

# Dylan's Visions of Sin

CHRISTOPHER RICKS

*All because . . .* one frequent function of those two words is to introduce – courteously but firmly – a remonstrance against injustice. It might be a political remonstrance. A black man, down in Mississippi, has been not just mistreated or badly treated but badly mistreated, “All because his face was brown”, or – soon pressing the same point slightly differently, as though wishing not to nag you but to urge you please to think again – “All because of the color of his skin”.

Oxford Town, Oxford Town  
Ev'rybody's got their heads bowed down  
Sun don't shine above the ground  
Ain't a-goin' down to Oxford Town

He went down to Oxford Town  
Guns and clubs followed him down  
All because his face was brown  
Better get away from Oxford Town

Oxford Town around the bend  
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'?

The scene is set. The fate and the face of James Meredith were set. He was the first black to enrol – over what some whites said would be their

<sup>1</sup> *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951), pp. 347–8.

dead bodies, although their hope was really that the dead body would be his – at the University of Mississippi. Oxford Town.

The haunted song is played by Dylan obliquely and yet unequivocally. But what was he playing at (equivocation?) when he said, on the *Studs Terkel Show*,<sup>1</sup> “Well, yeah, it deals with the Meredith case but then again it doesn't”? The right question to ask about this soft-shoe-shuffle of his is not “Is it true?” but “What truth is there in it?” And the answer radiates. Yes, *Oxford Town* deals with the Meredith case in the sense that as a matter of historical fact this was the place and this was the person there: the confrontation was altogether real, as the photos and footage of the siege in 1962 bear witness, and the challenge by Meredith – that the law be upheld, that his right to admission be admitted – was burlily and brutally met by a challenge to the law from the very officials whose duty it was to enforce the law. In Mississippi, “The leading institution of higher learning”, recorded *The Oxford Companion to American History*,<sup>2</sup>

is the University of Mississippi (Oxford, est. 1848). Its campus was the scene (1962) of the most violent opposition to Federal court rulings since the Civil War, after the governor of the state in person sought to block the registration of a Negro student.

So the song deals with the Meredith case. But then again it doesn't. Not naming Meredith, it isn't handcuffed to a political particularity. It may be asked whether *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*, then, is limited to its occasion, but the cases are very different, not only as history but in the type of artistic realization that Dylan gives to them. The story of Hattie Carroll and of William Zanzinger is told in full and in detail; moreover, though it is dramatic, it is not told by a voice that is itself dramatized in the song. Nobody has been imagined by Dylan, the imaginer, as having this to say. He speaks, and sings, in his own voice, for all of us, and not as any dramatized imaginary one-of-us. But *Oxford Town* is not on the scale of such a tragic novel (an American tragedy, Hattie Carroll's life and death, and, yes, William Zanzinger's life, too); it is a sketch. Not sketchy at all, but offering in twenty short lines a picture of a different kind from that which is painted in the nearly fifty long lines of *Hattie Carroll*. Added to

<sup>1</sup> WFMT Radio, Chicago (3 May 1963). Dylan didn't perform the song on this show.

<sup>2</sup> (1966), ed. Thomas H. Johnson, under *Mississippi*.

which, the swift wretched tale of *Oxford Town* is told to us by someone who (it is imagined) was there. *Oxford Town* is sung with Dylan's voice but not sung in Dylan's voice exactly. For whereas the voice in *Hattie Carroll* is crucially not that of someone who had been present at the Baltimore hotel society gathering, down there in Oxford Town there we were,

Me and my gal, my gal's son  
We got met with a tear gas bomb  
I don't even know why we come  
Goin' back where we come from

This is the only verse that doesn't include "Oxford Town", a name placed and pressed home three times in the first verse, twice in the second, once in the third and in the last, as if the song, like "Me and my gal, my gal's son", can't wait to get out of Oxford Town. "Goin' back where we come from". Where was that, exactly?

