

All Along Bob Dylan

America and the World

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Chapter 5

Conspiring to Be Unknown; or, Is a Bob Dylan There?

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5 Conspiring to Be Unknown; or, Is a Bob Dylan There?

Agnieszka Pantuchowicz

Michael Long begins his review of David Yaffe's *Bob Dylan: Like a Complete Unknown* and Sean Wilentz's *Bob Dylan in America* saying that "Bob Dylan brings out the worst in scholars" (Long 2011). What Yaffe demonstrates in his book, Long claims, is the possibility of unlimited interpretation of Dylan's songs which he ascribes to the postmodernist lack of standards of measuring quality to which Bob Dylan himself gave the name of "the disease of conceit" (Long 2011).

Any interpreter of Dylan is thus put in a precarious situation in which the suspicion of the disease of conceit may well discourage her or him from the work of interpretation, so as to avoid the suspicion of speculative musings and an inability to evaluate and clarify things in plain words, without fanciful metaphors or comparisons which make us baselessly proud. However, in the context of Dylan's lyrics in which tropes, similes or metaphors seem to be eclipsing any possibility of plain reading, the demand of clarity of interpretation and of objective evaluation of quality (whatever this might mean) is at least hard, as hard, perhaps, as the decision as to the quality and meaning of the hardness of the rain that's gonna fall. The dissemination of senses and connotations of his lyrics invites reading them in a deconstructive way and, as I will try to show later, some effects of his texts may well be situated closely to the effects of inscription of such "classics" of poststructural critique of the logocentric belief in singularity of meanings as Barthes, Foucault or Derrida. What Dylan himself called the disease of conceit is also hard to clearly understand even though "[t]here's a whole lot of people suffering tonight from the disease of conceit", as he sang, with the phrase "the disease of conceit" itself being quite evidently a brilliant example of a poetic conceit. The song "Disease of Conceit" (*Oh Mercy*) may, of course, bring out the worst in a scholar, as what its text invites may evoke associations ranging from John Donne and the Metaphysical Poets, through Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death* or Susan Sontag's reading of illness as a metaphor, to T.S. Eliot's "Burial of the Dead" in *The Waste Land*, for example. Given Dylan's erudition, all these may be found in the closing lines of the song where the metaphor of disease may be associated with Hamlet's sea of trouble ("people seeing trouble tonight") which buries

a lot of people who are deafened by conceit to Donne's tolling of the bell hoping that they are "too good to die". Through the allusion to the sea, one may clearly find the deluge of conceit as a kind of death by water in Eliot's poem and think of Phlebas's entering the whirlpool. Even more indirectly, this kind of death by water brings in the theme of a sinking ship whose catastrophe may well be that from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* or that of the Titanic – two "events" strongly recurring in Dylan's later texts to which I will return later.

Since Bob Dylan is also, at least according to Michael Gilmour (2004), tangled up in the Bible, biblical references and allusions can be found literally everywhere in his songs. However, he often hides them under some everyday events, names and concepts which, like "the disease of conceit", do not appear in the biblical text. The interpreter – the reader or the listener – can hardly identify the allusions unless, of course, he or she is an academic scrutinising the text so as to willingly suspend one's disbelief. The seemingly simple message of Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Chainging", for instance, may, in the hands of insightful interpreters, become quite a complex tangling of biblical allusions and inspirations. Here is Frances Di Lauro reading Bert Cartwright's (1992) interpretation of the song:

Cartwright believes the title of the song was inspired by *Daniel 2:21* which states that God 'changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings.' His only comment on the first verse is that the change in the times will be 'apocalyptic,' along the lines of 'Noah's flood,' but in his biblical annotations at the end of the book he draws a direct parallel with the lines 3–10 of this verse and references to the deluge in *Genesis 6–7* and *Matthew 24;36–39*. Cartwright makes a logical association, however, lines 9 and 10, 'Then you'd better start swimmin' or you'll sink like a stone' are clearly a reference to the song of Moses in *Exodus 15:5* which rejoices the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea: 'The depths have covered them: they sank into the bottom as a stone.'

