

# Dylan's Visions of Sin

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## Anger

### *Only a Pawn in Their Game*

It need not take much courage to take a life. "A bullet from the back of a bush took Medgar Evers' blood". That the killer was a skulker is enough to make your blood boil.

Medgar Evers (1925–63) was Mississippi's first African-American field secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He was an active organizer of voter-registration drives until he was murdered by a sniper.<sup>1</sup>

But the word "sniper", with its possibility of solitary courage in military combat,<sup>2</sup> is in danger of flattering the lurker. Evers' killer was no soldier. A pawn is a foot-soldier (this is what the word means), but a foot-soldier might find himself called upon to show courage in open warfare.

It took courage in Dylan, back in the summer of 1963 only a month after the murder of Medgar Evers, to say of the white killer – to sing of the white killer, there in front of a Mississippi audience that was mostly black – "But he can't be blamed". Dylan understood the anger that he might invite by not sounding angry enough. He was aware of how he might himself be blamed for not blaming. A society is indicted, and with an anger that is all the more forcefully contained, because the killer, "he can't be blamed". And then this is averred again, in the second, third, and fourth verses; in these, the wording changes to something that is in its way uneducated and so might be heard as sympathizing with the poor white (not condescending, because elsewhere in quite different Dylan songs there are similar moments when the demotic meets the democratic): "But it ain't him to blame". It is

<sup>1</sup> *The American Spectrum Encyclopedia* (1991).

<sup>2</sup> The original military application ("a sharp-shooter", *OED*) dates from 1824. "Several sepoys were killed and wounded by the enemy's snipers." 1897: "It is impossible to see the snipers, who generally stalk the sentries from behind stones." 1900: "The artillery keep the Boer snipers down."

not until the final verse that there is no longer any talk of blaming or of not blaming. But then at this conclusive stage the scene is set in the imagined future, with the killer himself duly in his grave, and with the words that have constituted the climax of every verse becoming – in the final end – not only his epitome but his epitaph:

His epitaph plain:  
Only a pawn in their game

A pawn is pressed to believe that the game is his, too, not just their game, and in a way he is right since it isn't for him to pretend that a pawn is no piece of the action. But it may be for someone else – in the spirit of Robert Lowell's cry "Pity the monsters!"<sup>1</sup> – to grant him the chilling charity "But it ain't him to blame". He being a dupe an' all.

A bullet from the back of a bush took Medgar Evers' blood  
A finger fired the trigger to his name  
A handle hid out in the dark  
A hand set the spark  
Two eyes took the aim  
Behind a man's brain  
But he can't be blamed  
He's only a pawn in their game

"A bullet from the back of a bush took Medgar Evers' blood". The act is furtive but the line's arc is direct. Yet the force is forked, two turns of phrase at once doubly dealing death.

– *A bullet took Medgar Evers' life*  
– *A bullet shed Medgar Evers' blood*

"A bullet from the back of a bush took Medgar Evers' blood": this compounds the guilt. And the sequence looks to the tracks that are traces of blood: *bullet . . . back . . . bush . . . blood*. Of these four words that alliterate, it is the first that fells: "bullet", with its two syllables (as though double-barrelled) as against the others' one.

<sup>1</sup> Florence in *For the Union Dead* (1965).

Anonymity is furtive, and the killer is reduced to body-parts as indifferently as a bullet reduces a body: a finger, a handle, a hand, two eyes, a man's brain. Dashed out, these.

From the back of a bush. From behind his back. The words "back" and "behind" can be heard to pound in the song, compounding the disease that rages in the killer – and that the song itself will need vigilant prophylaxis to escape infection from.<sup>1</sup> This first verse, a moment later, eyes the murderous moment:

Two eyes took the aim  
Behind a man's brain

– the back of his head, behind a man's back. The more forceful, these lines, because they are unobtrusively paradoxical: the brain is behind the eyes, not the other way round – except that the eyes are behind the brain in the grim sense that they carry out the brain's decision, they back the brain: *behind*, "supporting, backing up", "at the back of (any one) as a support; backing (one up)", with the earliest *Oxford English Dictionary* citation being honourably military, "The remainder of the regiment . . . being behind Captain Lucy".

From the poverty shacks, he looks from the cracks to the tracks  
And the hoof beats pound in his brain

This seethes. A bloodshot gaze can be felt to tack from "shacks" ("the poverty shacks", a stricken phrase) to "cracks" to "tracks", joining the "pack" en route to the word that comes back from the back of a bush: "back".

