# 3

# Between Vision and Nightmare

'Like a rolling stone' is about a girl whom Dylan calls Miss Lonely because that is what–though she has 'been to the finest school'–she is. He strips her of both her possessions and of her self-deceits:

You shouldn't let other people
Get your kicks for you.
You used to ride on the chrome horse with your diplomat
Who carried on his shoulder a Siamese cat
Ain't it hard when you discover that
He really wasn't where it's at
After he took from you everything he could steal.

Although the words are dismissive, the music–with its jaunty repeated notes and eyebrow-arching rising thirds, its fragmented phrases that leave one agog for what's coming next–is positive in total effect. Stripped to a rolling stone the girl, like Dylan himself, has a chance of starting again. The sheer exuberance of the rocking instrumentals imparts to Dylan's broken crowing a heady glee. He is putting down a girl who may have wanted to gobble him up like a lollypop, but music so affirmative cannot be finally destructive. Although the tune is so potent, it is restricted to very few pitches. Its affirmation depends largely on its irregularly rhythmed repeated notes, and on an opposition between rising third and falling fourth, changed to rising fourth and falling major third during the refrain. From its simplicity springs its universality. Dylan seems to have been aware of this, since it was about the songs of this





period, and this one in particular, that he confessed that in saying 'he', 'she', 'it' or 'they', 'I was really talking about me. I hadn't really known before that I was writing about myself in all these songs.'[1] So in a sense Dylan is here putting himself down, as well as the girl, and finds strength in self-knowledge. 'Like a rolling stone' became an anthem for youth in the sixties, and is still susceptible to varied transformations, some of which will be discussed later. In all versions the song, though it is about rejection, comes across as positive, for the denial of secrecy and pretence leaves Dylan free.

This song, and *Highway 61 Revisited* as a whole, represent a new start, the basis of which is freedom. But freedom, though exhilarating, is also dangerous, for it means accepting everything that the mind contains, the rough with the smooth, the black with the white. Dylan's resort to the drug experience was not an escape but rather an attempt to face up to whatever darker depths, as well as whatever lighter heights, were waiting to be revealed. It cannot be an accident that this evolution coincides with Dylan's rejection of folk tradition and his adoption of electrophonic technology. Whereas 'Mr Tambourine Man', although a drug song, is folky and countrified, with acoustic guitar and Edenic harmonica, 'Ballad of a thin man', a key number on the new album, is in city blues style, late Chicago vintage, with driving rock beat and electric amplification. When he first turned from folk guitar to the pop groups' electrophonic media Dylan was branded as a traitor by folk purists, even though he had never been, strictly speaking, a folk singer. Their objection was frivolous. A folk-pop artist, communicating with thousands, has no choice but to use the media his environment offers him, and may do so the more potently when these media may be used to turn the tables. The fine modal tune of 'Ballad of a thin man' can embrace both the subtlest harmonic ellipsis and the spooky electrophonic gibberings, so that although Mr Jones is witheringly demolished, the melody's breadth preserves something like compassion. There have been many specific identifications of Mr Jones and none of them matters. We need recognize only that he's the (fairly) respectable man in the street, and possibly you or I. He might

[1] Interview in *Rolling Stone*, 1969.

even be Dylan himself, for the singer is no longer outside his victim:

> You raise up your head
> And you ask, 'Is this where it is?'
> And somebody points to you and says 'It's his'
> And you say 'What's mine?'
> And somebody else says 'Where what is?'
> And you say, 'Oh my God, am I here all alone?'

The nightmare is both without and within, and the song asks questions about identity and, indeed, about existence itself: 'What *is*?' The dark threat inherent in melody, harmony and driving pulse is poles removed from the self-righteous arrogance of some of the early protest songs. The same could be said of 'Desolation row' in comparison with an early monologue like 'Talkin' World War III blues'. In a sense it is a political piece, cataloguing at some length the ills of modern civilization, its hypocrisies and self-deceits. But these ills cannot be righted by a particular course of action. We are all involved in them, as we are all to some degree the Mr Jones whom Dylan's deeper voice seems momentarily to threaten. Our involvement is the more anguished because the desolation that faces us is not merely our failings and perversities but also the nuclear holocaust that may bring a Day of Judgement in its wake. From this man-made horror the moon and stars are not merely hidden because dust-shrouded, but are themselves cowering, 'beginning to hide'. The 'fortune-telling lady' has packed up shop because no individual human creature has a life or fortune left to tell; only 'Cain and Abel and the Hunchback of Notre-Dame' find some perverse gratification in the situation. Ophelia has a fleeting glimpse of Noah's rainbow, but the rest of the world is mindlessly making love or, in several senses, 'expecting rain'. 'Praise be to Nero's Neptune, the *Titanic* sails at dawn,' caws Dylan with grim jubilation, encapsulating in this brilliant image the possibility that only through disaster, as Nero fiddles while New York-London-wherever burns, can there be any hope for mankind redeemed, even though individual men and women may have been obliterated. The bass is animatedly melodic, even perky.





