountain song is sung by real folk singers like Sarah Ogan Gunning or by a modern revivalist like Judy Collins. Dylan takes over from traditional mountain style the bleatingly sustained tones that echo across the valleys, the painful elongation of vowel sounds, and the quavery melismata on words like 'troubled', complementing these vocal features with the spluttering gasps and the lonesome train hoots of his harmonica.

Still more remarkable are the numbers adapted from black singers. 'You're no good' he picked up from Jesse Fuller, the itinerant West Coast bluesman. He barks it huskily, fast and fierce, but tempers savagery with a minstrel-show style hint of the ludicrous. His harmonica playing, perhaps influenced by Sonny Terry whom he deeply admires, is very drunk: high, perhaps, because he had 'no food to eat'. Two death songs, however, balance this by being as primitive as black field or gospel hollers. 'Fixin' to die', adapted from Bukka White, has no tune but hollers in repeated notes and falling minor thirds, the rhythm distraught, the vocal timbre strangled. 'In my time of dyin'' has a rudimentary ostinato on guitar and a shouted incantation for voice as savage as a black tumbling strain. Dylan cannot remember when he first heard the song but makes no claim to have invented it–nor need he, since its shapes are so basic that they are common property. Another holler, this time in gospel vein, is his deeply moving version of Blind Lemon Jefferson's death-haunted 'See that my grave is kept clean'. This is a real blues, though often the guitar is content to substitute a throbbing drone for the conventional blues chord sequence. Whatever he may have learned from Jefferson, Dylan's control of line in relation to verbal meaning is here already *sui generis*; his extraordinary, instantly recognizable voice whispers, chuckles, grunts, growls and howls without impairing the line's musical contour. This is still more evident in 'House of the risin' sun', a semi-folk tune so haunting that it has been adapted by generations of folk, pop and even jazz singers. Dylan sings the number, originally the protest of a New Orleans prostitute, in her persona; in introverted intimacy, yet with disturbing

immediacy, as the pain-induced words provoke a tremor, even a soft snarl, in the rather noble melody. The wildly melismatic expansion of the tune in the middle stanzas and its graduated decline at the end show a remarkable, spontaneous maturity for so young a man. Although the song is not his own, there is enough re-creation to suggest that Dylan will soon emerge as a creator in his own right.

Other people's experience is personalized: singing 'Gospel plow', a spiritual that may be white or black, Dylan crowingly pleads for God's help in hanging on to the plough's handle. It is no longer merely a plough, but also any prop that the rudderless young might grasp at. Twenty years later Dylan is to grip that plough with a difference, but there can be no doubt of the intensity of this potential commitment in early youth. Desperation is not, however, an exclusive or even the main note of this album. Much of it is sheer fun, and some of it is comic to the verge of parody. He treats 'Freight train blues', a railway number garnered from Roy Acuff, in guitar-strumming white country abandon, blurting into Jimmie Rodgers-like yodels in emulation of the hooting train. Dylan makes himself laugh as much as his listeners. Caricature, benign rather than savage, balances his protesting anger, in a manner essential to his evolution as an independent song writer.

Such an equilibrium is embryonic in the only two originals on this disc, though neither is of much musical consequence. 'Talkin' New York', the first of Dylan's talkin' numbers, makes no pretence to musical substance. The words, jotted down–according to the record sleeve–on a hitch-hiking trip west as he abandoned a disillusioning New York, manage to be both acidly acute and funny. The incanted inflexions, over a thrummed ostinato, give vestigial musical pith and point to them, already indicating that Dylan's music will always be in some degree 'performed literature'. 'Song to Woody', the other original, is precisely what it says: a lonesome hobo song, with a tune that, like 'Three blind mice', is memorable if not distinguished, and with words addressed to, and in the manner of, his folk hero–with passing references to other legendary figures. Talkin' and Woody Guthrie were sparking points for Dylan's art. The song is both a homage and a farewell. Though he is to leave Guthrie

far behind as he gives the heritage presented on this first disc radical and wondrous transformations, he might legitimately claim that 'in my end is my beginning', as well as vice versa.

