Fortitude

Blowin' in the Wind

How many roads must a man walk down
Before you call him a man?

Dylan's greatest hit is a song that sustains fortitude in an appeal for justice. Two of the four cardinal virtues for the pricelessness of one.

"Equality, liberty, humility, simplicity": in due course, *No Time to Think* came to be sardonic about such abstract nouns and their lending themselves so obligingly to sloganry. But Dylan is aware that these concepts are indispensable aspirations. In *Blowin' in the Wind*, simplicity is everything, the everything that sets itself to promote equality, liberty, and humility. (Fraternity, too, my friend.) Which means that to expatiate on *Blowin' in the Wind* is to risk detracting from its simplicity. Yet it would be a detraction to suppose that simplicity has no truck with the subtle or suggestive or wayward. For it is characteristic of true simplicity that there may radiate from its utmost directness a good many glinting things.

The refrain of *Blowin' in the Wind* is simplicity itself, simply repeated:

The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind

Could it be that by now we all know these words too well, and that we no longer listen to them but only hear them? It would be good if they could again become a surprising thing to hear. The refrain, even while it sounds like an assurance or reassurance, ought on reflection to continue to give us pause, ought even to be understood as insisting that there will always be some pause that we human beings will have to be given.

"This land is your land". "We shall overcome". "Which side are you on?" Those are words entirely without misgiving, and there are good things that such a way of putting it can give us.[1] But "The answer is blowin' in the wind"? This is a very different proposition.

[1] Dylan pinpoints and punctures such a political rallying-cry as "Which side are you on?": "Praise be to Nero's Neptune / The Titanic sails at dawn / And everybody's shouting / 'Which Side Are You On?'" (*Desolation Row*).

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, it's in the wind – and it's blowing in the wind. Too many of these 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 when it comes down so not too many get to see and know it . . . and then it flies away again.[1]

What Dylan has to say there about the refrain is corroborated or authenticated by his comments' taking up so many of the words that constitute the song. Over and above the simple quotation ("the answer is blowing in the wind"), there are these overlappings of the song's words with those of Dylan thinking about it:

The Song	*The Comments*
many roads	*many* of these
a *man*	*Man*
walk *down*	come *down*
many *times*	some *time*
cannon balls *fly*	*flies* away
some people	*some* time / hip *people*
just doesn't	*just* like
doesn't *see*	to *see*
look *up*	picks *up*
one man	no *one*
he *knows*	*know* it
too many	*too many*

[1] *Sing Out!* (October / November 1962), reporting Dylan in June 1962. Dylan at Carnegie Hall in 1963, introducing the song: "Met a teacher who said he didn't understand what *Blowin' in the Wind* means. Told him there was nothin' to understand, it was just blowin' in the wind. If he didn't feel it in the wind, he'd never know. And he ain't never gonna know, I guess. *Teachers*." (Anthony Scaduto, *Bob Dylan*, 1971, revised edition 1973, p. 157.)

One of the things that makes *Blowin' in the Wind* so good is that it never says, or even hints, that "The answer, my friend, is this song that I have written, called *Blowin' in the Wind*". The answer? "It ain't in no book or movie or TV show or discussion group" – nor is it in this song itself. The "restless piece of paper" comes briefly to rest, and "then it flies away again". For what would it be, for an answer to be blowing in the wind? Assuredly, the opposite of anything assured, final, achieved once and for all. The song staves off hopelessness and hopefulness, disillusionment and illusion.

Fortitude is in demand, for there is no assurance that all that is in question is *when* justice will come, there being (we should prefer to think) no question as to *if*. Fortitude finds itself in need, not of a fellow-virtue, but of a grace: Hope. "We shall overcome"? Realism does not shake its head, or take its head in its hands, but does have to be hard-headed. Cynicism always has an easier time. The *Onion* offered one of its memorable news items and a headline (30 January 1968):

Martin Luther King: 'Perhaps We Shall Not Overcome After All'

KNOXVILLE, Tenn.—In a speech at First Baptist Church in Knoxville, civil-rights leader

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. acknowledged that he and his fellow negroes may not overcome, after all.

"For many long years, the rallying cry of our movement has been, 'We shall overcome,'" King told the capacity crowd. "But, having taken a few steps back to examine all sides of the situation, I have come to a new conclusion: that we most likely shall not."

As the assembled churchgoers listened intently, King continued: "For all our bravery in the face of hatred and intolerance, it appears that the white power structure is simply too powerful and entrenched to be overcome. I hope not, obviously, but it is very much starting to look that way."

"Nonetheless," King continued, "with deep faith in ourselves, and even deeper faith in God, we hope that our children and our children's children will, in time, come to witness an end to racial hatred, and that they will know freedom and equality."

"But I would not count on it happening any time soon."

Dylan was straightforward in commenting on the song's not saying straightforwardly what you might have expected or preferred it to say. His comments are fully borne out by the song's words as soon as you think about them. But thinking about them did soon become difficult, given that the song was so easily and promptly memorable as to become at once a memory of itself. A song that so immediately adheres to us,

especially a song that is an adjuration, must always be in some danger of settling down as its own enemy – not its own worst enemy, its own best enemy, but an enemy in some ways still.

> Fearing not that I'd become my enemy
> In the instant that I preach
> (*My Back Pages*)

Very tempting, even in the moment of hearing the song for only the second time, to substitute a memory of it for the experience anew of the song. But to have the song itself be the answer would be to forgo the truth there in its lucid cryptic refrain.