On this disc there is a comparable deepening and opening out in lyrical as well as in talkin' numbers. 'Never say goodbye' is beautifully economical in setting its wintry scene of silent twilight on the frozen lake, and in balancing dubiety about a relationship with someone else with self-doubt; his 'iron and steel' dreams reach after a 'big bouquet of red roses' hanging from the heavens, and he reaches for the girl's hand as the 'crashing waves' threaten to engulf him. Musically it is a slow loping blues in barrel-house style, played on a honky-tonk piano, with harmonica making wailing train noises. Its synthesis of toughness and tenderness is strangely moving.

Some such fusion of poetic with musical depths becomes the heart of the work of Dylan's mid-sixties phase, and especially of the next (double) album, *Blonde on Blonde* (1966). Here apparent opposites have become almost indistinguishable, as Dylan gets deeper into drugs, especially LSD, hopefully to aid his search for inner identity. In later years Dylan has been cagey about his drug use which has, of course, a negative aspect in so far as it was an attempt to deal with the paranoic, near-psychotic state induced in him by conflict between the personal integrity and social honesty his songs dealt in and the nightmare life of a superstar, which he yearned for yet hated. What matters is not the nature or extent of his recourse to drugs, if any, but the intensity of his songs' equivocation between reality and dream. Quasi-surrealistic imagery has become pervasive, yet the verse is not automatic writing by free association. The openness of the words functions in the same way as oral poetry, and although meanings may be multifarious and sometimes contradictory, they do exist, and are ultimately apparent in what the music, in any given performance, does to them. Dylan has retained a special affection for *Blonde on Blonde* as the album in which he first uncompromisingly explored his inner resources. Speaking of the disc he said:

> It's the sound and the words. Words don't interfere with it. They punctuate it. You know, they give it purpose. And all the ideas for my songs come out of that. . . . I'm not doing it to see how good I can sound, or how perfect the melody can be, or how intricate the details can be woven or how perfectly

written something can be. . . . I symbolically hear that sound wherever I am . . . the sound of the street with the sunrays. The closest I ever got to that sound I hear in my mind was on individual bands in the *Blonde on Blonde* album. It's that thin, that wild mercury sound. It's metallic and bright gold. . . . I haven't been able to succeed in getting it all the time.[2]

The electrophonic sophistication of Dylan's resources is clearly an aspect of that search; and although Dylan's use of electrophonics must owe much to his experienced associates, notably Robbie Robertson, the above quotation would seem to indicate that Dylan provided the imaginative initiative. He knew the sound he wanted in a given context; the technical gadgetry was a means towards the heart's truth. In later work Dylan sometimes builds on it and sometimes, as in *John Wesley Harding*, bypasses it. But the metamorphosis remains radical. That thin, wild mercury sound is pertinent to most of Dylan's later music.

Characteristically, *Blonde on Blonde* is introduced by a number which consists simply of variations on a pun. 'Rainy day women ♯ 12 & 35' is musically corny: a parody of a New Orleans marching or Yankee Revivalist band, with a tune that is a crude chromatic descent over a lolloping, Sousa-style 6/8 beat. The electrophonic scoring, with crowd noises offstage, is brilliant. The words pun playfully upon two meanings of 'stoned': the honest man or woman, an outsider because of his or her freedom from conventional values, will have stones hurled at him or her by the conformists, even when 'tryin' to be so good'; he or she will also get stoned on whatever it might be, partly as a consequence of this outlawism, partly in an attempt to discover truer values through the Blakean Doors of Perception. The words are mostly comic, though their serious portent surfaces in the later stanzas:

> They'll stone you and then say you are brave,
> They'll stone you when you are set down in your grave,
> But I would not feel so all alone,
> Everybody must get stoned.

[2] Interview, *Rolling Stone*, 1969.





Dylan's voice rasps subtle changes, through the tritely trotting tune, emphasizing different words–now 'would not', now 'alone', now 'everybody', now 'must'. Although it is a joke number, musically insignificant, the joke itself may have profound implications–as is perhaps evident when Dylan follows 'Rainy day women' with 'Pledging my time', a very black blues in a slow-lilting boogie rhythm that reflects back on the perfunctory jogging of the previous march. In this number Dylan's distonations of pitch are authentically Negroid; the blue thirds and fifths are always painfully indeterminate–which fits the words, teetering between negative emotions of disgust and betrayal and positive emotions of hope and trust, as he pledges his time to her, *in potentia*.