Dylan's development, both as man and as artist, was rapid and remarkable during the first three years of the sixties. By now he was concentrating mainly on originals in which the story-telling he had indulged in in boyhood takes on a deeper, more archetypal import, with resonances relevant to everyone. His musical techniques grew, through sedulous imitation and a hard process of self-discovery, in consort with his poetic flowering; his voice acquired its characteristic twang, his guitar and harmonica playing became potent enough for him to teach himself all he needed to know, at this stage, about composition. Like a real folk singer, he never had a formal music lesson and never needed one. His 1962–3 disc is pertinently called *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, followed in 1964 by *The Times They are A-changin'*, another title apposite in both private and public terms. These discs present numbers which are either originals or are made from traditional material so transformed that the re-fashioning has become a creative act. The songs may be grouped into four basic conventions.

The first is the narrative and/or preaching number in which the words are crucial because they tell a tale and deliver a message, to which the music is ancillary but supportive. Dylan's master, Woody Guthrie, though remarkable for the direct immediacy of his songs, was a complex, neurotic man whose obsession with radical politics was intellectually potent; he read widely and deeply, and knew what he was talking about. Dylan's politics, absorbed at second hand or from the air around him, were emotive and instinctual. In his teens older women mothered him and young women adored him for his waif-like vulnerability and boyish charm; many detected in him a comic pathos recalling Charlie Chaplin, whose films he had never seen. This image changed as he discovered his poetic and musical voice; but although, growing up to confront the painful realities of the world, he acquired a tart astringency, he was animated by gut reactions–by social conscience rather than by political intent. This is true even of 'Talkin' World War III blues' which, like 'Talkin' New York', has no tune and therefore no

lyricism. The words, spoken against a rudimentary blues sequence on guitar, are bitterly sophisticated in their comment on the plight of modern man, and the number seems to differ from a Woody Guthrie talkin' blues only in that Dylan's voice is more cunningly inflected. Even so, the tone is different; the words' fantasticality has a poetic rather than a social-political dimension.

This is more evident in a slightly more musical narrative number, 'The ballad of Hollis Brown'. The verses tell a true story of a farmer in South Dakota who, maddened by penury, shoots himself and his family. The motivation is political, but what Dylan responds to is the basic, pitiful human situation. He uses a straightforward linear technique to tell the tale, yet the literary form turns out, as with 'Talkin' New York', to be circular. Past and present tenses are confused; flashes of poetic metaphor and folk-like magical references–for instance to the number seven–enliven the flat language, while the music, consisting of a pre-pentatonic incantation supported by an unchanging ostinato of tonic and dominant chords on acoustic guitar, could hardly be more deprived. Dylan sings the mostly four-note incantation in middle register, in rasping sonority, with painful elongation of vowels. He sounds remarkably like Roscoe Holcomb or Nimrod Workman (whom he is unlikely to have heard), with a black tinge from, perhaps, Fred Macdowell. Musically, nothing happens within the song, except for a slight agitation of the guitar figuration in the penultimate stanza, yet the numbing vocal line, the nagging instrumental ostinato, the inexorable continuity, serve an imaginative purpose: it is possible to *go on*, at whatever rock-bottom level of fortitude. If seven people are dead on a South Dakota farm, somewhere seven new people are born. Dylan's deadpan, throwaway delivery of this statement leaves it open to the listener to interpret it as optimism or defeat.

Dylan's singing technique here testifies to the sense in which his identity as poet is, even in these early days, inseparable from his identity as composer. Although his numbers are notated, as a real folk singer's are not, the pitches and rhythms he sings are not those on the printed page: microtonal distortions of pitch and flexibilities of nuance determine both musical and verbal expression. In this song, for instance, the potent metaphor of

the grass 'turning black' in the sixth stanza, the 'cold coyote' that howls in the wilderness of stanza seven, and the 'seven breezes a-blowin' all around the cabin door' after the murder and suicide, introduce linear arabesques and hesitancies of rhythm that are the heart of the musical experience, not a decorative addition to it. The relationship between words and music is as intimate as it is in medieval and non-Western cantillation, and considerably more so than it is in the Elizabethan ayre with lute.