There is nothing dubious about the questions (the warnings, the pleas, the admonitions and premonitions) that shape the song. But the assurance as to the answer does have its small skilful doubt as to just how it is about to be taken. For the formulation *The answer is . . .* might have been expected to culminate differently. Whereas the refrain's culmination is a location or an *en route* ("The answer is blowin' in the wind"), you might have hoped for a different kind of answer, not a where but a what. The answer is tolerance. The answer is desegregation. Or faith in the Lord. Similarly, the answer to "How many . . ." could have been an actual figure, preposterous though it might sound ("How many roads . . . ?" – 61 Highways, actually). Such a numerical answer is unthinkable, which is not the same as supposing that the thought shouldn't even cross your mind. Matthew 18:21: "Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven."

"Blowin' in the wind": in the end the answer is not in words but in music, there in the final harmonica, a wind instrument to be blown.[1] Still,

[1] At Gerde's, April 1962, the song opens with harmonica introduction and has the harmonica between verses and at the end. The Witmark demo tape, July 1962, has no harmonica. *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, July 1962, does best by the song, establishing itself as the performance against which all others are heard and (though not necessarily measured) weighed: it opens with guitar, but has harmonica between the verses and at the end. Blown with breath's wind. Dylan does not sing the verses in the order in which they have been printed in *Lyrics 1962–1985* (1985). The printed sequence is: the first verse, but then the last one sung, and then the second that is sung. But *Broadside* (late May 1962) printed the verses in the order in which he sings them.

Dylan's words abide our question. For instance, the words "in the wind". *The Oxford English Dictionary*:

> a. in reference to something which can be scented or perceived by means of the wind blowing from where it is.
> b. *fig.* So as to be "scented" or perceived.
> c. predicatively: Happening or ready to happen; astir, afoot, "up". 1535 A thing there is in the wind . . which I trust in God will one day come to light.

If you want somebody you can trust, trust in God. "How long, O Lord, how long?" But the phrase "in the wind" can catch a cross-current, and within the sequence *to hang in the wind* the sense is "to remain in suspense or indecision". "I still say it's in the wind and just like a restless piece of paper, it's got to come down some time . . . and then it flies away again." Not indecision, perhaps, but re-decision, decision that will always have to be taken, taken up, again.[1]

The song made a great bid for popularity (a bid that was not beyond its means), in its tune and in the simplicity of its words. A man should stand up. As yet, there are not many men to stand up in this cause and be counted, but there is a confidence that the cause will be joined by many others. The song's claims to courage, and its asking courage of others, its incipient solidarity, all required that it convey a certain political loneliness, and it effected this by continually playing plurals against singulars:

> How many roads must a man walk down
> Before you call him a man?

Each of the three verses includes five words that are plurals; every word of the refrain is resolutely in the singular.

How many times is the phrase "how many" tolled in this song? Nine times, with three of them being "How many times" – and then the

[1] The song was recorded on 9 July 1962. Harold Macmillan's words, which became famous at once, had been delivered on 3 February 1960 in Cape Town: "The wind of change is blowing through this continent and, whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact." *Forever Young*: "When the winds of changes shift". What a singular difference the plurals make.

once-and-for-all chiming (immediately before the final refrain) of "too many": "That too many people have died". Dylan sings this line with timing that both seizes and touches: accelerating slightly, just ahead of the music, as though time and patience are running out.

The last verse begins "How many times"; each verse has this phrase, but the others have it not as their first but as their last question.

The first verse begins "How many roads must a man walk down", and the last begins "How many times must a man look up".

A man, not because of thoughtlessness or a hidden gender. Or because of misogyny. A man has no monopoly of common humanity or of mankind. But "a man" here because of the forms that a man's courage may have to take, forms different from those of a brave wise woman up against aggressive swaggering, a woman of the kind honoured in *License to Kill*:

> Man thinks 'cause he rules the earth he can do with it as he please
> And if things don't change soon, he will
> Oh, man has invented his doom
> First step was touching the moon
>
> Now, there's a woman on my block
> She just sit there as the night grows still
> She say who gonna take away his license to kill?

A man, because of particular men on particular roads, men who got themselves killed for the rights that were theirs and others'. And a man, because this can then be held in tacit tension with the "she" of the song, she who had originally been a "he":[1]

> How many seas must the white dove sail
> Before she sleeps in the sand?
> Yes, 'n' how many times must the cannon balls fly
> Before they're forever banned?

[1] "Before he sleeps in the sand" in the early sheet-music (*Broadside*, late May 1962). *Lyrics 1962–1985* prints "a white dove", but Dylan sings "the white dove": of peace in the world, of mercy from the Flood, and of pentecostal message. True, he wasn't a Christian in 1962, but he copyrighted *Long Ago, Far Away* long ago, in the same year as *Blowin' in the Wind*. "And to talk of peace and brotherhood / Oh, what might be the cost! / A man he did it long ago / And they hung him on a cross". Several of the early songs have more than a turn-of-phrase that is Christian.

"Let the bird sing, let the bird fly" (*Under the Red Sky*). Let the cannon balls no longer fly. Let all such weapons become as archaic as cannon balls.

But then Dylan has already done something to see the cannon balls off by voicing the words with such soft roundedness as to mollify their military mettle into cotton-wool, or into the feathered texture of a dove.

In March 1962, just a few months before the song was released like a dove, the *Broadside* lines had been abroad:

> How many roads must a man walk down
> Before he is called a man?

Revised, the song calls you on this. "Before you call him a man". This is the only "you" in the song, right there at the start, and it points to you and perhaps at you, even while it isn't as simply accusatory as it would be if the words "you call him" couldn't carry, too, the sense "before he is called". The song addresses someone, or many a one, throughout. "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind". And we need to be mindful of the equivocal tone of "my friend". Perhaps you are indeed a friend to me and to this cause, so that before too long the implication of "my friend" will be able to be "my friends" or even "friends". But what protects the song against credulity (for there are murderous enemies out there, or the song wouldn't have had to be written) is the other possibility in the words "my friend", the edge of possible reprimand in it: What you don't seem to understand, my friend, is that . . . Such an edge is sharpened in another chilling civil-rights song, *Oxford Town*:

> He come to the door, he couldn't get in
> All because of the color of his skin
> What do you think about that, my frien'?

