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‘This Time We Shall Escape’: Bob Dylan’s Rolling Thunder Tours

Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay, ‘The Poet’, famously invoked America’s need for its native poet, while acknowledging that:

I look in vain for the poet whom I describe. We do not, with sufficient plainness, or sufficient profoundness, address ourselves to life, nor dare we chaunt our own times and social circumstance.¹

Mark Ford has valuably explored parallels between Dylan’s sensibility and Emerson’s, and suggested how Dylan might appear in fact as an embodiment of the American visionary that Emerson longed for. Citing Emerson’s essay, Ford notes a strange prescience, asking ‘Has there ever been a finer description of Dylan’s 1966 tour with the Band?’²:

Doubt not, O poet, but persist. Say ‘It is in me, and shall out.’ Stand there, balked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until the last rage draw out of thee that dream-power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity. (Emerson, 263)

Emerson’s image of inspiration as conduction, of an emancipating power ‘transcending all limit and privacy’, is one that can be identified with what was transformative (dynamically channeling forces of change) and inaugural (liberating new social phases of voice and selfhood) in Dylan’s art of the 1960s.

Certainly, Dylan’s cultural pre-eminence in the period is undoubted, and Greil Marcus offers a powerful image:

Once a singer stood at a world crossroads. For a moment he held a stage no one has mounted since – a stage that may no longer exist [...] Bob Dylan seemed less to occupy a turning point in cultural space and time than to be that turning point. As if a culture would turn according to his wishes or even his whim; the fact was that for a long moment it did.³

This piece evaluates the nuances of Dylan's work during the Rolling Thunder Revue tours of 1974-75, taking them to show how the potency of the moment that Marcus describes has now passed. Dylan in some respects was an artist at the top of his powers, and displayed what I take as intrinsically original and essential features of his work. However, overall the tours and music of the time variously and significantly bear out a crucial belatedness that is both cultural and personal. The emancipating 60s nexus between political and creative opportunity has vanished, while Dylan's work is now most eloquent when it turns on themes of entrapment, loss, and displacement.

Of course, any thumb-nail sketch of the 1960s must reveal it as a riven, violent, and uncertain decade, one in which idealism and illusion were all-too-humanly inextricable. However equally indisputably, youth culture, galvanized by the civil rights struggle and the war, had been invested with an expansive scope, anger, engagement and optimism that were to recede and disintegrate by the mid-70s. Dylan's inspiration, as I have argued elsewhere,⁴ had been so potent in the 60s because of the singular concord between what was forward-pressing and convulsive in the politics of the period, on the one hand, and, on the other, the essential (and essentially American) kind of temporal dynamic involved in his creative sensibility. His songs could appear to signal (and even contribute to) social and political transformation because in aesthetic terms they were so innately transformative, placing themselves at an indefinite turning point and scoping an uncertain futurity. They enacted and projected a transitional subjectivity, in which the self was subtracted from its social conditions and its past. Emancipated from a prior state of inexpression, this newly reliant self set out to assume an as yet indefinite state. However, by the time of the Rolling Thunder tours, this informing sense of cogent critique and future possibility had in crucial ways collapsed in the larger culture, as the times had become over-shadowed by political failure, and the demeaning realities of Watergate, the oil crisis, the Kent State shooting, and the redoubled racism that appeared endemic in a social fabric that also would not hold together.

Of course, there is an issue to iron out here, in so far as for many people the identification of Dylan's 1960s career as a whole with political engagement would need defending (or at least more explication). It is a commonplace - though it is untrue - to assert that Dylan as a song-writer had renounced politics towards the end

of 1963 or so, as his focus shifted from the issue of civil rights. Though perceived by many as a betrayal of the issues of race and social protest, in fact this turn was an extension of the political: towards new, often more internal or ethical, dramas of constraint and release. So, the broader claim is that throughout the 1960s the political for Dylan had been bound up with creative values of self-difference, with an originality that scoped ever-new forms of freedom, themselves premised on new forms of critique. This was clearly true for *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* or *The Times they are a-Changin'*. However, it was equally true of the dystopia of *Highway 61 Revisited*; the estranged, often phantasmatic, urban subjectivity of *Blonde on Blonde*; or the vagrant and obscure figures of John Wesley Harding. Similarly, often described as concerned with re-inventing himself, in fact Dylan's was more determined to escape and overturn former versions of himself, his work drawing on the tension and impetus of an interval between the person he no longer is, and the person he has not yet become. What is involved is an endlessly renewed battle of self-constitution, an ongoing war of independence, one driven by kinds of ruthlessness, repudiation, provocation or protest, in pursuit of something close again to what Emerson in 'History' identified as the 'unattained yet attainable self' (Emerson, 117). It was this creative struggle against the socially invested self that can be seen to have led Dylan not only to Greenwich Village in 1961, or Mississippi or the Washington monument in 1963, but also to the Free Trade Hall in 1966, and to Nashville in 1969.