These two quite brief numbers are preludial to 'Visions of Johanna', one of Dylan's longest and most complex songs, and poetically among the finest. The words are usually considered to be psychedelically obscure, though they are intelligible enough if one grants that Dylan is using a cinematic rather than a chronologically linear technique. The scene is set with maximum economy, without resort to overt description: in a nocturnal urban tenement room, 'lights flicker from the opposite loft', 'the heat-pipes just cough' and 'the country music station plays soft'. Dylan or the poet-speaker is there, apparently in bed with a girl called Louise, though her physical presence gets confused with the ghostly identity of an absent girl, Johanna, whose image is far more potent. (She has sometimes been identified as Joan Baez, though that is needlessly and destructively to limit the poem's reverberations.) That the pronoun veers between 'I' and 'he' is not only in folk tradition, but also psychologically apposite in that Dylan is aware of a dual identity: a self that is here with 'delicate' Louise, who is like a mirror (of himself) and makes it 'all too concise and too clear'; and an *alter ego* that lives and breathes, in this room, with Johanna's ghost. In the third stanza Dylan is outside both identities, seeing himself as a lost little boy who fails to relate either to the present or to the past. The blurring of time and consciousness is marvellously realized; particularized present moments–the all-night girls whispering, the nightwatchman clicking his flashlight–give sudden definition to the haze of sensations and

memories, even during the later stanzas when Johanna becomes a mythic *femme fatale* as well as a real woman, floating in and out of the 'museums where infinity goes on trial'.

In the context of history and myth she becomes a countess who 'pretends to care' for a pedlar; a madonna; the mysterious Mona Lisa. The last stanza ties up the fluctuating images in an encapsulated recapitulation, ending with the 'skeleton keys' the all-night girls had played with, and the elusive 'rain' that Louise had pathetically tried to hold in her hand; it is of course heroin or cocaine, though it can be visualized as real rain too, trickling refreshingly yet hopelessly through the fingers. At the end visions of Johanna are *all* that remain; the music enacts this since throughout the song the dotted rhythm is potent but the vocal line is waveringly undefined. That the tune itself should be unmemorable is the point, for it is borne along on the tide of dream and memory. The magical words resonate in the mind because Dylan declaims or incants them with maximum malleability of both rhythm and pitch.

Side I ends more lyrically with one of Dylan's songs of apparent rejection. 'One of us must know' is about a love gone wrong, ending with the blunt words:

> You weren't really from the farm
> An' I told you as you clawed out my eyes,
> That I never really meant to do you any harm.

None the less rejection turns out to be once more a kind of affirmation, partly because the tune soars upward in triadic form, and turns into a forceful tumbling strain in the refrain. The beat is sturdy, the same as that of 'Johanna' but faster; the tonality is a clear diatonic major, with no blue notes. At the same time the music attests that he is sad to have caused pain, that he really did 'try to get close to you'. Dylan's singing of words like 'personal', 'understood', and 'believed' particularizes a generalized emotion; in the faster-moving rhythms of the middle eight song turns into highly inflected speech.

The next number, the famous 'I want you' is unequivocally positive. It too is in an unsullied major, with a briskly unremitting beat. The timbre generates an overwhelming erotic compulsion from what on paper is no more than a series of oscilla-





tions between two tones. The immediacy of the cry of desire in the refrain comes as climax to the highly charged verses, in which the singer's regular woman and the girl's other man hint at the hallucinatory landscape of 'Visions of Johanna' in being described respectively as the Queen of Spades and as a 'dancing child with his Chinese suit'. Here is further evidence of the interdependence in Dylan's songs of everyday reality and myth. A brilliant example of this is provided by 'Stuck inside of Mobile with the Memphis blues again', a long strophic song which presents Dylan *im*mobilized in dreary Mobile confronted by a ragman, a senator, a preacher and a rainman (some twentieth-century shamanistic quack?), who purvey their sundry deceits but suggest no 'end' to the minor hell of Mobile. A man called Shakespeare and a woman called Mona (Lisa?) also appear among the personnel. They are an everyday guy and girl–he chats with 'some French girl' and she consorts with railroad men–but at the same time they are given mythic overtones by their names and by the fact that he wears 'pointed shoes and bells' like a fool, and she warns Dylan that the railroad men will 'drink up your blood like wine'. Not all the characters who pass by or flit through Dylan's consciousness come from the other side of the fence: Grandpa, though dead, makes a farcical appearance, while a warm-hearted hooker called Ruth may be justified in remarking that though his 'debutante' knows what he needs, she knows what he wants and can give it to him. Despite the hallucinatory threats and the boredom, the song as Dylan sings it, lyrically, with a ruthful wonder, comes across as almost benign. The tingling sonority, the lilting tune and the energetic beat–especially the dotted-rhythmed declining scale at the end of the refrain–alleviate any sense of non-communication between stranded Dylan and the beings who float in and out of his consciousness.

