Dylan's Visions of Sin

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Pride

Like a Rolling Stone

The performers of the dance of death in *Tarantula* include tragedy. Or rather Tragedy. Or even perhaps (the actor's throbstuff) Taragedy. But be warned, there is a caveat. *Caveat*: let him beware, or at least be wary. For although tragedy can be profound in its understanding of pride, tragedy becomes shallow as soon as it does itself fall into pride. It should not presume to look down on comedy, its otherwise inclined brother. *Tarantula* contemplates "tragedy, the broken pride, shallow & no deeper than comedy", tragedy in line for "the doom, the bending & the farce of happy ending".[1]

Like a Rolling Stone, which looks into the depths of such comedy as is savage farce (and yet is not without a happy ending of a weird kind), is an achievement in which Dylan takes pride.[2] The song takes pride as its target.

> Once upon a time you dressed so fine
> Threw the bums a dime in your prime, didn't you?
> People'd call, say, "Beware doll, you're bound to fall"
> You thought they were all kiddin' you
> You used to laugh about
> Everybody that was hangin' out
> Now you don't talk so loud
> Now you don't seem so proud
> About having to be scrounging your next meal

"Once upon a time": do remember how fairy-tales sally forth, but don't

[1] *Tarantula* (1966, 1971), p. 52.

[2] "*Like a Rolling Stone* changed it all; I didn't care any more after that about writing books or poems or whatever. I mean it was something that I myself could dig. It's very tiring having other people tell you how much they dig you if you yourself don't dig you" (*Playboy*, March 1966).

forget how soon the darkness encroaches. For this nursery formula enters not as a sarcasm but as an irony.

The song bides its time before releasing "proud" (getting on for the sixtieth word), but we have got the picture. The posture, too, there in "Once upon a time you dressed so fine". (Of pride, the proverb says: "be her garments what they will, yet she will never be too hot, nor too cold".[1]) There, too, in "Threw the bums a dime in your prime, didn't you?", with its evocation of small-minded largesse (all change was small change to her in those days). Averse to advice, she saw no need to heed. "People'd call, say, 'Beware doll, you're bound to fall'". And why was she bound to fall? Because of what famously comes before a fall. This thought itself, within the song, comes before "proud".

Her misguided insouciance is guyed in the rhyme "didn't you?" / "You thought they were all kiddin' you". (A rhyme? That? You must be kidding.) "Now you don't talk so loud": but the song is, in its way, a talking song, a good talking-to. "Now you don't seem so proud": "seem" partly as a further rounding on her, but partly as an admission that he can't really be sure what is going on inside, as against how she seems.

> Now you don't seem so proud
> About having to be scrounging your next meal

Not at all the same thing as a meal, this phrase "your next meal". We know where "your next meal" is coming from. Scrounging your next meal means swallowing your pride.

So she *had it coming*? But Dylan knows that those who take pleasure in the words "had it coming" are themselves likely to be guilty of the complacency that they impugn. Or the callousness, dressed up so fine. Dylan's voice can be heard to disown the phrase at the heinous end of *Black Cross*, the story of Hezekiah Jones:[2]

> And they hung Hezekiah
> As high up as a pigeon
> White folks around said
> Well, he had it comin'
> Son-of-a-bitch never had no religion

[1] 1614; *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, ed. J. A. Simpson (1982).
[2] *Black Cross*, Lord Buckley's monologue from Joseph Newman's poem. Dylan recorded it (Michael Gray gives the date, 22 December 1961).

Not that a religion guarantees a good god. Samuel Butler transubstantiated the piety of "An honest man's the noblest work of God" into a provocative proverb: "An honest God's the noblest work of man". There are dishonest gods and goddesses. William James deplored "the moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess *success*. That – with the squalid cash interpretation put on the word success – is our national disease."[1] The woman in *Like a Rolling Stone* has been down upon her knees before the bitch-goddess, the goddess that failed and that made her fail. Fail, fall, feel.

Yet this relentless pressure (the drill of "How does it feel"), though it will not give up, is not without misgivings. They are what saves the song. Saves it from being – in all its vituperative exhilaration – even more damnably proud than the person whom it damns and blasts. For in the end the song doesn't only chastise, it finds itself chastened by its recognition of more feelings than it had at first bargained for. But perhaps not so much *more* feelings (I am thinking of the good old gibe, "I'm afraid this will hurt X's feelings, but then he has so many of them . . .") as different ones, feelings more at odds with themselves and with the revenge comedy that is the song.