(Di Lauro 2008, 197)

The already mentioned erudition of Bob Dylan also makes it hard, sometimes even impossible, to clearly indicate the sources and inspirations of his lyrics. Some of the phrases used in the songs, as in the case of sinking stones, need quite an elaborate investigation to indicate their (in this case biblical) origin. Dylan may well be called an intertextual writer – with intertextuality understood in the Kristevan sense of traces and iterations of other textual constructs which constitute "an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning)" (Kristeva 1980[1977], 65). Michael Gilmour in his book on Dylan and the Scripture also addresses the question of intertextuality, quoting Dylan's confession of

being a thief of thoughts and juxtaposing it with the quotation from U2 saying that “every poet is a thief” (2004, 18). However, thoughts seem to be fairly evanescent things, and what may be called a poetic kind of stealing is hardly evidenced, unless it is a word by word repetition of an expression. The idea of intertextuality in obvious ways involves some kind of iteration; yet, what is repeated seems to be questioning the possibility of the originary authenticity of creation and of the unquestionable ownership of words. Though some of Dylan’s references seem to be obvious, the stealing involved in his texts also complicates the authorial status of Bob Dylan who seems to be always saying more than was there in the stolen thought or thoughts, though by means of an allusive referentiality which, like poetic conceits, “use familiar ideas in nonobvious combinations” (Veale 2015, 202). His poetic conceit seems to be announcing the inherently thievish nature of poetry, pointing to the deceitful nature of conceit, the thought to which “Disease of Conceit” seems to be alluding.

The composition is an interesting case of supplementing the biblical with non-biblical. Though we can read about the dangers of conceit understood as excessive pride in the image of oneself and of one’s position in Romans 12:16 and in Proverbs 26:5, conceit is not described there as a disease¹. Dylan contextually conflates conceit with deception, with deceit, which is also biblical², and which, as Michael Gilmour notes, “moves outward and involves a deliberate attempt to mislead others. The folly of fools is deceit (Proverbs 14:18), yet people find the bread of deceit to be sweet (Proverbs 20:17)” (Gilmour 2004, 32). Dylan alludes to deception in a complex way through making conceit an incurable disease which is in fact embodied in the surrounding reality. In the song, deceit is violent. It not only “Rips into your senses / Through your body and your mind”, but is also devoid of sweetness. What is thus allusively disclosed is the evil character of the illusory, perhaps also of the illusory sweetness of poetry, and thus of conceit which is identified with pride and absolute selfishness.

Even this short look at the visible and encrypted biblical allusions shows the complexity of Dylan’s rewriting of Scripture and of numerous other texts. This rewriting does not consist in a simple copying but is an activity which Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere found to be an almost synonym of translation – “translation is, of course, a rewriting of an original text” (2004, vii). Rewriting is also a kind of manipulation and, as such, can be both used and abused. For Bassnett and Lefevere, rewriting is manipulation

undertaken in the service of power, and in its positive aspect can help in the evolution of a literature and a society. Rewriting can introduce new concepts, new genres, new devices and the history of translation is the history also of literary innovation, of the shaping

power of one culture upon another. But rewriting can also repress innovation, distort and contain, and in an age of ever-increasing manipulation of all kinds, the study of the manipulation processes of literature are exemplified by translation can help us towards a greater awareness of the world in which we live.

(Lefevere 2004, vii)

Though Lefevere's Theory of Translation as Rewriting does not explore the inverse possibility of rewriting being a kind of translation, which concept, however oxymoronic it may sound, seems to grasp the complexity of intertextual readings and writings, such as Dylan's. Without going into details of contemporary translational theories, one may rightly say that Dylan is a creative rewriter/translator of texts in which, and through which, he opens up various interpretative possibilities.

Things get much more complex when it comes to the translation of Dylan into other languages which, as regards Scripture, have to refer to its translations. Biblical references can often be hard to be recognised because of translational differences, and given Dylan's allusive way of expressing them, their reappearance in translations of Dylan may be strongly muffled. If we look, for instance, at the Polish translations of "All Along the Watchtower" whose lyrics were written long before Dylan's conversion (*John Wesley Harding*), the biblical address of the text becomes vague, even as regards the title. The direct reference of the title to the Book of Izaiah (21: 5, 21:6, 21: 8) seems to be relevant as providing at least one fixed point in a text which is frequently seen as unclear, vague and cryptic: "there have been theories of it being about everything from the Vietnam War to Armageddon" (cf. Genius Lyrics).

The fragment from Izaiah in King James's translation to which the title refers reads: "5: Prepare the table, watch in the watchtower, eat, drink: arise, ye princes, and anoint the shield. 6: For thus hath the Lord said unto me, Go, set a watchman, let him declare what he seeth". The watchtower in Dylan's song evidently sends the reader to Babylon and its towers set up outside of the city to protect its consumerist life from intruders. The song begins with a conversation between a joker and a thief, two figures who as it were stand at the margins of the city's mainstream life and seem to be thinking of and escape from the system which in a way feeds them, though to which they do not really belong. The reason for their search for a way out is "too much confusion" which, among others, concerns a displacement of ownership of what is whose in the capitalist system in which the joker says that Businessmen drink his wine, while the Ploughmen dig his earth.