Similar in technique to 'Hollis Brown' is an explicit preaching song, 'Masters of war', one of the few numbers which Dylan admits to being motivated by hate. The words are satirically trenchant and cumulative, the music a pre-pentatonic incantation close to that of 'Hollis Brown' over the same oscillating tonics and dominants. However, the song is the obverse of 'Hollis Brown' in that the words are highly charged and rhetorically pointed, safeguarded from hysteria by the music's non-developing reiterations. In 'Hollis Brown' the music's inexorability reinforces the flat telling of the tale, incrementally inducing panic which explodes in murder and suicide, before placing the 'tragedy' (in the newspapers' sense) in the context of history. The language of 'Hollis Brown' is poetic because the words invite sympathy for, though not identification with, the protagonists. The words of 'Masters of war', on the other hand, are plain, apart from the 'pale afternoon' on which, in the last stanza, the funeral of the mass murderers takes place. In those two simple words, the dire machinations of the war-lords are revealed to have human consequences. The afternoon is anthropomorphically pale: it is drained of our blood. In the penultimate verse there is an early reference to Jesus, though he belies his nature in that even he would 'never forgive' what the war-lords do.

Sometimes these incantatory songs are narrative and preaching at the same time. 'Who killed Davy Moore?', a number which Dylan has not recorded commercially,[1] deals in primitive intonation–the last six bars merely alternate between two tones–with a specific human situation. In the tersely vernacular

[1] Pete Seeger's rather melodramatic version is available on *Pete Seeger: We Shall Overcome*.

verses everyone–boxer, referee, promoter, manager, journalist, crowd–in turn disclaims responsibility for a ringside disaster, and the music universalizes this by floating, in pentatonic spontaneity, to the surface of the mind. It is as archetypal as the 'Cock Robin' rhyme it transmutes, and this must be why the effect of the song is more musically impressive than its minimal notation would lead one to expect. The 'Cock Robin' phrase has wide and deep mythological references, and a tale told in the squalid context of the boxing world proves to be a confrontation with, not a liquidation of, universal guilt.

Such an exploitation of old and powerfully reverberative sources leads to the second type of song typical of Dylan's early years. In this category interest centres not in declamation but in a tune. None the less, the impact of these melodies is inseparable from the way in which the words would be spoken: particularized tenderness, grace or vivacity; or anger, disgust or malice. Sometimes, though infrequently in the early period, these lyrical numbers are love songs, and are in both verbal and musical formulae closely related to or directly derived from real rural melodies. 'Girl from the north country', for instance, is a rehash of 'Scarborough Fair'; the singer conveys, in traditional folk style, a message to his girl by way of a third party, and in the process nostalgically identifies person and place. The tune's obsession with a tonic major triad is reflected in the simplest triadic harmony, yet so sensitively does Dylan vary pitch and rhythm that the melody lilts across the beat, emulating the 'snowflakes and howlin' winds' making the girl's hair 'flow and roll all down her breast'. 'Boots of Spanish leather' is a comparably tender, original love song. The poetry has something of the radiance of real folk verse:

> O but if I had the stars from the darkest night
> And the diamonds from the deepest ocean,
> I'd forsake them all for your sweet kiss,
> For that's all I'm wishin' to be ownin'.

Even the wryly defensive last stanza, in which he suggests that if she is going to leave him he may as well get a pair of Spanish boots as compensation, is not without parallel in folk sources. The tune is clearly diatonic and again tends to be triadic; none

the less it floats across the triple beat and hints, since the III–IV–I harmony evades the dominant, at a folk-like modality. The guitar figuration is continuous, but gently enveloping, rather than mindlessly merry. Such a song belongs to a young man of the second half of the twentieth century, while incorporating elements that spring from a remote rural past–as does his version of a genuine country song, 'Corinna, Corinna', which he sings with an open-eyed and open-eared tenderness safeguarded from sentimentality by the tranquillizing, jogging 6/8 metre, and an occasional falsetto lift.