In *Blowin' in the Wind*, the words "my friend" are not the threat that they constitute in *Desolation Row* ("And someone says, 'You're in the wrong place, my friend / You better leave'"). But they are salty, too, not just sweet.

Roads and seas and times are plurals set against a man or a mountain, a man or one man. One particular resourcefulness not only turns to the sound of words ("can a mountain" / "can a man turn") but does so with the help of the very word "turn": "How many years can a mountain exist" turns into "How many times can a man turn his head". This is in touch

with the ancient good sense that even the prophets must acknowledge: "If the mountain will not come to Mahomet, Mahomet must go to the mountain." This is good sense that Dylan in an interview brought down from the mountain to the plains or the plain:

> "Just getting on a Greyhound bus for three days; and going some place".
> *Can you do that now?*
> "I can't do that any more. It's up to . . . y'know, get the Greyhound bus to come to *me*."[1]

The man and the mountain meet in *Blowin' in the Wind*, in tune with Blake's political scale:

> Great things are done when men and mountains meet;
> This is not done by jostling in the street.

The song is itself one of these great things, one that then – like Blake's poems – conduced to the great things of social conscience:

> How many years can some people exist
> Before they're allowed to be free?

The tone of the phrase "some people" is not casual or perfunctory (for the history of a people may be a justifiably proud one, and in this sense a people is not merely some people), but "How many years can some people exist" is designed to bring home, very simply, in common humanity, that a people is people – you know, *people*. A people *is*, or *are*? For the word "people" is a singular that constitutes a plural, too.[2]

What does it ask? It asks fortitude. The song is determined to keep asking its searching questions, indeflectibly. But it is sensitive to the difference between pressing a point and nagging, so the voicing has its concessive gentleness. A phrase like "How many times must" could very easily have found itself hardened into aggression (How many times must I tell you . . .)

[1] *Whaaat?* (the 1965 interview with Nat Hentoff, in full, differing from that in *Playboy*, March 1966), p. 10.

[2] The rhyme, as it were, of "exist" with "exist" (no shifting or paltering) lends to the people something of a heartening geological stubbornness: "Yes, 'n', how many years can a mountain exist / Before it is washed to the sea? / Yes, 'n' how many years can some people exist / Before they're allowed to be free?"

– Dylan wants the hint of steel but only the hint. And the same goes for another reiterated turn: "Yes, 'n'". Dylan has it once in the first verse, and three times in each of the other two verses,[1] culminating in the question that is asked of "a man", of everyman:

> Yes, 'n' how many deaths will it take till he knows
> That too many people have died?

Like "How many times", "Yes, 'n'" could easily manifest too much negativity. *And another thing . . .*: such is the proclivity of "Yes, 'n'" to lean in for a quick jab. But Dylan doesn't let this happen; his tone of voice is *Let me put this to you*, not *Let me tell you*.

The song has entire singleness of purpose and of tone, but it would not be as supple (and as fertile of new performances) were it not for the modulations of the patterns that it establishes. Take the word "must" again. "How many roads must a man walk down". In the first verse, this is the insistence, twice more ("how many seas must a white dove sail", "how many times must the cannon balls fly"). The second verse weaves around, as though seeking a different point of entry into consciences, and the crux becomes a different form of necessity and contingency, not "must" but "can": "how many years can a mountain exist", "how many years can some people exist", "how many times can a man turn his head". And then the final verse reverts to "must" (". . . must a man look up", "must one man have"), only to change the whole timbre of the questioning by having the last instance of all be neither "must" nor "can" but the poignant ordinary cry, "will it take": "how many deaths will it take till he knows / That too many people have died?". And this thought, which is simple enough (God knows), has its recesses, being not only about how many deaths it will take but about how many lives will they take. Yet fortitude has what it takes.

But the word for which "must" and "can" and "will it take", each in its turn, stands by is the obdurately waiting word "Before".

> How many roads must a man walk down
> Before you call him a man?

And "Before" is soon compounded by the sounding sequence: "Before

[1] He sings it otherwise than as printed in *Lyrics 1962–1985*, dropping it (in singing) from the third line of the first verse, but adding it at the start of the second and third verses.

they're forever banned". *Before . . . forever*: yet let us not have to wait forever. Hope deferred maketh the heart sick. Even fortitude has its limits.

But how many times does a man have to maintain that *Blowin' in the Wind* is at once simplicity and multiplicity? "Man, it's in the wind – and it's blowing in the wind." You don't need to make heavy weather, man, to know which way the wind blows.

A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall

> But when I came to man's estate,
> With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
> 'Gainst knaves and thieves men shut their gate,
> For the rain it raineth every day.

Shakespeare's Song, its refrain to be adapted as that of *Percy's Song*: "Turn, turn to the rain / And the wind". *Blowin' in the Wind* – Freewheelin' along – turns to rain, to *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall*.

It's a hard song to befall the critic. (Tempted to take a hard rain check.) For one thing, it declines to be an allegory. If someone were to ask, "What does it mean, *I saw a white ladder all covered with water*?", might you reply "It means what it says"? T. S. Eliot was once asked what a line of *Ash-Wednesday* meant, "Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree". The answer: "Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree".[1] And there is another thing: that (as with *Blowin' in the Wind*) we may well know the song too well, which can easily mean too easily. "I'll know my song well before I start singin'": that's for him to say, or rather to sing, as he does at the end of *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall*, in the instant before drawing to a close the curtains of his cosmic stage. Alexander Pope drew *The Dunciad* to an end with an apocalyptic vision:

> Lo! thy dread Empire, CHAOS! is restor'd;
> Light dies before thy uncreating word:
> Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;
> And Universal Darkness buries All.

In the universe of Dylan, there is the final rain to come.