The two figures do not belong among the watchers of the order of things of the Businessmen, who seem to be the eating and drinking princes of the world, and who anoint others to defend them. They may well be the figures of Christ and the Good Thief next to whom Christ

was crucified, but, as one critic has noticed, they may refer to the more mundane world of showbusiness where “the Joker is Dylan himself, and the thief is Elvis Presley” as Elvis was accused of stealing rock and roll from the African-Americans to make money (ASAD123 2009). What is crucial, however, seems to be the vision of the watchtower as the place of surveillance from where princes “keep the view” over the everyday life of people.

The watchtower is also a place, or space, of surveillance dominating the world below, the space which in the next line of the lyrics is shown as populated by women and servants, perhaps by the masses whose mobility demands supervision and control. While the princes were busy watching, “the women came and went” along with “barefoot servants”. On top of the pairing of both the women and the servant as inferior, Dylan’s allusive discourse seems to be slightly more complex here. The figure of women coming and going seems to be taken from T.S. Eliot’s *The Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (vainly talking of Michelangelo), ignorant of the danger coming from the outside of the room, perhaps from the riders of the Apocalypse whose number Dylan reduces in the song to two, and whose ominous approach is also ignored by the lodgers of the watchtower. What seems to be performed in the song is a projection of the biblical watchtower as a space of blindness, with its captains oblivious to the coming of an inevitable catastrophe, or perhaps to its slow train coming up around the bend.

There are two Polish translations of the text of “All Along the Watchtower” which have been performed and recorded by their authors – Martyna Jakubowicz and Filip Łobodziński³. In Jakubowicz’s translation, the word “watchtower” does not appear at all, and what she uses instead is the phrase “na straży” (on the watch) (2005). Jakubowicz’s title of the song – “Na straży w dzień i w nocy” (On the watch – day and night) – focuses on the activity of watching which is also underlined in the Polish translation of the Bible which she, without doubt, consulted: “Na wieży strażniczej, o Panie, stoję ciągle we dnie, na placówce mej warty co noc jestem na nogach” (2005). For some reason, however, she omits the word “watchtower”, though in the text of the songs, she quite clearly indicates that the princes observe the world “from the tower”:

na straży w dzień i w nocy
strażnicy patrzą z wieży.
(*on guard all day and night,
guards are looking from the tower*)

(Jakubowicz 2005)

Łobodziński decided to translate the title as “W oknach całej strażnicy” (In the windows of the whole guardroom [2017, 172]) using, unlike Jakubowicz, the word which does not figure in the Polish translation

of the Bible and which denotes a construction which, importantly, need not be a tower. He also supplies the building with windows which are absent in Dylan's text. This architectonic levelling of the space seems to be weakening the vertical hierarchisation strongly speaking through Dylan's song though; however, it draws attention to the horizontality of the phrase "all along" with which Dylan complicates the architecture of his text. Commenting on Dave Van Ronk's remark on the use of the phrase "all along" by Dylan, Kees de Graaf notes that

the "Along" of "All along the watchtower", is simply a mistake. A watchtower is not a road or a wall, and you can't go along it. In van Ronk's eyes it was a poetic liberty Dylan thought he could get away with. Probably the words "All along" were inserted for rhythm purposes or to focus not on what happened on the watchtower but on what happened alongside the watchtower, the activities surrounding the watchtower.

(Van Ronk in de Graaf 2018)

As it seems, the horizontal dimension of the tower can also be read as the spatial extension of the space of observation, and what is surveilled may well be the whole of America, perhaps the whole world. The sphere of observation is not confined only to the outside, but also to the inside of the symbolic Babylon whose dwellers are also a potential source of threat – thieves who steal and jokers who distance themselves from the state. When writing the song, Dylan could not have known Foucault's reading of Bentham's panopticon; yet, the watchtower in the song seems to be offering precisely such a panoptic vision of state. The conflation of the horizontal and the vertical spaces does seem to result from an erroneous use of "all along", but Dylan literally flattens the text, as does the disappearance of this dimension from Łobodziński's translation.