> You never turned around to see the frowns on the jugglers and the clowns
> When they all did tricks for you

But the song eventually turns around, in the way in which Kipling's masterpiece of revenge, his story *Dayspring Mishandled*, turns around in some of its sympathies by the time it is through with the monstrous trick that the revenger plays upon someone who had it coming – someone who then turns out to have something more than a cruelly practical joke coming: the final fatal it.

The right characterization of the animus within the song, in my judgement, is not gloating but exulting. Dylan's judgement in the song, by the end, feels different from the one he was moved to make before it, outside it, about it. What do we really feel about its question "How does it feel?"? (A question within a question there.) How does it feel? Mixed: is that not how it feels? Not to be confused with Mixed-Up Confusion, but mixed feelings, nixed feelings.

[1] 11 September 1906; *Letters* (1920), vol. II, p. 260.

How does it feel
How does it feel
To be without a home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?

Those several questions amount to – they mount to – one question. Just how many questions the song puts is itself in question. "Threw the bums a dime in your prime, didn't you?": is that a question, exactly?

As you stare into the vacuum of his eyes
And say do you want to make a deal?

Doesn't this report a question rather than put one?

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

It's not just the lack of a question-mark on the page that makes "Ain't it hard" feel obdurately uninquiring, beyond question. Still, the final verse is the only one of the four to have no question or question-type solicitation other than the single-minded tireless inquisition, "How does it feel?"

And does this question permit of a single-minded answer? If the song were nothing other than a triumph of gloating, then the hoped-for answer would be reduced to the broken admission, "Terrible, that's how it feels, if you must know." But there can be felt in the refrain an exhilaration and a further exultation, not just the one that is being bent upon this Princess (proverb: "Proud as a prince"), but a different one, some exultation that she herself may have come belatedly into possession of and be feeling even now. Allen Ginsberg caught Dylan's catching this, Dylan who is loved (Ginsberg said) "by every seeker in America who's heard that long-vowelled voice in heroic ecstasy triumphant. 'How does it feel?' "[1]

How does it feel
To be without a home

Does the answer have to be *terrible*, *terrifying*? Is there nothing about being

[1] Sleeve-notes to *Desire*.

without a home that could be, even if far short of *terrific*, at least freed from certain pressures or oppressions? (Ask any artist whose life, by and large, is on the road.) Or freed from certain sadnesses? Ask Philip Larkin.

HOME IS SO SAD

Home is so sad. It stays as it was left,
Shaped to the comfort of the last to go
As if to win them back. Instead, bereft
Of anyone to please, it withers so,
Having no heart to put aside the theft

And turn again to what it started as,
A joyous shot at how things ought to be,
Long fallen wide. You can see how it was:
Look at the pictures and the cutlery.
The music in the piano stool. That vase.

Not that the music in the piano stool was likely to include *Like a Rolling Stone*.

Again:

How does it feel
To be on your own

The point isn't that a positive answer can shove aside the negative one; rather, that if you acknowledge any possibility of a positive answer, you immediately grant mixed feelings as to how it feels, you concede that the song is alive to more than one kind of exultation, and your imagination reaches well beyond gloating. True, she lost a great deal of what had constituted her being, this princess. But did she gain nothing?

The refrain gains something. At first, it lacked this taunt or tint that subsequently comes to colour the song and make it its own:

How does it feel
To be on your own

It would be stubborn to acknowledge no thrill whatsoever when this arrives. You don't have to have led the life of the young Dylan to sense that something of power arrives with "To be on your own". And you have

only to imagine the flash-lit life of a celebrity (goldfish-bowled) to feel a touch of yearning in "Like a complete unknown". Dylan's voicing of this includes something of relief, release, as though the exchange might, just might, have gone like this: *How does it feel? Good of you to ask, not at all bad, or at any rate not all bad.*

"Tragedy, the broken pride": her pride may have been broken ("Now you don't seem so proud"), but she may not have been. She is not altogether to be bullied into abjection by the school-bully named Life. Bully for her.

> You've gone to the finest school all right, Miss Lonely
> But you know you only used to get juiced in it
> Nobody's ever taught you how to live out on the street
> And now you're gonna have to get used to it

For in the end the finest school is the Little Red School of Hard Knox, the school that by the end may have taught you how to live out on the street. Like all of us, Miss Lonely bridles at the thought of being taught a lesson, but she may not be above learning her lesson, provided that it is hers, provided that it is something more than an exposure (though never less than that), an exposition in the song, not an imposition by the song.