The two most characteristic love songs on these two discs are, if not anti-love songs, at least dismissive in tone. 'Down the highway' is a farewell to a girl the singer has obviously been fond of but has become disillusioned with. Although the number is credited to Dylan as an original composition, its manner is so basic to black blues idiom that it can be thought of as part of an old and primitive tradition. The verse structure is that of the blues; the falling pitches are as rudimentary as a field holler; the vocal distonations and colorations are worthy of Big Joe Williams to whom, in this context, Dylan pays homage. He is also justified in claiming that, like a real black bluesman, he is here using the blues authentically–as a means of getting outside personal distress, instead of wallowing in it–as is implicit in the tremolando guitar interludes.

The same therapeutic function is served by another song, this time in white country idiom. It is not really surprising that 'Don't think twice, it's all right' has remained one of the most potent of Dylan's early songs, for it does far more than wave a cheery goodbye to a girl who has proved inadequate. When the rooster crows, he is 'travelling on', not because the woman was particularly 'unkind', but because she 'could have done better', and 'kinda wasted my time'. He wanted a relationship which didn't waste time because it was rooted in the truth of feeling, with which, Dylan has said, all his songs are concerned. Having failed to find such a relationship, he does not feel vindictive, but knows he must have the confidence to move on, even to be lonesome a while, if need be. This necessity to be himself is what he learned from Woody Guthrie, and in this song it is the music that offers an affirmation. The tune rocks between minor

and major thirds over the vivacious beat, balancing its dominant by a subdominant modulation, and effecting release by a chromatic twist in the return to the tonic. It comes across as a song about dawn and the rooster rather than as a song of farewell. Its re-creativity is inherent in the immediacy of Dylan's vocal inflexions–for instance the open caws on 'break' (of dawn) and on 'all' in contrast with the decline of pitch and discoloration of tone on 'stay'. 'Don't think twice' is a love song because it is infectiously pro-life.

Songs in Dylan's lyrical category are not necessarily love songs. 'North country blues', for instance, is not a blues but a mining town song in the form of a waltz. The Aeolian tune, enclosed within fourths and fifths, is as austere as a real Kentucky mining melody. The tale is told, again in authentic folk spirit, without rhetoric, though the self-enclosed identity of the melody assuages pain in a way that the declamatory technique of 'Hollis Brown' does not. Occasionally a lyrical song may be also satirical and covertly or overtly political. 'With God on our side' retells American military history with savage verbal humour, to a swinging hillbilly waltz tune. On any count this melody–with its cowboyish upward-arching sixth and slow declension–is memorable, and Odetta's very slow and very beautiful performance proves that it can be deeply affecting. This is not Dylan's intention: the total impact of *his* performance depends on an equilibrium between the bitterness of the words:

> The cavalries charged,
> The Indians died,
> O the country was young
> With God on its side;

their grotesque horror:

> Though they murdered six million
> In the ovens they fried,
> The Germans now too
> Have God on their side;

and the annealment the lyrical tune offers. The tune comforts, even delights, yet at the same time is recurrently modified by

Dylan's response to specific words and phrases. With Dylan melody is never an absolute.

In this song the harmonica sometimes sounds Edenic, but sometimes emulates–ironically in the context–a chapel organ. This fits with the Christian gloss given to the penultimate stanza, which ought to be the end of the number, since the moralizing last stanza is tautological. Though the point of the words:

> But I can't think for you,
> you'll have to decide
> Whether Judas Iscariot
> Had God on his side.

remains political or at least sociological, Dylan is later to give an explicitly religious answer to his hitherto unanswered question. The same is true of other songs of the period which are usually construed as political. The folk technique of question and answer in antiphony, allied to the positive, unmodulating, resolutely diatonic country tune, gives 'Blowin' in the wind' a dimension indicative of a change of heart as well as of political organization, reminding us that an answer to the question:

> How many deaths will it take till he knows
> That too many people have died?

cannot be given in merely material terms. A political panacea, though necessary, is not enough; nor was it even Dylan's ostensible theme, for he remarked in an interview for *Sing Out!* that, 'There ain't too much I can say about this song except that the answer is blowing in the wind. It ain't in no book or movie or TV show or discussion group. Man, hip people are telling me where the answer is but oh *I won't believe that*. I still say it's in the wind and just like a restless piece of paper it's got to come down some time . . . But the only trouble is that no one picks up the answer.'