"I don't even know why we come". This is not the stuff of which heroes are made.<sup>1</sup> Oh, it took courage to be down there, in the midst of protest, the three of us. But there are limits. In the unmousy words of *Tarantula*: "it's every man for himself – are you a man or a self?"<sup>2</sup>

In *Some Other Kinds of Songs* . . .<sup>3</sup> Dylan imagines a scene:

a loose-tempered fat  
man in borrowed stomach slams wife  
in the face an' rushes off t' civil  
rights meeting.

It would be nice to be sure that a man of this stripe was rushing off to the civil rights meeting in order illiberally to disrupt it, but we had better admit that he just might be going to it to support it. For many a good cause politically is supported by people who don't begin to practise at home what they preach abroad. "What do you think about that, my frien?"

*Oxford Town* does not avert its eyes or ears from the fact that you can't

<sup>1</sup> On gals and heroes, see *Hero Blues*: "Yes, the gal I got / I swear she's the screaming end / She wants me to be a hero / So she can tell all her friends". "She wants me to walk out running / She wants me to crawl back dead". "You can stand and shout hero / All over my lonesome grave".

<sup>2</sup> *Tarantula* (1966, 1971), p. 81.

<sup>3</sup> *Lyrics 1962–1985*, p. 147.

count on liberals to be heroes. So? Why should you expect it of them? The song is not in the business of urging its listeners to feel superior to the voice they overhear, the voice of someone decent, who was up to going down there but who is not up to dealing with tear-gas bombs. Now is the time for your tears? – but it is not pleasant to think that now is the time and place for tear-gas tears. The idealism, though it is not ridiculed, is felt to falter, all too naturally:

I don't even know why we come  
Goin' back where we come from

People do well not to go in for protestations about their protest-marches. Robert Lowell cast into verse a letter from Elizabeth Hardwick:<sup>1</sup>

"I guess we'll make Washington this weekend;  
it's a demonstration, like all demonstrations,  
repetitious, gratuitous, unfresh . . . just needed."

Bigoted bullies like Bull Connor who wield cattle-prods against protesters, these *Oxford Town* has no time for, but this does not prevent it from setting reasonable limits to the amount of time that it has for liberal fellows or liberal fellow-travellers, the limits then being the amount of time that the liberals themselves will courageously commit themselves to. "Goin' back where we come from". I don't blame you. But I can't idolize you or idealize you either. And the song is saved from being in any danger of self-righteousness because it is mediated to us through the voice of someone who has no wish to be a martyr, makes no priggish claim to be a hero, and is not despised for not being a martyr or a hero. "I don't even know why we come".

Oxford Town in the afternoon  
Ev'rybody singin' a sorrowful tune  
Two men died 'neath the Mississippi moon  
Somebody better investigate soon

"Ev'rybody singin' a sorrowful tune". Singing it insincerely? Hypocritically? Playing along with it? This line is parallel to the earlier one with which it is paired: "Ev'rybody's got their heads bowed down". In genuine sorrow?

<sup>1</sup> Letter, in *The Dolphin* (1973).

In pretended sorrow? Or prudentially, heads ducking below the parapet? The word "down" is bent on dragging the song down, four times in the first six lines, from "Ev'rybody's got their heads bowed down", through "Ain't a-goin' down to Oxford Town" and "He went down to Oxford Town", to "Guns and clubs followed him down".<sup>1</sup>

"Ev'rybody singin' a sorrowful tune". But as Robert Shelton wrote of this song, "Melody and tempo are jaunty, the lyrics are not."<sup>2</sup> The brisk buoyant strumming that opens the song does not ever let up or let you down in *Oxford Town*. It gives you something sorrowful, "but then again it doesn't", for the unsorrowful tune does not play along with what the words lay bare. Such counteraction is characteristic of a song that does so much interweaving. The "Ev'rybody" of "Ev'rybody's got their heads bowed down" and "Ev'rybody singin' a sorrowful tune" becomes, two lines later, the wistful wishful "Somebody" of

