# Dylan's Visions of Sin

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## Envy

### *Song to Woody*

It would have been only too human for Bob Dylan at nineteen to envy Woody Guthrie. His fame, for a start, and (not the same) the sheer respect in which Guthrie was held, his staunch stamina, his being an icon who wouldn't have had any truck with such a self-conscious word and who had not let himself become an idol. Enviable. Inevitably open, therefore, on a bad day, to competitive petulance.

> For 'tis all one to courage high,
> The emulous or enemy.[1]

And yet not so. Truly high courage knows the difference between emulation and its enemy, envy. Dylan was sufficiently secure of his genius, even at the very start, to be able to rise above envy, rising to the occasion that was so much more than an occasion only.

*Song to Woody* is one of only two songs written by Dylan himself on his first album. (If the song had been called *Song for Woody*, it would not be the same, would be in danger of mildly conceited cadging as against a tribute at a respectful distance.) The other song by Dylan on the album, *Talking New York*, also paid tribute to "a very great man",[2] and didn't even need to tell you that it was again Woody Guthrie to whom Dylan was showing gratitude. *Talking New York* brings home that there was not all that much to be grateful for, back then, when it was early days:

> Well, I got a harmonica job, begun to play
> Blowin' my lungs out for a dollar a day
> I blowed inside out and upside down
> The man there said he loved m' sound
> He was ravin' about he loved m' sound
> Dollar a day's worth

[1] Andrew Marvell, *An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland*.
[2] "Now a very great man once said/That some people rob you with a fountain pen".

But *Song to Woody* appreciates a life's worth, and it knows about gratitude: that, for a start, gratitude is the due of Woody Guthrie, and not of him alone. That to give gratitude is to be the richer, not the poorer, for the giving. And that it is gratitude that sees through and sees off envy. Gratitude is the sublime sublimation of envy. Meanwhile, all this is of course easier said than done. Or, if your doing takes the form of the art of song, easier said than sung.

For there is, from the very start, a challenge about how you are going to end any expression of gratitude. The expression of it has to end without ever suggesting for a final moment that the feeling itself has come to an end. The song, like everything human, will have to end, but not because gratitude has ceased.

SONG TO WOODY

I'm out here a thousand miles from my home
Walkin' a road other men have gone down
I'm seein' your world of people and things
Your paupers and peasants and princes and kings

Hey, hey, Woody Guthrie, I wrote you a song
'Bout a funny ol' world that's a-comin' along
Seems sick an' it's hungry, it's tired and it's torn
It looks like it's a-dyin' an' it's hardly been born

Hey, Woody Guthrie, but I know that you know
All the things that I'm a-sayin' an' a-many times more
I'm a-singin' you the song, but I can't sing enough
'Cause there's not many men 've done the things that you've done

Here's to Cisco an' Sonny an' Leadbelly too
An' to all the good people that traveled with you
Here's to the hearts and the hands of the men
That come with the dust and are gone with the wind

I'm a-leavin' tomorrow, but I could leave today
Somewhere down the road someday
The very last thing that I'd want to do
Is to say I've been hittin' some hard travelin' too

How do we sense that the final verse of this simple (far from easy) song is to be the final verse, without there being a cadging nudge? Things would be different on the printed page, because your eye can see that you're reading the last lines, whereas your ear can't in the same way hear that it is hearing them.[1]



You sense that the end is imminent because the song turns back to the beginning (gratitude is a virtuous circle, not a vicious one): the opening words of the final verse, "I'm a-leavin'", recall the opening of the first verse, "I'm out here", passing back through – though not passing over – the hailing that heartens the three central verses of the song: "Hey, hey, Woody Guthrie", "Hey, Woody Guthrie", "Here's to Cisco . . . Here's to the hearts and the hands . . .".

And there are other intimations that the song, which is not going to quit, is about to leave. For instance, the second line of the first verse, "Walkin' a road other men have gone down", is glimpsed in the vista of the second line of this final verse, "Somewhere down the road someday". Again, this feels like the final verse because of the announcement "I'm a-leavin' tomorrow" – and yet not obdurately the last verse since it does go on immediately "but I could leave today", so there may or may not be a little time in hand. The rhyme *today / someday* has a stranded feeling, reluctant to leave (*-day* after *-day*), especially when combined with the wistful effect in the move from the beginning to the end of the line: "Somewhere down the road someday".

Added to all of which, it feels truly like the last verse, because in the sentence that makes up these two lines (the penultimate line and then the last line) the song concedes what it needs to:

> The very last thing that I'd want to do
> Is to say I've been hittin' some hard travelin' too

The singer (the young Dylan, yes, but the point is art, not autobiographical application) is truthful and rueful: I wouldn't want even to seem to upstage you or pretend that I've had your life's experiences, including the hard travelling of the hard old days. Hard, though, my disclaimer, for I do have some claim to share things with you, don't I? And then "The very last thing" turns out to be *almost* the very last thing in the song: that is, it opens the very last sentence of the song but it does not close the song. For the very last line of the song is not where those words occur.

This is an arc completed, not a feeling vacated. Our mind is tipped off – through Dylan's play with the phrase "The very last thing" – and so is our ear: for this is the first time, the only time, then, that a rhyme has returned

[1] See p. 14.

in the song: *too / you* in the one but last verse, and then *do / too* in these very last lines. ("Travelin' too": the word has itself travelled on from the previous stanza: "that traveled with you".)

> I'm a-singin' you the song, but I can't sing enough
> 'Cause there's not many men 've done the things that you've done

– so Dylan sings, finding a way of making this truth of gratitude's benign insatiability ring true. Some of the tribute's authenticity, and its being so entirely an envy-free zone, must come from the reluctance to make an inordinate claim even for the singer whom you are honouring, audible in "not many men". Any men, really, when it comes to the world that Dylan is evoking? Let us leave it at not many men.

"Walkin' a road other men have gone down": and other men than both Guthrie and Dylan are to be the beneficiaries of the song's gratitude. Not only as being thanked both personally and on behalf of us all, but because of the nature of gratitude itself, which appreciates – even in the moment when it is grateful to genius – that genius is not solitary and can thrive only because of all the others that keep it company, "all the good people" that travel with it – and with the rest of us.

> Here's to Cisco an' Sonny an' Leadbelly too
> An' to all the good people that traveled with you

This is full of respect, even while the names themselves are duly differentiated: Cisco Houston, Sonny Terry, and Leadbelly are spoken of famously and familiarly, though not impudently. Woody Guthrie is Woody in the title, *Song to Woody*, but in the song proper he is treated with a propriety that is saved from being too deferential by the affectionately chaffing lead-in: "Hey, hey, Woody Guthrie, I wrote you a song" (that might seem cheeky of young me, but honestly it isn't), and

> Hey, Woody Guthrie, but I know that you know
> All the things that I'm a-sayin' an' a-many times more

That is quite something to say, and to sing, and it asks – as art, I mean, not as a personal plea – a substantiated trust that we will take it in the spirit in which it is offered: not as false modesty but as true tribute. For the song has not moved, as it so easily might have done, from the words of the first



verse, "I'm seein' your world", to something along the lines of "Now I'm goin' to show you *my* world", but to a world that is neither yours, Woody Guthrie, nor mine (as yet . . .), "a funny ol' world that's a-comin' along". And "I know that you know" can, on this happy unenvious occasion, have nothing of the icy negation of *Positively 4th Street* with its soured repetition of the word "know". No?