> You said you'd never compromise
> With the mystery tramp, but now you realize
> He's not selling any alibis
> As you stare into the vacuum of his eyes
> And say do you want to make a deal?

But now you realize: there is much that she is coming to realize. For instance, that she can't claim to have somehow been someone else or somewhere else at the time ("He's not selling any alibis"), somewhere other than the pinnacled stage of life where she strutted and fretted.

> Princess on the steeple and all the pretty people
> They're all drinkin', thinkin' that they got it made
> Exchanging all precious gifts
> But you'd better take your diamond ring, you'd better pawn it babe

That word "pawn" may hold a grudge, yes, but then if you were a grudge, wouldn't you like to be held?

Realizing such things is a gain of a sort. Perhaps pure loss is as rare as any other purity. "Like a complete unknown": under one aspect this is a threat, but there are other aspects, and one of them would be the reminder that being like a complete unknown[1] might not feel as totally evacuated as being like a complete known. Think of the celeb, known not only to all but to sundry, and with no longer even a chance of going (a complete unknown) *incognito*.

Robert Shelton, then, was not being perverse (tactless, perhaps) when he retorted the song's question upon the singer. His interview in *Melody Maker* (29 July 1978) had the title *How does it feel to be on your own?*, and it began: "'How does it feel?' I teased Bob Dylan with his own famous question." And eight years later, Shelton's biography called itself simply *No Direction Home*. Simply, and simplifyingly, but still with a response to something positive, something liberating, in the thought of being without a home. (Which is not the same as being homeless.) *Like a Rolling Stone* put this complex plight in stages. The first time the refrain comes, the line is "To be without a home". Thereafter it recedes further: "With no direction home". From no home to no direction home. And yet neither of these is sheer.

Like a Rolling Stone is home to a great many home truths, valid home truths.

> *Home*: That strikes home; that comes home to one; searching, poignant, pointed; effective, appropriate; to the point, close, direct. Now chiefly in *home question, home truth*.
>
> (*The Oxford English Dictionary*)

Such is the song all right, earning all of those epithets. Its home question: How does it feel? Its home truth: Like a rolling stone. For those four words, the entitlement, are not just part of what you are being asked about ("How does it feel to be like a rolling stone?"), they constitute one answer, too: like a rolling stone, that is how it feels. And how does that feel? Exercise your imagination, as Keats did: "He has affirmed that he can conceive of a billiard ball that it may have a sense of delight from its own roundness, smoothness, volubility, and the rapidity of its motion."[2] A sense of delight within *Like a Rolling Stone*? Certainly, but what is not certain is that the

[1] The refrain, on its second appearance, does not say "Like a complete unknown", but – unmitigated – "A complete unknown".

[2] Richard Woodhouse to John Taylor, about 27 October 1818; *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. H. E. Rollins (1958), vol. 1, p. 389.

delight is monopolized by the excoriator, with none of it seized by the excoriated. And the rapidity of its motion? "That was a great tune, yeah. It's the dynamics in the rhythm that make up *Like a Rolling Stone* and all of the lyrics."[1] Such is the source of the song's delight (energy is eternal delight, as Blake sensed), and since delight often overflows its bounds, then if the Princess is indeed like a rolling stone, some of this sense of delight just might roll her way. She can't simply be anathema to him, for the song rolls like an anthem.

Mustn't sentimentalize, true. I am not convinced that the song rises quite as high (or would be the better for rising quite as high) above its ugly truthful feelings as Paul Nelson's shining upward face suggests.[2] Ill-will is there, for sure, and critics have found the song distasteful in the charge that it brings, in the charge that it makes, and in the charge that it carries.[3] The song's recrimination might incriminate it. But just as creators are more magnanimous than critics, so creations – works of art – have a way of being more magnanimous than their creators. Dylan's conversational relish as to *Like a Rolling Stone* is no doubt true to the song's occasion and to its impetus, but the achievement is then the sublimation of all the dross that it knew it needed to start with or to start from. There is a process that transmutes what is acid and acrid and acrimonious. The original impulse and the original draft are something other than the song.

> In its early form it was 10 pages long . . . It wasn't called anything. Just a rhythm thing on paper all about my steady hatred directed at some point that was honest. In the end it wasn't hatred, it was telling someone something they didn't know. Telling them they were lucky. Revenge! That's the better word. I had never thought of it as a song until one day I was at the piano and on the piano it was singing, How does it feel? in a slow motion pace, in the utmost of slow motion, following something. It was like swimming in lava. In your eyesight you see your victim swimming in lava. Hanging by their arms from a birch tree. Hitting a nail with your foot. Seeing someone in the pain they were bound to meet up with. I wrote it. I didn't fail. It was straight.[1]

[1] *Playboy* (March 1978).