In his notorious speech to the Civil Liberties Committee which had awarded him the Tom Paine medal for his services to civil rights Dylan came near to biting the hand that fed him. 'I'm trying to go up without thinking of anything trivial, such as politics,' said he. 'That has got nothing to do with it. I'm

thinking about the general people, and when they get hurt.' Even when he is writing positively of political issues, his approach tends to be as much religious as sociological. 'When the ship comes in' sounds like a revolutionary song and John Herdman may be right in suggesting that it was prompted by Brecht's 'Pirate Jenny'. Yet the basic provenance of this ship is messianically biblical, and its vision of the 'dreadful day' (of Judgement) is no less theologically traditional for being comic. Whether the words are taken politically or apocalyptically, and both are valid, the song comes across as neither bitter nor even satirical, but as merrily affirmative. The mainly stepwise-moving, unambiguously diatonic tune bounces out of the wittily lilting words:

> Oh the fishes will laugh
> As they swim out of the path
> And the seagulls they'll be smiling.

And the very symmetry of the tune, which thrusts forward but does not modulate, demonstrates how

> The sun will respect
> Every face on the deck,
> The hour when the ship comes in.

Here Dylan has imbued the euphoria of the white American march with recharged electrical energy. The song does not merely encourage its audience to keep going by being vacuously cheerful in the face of desperate odds; rather it achieves a resilience in its metrical rhythm and an elasticity and drive in the repeated notes in the marching melody that effect a creative awakening, even a new birth. The benign glee with which Dylan announces that even 'foes', jerked from their beds, will

> . . . pinch themselves and squeal
> And know that it's for real,
> The hour when the ship comes in.

clearly involves more than social metamorphosis. Words and music have an equal and complementary liveliness. Although tune and beat seem to carry all before them, Dylan's response to individual words and phrases is continually renewing: consider

his treatment of the long note, originally a 'breaking', at the end of the stanzas, and the effervescent rhythms, half rhymes and internal assonances that prompt one to laugh out loud. Such technical skill should not be underestimated because it is largely instinctual.

Such a song crosses the border into the fourth category which we may call apocalyptic. In these songs words and tune are often a permutation of real folk sources. 'A hard rain's a-gonna fall', for instance, is a refashioning of the ballad of Lord Randal. The sinister story is remade in universal terms:

> O what did you see, my blue-eyed son?
> . . . I saw a newborn baby with wild wolves all round it,
> I saw a highway of diamonds with nobody on it,
> I saw a black branch with blood that kept dripping . . .
> I saw a white ladder all covered with water.

Such poetic imagery has an affinity with runic folk verse such as the magnificent 'Nottamin Town' in which a country boy, marooned in a city, sits himself down

> . . . on a hard, hot, cold frozen stone,
> Ten thousand around me, yet I was alone;
> Took my hat in my hands for to keep my head warm,
> Ten thousand got drownded that never were born.

There are parallels too with the visionary writing of Bunyan and Blake. But although Dylan preserves the incremental treatment of the original tune, he damps down its wildness, transforming its modality into a halting seven-bar phrased hillbilly waltz, and singing it flatly, even monotonously. The song is often related to the Cuban missile crisis, with the hard rain being atomic fall-out. Dylan denied this, with some point since the first version of the number predates that event. Associations with the Bomb inevitably intrude, though there are no specific references to it in the text and the 'pellets of poison' are virulent enough in representing 'all the lies that people are told on their radios and in the newspapers, trying to take people's brains away'. The text functions by way of ironic parallels between the private crime of Lord Randal's murder in olden times and the public holocaust faced by the modern world. The scenes evoked in the

poetic imagery are indeed archetypal; and the attitude of the narrator–both Dylan himself and an anonymous representative of our beleagured race–varies from stanza to stanza, being now hopeful, now despairing, now savage, now sad. The reference to the young girl's rainbow in the last stanza has Christian overtones which grow stronger in Dylan's later work. But the Christian hope is present merely among many, often contradictory, possibilities. The ambiguity mirrors that of the world we live in, and is feasible only in an aural poetry which may be modified in the moment of utterance. Even in his protest days Dylan was seldom a didactic artist.