The delightful 'Leopard-skin pill-box hat' is another song that defuses negative emotions with humour. The girl is laughed at in a frisky boogie rhythm, with plangent blue notes so rapid that they sound more like chortles than sighs. The tale of infidelity, ignominiously revealed in a glimpse through an unclosed garage door, is ludicrous enough to seem phantasmagoric, especially in the pungent, 'wild mercury' sound of the scoring.

The number has been construed, even dismissed, as a satire on Carl Perkins's 'Blue suede shoes', which is not only to limit its range of reference, but also to ignore its good humour. Attempts to turn 'Just like a woman' into a homosexual number seem to me equally misguided, not because it is inconceivable that Dylan should create a homosexual song, but because there is nothing in the words or music or manner of performance to hint that this song does not mean what it says. The tune arches through big leaps and declines gently, again in an unsullied F major, which seems to be the positive key on this album. The words carry an ironic sting in reference to women as a class as well as to this particular member of the species; yet both lyricism and rhythm are healing rather than aggressive, and when she 'breaks just like a little girl' Dylan's arabesques are compassionate as well as critical.

'Most likely you go your way' is another rejection song that is really about freedom. In a bouncy boogie beat, it is gleeful, almost jolly, the 'mercury' sonority glinting and gleaming. 'Temporary like Achilles', also in G major, also carries us into a low barrel-house, but gently, the blue notes pathetic as Dylan atypically appeals to the woman to take notice of him. But the boogie lilt gathers energy as the stanzas unfold until the other man, Achilles(!), is discovered lurking in the alleyway. Dylan turns the tables in presenting him as a judge who

> . . . holds a grudge.
> He's gonna call on you
> But he's badly built
> And he walks on stilts
> Watch out he don't fall on you.

The farcical words contrast piquantly with the quietly seductive tune.

'Absolutely sweet Marie' is an ironic title. Again there is a precarious balance between negative emotions (the girl is absent, has probably let him down) and positive emotions (she is, or was, sweet, as can be heard in the fast tingling rhythm and the open tune, with its leaping fourth and falling sixth). The middle section modulates nervously to the submediant; and there are verbal equivocations too in Dylan's masterly handling





of conversational half rhymes: 'Well, anybody can be like me, obviously,/But then, now again, not too many can be like you, fortunately.' Though these are speech rhythms, they effect the song's lyricism, coolly throwing away the cadential arpeggio. 'Fourth time around' is an anti-woman song alleviated by its plangent broken chord sonority, again in a diatonic F major. It may have some parodistic reference to the Beatles' 'Norwegian wood'; but in context serves mainly as respite before 'Obviously five believers', a powerful rock song in driving beat, prickling with black blue notes. He yells for his girl to come home, his black dog barks, the girl's mama moans; but in the fifth stanza:

> Fifteen jugglers and five believers
> All dressed like men
> Tell yo' mama not to worry because
> They're just my friends.

It is not clear what the point of these mythical intruders is unless he is recognizing that they are substitutes for the woman's flesh and blood. He seems to be saying that there are three times as many jugglers (charlatans?) in him as there are true believers; but when in the last stanza he cries for her to come back 'early in the morning' he sounds as earthily honest as a black bluesman. It will be sad, and surprising, if she fails to come.

The final song, which covers the whole of the fourth side, is the most mysterious of all, reminiscent of 'Visions of Johanna' in that the poem is in more than one sense highly evocative. It is less tethered to the reality of present moments through which dreams swim, but directly explores 'the savage and beautiful country' below or beyond the waking mind. This may be why, whereas 'Johanna' has a vocal line that stems from speech, 'Sad-eyed lady of the lowlands' has a melody almost as memorably self-subsistent as 'Mr Tambourine Man', the classic dream song from the earlier period. Like much genuine folk verse, the complex poem functions allusively as well as elusively. The sad-eyed lady has been identified with Dylan's then wife, Sara, as well as with America and with the Statue of Liberty. To be specific is, as usual, to miss the point; the lady is a maternal goddess because imagery, rhythm and most of all music make her so. The song is basic to Dylan's work because it hymns the

female divinity he seeks from the heart of the patriarchal dominance that made him. This motif is endemic in much of the art, especially the pop art, of our time, but nowhere is it more richly incarnated than in this song. The sad-eyed lady is presented in religious and magical imagery that makes her at once madonna and harpy. Because she is 'beyond good and evil', Dylan offers her his gift of his 'warehouse eyes' and 'Arabian drums' more insistently in each stanza. ('Warehouse' because he haunts the periphery of cities, without stable roots, 'Arabian' because she offers him magical dreams and exotic horizons?) Like an ancient earth goddess the Lady releases him from moral choice and commits him to Being, here and now, embracing within the verbal assonances and alliterations the harsh with the hilarious, the grim with the grotesque.