Two men died 'neath the Mississippi moon  
Somebody better investigate soon

Somebody else, as always. Not *whatever*, but *whoever*. The patterned song is about patterns of behaviour. And "Sun don't shine above the ground", of the first verse, becomes in this last verse "Two men died 'neath the Mississippi moon". And just as "sorrowful tune" might have a romantic colouring, ugly in the circumstances, so another of the quiet horrors in the song is the contrast within the phrase "'neath the Mississippi moon", for it, too, might have a disconcertingly romantic colouring:

Where I can watch her waltz for free  
'Neath her Panamanian moon

That is *Stuck Inside of Mobile*. Fortunately you don't have to be stuck inside of Oxford Town. "Better get away from Oxford Town". The minimal hopeless "Better" of "Better get away" is not at all a good thing, and it returns in "Somebody better investigate soon", where nothing is any longer being shouldered and somebody is relapsing into shrugging the whole thing off.

Verse 1, "Ev'rybody's got their heads bowed down". Verse 2, "Better get

<sup>1</sup> What a contrast with the spirit in which Dylan sings *Baby, Let Me Follow You Down*.

<sup>2</sup> *No Direction Home* (1986), p. 156.

away from Oxford Town". Verse 3, "He come to the door, he couldn't get in". Verse 4, "We got met with a tear gas bomb". "Got" and "get", get it? At which point there is verse 5, which has got rid of "got" and "get". Nobody is going to get caught or punished.

Oxford Town in the afternoon  
Ev'rybody singin' a sorrowful tune  
Two men died 'neath the Mississippi moon  
Somebody better investigate soon

A silkily sinister ending. Even tinged, perhaps, with *hope they don't find out anything*, a dark thought that is in touch with the bright thought that ends a very different early song about politics, *Talkin' John Birch Paranoid Blues*:

So now I'm sitting home investigatin' myself!  
Hope I don't find out anything . . . hmm, great God!

"Somebody better investigate soon". As printed in *Lyrics 1962-1985*, though (and as can be heard on a bootleg tape), *Oxford Town* ended not with this "soon" that will never be realized, but by circling back to repeat the first verse of the song:

Oxford Town, Oxford Town  
Ev'rybody's got their heads bowed down  
Sun don't shine above the ground  
Ain't a-goin' down to Oxford Town

Circling is good, both as being wary and as going nowhere, but there is a more effective circling back without the repetition of the opening verse (a touch easy, that), in the coming back round to the "Ev'rybody" lines. "Ev'rybody's got their heads bowed down": "Ev'rybody singin' a sorrowful tune".

The sorrowful tune is embodied in the sound that ends the word "tune" or the closely related sound that ends the word "from". This sound has its unremitting and encircling drone or hum. For all the lines of this song rhyme, and every line can be heard to sound (like "line" and "rhyme") *n* or (in the fourth verse) *m*. Not so, you might say, for what about "ground" in the very first verse? But "ground" there is denied its *d* by rhyming with "Town", even as "bend" in the third verse is denied its *d* by rhyming

with “frien’”, and even as “bomb” – with its silent *b* – is rhymed with “from”. And what might this steady drone or hum do within the song? Create a tone of semi-military menace without remission, not letting up, a background (or a backgroun’) that bows heads down and brings everything down to Oxford Town. Think of the sounds of the bagpipe and of how the chanter’s penetration is set against the drone, the brown air that the drone suffuses through it all.<sup>1</sup>

The short words go about their work. Meanwhile, “Mississippi” and “investigate” are the long words in the song, and there they are in two successive lines, the two closing lines.

Two men died `neath the Mississippi moon  
Somebody better investigate soon

Two men stayed in Mississippi a day too long. Somebody better see that justice is done to all this. As somebody truly did.

<sup>1</sup> About *Lay Down Your Weary Tune*, Dylan said: “I had heard a Scottish ballad on an old 78 record that I was trying to really capture the feeling of, and I couldn’t get it out of my head. There were no lyrics or anything, it was just a melody – had bagpipes and a lot of stuff in it. I wanted lyrics that would feel the same way” (*Biograph*).