[1] Eliot in 1929, recalled in B. C. Southam, *A Guide to the Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot* (sixth edition 1996), pp. 225–6.

And I'll stand on the ocean until I start sinkin'
But I'll know my song well before I start singin'
And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, and it's a hard,
It's a hard rain's a-gonna fall

He knows his song well. But as for us: instead of being kept on our toes, we may find ourselves resting on his laurels when we know his song well before he starts singing. Similarly with what it means for a prodigious performer to sing "I heard ten thousand whisperin' and nobody listenin'". We've all been at Dylan concerts when this was infuriatingly the case, except that the ten thousand weren't whispering, they were talking or shouting. Or *singing along* . . . They know his song well before he starts singing. Know it backwards. Would that they would just let the song surge forwards.

He will not have forgotten what it was like to be out in front of a dozen dead audiences. Bad trips. To be on the road is to be on a quest. *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall* tells of a quest, which spells the opening of a question. So each verse will open with some variation of the initiating inquiry:

Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?
And where have you been, my darling young one?

The immediate question about this question is "And you, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?" Dylan knows, and trusts us to know, just where this question has been, has come from. Sure enough, this particular source and resource we are all soberly aware of.[1]

O where ha you been, Lord Randal, my son?
And where ha you been, my handsom young man?

Not a source only, but an allusion, calling something into play – as will happen with the opening of *Highlands*,[2] where if you fail to recognize that you are in Robert Burns country you must be a pad-eared laddy of the lowlands.

The sinewy ballad *Lord Randal* prompted a structure within *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall*: its having for each verse both an inaugurative question and the concluding refrain. The song, like the predecessor ballad, takes poison, and it knows what impends: hell.

But the ways in which Dylan then chooses to depart so wide-rangingly from the original song of sin are one source of the achievement that is *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall*. The ballad's questions and answers ask the justice of being here in full.

[1] "Lord Randall playing with a quart of beer" (*Tarantula*, 1966, 1971, p. 82). Early nineteenth century, *Lord Randal* is in most anthologies of ballads or of Scottish verse.
[2] Dylan: "Well my heart's in the Highlands gentle and fair". Burns: "My heart's in the Highlands, my heart is not here".

LORD RANDAL

"O where ha you been, Lord Randal, my son?
And where ha you been, my handsom young man?"
"I ha been at the greenwood; mother, mak my bed soon,
For I'm wearied wi hunting, and fain wad lie down."

"An wha met you there, Lord Randal, my son?
An wha met you there, my handsom young man?"
"O I met wi my true-love; mother, mak my bed soon,
For I'm wearied wi hunting, and fain wad lie down."

"And what did she give you, Lord Randal, my son?
And what did she give you, my handsom young man?"
"Eels fried in a pan; mother, mak my bed soon,
For I'm wearied wi hunting, and fain wad lie down."

"An wha gat your leavins, Lord Randal, my son?
And wha gat your leavins, my handsom young man?"
"My hawks and my houns; mother, mak my bed soon,
For I'm wearied wi hunting, and fain wad lie down."

"An what becam of them, Lord Randal, my son?
And what becam of them, my handsom young man?"
"They stretched their legs out and died; mother, mak my bed soon,
For I'm wearied wi hunting, and fain wad lie down."

"O I fear you are poisoned, Lord Randal, my son!
I fear you are poisoned, my handsom young man?"
"O yes, I am poisoned; mother, mak my bed soon,
For I'm sick at the heart, and I fain wad lie down."

"What d'ye leave to your mother, Lord Randal, my son?
What d'ye leave to your mother, my handsom young man?"
"Four and twenty milk kye; mother, mak my bed soon,
For I'm sick at the heart, and I fain wad lie down."

"What d'ye leave to your sister, Lord Randal, my son?
What d'ye leave to your sister, my handsom young man?"
"My gold and my silver; mother, mak my bed soon,
For I'm sick at the heart, and I fain wad lie down."

"What d'ye leave to your brother, Lord Randal, my son?
What d'ye leave to your brother, my handsom young man?"
"My houses and my lands; mother, mak my bed soon,
For I'm sick at the heart, and I fain wad lie down."

"What d'ye leave to your true-love, Lord Randal, my son?
What d'ye leave to your true-love, my handsom young man?"
"I leave her hell and fire; mother, mak my bed soon,
For I'm sick at the heart, and I fain wad lie down."

Throughout, a question is at once asked twice; there is vouchsafed the briefest of answers; and then there is heard an exhausted plea on the verge of death.

Dylan's creative departure from the shaping spirit of *Lord Randal* establishes his territory immediately.

Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?
And where have you been, my darling young one?
I've stumbled on the side of twelve misty mountains
I've walked and I've crawled on six crooked highways
I've stepped in the middle of seven sad forests
I've been out in front of a dozen dead oceans
I've been ten thousand miles in the mouth of a graveyard
And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard,
It's a hard rain's a-gonna fall

Where have I been? Where fortitude and powers of endurance were called for. There, where I stumbled and walked and crawled. There, where I was the only human being – more, the only sentient being. There, where there

was no bed for me to lie down upon, and no succumbing to weariness. The travelling: travail. The landscapes: lethal. This first verse establishes the impulse of the song, a willingness if need be (not a masochistic wish) to take the path of most resistance. Hard going. Thorough going. "I fain wad lie down". But I'm pressing on.

What *Lord Randal* may help us to grasp, by taking the force of the contrasts, is the form that Dylan has given to fortitude.

The lineaments of *Lord Randal* are these. First, that every verse is divided equally between mother and son, between question and answer: two lines apiece. Second, that every verse is therefore of identical size, a quatrain that asks and gives no quarter. Third, that every verse is possessed by not just the same rhyme-scheme but the same rhyming words: *son / man* [Scottish *mon*]; *soon / down* [Scottish *doun*]. Fourth, that because so much of each verse is constituted of a question that will be sealed in due course by the refrain, it follows that pitilessly few of the words ever change from verse to verse, and this means an unremitting indeflectibility and then a ratcheted force exerted by those few words that do change, the words that are tortured into telling all.