The scene and story are not presented in linear sequence but in a swinging, circular 6/8 tune that contains, in Dylan's elongations of line and darkenings of tone, both fulfilment and regret. Oddities of vocal production are here peculiarly extravagant: the ululating permutations of 'lowlands' for instance, are strange to the point of risibility yet also induce a sense of awe. The music makes the words function in mythological rather than chronological time. Although the song's temporal duration approaches twelve minutes, it enters a once-upon-a-time where the clock–unlike the hypnotic percussion beat–has ceased to tick. The regularity of the beat and the enveloping organ sonority underline this womb-regressive, pre-conscious quality, which may or may not be inherent in the (drug-induced?) imagery. Dylan is left playing his Edenic harmonica in a long postlude which is perhaps even more poignant than the one that ends 'Mr Tambourine Man'. 'Ends' is, however, too strong a word: the fade-out in Dylan's music–as in much pop music and in jazz–is one manifestation of the yearning for release from Western temporal progression. Both the lack of linear sequence in the narrative and its endless circularity recall the incantations of those waulking women in the outer Hebrides. The fade-out on the harmonica insists that Eden ought to be for ever; the melancholy springs from the fact that it isn't.

Much of the power of *Blonde on Blonde*, especially in hard





blues numbers like 'Obviously five believers', derives from the talents of the instrumentalists: Charlie McCoy, Kenneth Buttrey, Wayne Moss, Hargus Robbins, Jeremy Kennedy, Joe South, Bill Aikins, Henry Strzelecki and the brilliant Al Kooper and Robbie Robertson. The increased range and enriched timbre of Dylan's voice may have been stimulated by this backing. Yet although *Blonde on Blonde* is now accepted as a, perhaps the, high in its 'high' genre, 1966 was a traumatic year for Dylan. On gruelling tours he was booed offstage by folk fanatics who objected to his electronic gadgetry and to what they considered his political betrayal. Physical and nervous strain may have led to increased reliance on drugs, and certainly lends edge to the Albert Hall bootleg tapes issued in 1966 under the title of *In 1966 There Was*, and to the patchier but intermittently brilliant *Basement Tapes* issued in 1967. For although with the backing of The Band–the rock group whose own recordings, from *Music from Big Pink* onwards, have so vividly evoked an era and an American landscape–Dylan sometimes relaxes into relatively easy-going numbers that foreshadow the country manners of *Nashville Skyline*, he also, in songs like 'Tears of rage' and 'Wheels of fire', achieves a fierce intensity that is as unafraid as it is uninhibited. These two poles of experience complement one another: the emotional commitment is safeguarded, by the relaxation, from self-indulgence, while the relaxation is toughened by the passion. In the light of this we can understand why, when Dylan 'legally' released another disc, he had made a radical change of front; and had created a new sound.

This phase climaxed in the motorcycle accident in which Dylan, breaking his neck, came near to eliminating himself. This may or may not have some connection with drug usage but it certainly has, like Beethoven's deafness(!), allegorical overtones: Dylan's next album, *John Wesley Harding*, issued in 1968, represents a new start. Here he relinquishes the heavy instrumental backing of *Blonde on Blonde* and relies as support for his own voice, guitar and piano on only his two trusted Nashville sessions men, Charlie McCoy on bass and Kenney Buttrey on drums, with a brief appearance of Pete Drake's steel guitar in the two love songs, 'Down along the cove' and 'I'll be your baby tonight'. Yet although the verses use comparatively

plain language, with biblical overtones, and although the music returns more starkly to his poor white country manner, the introversion of the psychedelic period is not bypassed. Rather the public and the private manners become one, as the social commitment of the early years is refashioned in the light and (especially) dark of the middle years' dreams and nightmares. Although the words have gained undertones from Dylan's retreat within the psyche, they are usually intelligible, if not unambiguously so; and the songs deal in moral issues without the crudity sometimes occasioned, in an early number such as 'Masters of war', by Dylan's assumption that he is always right, 'they' wrong. As the words have grown up, so the music complementarily matures in its interrelations of line, rhythm and harmony, and no less in manner of performance. Dylan's post-accident voice is riper, richer, more varied in timbre.

The title song, 'John Wesley Harding', is lightweight and is placed first, Dylan says, because he could not decide where to put it. It is about an outlaw, presented with characteristic ambiguity. For Dylan, the outlaw is a hero, in the sense that he was one himself when he spurned the Establishment and rejected the superficies of the American Way of Life. He lights on a fetching tune, in straight, white diatonic country style, to embody Harding's strength and resilience. Yet, like much white country music, this tune is slightly crass in its cockiness; and dubiety is latent in the words too, for while this outlaw seems noble in that he was 'a friend to the poor' and 'was never known to hurt an honest man', the last stanza praises him for more suspect reasons. 'No charge against him could they prove . . ./ He was never known to make a foolish move' may mean no more than that he was crafty and ruthless; and looked at retrospectively the first lines of the song–'John Wesley was a friend to the poor,/He travelled with a gun in every hand'–turn out to encapsulate an archetypal American paradox: the freedom that promotes courageous independence may also lead to violence. The comic irony in the phrase 'a gun in every hand' has a sting in its tail, especially in Dylan's intonation. Not surprisingly, a tinge of irony can be detected in the Edenic harmonica interludes too. There seems little doubt that this is intentional, for the real John Wesley Hardin was an anarchic





murderer, without recorded empathy for the poor and outcast. Perhaps Dylan added a 'g' to his name to indicate a hardening process in his legendary version of the genuine outlaw.