Prophetic songs like 'When the ship comes in' and visionary songs like 'A hard rain' set the stage for Dylan's second period which is broached, though not conclusively entered, in his fourth album, appropriately titled *Another Side of Bob Dylan* (1964). Links with his earlier songs are obvious enough: 'I shall be free No. 10' is a talkin' number with a political burden, while 'Chimes of freedom' might be described as the last of the protest songs, with an apocalyptic undertow. There is, however, a difference: the 'victims' who are involved and prayed for are not merely casualties of an unjust economic system but rather the 'countless confused, accused, misused, strung-out ones an' worse'. There is therefore a connection between such public appeals for freedom and the more personal songs in which Dylan seeks escape from any human relationship that threatens his personal integrity. These songs are not really cruel, because he is asking the other person not to fear self-knowledge. Sometimes the effect is comic, as in 'All I really want to do', a rudimentary country waltz with a verse that simply flops down the scale and is then perked up by a yodelling refrain in Jimmie Rodgers style. Both the internal rhymes and half rhymes and the bouncing phrases are irresistible, defining positives by listing the negative qualities his girl would be better without.

'Black crow blues', a mean, low-down honky-tonk number, seems more desolately negative, yet generates energy from its meanness, so that it comes across as a kind of affirmation. 'It ain't me, babe', also dismissive in that he refuses to allow the girl's self-regarding love to engulf him, disarms through its lyricism and chuckles through its internal rhymes. Here Dylan's

irony laughs rather than blisters, and laughter can be a great healer. Something similar is true of 'To Ramona' and 'Spanish Harlem incident', which move closer towards Dylan's second phase–perhaps because the young women in these songs are exotic. Ramona's Tex-Mex waltz slides through a ninth on to a firm tonic, as Dylan tries to dispel her dreams and make her face herself as well as him. 'Spanish Harlem incident' concerns a 'gypsy gal' whose 'temperature's too hot for taming'. This time it is the singer who learns self-knowledge: 'Will I be touching you/So I can tell if I'm really real?' The tune is not as insidious as Ramona's, but it gets the words across–which in this case is the point.

If such songs are regarded as transitional, Dylan's second period proper can be said to begin in the following year, 1965, with *Bringing It All Back Home*. Whereas his first phase had been a kind of anti-litany, exorcizing the devil in an incantory, even at times unmusical, cawing style, raucous and rancid, the evolution from protest to ambiguous acceptance is also a move towards lyricism and music. 'It's all right, ma (I'm only bleeding)' is a turning-point. Basically it is a talkin' number in which the words, building incrementally with complex internal rhymes, devastatingly comment on the hypocrisies of (especially modern) civilization. There is a mixture of narration and preaching but both, perhaps continuing from the apocalyptic numbers, have a somewhat hallucinatory quality. The analysis of social ills is no longer merely from the outside:

> My eyes collide head on with stuffed graveyards,
> False gods, I scuff
> At pettiness which plays so rough
> Walk upside down inside handcuffs
> Kick my legs to crash it off.

But when Dylan reaches the refrain and tells his mother and us that he can make it, the music breaks into a pentatonic roulade that is at least more lyrical than the previous talk. Over a rudimentary guitar ostinato the pentatonic falling third is augmented on 'It's all right, ma'. The effect of this unchanging refrain grows stronger through the slowly exfoliating stanzas, getting the better of both the nagging and the talk. The music

amplifies the words: despite the horrors abroad, the bleeding and sighing and dying, it *is* all right, and the mother figure can be addressed comically yet without contempt.