Dylan, for all his respectful gratitude to *Lord Randal*, abides by none of these precedents that it sets. Such is his right. His making his own way may clarify the lines followed by his song – and to what end.

First, Q. and A. to weigh the same? But in Dylan's song the question is always outweighed by the scale of the answer, and furthermore this scale itself then varies. The first verse consists of the opening couplet that is the question, followed by five lines of narrated endurance, and then by the two-line refrain – or is the refrain all one line really? (The refrain comes as five asseverations: "it's a hard . . .", heard five times before being completed.)

And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, and it's a hard,
It's a hard rain's a-gonna fall

There were, at first, five lines of narrative at the centre; this is varied by expanding to seven such lines and then to six, but with the last verse, doubled up but not flinching in pain, encompassing twelve lines of narrative. Conclusively.

For his part, Lord Randal can do no more than urge again his fatal fatigue: "For I'm wearied wi hunting, and fain wad lie down". Will we weary of hearing this? Such is the question that every refrain has to put to

itself. But no, we don't weary, and this partly because here is no ordinary tiredness, "wearied wi hunting", rather the pangs of what will soon prove a cruelly altered refrain, with a death different from hunting: "For I'm sick at the heart, and I fain wad lie down". All the more *sick at the heart*, love-sick, because it was she who administered the poison, "my true-love".

Far from working with the steeled unchanging penetrations of *Lord Randal*, Dylan needs a different – a widespread – monotony, something like what Dryden evoked as the infernal ruin that fell to Lucifer after the war in heaven:

> These regions and this realm my wars have got;
> This mournful empire is the loser's lot:
> In liquid burnings, or on dry to dwell,
> Is all the sad variety of Hell.[1]

As to rhyme-scheme, *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall* doesn't have one. Or much rhyming, come to that. This, despite its starting with a rhyming couplet that will be varied crucially but never relinquished at any verse's head:

> Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?
> And where have you been, my darling young one?

The moment that it moves from this rhyming couplet (immediately, that is), the song sets itself at a great distance from how the ballad had enforced its sombre cross-examination. The song proceeds to work upon us – after every opening question – not by rhyme but through an insistent cadence, the unstressed final syllable that is the feminine ending: "I've stumbled on the side of twelve misty móuntains".[2]

The most common feminine ending in the language, my darling young one, is *-ing*. Or *-in'* in Dylan's voicin' – though not invariably. ("I heard

[1] T. S. Eliot in his essay *John Dryden* (1921): *The State of Innocence and Fall of Man* "is an early work; it is on the whole a feeble work; it is not deserving of sustained comparison with *Paradise Lost*. But 'all the sad variety of Hell'! Dryden is already stirring" (*Selected Essays*, 1932, 1951 edition, p. 312).

[2] For the feminine ending *móuntains* (as against *hills*), see the commentary on *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll* (pp. 223–4), where again the body of the song is a cadence; both songs play the dying fall of the feminine ending against a refrain of masculine ending or endings. *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall* hoops together the opening and the closing of each verse by beginning and ending with the masculine: *son* (as it happens) / *one* and *hard* / *fall*.

many people laughin'", but "I met a young woman whose body was burning" – "laughin'" is one thing, "burning" is no laughing matter.) Against the future that is *a-gonna fall*, the present participles from the past in the song are an ominous presence. If we pluck out the endings of the lines, we see or hear that the first verse (surprising, in retrospect) has no truck with *-ing*. What it confronts at the line-endings is a mounting of nouns: "son", "one", "mountains", "highways", "forests", "oceans", and (finally) "graveyard" – the mouth of the graveyard at once closing hard on the rhyme as it swings around:

> I've been ten thousand miles in the mouth of a graveyard
> And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard,
> It's a hard rain's a-gonna fall

There will later be a variant of this vocal grimace at the end of the fourth verse: "I met another man who was wounded in hatred, / And it's a hard, it's a hard . . ." – where "hatred" swallows "hard".

Only one of the first verse's noun-endings will return to such a position: "forests", which (as "forest") comes to darken the last verse within a sequence of words that – given "deepest" – makes "forest" feel less like a noun than an adjective in the superlative, an extremity: "I'll walk to the depths of the deepest dark forest".[1]

The lines come to an end with fateful nouns, and Dylan's forests and mountains are in tune with those of Philip Sidney. The double sestina in *Arcadia* opens:

> You goat-herd gods, that love the grassy mountains,
> You nymphs that haunt the springs in pleasant vallies,
> You satyrs joyed with free and quiet forests,
> Vouchsafe your silent ears to plaining music,
> Which to my woes gives still an early morning,
> And draws the dolour on till weary evening.

William Empson's eliciting of Sidney's greatness could be vouchsafed to Dylan's plaining music:[2]

The poem beats, however rich its orchestration, with a wailing and immovable

[1] Dylan sings "dark"; as printed in *Lyrics 1962–1985*, "black".

[2] *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930, second edition 1947), pp. 36–7.

monotony, for ever upon the same doors in vain. *Mountaines, vallies, forests; musique, evening, morning*; it is at these words only that Klaius and Strephon pause in their cries; these words circumscribe their world; these are the bones of their situation; and in tracing their lovelorn pastoral tedium through thirteen repetitions, with something of the aimless multitudinousness of the sea on a rock, we seem to extract all the meaning possible from these notions.

mountains: they suggest being shut in, or banishment; impossibility and impotence, or difficulty and achievement; greatness that may be envied or may be felt as your own (so as to make you feel helpless, or feel powerful); they give you the peace, or the despair, of the grave.

forests: though valuable and accustomed, are desolate and hold danger; there are both nightingales and owls in them; their beasts, though savage, give the strong pleasures of hunting; their burning is either useful or destructive.

music: may express joy or sorrow; is at once more and less direct than talking, and so is connected with one's permanent feeling about the characters of pastoral that they are at once very rustic and rather over-civilised; it may please or distress the by-standers.