The second song, 'As I went out one morning', is still more equivocal. The lovely tune, airily balancing rising fifth against falling fourth in a mainly pentatonic contour, is as archaically folky as the verbal cliché the song opens with. But the 'fairest damsel' he meets with in the bright morning is certainly not the traditional maid of folk song; or if she is, she is also a siren of foreboding, and seems to be also the material lures of America, with her technological pseudo-panaceas–which may be why the rhythm, beneath the old-world tune, beats in jazzy jitteriness. Libertarian Tom Paine, a hero who celebrated the American Revolution, comes 'running from across the field' to make the girl/America 'let go her grip' on Dylan. He succeeds, and the siren gives up her attempted seduction with a crooked look and words muttered 'from the corners of her mouth'. But Tom Paine no longer has any political solution to offer, and contents himself with a lame 'I'm sorry, sir.' He is sorry, presumably, because 'America' has betrayed her original ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. Both as a woman and as America the 'damsel' is the sad-eyed lady goddess whom Dylan had to embrace if he were to grow to maturity. Once he has done so he can recognize that he and she have now to come to terms with the social moralities of his early youth.

This process begins in the third song, 'I dreamed I saw St Augustine', which is very freely based on an earlier political song, 'Joe Hill', but relates the political dimension to the Calvinist religious responsibilities of Dylan's Yankee heritage. Religious conscience plumbs deeper than political duty, and the haunting country tune, beginning with a simple spread triad, lyrically blooms even as it teeters microtonally between major and minor third, never quite making either. Augustine was a saint who knew more about guilt than most, and Dylan gives him an oblique reference to his own autobiography, for he too has come through dissipation, sexual confusion and drugs and is waiting for–though he does not at this point find–a redeemer. The Augustine who tears 'through these quarters/In the utmost misery' is also Dylan, searching for souls who have

'already been sold'. Presumably this means sold in the modern colloquial sense of being betrayed and sold down the river; and the point of the second stanza is that guilt-ridden Augustine-Dylan tells these 'gifted kings and queens' (social, political and ecclesiastical VIPs–'gifted' with wealth as well as talents?) that he is in the same boat ('Know you're not alone'). But in the third and last stanza there is a further turn of the screw: Augustine, in his guilt snorting like the dragon 'with fiery breath' from the Book of Revelation, is 'put out to death' by Dylan himself. Technically speaking Augustine was not a martyr except in the sense that he believed he was slaughtered by his own sins. In this sense Dylan identifies with him, and with a final twist cries

> Oh, I awoke in anger,
> So alone and terrified,
> I put my fingers against the glass,
> And bowed my head and cried.

He too is 'angry' because he recognizes in himself that 'tearing' fiery dragon; but is also 'terrified' because he admits to his responsibility and cannot see where he is to find the absolution that Augustine, after his anguish, won through to. The glass is a mirror in which Dylan sees himself, and the fingers pressed against it exactly convey the agony of self-knowledge. This is the more affecting because the tune's pentatonic innocence belies its intermittent, very tentative blue notes, and has no need of the electrophonic distortions Dylan had so brilliantly exploited.

The protests of Dylan's early songs did not necessarily imply a Christian interpretation, though they often had a biblical background. In this mysterious song Christian eschatology is powerfully evident, though in awareness of its fearfulness rather than of its remedial potential. So it is no surprise when 'All along the watchtower', the finest song in the cycle, heroically confronts, in grandly swinging Aeolian melody, deeply oscillating bass and thrusting rhythm, the chaos of fallen man. The biblical reference is to Isaiah:

> Watch in the watchtower, eat, drink: arise, ye princes, and anoint the shield. For thus hath the Lord said unto me, Go, set





> a watchman, let him declare what he seeth. And he saw a chariot with a couple of horsemen, a chariot of asses, and a chariot of camels; and he hearkened diligently with much heed: And he cried, A lion: My lord, I stand continually upon the watchtower. . . . And, behold, here cometh a chariot of men, with a couple of horsemen.[3]