From the poverty shacks, he looks from the cracks to the tracks  
And the hoof beats pound in his brain  
And he's taught how to walk in a pack  
Shoot in the back  
With his fist in a clinch  
To hang and to lynch  
To hide 'neath the hood

<sup>1</sup> For a different infection, see Michael Gray, who believes that Medgar Evers and his killer are "a device for strengthening an essentially political and social polemic": "the two men are just pawns in Dylan's 'game'" (*Song and Dance Man III*, 2000, p. 24). For me, either this judgement is crassly "a handle" (for the critic) or the song is.

To kill with no pain  
 Like a dog on a chain  
 He ain't got no name  
 But it ain't him to blame  
 He's only a pawn in their game

*Poverty . . . pound . . . pack / beats . . . brain . . . back:* the persistent insistence might remind us what kind of consonant a *p* or a *b* is. A plosive. Plosion and explosion. His head was exploding.

Dylan's head knows how to contain such explosions. His exposure of them makes us hear what it is for something to pound in a brain. The throbbing pounding rhythms of the song are in time with its alliterations, rhymes, and assonances, so as to make audible the insanity of a raging obsession, an insanity that is cause and consequence of killing. A hundred and fifty years ago, Tennyson took the sick pulsations of a man who had killed and who was now in the living death that is madness:

Dead, long dead,  
 Long dead!  
 And my heart is a handful of dust,  
 And the wheels go over my head,  
 And my bones are shaken with pain,  
 For into a shallow grave they are thrust,  
 Only a yard beneath the street,  
 And the hoofs of the horses beat, beat,  
 The hoofs of the horses beat,  
 Beat into my scalp and my brain,  
 With never an end to the stream of passing feet<sup>1</sup>

"A bullet from the back of a bush took Medgar Evers' blood": this opening shot is taken up, caught up, in the opening line of the final verse: "Today, Medgar Evers was buried from the bullet he caught". Here is the return not only to the name that is to be honoured but to the dishonour of the bullet (which now alliterates anew). The first line of the song had the death-scene in its sights. The second line sounded the unrelenting note that commands the song, there in "name" as it will be in "game".

<sup>1</sup> *Maud*, II, v, 1. Tennyson and Dylan: "beat", "brain", "grave", "hoof(s)", "never", "pain". Tennyson, "handful"; Dylan, "handle" and "hand".

A bullet from the back of a bush took Medgar Evers' blood  
 A finger fired the trigger to his name

His name: Medgar Evers. A bullet had his name on it – but not because of divine destiny, only because of human hatred. As to the killer's name: it means nothing, it means nothingness.<sup>1</sup> "There be of them that have left a name behind them, that their praises might be reported. And some there be, which have no memorial" (Ecclesiasticus 44: 8–9). Medgar Evers left a name behind him. His praises are reported. He has a memorial. His name is there in the first line of the first verse (as it will be in the first line of the last verse), and it remains the only name in the fifty-two lines of the song, a song in which the word "name" is sounded four times. In another Dylan song about the brutal killing of someone black by someone white (*The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*), the killer enjoys a certain infamy: William Zanzinger, immortalized for that mortal blow of his. But *Only a Pawn in Their Game* accords its killer no name. "He ain't got no name". The last words of the song, the killer's laconic epitaph, get their dour force from the vacuity of "Carved next to his name":

He'll see by his grave  
 On the stone that remains  
 Carved next to his name  
 His epitaph plain:  
 Only a pawn in their game

Medgar Evers is named. Twice. As for the rest of those who are set upon by – and are set against – the poor whites, back in the sixties there was the word that had not yet become opprobrious to those who have since chosen to be known as African-Americans: the word "negro", or rather (in this song) "Negro". The n-word that is not Negro is never heard in this song, but you are incited to imagine it, to acknowledge that it, not "Negro", is the word that "the South politician" (not quite the same, darkly, as a Southern politician or even a politician from the South), the marshals, the cops, and the poor whites will all be most pleased to use most unpleasantly. Dylan doesn't flinch from using the word, dramatized, in *Hurricane*:

<sup>1</sup> In 1994 Byron de la Beckwith was found guilty of Evers' murder. This matters, but not to the conscience of the song.

