

Dylan's Visions of Sin

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Mr. Tambourine Man

So lithe is the movement of *Mr. Tambourine Man* that to number it among the songs of sloth might seem perverse or even counter-intuitive. The song may talk of being "too numb to step", but that is not the way it walks.

My senses have been stripped, my hands can't feel to grip
My toes too numb to step, wait only for my boot heels
To be wanderin'

I don't believe you, one is happy to report, since the gait of the song is quite other. "My weariness amazes me"? Weariness, my foot. An amazing thing for the song to maintain. Refreshing and refreshed is how it sounds.

Would not sloth be sluggish? Yet there are affinities between *Mr. Tambourine Man* and some other songs engaging with sloth, those that breathe

¹ See the lines from Barnes on p. 399, delighting in such rhymes.

relaxation and escape, relief and release.¹ For instance, *Lay Down Your Weary Tune*, which started with its refrain, as though it had already arrived – in good time and with all effort over – where it was hoping to come to rest:

Lay down your weary tune, lay down
Lay down the song you strum
And rest yourself 'neath the strength of strings
No voice can hope to hum

His weary tune amazes him? No matter, the time has come to lay it down. *Mr. Tambourine Man* opens, likewise, with a refrain that is an injunction, yet not this time to himself, to lay down a tune, but to someone else, to take up a tune, to play a song.

Hey! Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me
I'm not sleepy and there is no place I'm going to
Hey! Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me
In the jingle jangle morning I'll come followin' you

A singer will sometimes wish to sing his refrain no more. "Sometimes my burden is more than I can bear" (*Not Dark Yet*). So a singer may wish that, for just one time, another would sing to him, sing for him. The first line of *Mr. Tambourine Man* takes us back to Dylan's first album, but with a difference. "Hey, hey, Woody Guthrie, I wrote you a song". And so he did, but right now he may not feel too good, and would appreciate it if someone would write a song for him. Or play a song for him. So "Hey, hey, Woody Guthrie, I wrote you a song" becomes "Hey! Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me", with a heart-lifting lilt when this "Hey!" modulates into "play". And for me, instead of my always having to be the one, always having to do it (I know, I know, and I'm not complaining exactly) for other people. What in *Lay Down Your Weary Tune* had been "And rest yourself 'neath the strength of strings" has become a promise to stir myself if you will just be so kind as to stir me:

play a song for me
In the jingle jangle morning I'll come followin' you

¹ The setting of *Time Passes Slowly*, where time "fades away", might suggest "ready for to fade", "there is no place I'm going to", and "no one to meet" in *Mr. Tambourine Man*.

"I'm not sleepy", but this does not mean that what I stand in need of is a lullaby. *Mr. Tambourine Man* is not out to lullify.

Lay Down Your Weary Tune had delighted in the music of the rain, because such a music-maker "asked for no applause". *Mr. Tambourine Man* asks for little or no applause, for it wants to keep up the playful subterfuge that the song that it really values is not the one it is singing but the one that it is requesting, asking another to sing. "Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand waving free". Free, among other things, of any obligation either to offer or to ask for applause (even while the waving does look like encouragement). What is the sound of one hand clapping? Quite something, as when an audience is asked – even before anything has been performed tonight – to give the performer a big hand. Big-hearted. An advance.

"Yes, to dance . . .": the affirmative energy of this is partly a matter of its finally fulfilling the promise that had been given earlier:

cast your dancing spell my way
I promise to go under it

In fairy stories, the dancing spell is not something that you would like to have cast on you (unable to stop dancing, your weariness will amaze you, and as for the spell, there will be no escaping it on the run), yet Dylan has put this in such a way as to escape any thought of the curse of exhaustion. Instead the murmur is *relax*. For the spell is not being cast on you, it is being cast your way.

"Yes, to dance . . .": the "Yes" is able to work wonders, for it comes after a succession of negative formations throughout the song. The refrain: "I'm not sleepy and there is no place I'm going to". The first verse: "not sleeping", "no one to meet". The second verse: "can't feel". The third verse: "not aimed at anyone", "no fences". The final verse is the only one that is a negative-free zone, and this despite all the dark things in it.

Down the foggy ruins of time, far past the frozen leaves
The haunted, frightened trees, out to the windy beach
Far from the twisted reach of crazy sorrow

– whereupon, the word "Yes" is a sudden exultant freedom:

Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand waving free

True, a negative formation can carry a positive message ("there are no fences facin'"), but there is no substitute for a cry of "Yes".

The comedy of the song is a matter of its criss-cross. It is marked not by mock-modesty, but by a mocking modesty, by bantering and antics. Take "the jingle jangle morning". Jingle-jangle is a characteristic creation of the English language, and *The Oxford English Dictionary* lists its low companions: "dilly-dally, dingle-dangle, ding-dong, clink-clank, etc."