Dylan transfers the biblical references into the arid landscape of the Wild West, in which Isaiah's mysterious riders are at home, while at the same time evoking the apocalyptic horsemen; Isaiah's lion becomes a desert wildcat. The two human creatures who are threatened by this unknown and perhaps unknowable doom are allegorically described as the joker and the thief. The equation between the modern life of 'business men and plowmen' who have no notion of 'what any of it is worth' and the biblical world of 'princes, women and barefoot servants' is delineated with masterly economy. The joker and the thief, stripped of the pretences of civilization, can at least confront confusion, even though 'the hour is getting late'. 'Outside in the distance a wildcat did growl'–the 'did' imbues him with sinister intention–'Two riders were approaching, the wind began to howl.' The menace is almost overwhelming; but not quite, for the threat is not exterior to the tune which remains, in its noble arches over its gravely descending bass, unruffled. Dylan sings it firmly, but without rhetoric; the wildcat is the more venomous because Dylan makes no attempt to dramatize his growl. As in Isaiah, the watchtower the tune and bass represent is surely conscience and self-responsibility which, jokers and thieves though we're reduced to being in this naughty world, enable us to face fear.

Although this great song confronts doomsday with fortitude it offers no redemption. The long narrative 'Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest', placed at the centre of the cycle, may explain why. The musical fulfilment of 'Watchtower' is abandoned for an unremitting talkin' style, and the words spoken, for all their biblical references, could hardly be more confusedly bleak. The landscape is again that of the American West, and Frankie Lee may be a fusion of the outlaw hero of

[3] Isaiah 21.

'Frankie and Johnny' with Robert E. Lee. Judas Priest is presumably the Established Church gone rotten: a priest who is a judas, a judas who is a priest. Honest stupid Frankie Lee capitulates to the wiles of Judas and his dollar bills, and enters a paradise of illusion, a brothel where he dies, apparently of sexual excess, in Judas Priest's arms. Church and state are identified with the bordello in which Judas claims yet another victim. At the end a 'little neighbour boy' carries dead Frankie to some kind of 'rest'. It is significant that he is a child as well as a neighbour, recalling the biblical injunction: 'except . . . ye become as little children'. Even so, the solace he can offer is not great:

> And he just walked along, alone,
> His guilt so well concealed,
> And muttered underneath his breath,
> Nothing is revealed.

The little boy's guilt, although latent, already exists and will presumably one day become patent. No revelation is at hand; Dylan speaks the words flatly and inexorably.

'Nothing is revealed' in the rest of the cycle. 'Dear Landlord' is a slowish 12/8 number in countrified barrel-house style, and is about the equivocation of its title. Although all landlords must be wicked, belonging to the category that the young Dylan had dismissed as 'them', the verses function on levels beyond their political and social implications. Indeed in a sense the landlord appears to be God, owning the whole show and renting it to humankind; Dylan is trying to establish a relationship with him that combines respect with an awareness of his own dignity. The adjective 'dear' is double-faced. The tune, lingering almost caressingly on the word, combines toughness with an upward-aspiring hopefulness; the sudden shift, at the top of the phrase, from the tonic major triad to the upper mediant with flat seventh, opens our ears in tragi-comic wonder as well as dismay at the discovery that Dylan and landlord, human creature and creator, might have mutual responsibilities. There is a similar, more extravagant effect at the wild modulation to the *flat* upper mediant on 'I'm gonna give you all that I gotta give.' The melismata induce surprise, yet carry conviction, and Dylan's variety of timbre, from sonorous confidence to





raucous bleat, has never been more impressive. The final line– 'If you don't underestimate me, I won't underestimate you'– carries contradictory if complementary meanings. Dylan, as a human being, is willing to respect authority but not to cower or to grovel. The little chortling crow on the E flat run-up to the quoted phrase is a tribute to human fortitude, even bravado; and the song stops, unresolved, *on* rather than *in* the dominant.

Three of the songs, not surprisingly, are about rebels. In 'Drifter's escape' the outlaw is accused by the Establishment of indeterminate crimes for which he offers no apology. Ironically, he escapes from authoritarian law and order that have little to do with the heart's truth by an arbitrary act of God in the form of a bolt of lightning. This may be cynical, but more probably it implies that he deserves to escape, having faced up to the true law of his own conscience. Musically, the song sounds cheery, over an unchanging tonic pedal, but at the same time it is blackly sprinkled with blue notes and metrical contradictions. Even blacker is 'I am a lonesome hobo', and in this case the drifter is presented negatively as blackmailer and thief; here the continuous tonic pedal fails to stabilize him. Although once 'rather prosperous', he falls through lack of trust in his 'brother', all that remains of friends, comrades or relatives. The moralistic coda is not Christian, but appeals only to individual conscience: one should live by 'no man's code' but 'hold your judgement for yourself,/Lest you wind up on this road'. Still bleaker and more morally ambiguous is 'The wicked messenger', a stern song in the Dorian mode, again liberally peppered with blue notes. The messenger, like Judas Priest, would seem to be a devil disguised as an angel, who cannot speak truth but only flattery. The people advise him, in biblically flavoured language, 'If you cannot bring good news, then don't bring any.' At one level this seems an unnecessary admonition to a flatterer, though at another level, spelling the Good News with capitals, one gets the point. Clearly he won't bring any and they know he won't; once more, there is no revelation.

