Dylan's Visions of Sin

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The Times They Are A-Changin'

When I paint my masterpiece, I had better acknowledge that one day it may need to be restored. According to *Visions of Johanna*, "Mona Lisa musta had the highway blues", but the greens that are now highly visible in the painting are viewed with suspicion inside the museums-world. But then every restoration, whether political or painterly (the pristine Sistine?), goes

up on trial. For history is like infinity[1] with its Louvre doors. "If the doors of perception were cleansed," William Blake said, "everything would appear to man as it is, infinite."

It is in an infinity of ways that *The Times They Are A-Changin'* has been restored by Dylan. Not that he has ever been stuck with a song, or stuck inside of one. (Maybe *Maggie's Farm*, there for dear life, until the worm farm.) The songs are on the move, although love-life, imagined within a song, may be rather the reverse:

> But it's like I'm stuck inside a painting
> That's hanging in the Louvre
> My throat starts to tickle and my nose itches
> But I know that I can't move
> (*Don't Fall Apart on Me Tonight*)

Dylan, king of the cats, majestically lets the songs lead their own ninety-nine lives. His transfusion or transmission of the songs is his life's blood. Yet a problem may attend our reception. For well-known songs can become too well known, may no longer prove as open to our knowing them as they once were when we were all ears. Our having so often heard them may make it hard for us truly to listen to them. Now, if the *ears* of perception were cleansed . . .

Dylan can issue the songs anew, but can we admit them to ourselves anew? Like *Blowin' in the Wind*, *The Times They Are A-Changin'* may sometimes seem too much of a success for its own good. Those cards for *Subterranean Homesick Blues* that Dylan lackadaisically dandles as prologue to the film *Don't Look Back*, cards with some of the song's key-words on them, include one that simply reads SUCKCESS. "Try to be a success", but there may be too much not only of nothing but of something, too much of a good thing.

One way perhaps of recovering for ourselves the very good thing that is *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, of having it become fresh to us again, or even fresh with us again, might be to go far back and guess at the process by which it grew to be itself. Not in order to track or trace its creator's own intuitions, let alone his deliberations as a conscious matter, but so as to

[1] In the Rome interview (2001), someone quotes to Dylan the words "Inside the museums history goes up on trial". Dylan, with infinite patience and corrugated brow: "Is it *history*?", and then "I don't think that's right . . . doesn't sound right – Is it right? It could be . . . Let me go look in the book." In this exchange, *infinity* is not the only thing that goes up on trial.

glimpse some of the possibilities as to where the effects may be coming from.

Like *Blowin' in the Wind*, *The Times They Are A-Changin'* is in essence its title-refrain, the title that is again almost, not quite, the refrain.

The waters have grown, and so has the song. Time involves evolution, such as the title-refrain knew. The acorn is presumably a thought from times long past, *tempora mutantur. Times change.* Then a series of new time began.

Times change
The times change
The times are changin'
The times are a-changin'
The times they are a-changin'
For the times they are a-changin'

The acorn has grown into a royal oak.

"Times change" is dubbed by grammarians the *simple present*. (The tone of "Times change" is something to come back to.) "The times are changing" offers something of a change, being a different *aspect* (the grammatical term) of the present tense. This aspect goes under several names. Not that Dylan, in order to be able to create intuitively from what grammar codifies, has any need to know what grammarians have to say. Knowing in a schoolish way about grammar is something other than having an instinct for the ways in which grammar itself is very knowing.

Two things about the "are changing" aspect are crucial to how Dylan wields it. First, that the terms for this aspect of the present tense are themselves intimate with what *time* is or what *the times* are, which may compound the thoughts and feelings that live within this title-refrain about time and the times. Second, that the terms are themselves suggestively at odds, which may have prompted some of the choppy energies of the song.