The *meaning* of Dylan's music of joy and sorrow? "I would suggest", T. S. Eliot said, "that none of the plays of Shakespeare has a 'meaning', though it would be equally false to say that a play of Shakespeare is meaningless."[1] The first verse of *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall*, while far from meaningless, is *-ing*less. The pressure is on in the second and third verses, in both of which there is this present tension in successive lines, first two lines, then three lines (from within which you might add the ten thousand whisperin'):

> I saw a black branch with blood that kept drippin'
> I saw a room full of men with their hammers a-bleedin'
>
> I heard one hundred drummers whose hands were a-blazin'
> I heard ten thousand whisperin' and nobody listenin'
> I heard one person starve, I heard many people laughin'[2]

The fourth verse has, on her own (and on its own as not *-in'*), "I met a young woman whose body was burning". And then the last verse insists that there is no escape, that there ain't no going back. First, there arrive

[1] *Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca* (1927); *Selected Essays*, p. 135.
[2] This picks up a warning from earlier in the verse: "I heard the sound of a thunder that roared out a warnin'".

the two participles – *a-goin'* and *fallin'* – that you have been waiting for ever since you heard that "a hard rain's a-gonna fall": "I'm a-goin' back out 'fore the rain starts a-fallin'". A-going back out: going to back out? Never. (This will be the last verse all right: no previous one has mentioned rain except as forming part of the refrain.) Next and last, there is the beginning of the final end in the reiteration *I start sinkin' / I start singin'*:

> And I'll stand on the ocean until I start sinkin'
> But I'll know my song well before I start singin'
> And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, and it's a hard,
> It's a hard rain's a-gonna fall

And the nub of it all? The pearly grit that is "it". All the way from the specific identifications of "it" in "Oh, what did you see?":

> I saw a newborn baby with wild wolves all around it,
> I saw a highway of diamonds with nobody on it

– through to the unspecified final "it" that is it all:

> And I'll tell it and speak it and think it and breathe it,[1]
> And reflect from the mountain so all souls can see it

The refrain is sequential and torrential:

> And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, and it's a hard,
> It's a hard rain's a-gonna fall

Its oppressive force is built by the repeated withholding of the other four-letter word, so that "It's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard" must leave us waiting for "rain". "Or else expecting rain".[2] The scale of this protraction will be the clearer if we think of another refrain that works by deferral, not massively amassed but quietly insistent or persistent: "There's a slow, slow train comin' up around the bend"

[1] In singing, Dylan transposes the printed words, "think it and speak it".
[2] *Desolation Row*. "Everybody is making love / Or else expecting rain". The train of thought? That the recumbent lovers share an intuition with the cows, who lie down (keeping that patch dry?) when expecting rain.

(*Slow Train*).[1] Not "There's a slow, there's a slow, there's a slow, there's a slow, and there's a slow train comin' up around the bend". Things have changed when it becomes a matter of waiting for a train.[2]

Waiting, because fortitude, like patience, is a relation of the present to both the past and the future. In this, it differs from, say, courage, which may be shown suddenly here and now. Courage need make no claim as to what it was and what it will be. True, the habit of being courageous ("May you always be courageous", *Forever Young*) is one to be cultivated, yet courage does not have the habitual built into its very constitution. But patience and fortitude give, in the present, an assurance about what their past has been and what their future has every chance of being; they are constituted of the three tenses, the three dimensions of past, present, and future. The past is summoned by the first four questions: "Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?", "Oh, what did you see . . . ?", "Oh, what did you hear . . . ?", and "Oh, what did you meet . . . ?" But the final verse is spurred into the future:

> "And what'll you do now, my blue-eyed son?"
> "I'll tell it and speak it and think it and breathe it"

The final panorama could be seen as a journey into the depths of the word "resolution". In the words of *The Oxford English Dictionary*:

Determination; firmness or steadiness of purpose: unyielding temper.
I'll walk to the depths of the deepest dark forest

A statement upon some matter; a decision or verdict on some point; a formal decision, determination or expression of opinion.
Where black is the color, where none is the number

The process by which a material thing is reduced or separated into its component parts or elements.
Where the pellets of poison are flooding their waters

[1] That Dylan hadn't forgotten *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall* when he came by *Slow Train* is suggested by the endings upon "it": "Oh, you know it costs more to store the food than it do to give it" / "They talk about a life of brotherly love, show me someone who knows how to live it" / "A real suicide case, but there was nothin' I could do to stop it".

[2] "I'm well dressed, waiting on the last train" (*Things Have Changed*). "There's a long-distance train rolling through the rain" (*Where Are You Tonight?*)

The act, process, or capability of rendering distinguishable the component parts of an object or closely adjacent optical or photographic images, or of separating measurements of similar magnitude of any quantity in space or time.
And I'll tell it and speak it and think it and breathe it
And reflect from the mountain so all souls can see it

Fortitude is the supreme virtue of the quest. *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall* calls up the quests both of the medieval world and of the medievalizing world of later art. "I had so long suffered in this quest": the poem that in some ways most breathes the pestilential air of Dylan's song (as against being the ballad that launched his song) is not medieval but Victorian, Browning's *"Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came"*.[1] Like the song, it is a vision of judgement. "'Tis the Last Judgement's fire must cure this place". It ends, after a daunting parade of all those who had failed in the quest, with – dauntless all the same – fortitude, *fortissime*:

> in a sheet of flame
> I saw them and I knew them all. And yet
> Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set,
> And blew. "*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came.*"

But when you have a trumpet at your lips (or a harmonica, for that matter), you cannot ask or answer questions, and *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall* is built, above all and below all, on its being – as Browning's poem is not – antiphonal. Like *Lord Randal*, Q. and A. Unlike *Lord Randal*, not equally Q. and A. Alternation with alteration. Q.E.D.