An alternating jingle of sounds; a sentence or verse characterized by this. Something that makes a continuous and alternating jingle; a jingling ornament or trinket.

But although the compound "jingle-jangle" is admirable, it is not admiring. "Such a paltry collection of commonplace tunes, handled clumsily" . . . "jingle-jangles its way through the piece" (1899). The same goes for "jingle":

The affected repetition of the same sound or of a similar series of sounds, as in alliteration, rime, or assonance; any arrangement of words intended to have a pleasing or striking sound without regard to the sense; a catching array of words, whether in prose or verse.

At which point, the dictionary reaches its verdict and its sentence: "Chiefly contemptuous". "Frivolous hearers, who are more pleased with little jingles, and tinkling of words than with the most persuasive arguments" (1663). The comical audacity of the song makes sure that it, too, is among Dylan's Songs of Redemption: jingle and jingle jangle are redeemed from the contempt that has been visited upon them. "Commonplace tunes"? "Without regard to the sense"? "The affected repetition"? No, the effective repetition. I had not known the terminology of the tambourine until *The Oxford English Dictionary* evoked the "pairs of small cymbals, called jingles, placed in slots round the circumference".¹

Alliteration, rhyme, or assonance: it would not be true to say that *Mr. Tambourine Man* consists of nothing else, but it is true that the song – like all such lyrical creations – is fascinated by the relations between these resources of sound and everything else that is the case, all those things in life that

¹ The *OED* includes a reminder of the tambourine's "use as a collecting dish": "Will you kindly drop a shilling in my little tambourine". Kipling's *Absent-Minded Beggar* in hope of a shilling, Dylan's "ragged clown behind/I wouldn't pay it any mind".

are not words but that we often need the life of words to help us catch. There is, for instance, the indefatigable standby, a rhyme on "rhyme", "And if you hear vague traces of skippin' reels of rhyme", where the vague traces of skipping ropes and of spinning wheels swirl exuberantly along with those skippin' reels.

The furthest reach of rhyme in every verse of the song is the one that has the eighth line harken back to the fourth line. In the final verse, this is "tomorrow" completing the thought of "sorrow", a rhyme that Dylan often uses and never fails to vary.¹

Then take me disappearin' through the smoke rings of my mind
Down the foggy ruins of time, far past the frozen leaves
The haunted, frightened trees, out to the windy beach
Far from the twisted reach of crazy sorrow
Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand waving free
Silhouetted by the sea, circled by the circus sands
With all memory and fate driven deep beneath the waves
Let me forget about today until tomorrow

The rhyme *sorrow / tomorrow* is the song's final rhyme except for the return to the final refrain, and the sense of this rhyme's simple predictability is perfectly right. Relax, again; forget about it. But there is, over and above and below this, the vocal timing of the words across and against the musical cadence. Don't forget about this voicing, his stationing of "until tomorrow" so that it is both gingerly and gingered up: "Let me forget about today until tomorrow". "Far from the twisted reach of crazy sorrow": yet not so far as to be beyond reach of the rhyme, the longest stretch that a rhyme is here called on to make.

"Let me forget about today until tomorrow": simple, but cryptic. This is not your usual reminder that procrastination is the thief of time. It may want us to hear the Sermon on the Mount, but not along the established lines:

Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

(Matthew 6:34)

Rather the reverse. Let me forget about tomorrow today.

A song that delights in what might be deplored as "jingle jangle" is

¹ See *Boots of Spanish Leather* and *Mama, You Been on My Mind*.

likely to intensify its rhyming. The first triplet of rhymes in the first verse, *sand / hand / stand*, moves then to "sleeping", which will in the end be consummated by the off-rhyme, "dreaming" – but only after crossing the stepping stones of the next triplet of rhymes, with their assonantal bridge to *sleeping / dreaming: feet / meet / street*. And then as the song nears and then reaches its ending, with the third and fourth verses, we hear the conclusiveness realized. For the last verse inaugurates itself with a sound that is far from having disappeared:

Then take me disappearin' through the smoke rings of my mind
Down the foggy ruins of time,

– a sound that rings from the previous verse:

And if you hear vague traces of skippin' reels of rhyme
To your tambourine in time, it's just a ragged clown behind
I wouldn't pay it any mind,

Whereupon the rhymes and assonances find themselves at once free and driven (driven deep in memory), with *leaves / trees / beach / reach* mounting to this climax:

Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand waving free
Silhouetted by the sea, circled by the circus sands
With all memory and fate driven deep beneath the waves
Let me forget about today until tomorrow

Free / sea / memory / deep / me: this presses forward while never forgetting the first verse of the song with its *sleeping / feet / meet / street / dreaming*. But then it doesn't forget an earlier rhyme (*sand / hand*), either. For when the "one hand" picks up, a moment later, "the circus sands", it circles back to the beginning:

Though I know that evenin's empire has returned into sand
Vanished from my hand

Nothing simply vanishes, and the circus sands return to sand.