A climax to these confusions and ambiguities is offered in 'I pity the poor immigrant' in which there is a gross and grotesque disparity between the whitely euphoric F major country waltz

which is the music and the frightening words. These describe the immigrant to the new-found land as a fallen Adam totally evil in impulse, cheating with his fingers, lying with every breath. He comes 'passionately to hate his life and fear his death'; any visions he may have cherished 'shatter like the glass'. The immigrant who has succumbed to the wiles of Judas Priest and the Wicked Messenger may be Tom, Dick or Harry–or Dylan himself. The savagely ironic dichotomy between words and music is somewhat alleviated by Dylan's delivery which, singing often against the waltz beat, through variations of pitch, contortions of vowel sounds and weird elongations of time values, transforms the messenger's flattering voice into a strong but forlorn melancholy. All the fortitude of Dylan's watchtower is necessary to navigate these quicksands.

In the remaining two songs Dylan relinquishes his confrontation with doom. He changes the instrumentation, bringing in a steel guitar suggestive of the pop music industry rather than the aridities of the Wild West; and produces two apparently slight, even light, songs of heterosexual love. The moment of revelation–what Dylan is later to call the Changing of the Guards–has not arrived, but what remains to offset fear and horror is sexual love, which may offer its momentary truth. In 'Down along the cove' the experience is as yet hardly for real. The verses are almost coy:

> Down along the cove
> I spied my little bundle of joy.
> She said 'Lord have mercy, honey,
> I'm so glad you're my boy.'

Dylan sings the artless phrases in a rarefied, airy timbre, as though he is looking wonderingly at rather than entering into the experience. Yet though the melody bounces in delight, the song is no escape into hedonism: it starts on a tingling blue note, never acquires a sharp third in the tune, and is rhythmically precarious as well as vivacious. Formally, the number is a blues, and the young woman may speak more truly than she realizes in asking the Lord to have mercy. The love is blessed, if not sanctified.

That certainly applies to the final number, 'I'll be your baby





tonight'. Although apparently slight, it turns out to carry enough weight to justify its placing at the end of this often harrowing cycle of songs. The significance of this totally if momentarily committed love song is that Dylan is no longer concerned with himself in opposition to the world, nor with the mazes of his dreams and nightmares, nor with open questions about guilt and responsibility, nor even with his personal destiny, released by dreams and nightmares. He is simply concerned with himself in relation to another human being. This is real, though he makes no claims he might be unable to fulfil; he'll be her baby tonight, but nothing is said about tomorrow. Sufficient unto the night is the good thereof. Superficially, Dylan is psychologically regressing in becoming, in something more than the colloquial sense, her 'baby'. But going back to the womb may bring about a rebirth; and in that case what matters is what is reborn. Here the creation is a minor miracle.

Listened to casually as background noise, the music may seem corny, ragtimey, in the manner of Hank Williams, while the quietly humorous words–'That big fat moon is gonna shine like a spoon,/But we're gonna let it, /You won't regret it'–forestall emotional indulgence. In total effect, however, the tune, lyrically extended in the silence of the night, is so beautiful that the song, far from being comfortable, almost stills the breath. The comicalities in Dylan's performance–the upward glide on 'sail away', or the hazardously deep glissando on 'bring that bo[tt]le over here'–underlines rather than undermines the loveliness of the tune. The music *demonstrates* that 'You don't have to be afraid': all the doom, the bleeding and dying and the minatory Thin Men, are banished from this silent room and warm bed. The melody's climax, rising from dominant to tonic and then leaping an octave, liberates; while at the same time the 'squeezed' notes, edging upwards, make us aware that love's joy, even in this impermanent moment, is inseparable from its pain. The harmonica postlude emphasizes this: the whining country instrument carries us 'out of this world' to the room of love, which is haven and heaven. Yet there's a hint of *lacrimae rerum* in its wailing. The song leaves us warmly at peace, yet also vulnerable, and it is not extravagant to

describe its simplicity as Blakean. Indeed it provides a precise gloss on Blake's marvellous fragment:

> He who bends to himself a Joy
> Doth the winged life destroy;
> But he who kisses the Joy as it flies
> Lives in Eternity's sun rise.

With Doomsday in the offing, that is all one can hope for; and it is much: so although it seems homelier, and in a sense that is the point, 'I'll be your baby tonight' is no less magically mysterious than Dylan's other great lyrical songs, 'Mr Tambourine Man' and 'Sad-eyed lady of the lowlands'.



# A DARKER SHADE OF PALE

## A Backdrop to Bob Dylan

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New York
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1985