[2] "The finest song on the album, and Dylan's greatest so far, I think, is *Like a Rolling Stone*, the definitive statement that both personal and artistic fulfilment must come, in the main, by being truly on one's own. Dylan's social adversaries have twisted this to mean something very devious and selfish, but that is not the case at all. Dylan is simply kicking away the props to get to the real core of the matter: Know yourself. It may hurt at first, but you'll never get anywhere if you don't. The final 'You're invisible now, you got no secrets to conceal/How does it feel?/How does it feel?/To be on your own' is clearly optimistic and triumphant, a soaring of the spirit into a new and more productive present."

(*Sing Out!*, February/March 1966)

[3] "*Like a Rolling Stone* is of course a put-down – most likely the best Dylan ever wrote. What is annoying about it to me is its self-righteousness, its willingness to judge others without judging oneself, the proselytizing in disguise for Dylan's own way of life" (Jon Landau, *Crawdaddy!*, 1968).

"Revenge! That's the better word." But revenge within dark comedy, Dylan's or Shakespeare's, can be left to time, is time's business or pleasure. "And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges". His, Time's, quite as much as his, Dylan's. "Seeing someone in the pain they were bound to meet up with." But one thing that we know proverbially is that *pride feels no pain*. Or rather, that there is a paradox in pride's relation to pain: "Pride is never without her own pain, though she will not feel it" (1614). Will not: refuses to. As to the future, she will feel it.

The song moves, in its own pain, from the vindictive to a vindication of itself. It doesn't torture, it cauterizes. "You never understood": this arrives at an understanding that has its own sadness.

> You never turned around to see the frowns on the jugglers and the clowns
> When they all did tricks for you
> You never understood that it ain't no good
> You shouldn't let other people get your kicks for you

When Dylan elsewhere makes a joke in this vicinity, we shouldn't put the joke down to the vacuum that is flippancy.

> *How do you get your kicks these days, then?*
> "I hire people to look into my eyes, and then I have them kick me."
> *And that's the way you get your kicks?*
> "No. Then I *forgive* them. That's where my kicks come in."[2]

"As you stare into the vacuum of his eyes": "You shouldn't let other

[1] *Bob Dylan* by Miles (1978), p. 28 (not to be confused with the compilation by Miles, *Bob Dylan in His Own Words*, also 1978). Apparently from an interview with Jules Siegel (March 1966).

[2] *Playboy* (March 1966).

people get your kicks for you". I know, I know, Dylan is jesting when he says "Then I *forgive* them", but it isn't an empty jest. Among the things that *Like a Rolling Stone* does to her is forgive her. Many things protect this against sentimentality; for one, the fact that forgiveness, which is styptic, makes you wince.

You used to laugh about
Everybody that was hangin' out

The song doesn't laugh and it doesn't laugh at her. "You used to be so amused": the song isn't amused or amusing. It is in earnest, and in its turbulent way it gives an earnest of its mixed feelings. "You've gone to the finest school all right, Miss Lonely": she is Miss Lonely, only, for she is not Miss Lonelyhearts. But in the long run that is life, she isn't heartless, and nor is the song.

This is what underlies the overlap between what the song sings of her arrival at bleakness, and what on occasion Dylan is moved to say of himself.

When you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose

You must be vulnerable to be sensitive to reality. And to me being vulnerable is just another way of saying that one has nothing more to lose. I don't have anything but darkness to lose. I'm way beyond that.[1]

And for now? "The word 'NOW'"[2] has its penetrative immediacy:

[1] *Rolling Stone* (26 January 1978).

[2] Now you see this one-eyed midget
Shouting the word "NOW"
And you say, "For what reason?"
And he says, "How?"
And you say "What does this mean?"
And he screams back, "You're a cow
Give me some milk
Or else go home"
(*Ballad of a Thin Man*)

How now no brown cow.

Now you don't talk so loud
Now you don't seem so proud

And now you're gonna have to get used to it

but now you realize
He's not selling any alibis

Go to him now, he calls you, you can't refuse
When you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose
You're invisible now, you got no secrets to conceal

Not since Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* has there been such an upsurge of the urgency of *now*:

Now, therefore, while the youthful hue
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing soul transpires
At every pore with instant fires,
Now let us sport us while we may;
And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour,
Than languish in his slow-chapped power.
Let us roll all our strength, and all
Our sweetness, up into one ball . . .