One more significant element missing from both translations is the biblically anachronistic presence of the word "businessmen" in the text of the song which seems to be dissonant with the archaically sounding "plowmen" digging the joker's earth. In Łobodziński's version, "businessmen" figure as a singular "karczmarz" (innkeeper) (2017, 172), while Jakubowicz (2005) proposes the word "kupiec" (merchant). As a result, both Polish texts are narratives retelling some past history, a tale from the old times which can be related to the present only allegorically. Dylan's "businessmen" make the timing of the story undecidable, and what is thus achieved is the effect of what André Lefevere called, in the context of translation studies, refraction – a metaphor of transformation of a text which carries within itself an ideological change (cf. Lefevere 1982, 3–7). Thanks to the use of "businessmen", it is the ideology of capitalism for which various kinds of watchtowers are crucial. In the song, the watchtower has as it were forgotten of the outside, of the coming of

the slow train of Apocalypse which closes the song through the approach of two riders and the howling of the wind which may be announcing the coming of a hard rain predicted in another well-known song. The biblical Babylon seems to be still here, in the quite mundane reality that surrounds us, though it seems to be already sinking like the Titanic – the outgrowth of technological pride and conceit. This theme, of course, brings us to “Tempest” (2012), a more recent song by Dylan where the retelling of other texts is scattered throughout as a never-ending story in which the sinking of the Titanic is not related solely to one of the themes of William Shakespeare’s play, but also to a story of the watchtower going to sleep and dreaming its own catastrophe – a tale which we do not believe, because we think it is only a dream, or perhaps exactly the stuff that we are made of. Since “The watchman he lay dreaming / Of all the things that may be”, a part of that dream being the vision is not only the Titanic going down into the sea (in the last line), but the sleeping watchman himself may stand for a number of watchful figures of masters not seeing what they are doing, perhaps also including the masters of war whom Dylan would rather see dead.

Though Dylan is not a poststructuralist literary critic, his dismantling of singularity of meaning in his texts is reminiscent of Roland Barthes’s activity of reading a writerly (*scriptible*) text, a text which is a kind of reading in which the reader participates as a writer and as an author, thus also as it were dismantling his or her singular identity. The writerly text, wrote Barthes,

is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages. The writerly is the novelistic without the novel, poetry without the poem, the essay without the dissertation, writing without style, production without product, structuration without structure.
(Barthes 1970, 5)

What is at stake in Barthes’s idea of the *scriptible* text is the transformation of consumption to participation in the production of texts which no longer constitute the property of the author. The lesson of his seminal concept of the death of the author is that the producer of a text is not the master of the complex networks which a text connotes and of myriads of other texts to which it may allude. The aforementioned examples of intertextual complexities of Dylan’s lyrics show that the question of “who really spoke?” is an unanswerable one. In Michel Foucault’s view, authorship is functional, and the questions which can be asked about a text may only relate to contexts in which it is used, rather than to any authentic intension of the author – the idea cherished by the traditional

authoritative and authorial approaches to literature. What Foucault calls “author function” involves a shift of the perception of the author from a unique singular being to a “plurality of self” (Foucault 1984[1969], 112), the plurality also involving the self of the reader. With the change of the position of the reader from the consumer of something readily provided to that of a creative participant in the networks of discourse, we would

no longer hear the questions that have been heard for so long: Who really spoke? Is it he and not someone else with what authority and originality and what part of his deepest self did he express in his discourse? Instead there would be other questions, like these: What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself?

(Foucault 1984[1969], 119–20)

Larry David Smith, though not quite literally, claims that Bob Dylan is made of texts which he absorbed into his chosen authorial name. Dylan, writes Smith, “assimilated what he liked, dismissed what he did not, and transformed what he absorbed into a new Bob Dylan” (2005, 75). The authorship of his lyrics on this new Dylan is not ascribable to a singular person, and something which may be very broadly called “French theory” seems to be implicitly speaking through his artistic persona. Stefán Snaevarr claims that there has always been “a postmodernist streak in his work” indicated by “the lack of any clear-cut ideology” even in his “early phase” (2014, 48). This streak is also strongly present in what Steven Rings (2013, 21) calls Dylan’s “erasure of authorship”, the term which might be aptly used with reference to both Barthes’s and Foucault’s reflections on the idea of the author. What seems to be going hand in hand with the erasure of authorship is the erasure of the singularity of identity. Christophe Lebold convincingly shows that “the fundamental gesture behind Dylan’s oeuvre is indeed the permanent construction and deconstruction of himself”, and provides quite a long, though surely not complete, list of what Bob Dylan has been:

Dylan, ever in search of a new “mask”, has successively been a (non-) protest singer, a beat-like symbolist poet, an absurdist rocker with a touch of the Shakespearian clown, a country-music everyman in a bucolic fiction, a wounded man and lyrical poet in the early seventies, a Christian preacher announcing the apocalypse, and again, an everyman, who carries the fate of mankind and our mortality in the persona of the vagrant blues artist, whose continuous touring, year after year, becomes more and more allegorical of our ontological rootlessness.