[1] Browning knew Shakespeare's song well before he started writing. From *King Lear*: "Childe Roland to the dark Tower came, / His word was still, fie, foh, and fum, / I smell the blood of a British man". Michael Gray is good on Dylan and Browning (*Song and Dance Man III*, 2000, pp. 64–70), but doesn't mention this instance. In the order of the song, the two have these in common (but I'm assimilating, for instance, singulars and plurals: Dylan, "highways" / Browning, "highway"): "mountains", "highways", "dead", "mouth", "what did you see" / "Not see?" (at the start of the verse), "a baby", "black", "blood", "water", "what did you hear" / "Not hear?" (at the start of the next verse), "starve", "laugh", "a man", "burning", "dark", "poison", "executioner" / "hangman", "ugly", and "the souls". Stronger may be the relation of Dylan's "the roar of a wave that could drown the whole world" not only to Browning's "my whole world-wandering" but to Browning's immediately succeeding his other phrase, "the whole world", with a ship's going down in a storm.

But this does itself raise a Q. For while there is no doubt at all as to who asks

> O where ha you been, Lord Randal, my son?
> And where ha you been, my handsom young man?

– there is doubt as to who opens by asking

> Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?
> And where have you been, my darling young one?

Moreover, antiphonal structure is markedly unusual in Dylan. *Blowin' in the Wind* has the asker be the answerer. *Who Killed Davey Moore?* has its question answered one by one by all those around the boxing ring. True, there is one song, alive with questions, that does set out as antiphonal: *Boots of Spanish Leather*, which alternates the verses until the seventh verse, when the dark truth dawns, with one of the interlocutors now becoming the narrator for the last three verses, verses that no longer have any place for questions. Though Dylan songs often turn upon questions, none of them has any such sequence of exchanges as makes *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall* distinctive.

Added to which, "Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?" doesn't sound like the sort of thing that one asks oneself – unlike, say, *Are You Ready?* ("I hope I'm ready"). And Dylan will not have failed to register that *Lord Randal* is not only antiphonal, it is an interrogation, an inquiry that becomes an inquisition. "My son" . . . "Mother", in every verse. What is so horrible about this murder story is how close the whole scene is to the banality of every mother to every son.

> "O where ha you been, Lord Randal, my son?"
>
> "An wha met you there, Lord Randal, my son?"
>
> "And what did she give you, Lord Randal, my son?"
>
> "An wha gat your leavins, Lord Randal, my son?"
>
> "An what becam of them, Lord Randal, my son?"
>
> "What d'ye leave to your mother, Lord Randal, my son?"
>
> "What d'ye leave to your sister, Lord Randal, my son?"

> "What d'ye leave to your brother, Lord Randal, my son?"
>
> "What d'ye leave to your true-love, Lord Randal, my son?"
>
> *"What was school-lunch like, Lord Randal, my son?"*
>
> *"What do her parents do, Lord Randal, my son?"*

Which is where another unforgettable ballad comes into the grim picture.[1] A man with his sword-blade a-bleedin'. Mother and son, antiphonally, her "Edward, Edward" being met always by his "Mither, mither".

> "Why dois your brand sae drap wi bluid,
> Edward, Edward,
> Why dois your brand sae drap wi bluid,
> And why sae sad gang yee O?"
> "O I hae killed my hauke sae guid,
> Mither, mither.
> O I hae killed my hauke sae guid,
> And I had nae mair bot hee O."

Whereupon the mother insists "Your haukis bluid was nevir sae reid" ("My deir son") – alternating her four lines with his four again, as in all seven of the verses. "O I hae killed my reid-roan steed". She again refuses to believe him. And he: "O I hae killed my fadir deir, / Mither, mither".

> "And whatten penance wol ye drie for that,
> Edward, Edward?
> And whatten penance wol ye drie for that,
> My deir son, now tell me O."

He will set sail, journeying into exile.

> "And what wul ye doe wi your towirs and your ha'?"
> "Ile let thame stand tul they doun fa"
>
> "And what wul ye leive to your bairns and your wife?"
> "The warldis room, late them beg thrae life"

[1] The eighteenth-century ballad *Edward, Edward* was and is in *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, as well as in most anthologies of ballads and of Scottish verse.

And then the devastating desolate end:

"And what wul ye leive to your ain mither deir,
Edward, Edward?
And what wul ye leive to your ain mither deir,
My deir son, now tell me O."
"The curse of hell frae me sall ye beir,
Mither, mither,
The curse of hell frae me sall ye beir,
Sic counseils ye gave to me O."

Like *Lord Randal*, this ends with the curse of hell, levied again upon a woman, this time not a true-love but (even more hideously) no truly loving mother or wife.

A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall is a vision of judgement, a scouring vision of hell. Hell on earth. And who is the mother who asks "Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?"? Mother Earth.

Milton has his *Paradise Lost*, where the fallen angels in hell, "with impious hands,/Rifled the bowels of their mother Earth". A. E. Housman has his Paradisal Shropshire Lost: "The earth, because my heart was sore,/Sorrowed for the son she bore". Dylan has his Paradise Lost: "There's a million dreams gone, there's a landscape being raped" (*Where Are You Tonight?*).

Mother Nature. And Mother Earth. If you don't care for the old girl, you call her "beldam earth", and leave her to her unlovely landscape of cosmic indigestion:

Diseasèd Nature oftentimes breaks forth
In strange eruptions; and the teeming Earth
Is with a kind of colic pinched and vext
By the imprisoning of unruly wind
Within her womb: which for enlargement striving,
Shakes the old beldam Earth, and tumbles down
Steeples and moss-grown towers.
(*I Henry IV*, III, i)[1]

Browning had shown her in a bad light and a bad mood, bitching about what had become of her landscape:

[1] Beckett: "It is made of dead leaves. A reminder of beldam nature" (*Closed Place*).