To His Coy Mistress is a love song. *Like a Rolling Stone* ("In the end it wasn't hatred") is an unlove song, *To His Coy Princess*: let us roll all our strength – this is no time for sweetness – up into one stone.

There is now, and there was then. You can hear the different parts played by the simple words "used to", meaning sometimes "was what you did" and one time "get habituated to". The song sets the "used to" of "You used to laugh about" ("You only used to get juiced in it", "You used to ride on the chrome horse with your diplomat", "You used to be so amused") against this moment when what was habit has become the need to get habituated to the way life is: "And now you're gonna have to get used to it". And both of these are set against the different meaning of "used" as "made use of" (differently pronounced, too, this different usage) in

You used to be so amused
At Napoleon in rags and the language that he used[1]

It is the word "you" that is used to make her confront her self-abuse. Nearly thirty times in the song "you" is thrust at her, eight times in the last verse, where it is pressed home even further by its accomplices in rhyme:

But *you*'d better take your diamond ring, *you*'d better pawn it babe
You used to be so *amused*
At Napoleon in rags and the language that he *used*
Go to him now, he calls *you*, *you* can't *refuse*
When *you* ain't got nothing, *you* got nothing to *lose*
You're invisible now, *you* got no secrets to conceal[2]

The pronoun "you" is the song's pronouncement, this being a song in which, although "they" may for a while be hanging out with "you" ("They're all drinkin', thinkin' that they got it made"), and "he" may be doing so, too (even if "He's not selling any alibis"[3]), "you" will never, Miss Lonely, enjoy the company of "we" or "us", and never ever the company of an "I". Of all Dylan's creations this is the song that, while one of his most individual, exercises the severest self-control when it comes to never mentioning its first person. Never say I. Not I and I: you and you.

[1] "Napoleon in rags" is, among other things, the great man who has fallen. People'd call, say, "Beware, Boney, you're bound to fall"; he thought they were all kidding him. On Napoleon and his fall in relation to how language can be used, consider Byron on "the 'greatest living poet'": "Even I . . . / Was reckoned, a considerable time, / The grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme. //. . . But I will fall at least as fell my hero" (*Don Juan*, XI, 55–6). My hero: compare Dylan's *Hero Blues*, "You need a different kind of man, babe / You need Napoleon Boneeparte".

[2] The "you" in "you're" is a different sound, and it does different work in the song (three times).

[3] There are two excruciating crescendos that writhe with "him" and "he":

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

You used to be so amused
At Napoleon in rags and the language that he used
Go to him now, he calls you, you can't refuse

And yet, in the end, with mixed feelings about you.

The song's proverb has gathered its own mixed feelings over the years. "A rolling stone gathers no moss, and a running head will never thrive" (Gosson, 1579). Moss, it seems, is imagined there as a good thing (making you feel comfortable in some way). *The Oxford English Dictionary* says of the proverb that it is "used to imply that a man who restlessly roams from place to place, or constantly changes his employment will never grow rich. Hence, in *slang* or allusive use, *moss* occas. = money." By 1926, what with what, the proverb was ready to receive the Stephen Leacock treatment, which included Leacock's scepticism about home when success is at stake.

A ROLLING STONE GATHERS NO MOSS

Entirely wrong again. This was supposed to show that a young man who wandered from home never got on in the world. In very ancient days it was true. The young man who stayed at home and worked hard and tilled the ground and goaded oxen with a long stick like a lance found himself as he grew old a man of property, owning four goats and a sow. The son who wandered forth in the world was either killed by the cannibals or crawled home years afterwards doubled up with rheumatism. So the old men made the proverb.

But nowadays it is exactly wrong. It is the rolling stone that gathers the moss. It is the ambitious boy from Llanpwgg, Wales, who trudges off to the city leaving his elder brother in the barnyard and who later on makes a fortune and founds a university. While his elder brother still has only the old farm with three cows and a couple of pigs, he has a whole department of agriculture with great sheds full of Tamworth hogs and a professor to every six of them.

In short, in modern life it is the rolling stone that gathers the moss. And the geologists say that the moss on the actual stone was first started in exactly the same way. It was the rolling of the stone that smashed up the earth and made the moss grow.[1]

Modern life, 1926. By the mid sixties, the Rolling Stone had got on in the world even further, what with a heaven-sent magazine and a hell-bent group, with the song itself maintaining the momentum of a rolling stone, of rock 'n' roll. And no need to say a word about moss.