"The times change": *simple present*. "The times are changing": *present progressive* – a term, as it happens, that might epitomize this song about being progressive at present. The *present progressive*: "sometimes called the *durative* or *continuous* aspect". These two are epithets close to the heart of *The Times They Are A-Changin'* and its urgings. One of the things about such a present tense, whether you call it durative, continuous, or progressive, is its two-edginess. For as the *Comprehensive Grammar*[1] shows, this form of

[1] *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, by Randolph Quirk, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, and Jan Svartvik (1985), pp. 197–200.

the present tense catches "a happening IN PROGRESS at a given time". A. E. Housman, exasperated by a dud scholar's having visited scepticism upon a certain textual principle ("so we should be loth to assume it in a given case"), tartly remarked that "Every case is a given case."[1] Likewise, every time is a given time (the given times they are a-changin'?), with the song powerfully intimating that *all* times are a-changin'. And *continuous* as an alternative to *progressive* present? The "continuous" is admittedly not the same as the "continual", but the interplay between those siblings might foster some of the creative friction in the song, rather as the *durative* present (if we were to prefer that term) at once insists upon and curtails duration. The durative must last, endure, but only for a duration. For the duration of the war, or of the battle outside that is raging.

We might see the key-phrase, "The times they are a-changin'", in the light of what the *Comprehensive Grammar* comprehends: "The meaning of the progressive can be separated into three components, not all of which need be present":

(a) the happening has DURATION
(b) the happening has LIMITED duration
(c) the happening is NOT NECESSARILY COMPLETE

The first two components add up to the concept of TEMPORARINESS.

It is timely that the words "The times they are a-changin'" add up to the concept of TEMPORARINESS,

As the present now
Will later be past

But then, just as nothing proves more permanent than a temporary solution, so temporariness is itself a permanent condition.

The Times They Are A-Changin' expresses its termination by means of *-ing*, or rather of the pliant *-in'*. The title-refrain commands the other such endings in the song, almost all of which are in the present progressive.

That it's namin'

Ragin'

[1] *The Application of Thought to Textual Criticism* (1921); *Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. Christopher Ricks (1988), p. 334.

Your old road is
Rapidly agin'

The order is
Rapidly fadin'

But of the many progressive presents that the song gives us, only one has its nature reinforced by the prefix that in itself emphasizes process: "*a*-changin'". The title-refrain enjoys the monopoly of this tiny touch within the song, a touch of which Dylan well understands the effect,[1] and one that, because it has weathered into archaism, is well adapted to times and their changing.

Bye, baby bunting,
Daddy's gone a-hunting

– nursery rhymes and songs apart, it is mostly time to say bye to the prefix *a-* in this sense, the prefix that denotes "in process of, in course of". 1 Peter 3:20, "in the days of Noah, while the ark was a-preparing".

If your time to you
Is worth savin'
You better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'

Or, "while the ark was a-preparing wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved".

Times change. And one exercise in which an imaginative writer takes delight is to change some time-worn thought about the times. Take the wit that Dickens brings to holy writ. Ecclesiastes, opening chapter 3: "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die . . ."[2] Dickens, opening chapter 1 of *A Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness . . ." Times have

[1] "As the night comes in fallin' . . .": how very different this would be from Dylan's "As the night comes in a-fallin'" (*One Too Many Mornings*), and not only for rhythmical reasons.

[2] A few verses later: "a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together". Dylan's song happens to have "time", "cast", "stone", and "gather".

changed, and so have the things that need to be said about the times. The same goes for the relation between the ways in which things stay the same and the ways in which they do not, within the world evoked by *The Times They Are A-Changin'*.

Back to the ancient adage. *Tempora mutantur nos et mutamur in illis.* "Times change, and we change with them." Or, in words from long ago that invoke a longer ago: "The times are changed as Ovid sayeth, and we are changed in the times" (1578). It has been crucial to the saying, whether in Latin or in English, that "we" be in it. But "we" is a word and a thought strikingly absent from *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. Strikingly, as having been struck out of it.

But then most of the pronouns, having been told "Don't stand in the doorway", have been shown the door. It is *you* who will apparently get to stay. For this is another of the great Dylan *you* songs.

Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you
Is worth savin'
Then you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'

Six times in this first verse, *you* – plus a *your* thrown in, en route to the next verse, which may be free of *you* but does need what are *your*s. The song chides but it hopes not to nag, which is one reason why *you* is used more sparingly after the first verse, even while the word *your* keeps the thought of you unremittingly in play, twice in the second verse ("your pen", "your eyes"), twice in the third ("your windows", "your walls"), and five times in the fourth verse ("Your sons and your daughters", "your command", "Your old road", "your hand"). As for the shorter sharper word, although *you* is off convalescing during the second and third verses, *you*s return with certain values in the fourth verse: "What you can't understand", rhyming with (and parallel to) "If you can't lend your hand".

The pronunciamento is willing to acknowledge, for a brief moment, the

word "he", provided that this pronoun identifies no one in particular ("For he that gets hurt / Will be he who has stalled"). There are plenty of occasions for "they" – but only on condition that the word refer not to people, solely to the times: "For the times they are a-changin'". The alignment of the song is the human "you" and the larger-than-human "they" of the times. And of these two, only the latter is left in the last verse, a verse that has no other pronoun except, be it noted, "it", the forgettable pronoun that at last comes into its own, the little "it" that has figured four times earlier but only now finds its opening, an opening that – with an emphatic syntactical redundancy of "it" – draws its two lines tightly parallel:

The line it is drawn
The curse it is cast
The slow one now
Will later be fast
As the present now
Will later be past
The order is
Rapidly fadin'
And the first one now
Will later be last
For the times they are a-changin'

Not just "now", and not just the admonitory "now, now", but three times the urgency of "now" at the line-ending. All the verses until this last one have launched an imperative address: "Come gather 'round people", "Come writers and critics", "Come senators, congressmen", "Come mothers and fathers". But when the last verse comes, it is too late for any such injunctions. The line is drawn under all that.

This final verse, rising exhilaratedly above any accusatory "you", might invite us once more to set the refrain, "For the times they are a-changin'", against its forebear: "Times change". And then to feel the transformation of tone that Dylan effects. "Well, times change, I guess": this remark from 1949 is quoted in Bartlett Jere Whiting's *Modern Proverbs and Proverbial Sayings* (1989), and although "Times change" wouldn't *have* to carry this tone of concessive reluctant acquiescence, this is a tone that comes naturally to it. "Times change": granted, it does lend itself to shrugging (I guess) more than to shouldering. But "The times they are a-changin'": this squares its shoulders while it rounds on people.

Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam

Dylan once said "I've never written any song that begins with the words 'I've gathered you here tonight . . .'"[1] True, literally, but it is an unexpected thing for him to say, given that he has written "Come gather 'round people", to say nothing of "Come gather 'round friends / And I'll tell you a tale"; "Come around you rovin' gamblers and a story I will tell"; "Come you ladies and you gentlemen, a-listen to my song"; or "Come you masters of war".[2] What can Dylan have been thinking of, then, with this claim, "I've never written any song that begins . . ."?

Yet there are differences in the air. *The Times They Are A-Changin'* is unlike *North Country Blues*, or *Rambling, Gambling Willie*, or *Hard Times in New York Town*, each of which tells a story. Nor is it like *Masters of War*, which foretells a story. *The Times They Are A-Changin'* admonishes, that is for sure, but it doesn't take the tone of "I've gathered you here tonight . . .". Its imperatives, immediately after the first one (which is simply "Come gather 'round"), put it to you at once that you already know the truth that is being pressed upon you: "And *admit* that . . ." And the recurrent urging finds its humanity and its decency in its own admission that it is putting to you something that you have already (come on, admit it) put to yourself. Admit it, and accept it.

Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you
Is worth savin'
Then you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'

[1] "I'm not about to tell anybody to be a good boy or a good girl," he went on. *Playboy* (March 1966).
[2] *North Country Blues*, *Rambling, Gambling Willie*, *Hard Times in New York Town*, and *Masters of War*.

As so often in Dylan, it is words of scripture that may be the bridge by which one word of his has crossed over to another.