"See
Or shut your eyes," said Nature peevishly,
"It nothing skills: I cannot help my case:
'Tis the Last Judgement's fire must cure this place,
Calcine its clods and set my prisoners free."
(XI)

The damp dirty prisoners. But in *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall* Dylan sorrows for the mother who is being lost to all her sons. Mother Earth and Mother Nature are imperilled by the hard rain. And by the pellets of poison. And by so much else that haunts the song. Not just the one Dead Sea, but a dozen dead oceans.

Childe Roland had asked "Who were the strugglers, what war did they wage?", with the adversaries "Crouched like two bulls locked horn in horn in fight". It might be wondered why my commentary says nothing about the Cuban crisis of October 1962, about the fact that – as Dylan himself said – the song was written when it seemed that Khrushchev and Kennedy were head-to-heading towards the war to end life. What Dylan says about the song – *said*, one should say, since it was all back then – earns respect and asks thought:

It's not atomic rain, though. Some people think that. It's just a hard rain, not the fall out rain, it isn't that at all. The hard rain that's gonna fall is in the last verse, where I say the "pellets of poison are flooding us all" ["flooding their waters"]. I mean all the lies that people are told on their radios and in the newspapers, trying to take people's brains away, all the lies I consider poison.[1]

"Every line of it is actually the start of a whole song." "Line after line after line, trying to capture the feeling of nothingness. I kept repeating things I feared." Feared, but imagined facing with fortitude.

And I'll stand on the ocean until I start sinkin'
But I'll know my song well before I start singin'
And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, and it's a hard,
It's a hard rain's a-gonna fall

What precipitated the song was the Cuban crisis. Agreed. But the song,

[1] *Studs Terkel Show*, WFMT Radio, Chicago (3 May 1963).

being a work of art, is always going to be larger than and other than what precipitated it. *The Oxford English Dictionary*: "Hence the frequent precipitation of heavy rain, and the banks and sheets of morning cloud which veil the tree-clad peaks" (1859). The misty mountains. And there remains the solitary man, whose individual suffering asks no less fortitude. "I met one man who was wounded in love". Next, "I met another man who was wounded in hatred". In English, you can be in love, and you can say something in hatred, and you can be wounded by or with hatred[1] – but "who was wounded in hatred"? Terribly damaged and damaging: in hatred with her or him or them, as if hatred were an ethos and an atmosphere.

The man who is left alone may stand in need of fortitude. You can feel it and you can hear it in *Most of the Time* or (with an alien sense of desertion) in *I Believe in You*. "They'd like to drive me from this town".

I Believe in You

There was once a "righteous king who wrote psalms". *I and I* is at one with *I* and *You*, there in *I Believe in You* – which sings "And I, I", and which is a psalm. As always in the Psalms, the unrighteous are the enemy. *You*, though, are my enemy's enemy, thank the Lord.

The stronger the unrighteous are, the more will fortitude be called for and called upon. "I will be sorry for my sin. But mine enemies are lively, and they are strong: and they that hate me wrongfully are multiplied" (Psalms 38:18–19). "Deliver me from my persecutors; for they are stronger than I" (Psalms 142:24).

The unrighteous are *they*. Unidentified, nameless. Psalm 3 begins: "LORD, how are they increased that trouble me! Many are they that rise up against me". Five verses later, it confronts those "that have set themselves against me round about". *I Believe in You* begins:

> They ask me how I feel
> And if my love is real
> And how I know I'll make it through
> And they, they look at me and frown
> They'd like to drive me from this town
> They don't want me around
> 'Cause I believe in you

[1] As printed in *Lyrics 1962–1985*: "wounded with hatred".

Me around / me round about.

They prowl in and around the song. They are in the first and second verses, and they return to lurk at the last. But the hope that is fortitude ("I know I'll make it through") is at the heart of the song, for the word "they" is not to be heard in the central sequence of it: not in the bridge the first time (beginning "I believe in you even through the tears and the laughter"), and then not in the central verse ("Don't let me drift too far"), and then not in the bridge the second time ("I believe in you when winter turn to summer"). That there exists this they-free zone puts hope in me: you and I can be there on our own together. Yet we need to be still aware of the threat, since the bridge – the second time – has to acknowledge "though my friends forsake me". (Psalms 38:11, "my friends stand aloof from my sore; and my kinsmen stand afar off".)

"And they, they" rings out its duplicity once only. "And I, I . . ." counters this twice with its refusal to flinch: "And I, I walk out on my own", "And I, I don't mind the pain".[1]

> They show me to the door
> They say don't come back no more
> 'Cause I don't be like they'd like me to

The bad grammar is up to no little good, since it is not a matter of slumming or of dumbing down but of intimating something different. Instead of the expected "Because I'm not like they'd like me to be", the turn of phrase makes "I don't be" take into itself both "I won't be" and "I can't be" (*like they'd like me to be*). My choice and at the same time my destiny.[2] People, uglily, will like you for being like what they want, which usually means like them.[3] The pressure that whets the word – "be like they'd like me to" – is the malign counterpart to what had been for John Keats a happiness about what this little word "like" (likewise near "because") could do in the right hands: "You will by this time think I am in love with her; so before I go any further I will tell you I am not . . . I like her and

[1] Printed in *Lyrics 1962–1985*, "And I walk out on my own". Dylan sings "And I, I walk out on my own".

[2] "Well, if I don't be there by morning / I guess that I never will" (*If I Don't Be There by Morning*, Dylan with Helena Springs).

[3] "Well, I try my best / To be just like I am / But everybody wants you / To be just like them" (*Maggie's Farm*).