There are more Negroid elements in this song than in most of the others so far discussed. Out of black rhythmic flexibility and ambiguous blue thirds comes the hint of a new world, embracing a reality within as well as without the mind. Given that white had to absorb black in order to attain to adulthood and that blacks are popularly supposed to be closer to instinctual sources than ego- and intellect-bound whites, it is not surprising that the merging of white with black idiom in Dylan's songs should initiate his exploration of the inner life of dream and nightmare. Certainly it would be on the mark, in comparing 'Subterranean homesick blues' with the first period's 'Talkin' World War III blues', to point out not only that the music is much blacker in its barrel-house beat and false relations, but also that the words are more potent but less logically explicit, with their derisive internal rhymes:

> Ah get born, keep warm,
> Short pants, romance, learn to dance,
> Get dressed, get blessed,
> Try to be a success. . . .
> Don't wanna be a bum,
> You better chew gum,
> The pump don't work
> 'Cause the vandals took the handles.

That last clause is not only funny but also–since handles are used to control things–exact in encapsulating the demise of industrial technocracy. 'Outlaw blues' has a similar comic ferocity. It is a genuine twelve-bar blues in fast barrel-house style, in which Dylan uses his voice like blackly neurotic Robert Johnson. Even white country numbers have acquired something of this interior electricity. 'Maggie's farm', for instance, is a half-speaking, half-singing, narrative ballad with social implications in that Dylan dismisses Maggie's brothers, Ma and Pa as the predators and slave drivers they seem to be. Yet at the same time he invests his comments–especially by way of his varied distortions of the interval of the fifth–with a blue-black edge

that is both passionate and hilarious. It follows that his denunciation is not totally negative. Ma and Pa are vividly realized, and for Ma there is even a hint of compassion: although she is an old bag who 'talks to all the servants about Man and God and Law', she is vulnerable–after all, she is 68, though she says she is 54.

Even 'Love minus Zero/no limit', though a country song with no obvious black features, has a new interior intensity in its displaced, slightly hallucinatory chords. It hints at an ideal(ized) love relationship with a woman who, Zen-affiliated, is beyond the evasions and insincerities that afflict most social intercourse: she 'winks, she does not bother,/She knows too much to argue or to judge'. There may be an anticipation of the surreal imagery of Dylan's psychedelic phase; and the revelatory moments seem to be precipitated out of the admission of harsh and abrasive realities:

> The bridge at midnight trembles
> The country doctor rambles
> Bankers' nieces seek perfection
> Expecting all the gifts that wise men bring.
> The wind howls like a hammer
> The night blows cold and rainy
> My love she's like some raven
> At my window with a broken wing.

The imagery startles in its unexpectedness. Herdman suggests that it owes its evocativeness to a probably unconscious reference to Edgar Allan Poe's 'Nevermore'-cawing raven; and since kafka means raven in Czech, there may be a reference to Franz Kafka's story *The Country Doctor*. Certainly Dylan's obliquities about events and motivations are often Kafkaesque, and the ghostly presence of Kafka's country doctor may have some bearing on his verse's mysteriousness: as does the airy melody which, floating waveringly over plain diatonic concords, mostly I, V, IV and III, seems at once real and illusory. This is one of the first Dylan songs to explore the cinematic technique of mutable images which he is to develop in much of his later work. It is both verbally and musically potent.

As Dylan's art embraces more layers of experience, it equivocates more between appearance and reality, dream and night-