Sloth is a form of escape, but not "escaping on the run" since that would ask too much energy. Dylan has said: "I don't write songs for

escape",¹ but that isn't the same as not writing songs that comprehend the yearning to escape, and respect it and suspect it. Wilfrid Mellers gave us the dope:

Far from being socially committed, it looks as though it might be an escape song, and is so, in that a tambourine man is a peddler of pot. Yet Dylan says he's "not sleepy", even though there ain't no place he's going to; and his pied piper myth encourages us to follow the unconscious where spontaneously it may lead us. This is subtly suggested by the wavery refrain and by the irregularity of both verbal and musical clauses, which pile or float up like smoke rings. As the rings unfurl, we are liberated.²

Dylan himself has not felt liberated by any such readings of *Mr. Tambourine Man*: "Drugs never played a part in that song" (*Biograph*).

What clearly did play a part is Dylan's sense of how precariously thrilling the whole matter of *following* may be. The Pied Piper is there all right, but with all the mixed feelings that we ought to feel about the story of someone who was cheated by "the city fathers" and who took his revenge by making off with the city children, "the sweet pretty things", as they are called in *Tombstone Blues*. "The town has no need to be nervous"? Rather the reverse, as is clear when *Tombstone Blues* goes on to imagine a king who "Puts the pied pipers in prison".

The Pied Piper has a dancing spell that he casts their way. The Pied Piper was wronged, and then was the wronger. "And Piper and dancers were gone forever": those words are Robert Browning's, in *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*. For words of Dylan's:

Farewell Angelina
The bells of the crown
Are being stolen by bandits
I must follow the sound
The triangle tingles
And the trumpets play slow
Farewell Angelina
The sky is on fire
And I must go

¹ *New York Times* (8 January 1978).

² *Bob Dylan: Freedom and Responsibility*, in *Bob Dylan: A Retrospective*, ed. Craig McGregor (1972), p. 164.

If you really must follow the sound, then better the jingle jangle than the triangle tingle.

"Don't follow leaders". Might it be safe to follow the children that follow the Piper? "Wherever the children go I'll follow them".¹ No, on further thought, don't follow anything. Even an enthusiasm.

Jazz is hard to follow; I mean, you actually have to *like* jazz to follow it; and my motto is, never follow *anything*. I don't know what the motto of the younger generation is, but I would think they'd have to follow their parents. I mean, what would some parent say to his kid if the kid came home with a glass eye, a Charlie Mingus record and a pocketful of feathers? He'd say: "Who are you following?" And the poor kid would have to stand there with water in his shoes, a bow tie on his ear and soot pouring out of his belly button and say: "Jazz, Father, I've been following jazz."²

So is it folly to follow? "& he say 'just you folly me baby snooks! jus you folly me & you feel fine!'"³ Cock some snooks at him, that's my advice. And yet perhaps just this once, it would truly be fine: "Yes, to dance . . ." In the jingle jangle morning, who knows what music might be made, and how? Not "swingin' madly across the sun", but by courtesy of it.

The Ethiopians, over whom Memnon reigned, erected a celebrated statue to the honour of their monarch. This statue had the wonderful property of uttering a melodious sound every day, at sun-rising, like that which is heard at the breaking of the string of a harp when it is wound up. This was effected by the rays of the sun when they fell upon it.

(John Lemprière, *Classical Dictionary*)⁴

Struck by the sounds before the sun
I knew the night had gone
(*Lay Down Your Weary Tune*)

¹ *Abandoned Love*, which mounts, like *Mr. Tambourine Man*, a parade. "I march in the parade of liberty".

² *Playboy* (March 1966).

³ *Tarantula* (1966, 1971), p. 32.

⁴ Ed. F. A. Wright (1948). It was first published in 1788, and Keats learnt much from it.

Struck by the sounds that were struck by the sun, I knew the night had gone.

But not for good. Immediately following (on *Bringing It All Back Home*) the melodious sound of the words “I’ll come followin’ you”, there is heard a different evocation of light and darkness:

Of war and peace the truth just twists
Its curfew gull just glides
Upon four-legged forest clouds
The cowboy angel rides
With his candle lit into the sun
Though its glow is waxed in black
All except when 'neath the trees of Eden
(*Gates of Eden*)

The trees of Eden are haunting frightening trees, true. In the fullness of time, the dawn will be back: “At dawn my lover comes to me”. But evening’s empire will return, likewise. To return to Lemprière and “the foreign sun”: “At the setting of the sun, and in the night, the sound was lugubrious.”