> Come gather 'round people
> Wherever you roam
> And admit that the waters

Where might we gather that the waters are from? From a biblical gathering together? Perhaps Genesis 1:9, "Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together." More probably, Exodus 15: "the waters were gathered together", given that this same chapter gives us a song ("Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the Lord, and spake, saying, I will sing unto the Lord"), a song that exults in terms that may sound the depths of Dylan's song:

> Pharaoh's chariot and his host hath he cast into the sea: his chosen captains also are drowned in the Red sea. The depths have covered them: they sank into the bottom as a stone.

"Or you'll sink like a stone". "The curse it is cast". Or, in the very different accents of exuberant word-work from the moment *When the Ship Comes In*:

> And like Pharaoh's tribe
> They'll be drownded in the tide

Dylan's words are never quite what you might have expected. "If your time to you / Is worth savin'": we know perfectly well what it perfectly means, but if this were a crossword clue, given the context of drowning the four-letter word *-i-e* would probably be filled in, not as *time*, but as *life*. (The time of your life, but not with the usual pleasure in the thought.) If your *life* is worth savin', you better start swimmin' or you'll sink like a stone: isn't that a line of thought?

Saving your life is one idiom; saving time is another; and the two mingle fluidly. Is time worth saving, however short? (Is it worth saving a few minutes?) And then there is a third way of putting it that may mingle with the others: "If your time is worth" – not *saving* but – "anything". All this, with "your time" set against what immediately ensues, "the times".

And with the words "Or you'll sink like a stone" sung by Dylan a moment ahead of the music, as though plummeting, "sink" sung out of synch.

The second verse comes in with a word that is both new (not in *The Oxford English Dictionary* . . .) and true:

> Come writers and critics
> Who prophesize with your pen

What's the matter, Dylan, the verb "to prophesy" not good enough for you?

That's right, not good enough here because what's needed is something that will not sound good: to *prophesize*, which gets and whets its sardonic edge from what the suffix *-ize* often implies, that the whole thing has become a predictable formula or an empty abstraction, complacently explaining away. You can hear this in the Dylan sleeve-notes for Peter, Paul and Mary,[1] from the same year: "At these hours there was no tellin what was bound t happen – Never never could the greatest prophesizor ever guess it –". No tellin what,

> And there's no tellin' who
> That it's namin'

But you'll know what I mean by "Who prophesize", you who "criticize / What you can't understand", or (elsewhere) "you who philosophize disgrace" (*The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*).

The coinage rings true because "prophesize" chimes naturally with "to prophesy" and with "prophesied": "Who prophesy with your pen", say, or "Who prophesied with your pen". "My tongue", says the singer of Psalm 45, "is the pen of a ready writer." Dylan's tongue curls at the thought of the too-ready writers.

> Come writers and critics
> Who prophesize with your pen
> And keep your eyes wide
> The chance won't come again

[1] To *In the Wind*, December 1963; *Bob Dylan in His Own Write*, compiled by John Tuttle, p. 23.

We may need to keep our wits about us when we hear "And keep your eyes wide". *The Oxford English Dictionary* points out that "wide" is in some respects "now superseded in general use by *wide open*". But "wide-eyed" has changed with the times. It used to be "having the eyes wide open, gazing intently", with D. H. Lawrence urging upon the human soul the duty of "wide-eyed responsibility" (*Man and Bat*). But then it comes to mean naivety, true or simulated: "You ask him all those wide-eyed innocent questions about making profits from cheap labour" (Len Deighton, 1983).

It was back in 1894 that the New York *Forum* praised Madison's "wide-eyed prudence in counsel". The virtue that is urged and celebrated in *The Times They Are A-Changin'* is prudence. This virtue asks courage and great good sense, and is to be distinguished from petty caution, in the knowledge that few things are more dangerous than playing safe. Tough maxims can be plaited into a rope that is thrown to you.

Then you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone

And keep your eyes wide

And don't speak too soon

Don't stand in the doorway
Don't block up the hall
For he that gets hurt
Will be he who has stalled

"Stalled", as *come to a halt* and (an altogether different verb) as *prevaricated*. Very apt to *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, since to stall is to play for time or temporize. Anyway, be warned. Prudence, though mannerly, *demands*. Be advised.