And to the black folks he was just a crazy nigger  
No one doubted that he pulled the trigger<sup>1</sup>

Those two lines (a dozen years later, admittedly, and in collaboration with Jacques Levy) make me wonder whether I am imagining things – as against Dylan's imagining how to get us to do so – when I sense that the word "nigger" lurks or skulks in the vicinity. Juxtapose with that couplet from *Hurricane* these two evocations in *Only a Pawn in Their Game*:

A finger fired the trigger to his name<sup>2</sup>

And the Negro's name  
Is used it is plain  
For the politician's gain

The word "name" links these two moments in the song, and the alliteration in "finger fired" plays along with the off-rhyme of *finger* / *trigger*, an off-rhyme (*Medgar* . . . *finger* . . . *trigger*) that was to become the true rhyme – truly dramatized and dismaying ("the black folks" use the word themselves) – in *Hurricane*: *nigger* / *trigger*. For there should be no ducking the fact that, whereas *Only a Pawn in Their Game* rightly observes the decencies, it manages to intimate to us that the racists in the South didn't observe them. It is not "the Negro's name" that "Is used it is plain / For the politician's gain", but the slur-name, contemptuous and contemptible. The song doesn't utter the word, doesn't even mutter the word, but does not let us forget it.

A South politician preaches to the poor white man  
"You got more than the blacks, don't complain  
You're better than them, you been born with white skin" they explain  
And the Negro's name  
Is used it is plain  
For the politician's gain  
As he rises to fame  
And the poor white remains

<sup>1</sup> *Only a Pawn in Their Game*: "the one / That fired the gun". *Hurricane*: "And though they could not produce the gun / The D.A. said he was the one".

<sup>2</sup> A disconcertingly deranged and unforgettable way of putting it. "A finger fired the trigger to his name"? Pulled the trigger that put an end to his name? (Not that it succeeded in doing that.) To? To?

On the caboose of the train  
But it ain't him to blame  
He's only a pawn in their game

For the poor white, the caboose of the train. For the black, whether poor or not, the back of the bus. And the name of the game that realizes in art this refusal to blame the poor white? The game is play that is in earnest: assonance laced with rhyme – *complain* . . . *explain* . . . *name* . . . *plain* . . . *gain* . . . *fame* . . . *remains* . . . *train* . . . *blame* . . . *game*.

The first line of the song ends in "blood". No rhyme is ever forthcoming, though off in the distance there is to be a glimpse of the hood that masks the Ku Klux Klan. "To hide 'neath the hood": "hide" rotating menacingly into "hood".

The second line of the song, "A finger fired the trigger to his name", establishes as the song's finger the rhyme-word "name", triggering the cumulative obduracy of the sequence *aim* . . . *brain* . . . *blamed* . . . *game*. This same sound is then pressed to the point of explosion in the second verse (ten of these assonances running). Then, still unignorable, it is the sound that opens and closes the third verse, from the opening "paid" and "same" to the pinioning at the end: *hate* . . . *straight* . . . *blame* . . . *game*. And it is the assonance that then does almost the same for the fourth verse, "brain" into the closing accumulation: *pain* . . . *chain* . . . *name* . . . *blame* . . . *game*. And that then, in the final verse, after first of all allowing a few lines to be released from the pain of this assonance, has the duty of reverting at the end – from the word "grave" – to this tolling insistence again:

Today, Medgar Evers was buried from the bullet he caught  
They lowered him down as a king  
But when the shadowy sun sets on the one  
That fired the gun  
He'll see by his grave  
On the stone that remains  
Carved next to his name  
His epitaph plain:  
Only a pawn in their game

See it, he won't. "Two eyes took the aim": but now death has taken aim and taken their life. "He'll see by his grave . . .": the shadowy sun may see the scene, but he the killer will not. He will no longer be in a position

to see anything. Unless, of course, death is not the end. "But he can't be blamed"? He shall see. God only knows.

There is, as there should be in the whereabouts of these hatreds, a great deal that we shall never know. "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" The question is a king's, King Lear's.

Today, Medgar Evers was buried from the bullet he caught  
They lowered him down as a king

Lowered down, as even a king will be in the end, and yet for Evers there is the ceremonial dignity of a royal burial, too. He is a king, not a pawn. Black and white. Black against white. In 1963 there was, as it happens, a king, Martin Luther King, whose name must have meant a great deal to the man named Medgar Evers. Five years later, when another killer had been taught "To keep up his hate", Martin Luther King was buried from the bullet he caught.