mare. 'Mr Tambourine Man' is the first and remains one of the greatest of his dream songs, with a melody the more haunting because it is impossible to categorize. Although it has something in common with Celtic folk song and American country music, its quality cannot be defined in terms of them, and it has no connection with the Negro blues. Far from being socially committed, 'Mr Tambourine Man' looks as though it might be an escape song: and may be so, if there is any basis to the suggestion that a tambourine man is a pedlar of pot. But the hallucinatory imagery need not have narcotic origins: Dylan specifically says that he is 'not sleepy', though there 'ain't no place' he's going to. The heart of the matter is that his Pied-Piper myth encourages us to follow the unconscious wherever it may spontaneously lead us–ecstatically into the sky where there are 'no fences' to confine 'the skippin' reels of rhyme', but also into vaguely minatory regions 'down the foggy ruins of time, far past the frozen leaves,/The haunted, frightened trees, out to the windy beaches'. Poetically, Dylan wings to lyrical heights, in a manner that is inherently aural rather than visual in its patterned internal rhymes, assonances and alliterations. Musically the refrain wavers irregularly, like the smoke rings, which are imitated by the circularity of the repeated clauses, sidling down through an octave, then unfurling.

The verbal and metrical equivocations are also reflected in the ambiguous tonality: although the song is notated as though it were in D major, the tune behaves melodically, and is harmonized, as though it were in a Lydian G major–D major's subdominant with sharpened fourth. It can be only fortuitous, though happily so, that the Lydian mode was traditionally associated with healing. Here it is the tonal ambiguity that makes the melody float so dreamily, so that when a D major cadence is reached at the end of the stanza, it has little finality and the music, like the words, seems ready to take off again. So, as the rings of the melody unfold, we are liberated; and the song turns out to be about recharging our spiritual batteries today in order to find life again tomorrow. The song is unexpectedly disturbing because its mythology plumbs unexpectedly deep. What Dylan is dealing in here, on behalf of the spiritually if not materially deprived young of the sixties, is musical therapy with

its origins in real folk art. He is a shaman who effects psychological fulfilment.

This bears on the fact that Dylan's harmonica playing in this song is extraordinarily poignant. He ends with a fade-out through a long da capo of the tune on his harmonica which, being a primitive country instrument, invented about 1820, evokes the pristine world of the American New Adam. The harmonica, like the voice, has to find its own pitch, and owes its pathos to its failure quite to do so. Its quavery tones sound young and hopeful, yet at the same time frail. It longs for Eden, where pitch could be perfect, and its lonesome sound–especially as Dylan expressively plays it–contains both promise and regret. It cannot be an accident that the next song in the sequence is called 'Gates of Eden'. The Blakean poem is again richly allusive, and if the tune is less memorable it creates, within the compass of a seventh in the Mixolydian mode, an appropriate naval-gazing hypnosis. Again the song concerns the state of Eden as a condition to be won and from which to be reborn:

> At dawn my lover comes to me and tells me of her dreams
> With no attempt to shovel the glimpse
> Into the ditch of what each one means.
> At times I think there are no words
> But these to tell what's true,
> And there are no truths outside the gates of Eden.

None the less these truths are being outmoded, and *Bringing It All Back Home* marks, for Dylan, the end of an era. Significantly, the album concludes with 'It's all over now, Baby Blue', a number which seems to be a rejection of the blue-eyed folk music within which Dylan had been nurtured. Songs like 'Baby Blue', 'Mr Tambourine Man' and 'Gates of Eden' mark an end to Dylan's interest in the folk 'movement' or in overt protest. It was about this time he made one of his most revealing pronouncements, dismissing protest songs as

> vulgar–the idea that somebody has to say what they want to say in a message type song. It's a stagnation kind of thing . . . worse than being a pregnant dog.

He dismissed folk song also, but only in its conventional stereotypes:

> Most of the people who are down on me because of folk music just don't know what they're talking about. They always say folk music should be simple so people can understand. *People*! That's insulting somebody, calling them people. But the truth is there are weird folk songs that have come down through the ages, based on nothing, or based on legend, Bible, plague, religion, just based on mysticism. Those old songs weren't simple at all.[2]

Indeed they weren't; and it's possible that Dylan was helped towards this realization by the stunning impact made on him by the songs of the Beatles' middle phase. Henceforth his songs will veer between reality and dream which may be nightmare; and this is true even although the first song on the next disc, *Highway 61 Revisited*, (1965), seems to dismiss dreams as mere illusion.

[2] Quoted in Scaduto, *Bob Dylan*.