George Bernard Shaw protested in his preface to *Misalliance*: "We keep repeating the silly proverb that a rolling stone gathers no moss, as if moss

[1] Stephen Leacock, *Studies in the Newer Culture; Winnowed Wisdom* (1926), pp. 104–5.

were a desirable parasite." A desirable parasite does figure in Dylan's song. But what would be so great about gathering moss anyway? "Gather ye rose-buds while ye may": that, I can understand. Herrick, not To Miss Lonely, but *To the Virgins, to make much of Time.*

Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying:
And this same flower that smiles today,
Tomorrow will be dying.

Gather ye rose-buds . . . But who could ever forget the great moment when Lou Costello suddenly says to Bud Abbott, "Gather ye moss, Bud, while ye may"?

Day of the Locusts

It is easy to make the mistake of supposing that a Dylan song is about Dylan, as against his being about it, its unmistakably manifesting him in his element. Don't break works of art back down into the biographical contingencies that contributed to bringing them into being but that are not their being. Don't track or trace him. Don't seek to interpret the life of his songs by resurrecting loathed people or loved people from his personal life. "My songs have a life of their own."[1] More, they lead their own lives. The impersonality that is one of art's strengths is a feat, and the artist has to exercise imagination to achieve it, to have the song be his but not he. More, even: to have it be true of his independent creations, as William Blake said of his, that "Though I call them mine, I know that they are not mine."

But there will sometimes be the special occasion, biographically and artistically, when we don't mishear a particular Dylan song if we bring it home to him and to the events of his life. *Day of the Locusts* preserves his life at what is not a stolen moment. The song alludes to what occasioned it. To allude is to call something into play, as Dylan does when he plays this song.

Alfred Tennyson in 1831 had not stayed to gain a degree from the University of Cambridge. His honorary degree twenty years later (from the University of Oxford . . .) both bestowed and earned honour. Robert Allen Zimmerman did not hang around – or in there – to gain a degree

[1] Interview, London (4 October 1997); *Isis* (October 1997).

from the University of Minnesota. In due course, ten years later, Princeton University gave Bob Dylan an honorary degree, a doctorate of music.

The artist can be and should be proud of such an honour. But this had better not tempt him or her into pride. One way to exorcize pride might be to write an unostentatious poem or song about the occasion, an occasional song. Careful now, for to ridicule the ceremony would be to demean not only it but oneself. But to rib it, fine. Comedy will save the day of the locusts.

"As I stepped to the stage to pick up my degree": of course no gentleman would ever mention that the degree in question was (don't you know) an honorary not an ordinary one. But there is bound to be at least the possibility of one's becoming a shade pompous in the circumstances. I remember when someone important and self-important put it to me once (over a glass of sherry) that he had a moral dilemma: could I help him with it? I shall do my best, I answered gravely. It is this: is it proper, do you think, to give exactly the same speech of thanks when I am given an honorary degree by the University of Middlemarch next week that I gave last week when I was given an honorary degree by the University of Barset? Well, I could see that there was a moral dimension to all this, but I wouldn't myself have located it quite where my affable inquirer did.

So how does Dylan's song protect itself against being affected by, infected by, pride? Humour is the penetrating disinfectant.[1] Which is why this song that sets the scene in the first verse – "As I stepped to the stage to pick up my degree" – will soon arrive in all innocence at a weather-report: "The weather was hot, a-nearly 90 degrees". My degree, 90 degrees. Did you realize, sir, before making such a song and dance about your honorary degree, that there are people out there who have been awarded nearly ninety degrees? Take the sage George Steiner, for one . . .

I am aware (as people say when too aware of themselves) that 90 degrees is a tot not of academic garlands but of heat. (90 honorary degrees would mean that you were a very hot property indeed, possibly even hot shit.[2])

[1] When Tennyson was about to be given his honorary degree at Oxford in June 1855, an undergraduate (recalling the first line of *The May Queen*: "You must wake and call me early, call me early, mother dear") called out as the long-haired honorand entered, "Did your mother call you early, dear?"

[2] Philip Larkin has a soundly patterned evocation of the bestselling novelist in lavish exile among glittering prizes: "the shit in the shuttered château / Who does his five hundred words / Then parts out the rest of the day / Between bathing and booze and birds" (*The Life with a Hole in it*). To bathe, not to bath, I take it.