(Lebold 2007, 63)

Lebold's ontological rootlessness is not ascribed only to Dylan, but to figures in the aforementioned quotation as an allegory applicable to "us"; it is our own rootlessness which is reflected in Dylan's deconstructions of himself, perhaps his translations of himself into texts which, as translations, are always removed, at least slightly, away from the original. Stephen Scobie in seemingly plain words describes Dylan's displacement: "Bob Dylan is always someone else, always a deferral, always a ghost" (2004, 44). However, both "deferral" and "ghost" come from the repertoire of Jacques Derrida's writings on difference and his hauntological reflections on otherness. Dylan's position of ghostly unidentifiability is not only the matter of his name and, as Damian Carpenter notes, it

goes beyond the common knowledge that "Bob Dylan" is literally a legal alias for Robert Zimmerman (Dylan legally changed his name in 1962), and Dylan has mystified even this fact. While "explaining" his rationale for choosing Bob Dylan as an alias in *Chronicles* (2004), Dylan strangely defers his identity... As he commented in an interview in 1978 "Names are labels so we can refer to one another. But deep inside us we don't have a name. We have no name".

(Carpenter, 289, quote from Dylan after Cott, 206)

Like Foucault's "author function", proper names are also functionally discursive constructs which enable communication, though they do not communicate what one is. Neither do they clearly tell us what one is or where one is, this mixing of temporality with topographical placement being at work in the phrasing of the presence of things and people in the formula of "there is ..." whose potential has been made use of in Todd Hayens's 2007 film about (?) Bob Dylan titled simply *I'm Not There*. Though Robert Sullivan wrote in *New York Times* that the film was "not a Bob Dylan movie" (Sullivan 2007), the statement seems to be a fitting address to the question of bringing out "the worst in scholars" with which I began this text. Never being quite there, exactly there, exactly in place, Dylan is not a simple object of study and we can never be sure who speaks in his texts and from where, even if he speaks or sings in the first person singular as an "I". In Hayens's film, there are a few characters playing Bob Dylan, though none of them carries Dylan's proper name. The "I" of what it is about, the title explicitly informs us, is not there, and the only place where Dylan somehow appears in the film is at the end, when Dylan sings his "I'm Not There" – a song written in 1956. However, the title of the song, as Stephen Scobie phrases it, is "only known as 'I'm Not There' ... At least, that is the title given to it on most of its early, bootleg appearances" (2004, 1). This aliased title may be also looked at as a harbinger of the figure of Alias appearing in Sam Peckinpah's 1973 *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, a mysterious helper of an outlaw, himself hardly belonging to the order of the law. Referring to the

song, Scobie writes that “I’m Not There” is “the most obscure of Dylan’s ‘lost’ songs: a major masterpiece that almost no one knows, and which indeed seems to *conspire actively against being known*” (2004, 1, my italics). Conspiratorial plotting is also an outlawed activity which takes place beneath, and against, the official state and order of things, and Dylan’s penchant for outlaws seems to be also a penchant for remaining unidentifiable, for living without an address which he expressed in “Outlaw Blues” (1965). The figure of another outlaw, Jesse James, whose treacherous killing by Robert Ford lurks in the song, also illustrates what Carpenter sees as Dylan’s promotion of self-honesty which is demanded in a life outside the law – a “Dylanism from ‘Absolutely Sweet Marie’: ‘[T]o live outside the law, you must be honest’” (Carpenter 2014, 290). One aspect of this self-honesty of a transgressive kind of living is, perhaps paradoxically, the courage of not being exactly what one is, of not being where one is demanded to be, exactly the courage of not being there. Needless to say, Dylan’s not being there may, and does, bring out the worst, but not only in scholars.

Notes

- 1 “Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits” (Romans 12:16). “Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit” (Proverbs 26:5).
- 2 “Thou givest thy mouth to evil, and thy tongue frameth deceit” (Psalm 50:19).
- 3 The translations of Bob Dylan’s lyrics which I briefly discuss below have been made by Martyna Jakubowicz and Filip Łobodziński. Both translators are also poets, singers and performers. Quotations in the text come from Martyna Jakubowicz’s album with her own translations of Dylan’s songs (*Tylko Dylan* [Only Dylan], Sony BMG, 2005) and from Filip Łobodziński’s annotated collection titled *Duszny Kraj* [A Stifling Country] (Biuro Literackie 2017).

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