Dylan's writings are happy to give advice, often of a derisory kind. *Advice for Geraldine on Her Miscellaneous Birthday*, which appears in *Lyrics 1962–1985* as the conclusion to the songs from the *Times They Are A-Changin'* album, is a formidable sequence of prudential assurances. It begins:

stay in line. stay in step. people
are afraid of someone who is not
in step with them. it makes them
look foolish t' themselves for

being in step. it might even
cross their mind that they themselves
are in the wrong step. do not run
nor cross the red line.

Stay in line, do not cross the red line. The line it is drawn.

say what he
can understand clearly. say it simple
t' keep your tongue out of your
cheek.

The Times They Are A-Changin' says what we can understand clearly, and is determined to *say it simple*. Not "simply". Yet in *Advice for Geraldine*, too, this wasn't so simple. "Say it . . ." looked likely to be completed with "simply", right after "understand clearly". What "say it simple" does is join forces with "keep it simple", the word "keep" then immediately surfacing: "say it simple / t' keep your tongue out of your / cheek".

"This was definitely a song with a purpose," Dylan said of *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. "I knew exactly what I wanted to say and for whom I wanted to say it to" (*Biograph*). A characteristic touch, this, in its throwing in more prepositions than it might seem to need.[1] Which do you want to say, sir, "for whom I wanted to say it", or "whom I wanted to say it to"? Both, because "to whom" is *as addressed to*, but "for whom" is *on behalf of*. It may seem surprising that so combative a song could be on behalf of those whom it berates, but salutary words are words on behalf of those who stand in need of them. As will later be realized.

For the loser now
Will be later to win

Again, there is the small but telling divergence from the likely ways of putting it. Will be later *the winner*? Will be later *the one to win*? (Will be *certain to win*?) The word "later" comes early in the song (this second

[1] Of old: "They said who they fought an what they fought for an with what they fought with" – enemy and weapon (*For Dave Glover*, programme for Newport Folk Festival, July 1963; *Bob Dylan in His Own Write*, p. 8). Of late: "For whom does the bell toll for, love?" (*Moonlight*).

verse) but it is only late in the song, the last verse, that its time comes, its triple time:

> The line it is drawn
> The curse it is cast
> The slow one now
> Will later be fast
> As the present now
> Will later be past
> The order is
> Rapidly fadin'
> And the first one now
> Will later be last
> For the times they are a-changin'

Matthew 19:30: "But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first." This is the last verse of the chapter, even as it is the last admonition of the song.[1]

The song has its pattern, and – as T. S. Eliot knew – the crucial thing for the artist is the "recognition of the truth that not our feelings, but the pattern which we may make of our feelings, is the centre of value".[2] Dylan: "Anyway it's not even the experience that counts, it's the attitude toward the experience" (*Biograph*). Things not only may but must change, but the refrain at the end of each verse is itself unchanging: "For the times they are a-changin'". In performance, the song is free to be always changing. Dylan knew better than to heed his own sombre warning in *Advice for Geraldine on Her Miscellaneous Birthday*:

> do Not create anything, it will be
> misinterpreted. it will not change.
> it will follow you the
> rest of your life.

The capital *N* on "Not" is Notoriously the only capital letter in the

[1] In the preceding verse of Matthew: "father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands". "Come mothers and fathers / Throughout the land / . . . / Your sons and your daughters".

[2] *A Brief Introduction to the Method of Paul Valery*, *Le Serpent* (1924).

hundred-and-more lines of *Advice*, and Dylan did well Not to obey it but, instead, to be beyond his own command. Children of the sixties still thrill to *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, kidding themselves that what the song proclaimed was that at last the times were about to cease to change, for the first and last time in history. Was not enlightenment dawning, once and for all?

But the times they are still a-changin', and for decades now when Dylan sings "Your sons and your daughters / Are beyond your command", he sings this inescapably with the accents not of a son, no longer perhaps mostly of a parent, but with grandparental amplitude. Once upon a time it may have been a matter of urging square people to steel themselves to accept the fact that their children were, you know, hippies. But the capacious urging could then come to mean that ex-hippie parents had better accept that their children looked like becoming yuppies. And then Repupplicans . . .

The Fourth Times Around Are A-Changin'.