Following on from this, the main change reflected by the Rolling Thunder tours is that Dylan's best work expresses a subjectivity that is now over-shadowed not by social fictions of the self so much as by his own past. Such features of reflexivity and retrospection are perhaps suggested by Nat Hentoff's remarks at the time in *Rolling Stone*, that in the solo performance and duets Dylan's singing was both 'more authoritative than ever before' while also revealing 'anxiety in his delivery' that 'has to do with the story he's telling rather than with the way he's telling it'.⁵ Certainly for many listeners, myself included, the acoustic performances of the Rolling Thunder period can be among the most powerful and compelling in Dylan's whole career. It is hard to think, for instance, that there are any more unbridled and forceful manifestations of Dylan's peculiarly dislocated yet authoritative kind of vocal intensity than many of the solo versions of songs like 'Spanish is the Loving Tongue', 'Sara', 'Tangled Up in Blue', 'If You See Her, Say Hello' or in the duets with Joan

Baez - 'The Water is Wide', 'Railroad Boy', 'Deportees', 'Dark as a Dungeon', 'Never Let Me Go'. One might say that within the 1960s the cultural storms and riptides of the period had allowed him like some buccaneer to purloin the riches, and discover the hiding places, of cultural and musical transformation. But by the mid-70s, these youthful adventures are no longer possible, and the times have changed. But it would be wrong to identify the Dylan of 1975 or '76 as some ancient mariner figure, though it is true that he is someone who has to wait for the creative current, and who experiences subjectivity most expressively as interiority and private fate. So in these most powerful performances and songs he projects a self who is riven by loss, trapped by circumstance or burdened by his past, in the recurring scenario where he must strive to 'keep on keepin' on'.⁶

It is important briefly to expand this point, and to acknowledge that throughout his career, from the early versions of 'Moonshiner' or 'Handsome Molly' in the Gaslight in 1962 to versions of 'Jim Jones' or 'Delia' in the Supper Club in 1993, Dylan's artistry has always been able to renew itself in songs about those who feel lost to themselves. Such performances are themselves invested with some homeless abandoned quality at the heart of his creative sensibility. This is very powerfully the case too in the tour warm-ups such as 'Patti's Gone to Laredo', 'People Get Ready', and 'Kwa-Liga', which exist in tantalizingly fragmentary form on Renaldo and Clara. But what is striking about the Rolling Thunder tours is how far Dylan's gifts now manifest themselves most compellingly in songs where dislocation is experienced no longer as an opportunity (as the 60s promised), but as a predicament. Losses are now undergone and carried within the self as it presses on, against the backwash of former times. The axis of the performance shifts inwards, to the timbres, intonation and resourcefulness of a voice that registers a sense of fate and loss, as well as the determination not to be bound by it: to escape it if possible, by voicing and renouncing it. Accordingly the key-note of Dylan's work on the tour is its compelling expression of subjectivity as a subjection to the wreckage and ghosts of the past:

Now the beach is deserted except for some kelp
And a piece of an old ship that lies on the shore
You always responded when I needed your help

You gave me a map and a key to your door ('Sara', Lyrics 370)

Taking a broader look at the tour's larger context, one can also say that retrospection and personal factors were involved from the beginning. By all accounts, following the 1974 tour, Dylan's marriage had begun seriously to unravel, and *Blood on the Tracks* is testimony to this. The early part of 1975 had been marked by a pattern of inner desperation and exorbitant hedonism, as with the lengthy hedonistic sojourn in the south of France that his host, painter David Oppenheim, would call 'pathetic and superb'.⁷ With this in mind, one can understand how a significant, if uncharacteristic, desire to reanimate the past was crucial to Dylan's putting together the first tour. Though the group would soon expand, the ensemble began as a kind of class-of-'62 Greenwich Village reunion troupe, with Bob Neuwirth, Rambling Jack Elliott, Joan Baez et al. central to the roster. Culturally speaking too, the tour might be said to recapitulate the origins of modern America, in so far as it began in Plymouth, and moved northwards - in winding fashion into New England and up the coast. Certainly Allan Ginsberg thought along these lines, channeling Whitman in declaiming rather implausibly, 'We have, once again, embarked on a voyage to reclaim America.' (Bell, 55)

Perhaps connected to this, the first tour was playfully engaged with a certain half-considered theatre of identity, submerging Dylan's own quasi-mythological identity at the time within that of the whole troupe (while the shows themselves, as we shall see, rehearsed in half-baked ways the mythology of American itself). Contrastingly, the second tour, in the spring of 1976 extended westwards, as if to mimic a later phase of American history. However, for all the incidental power of much of the music, there was a distinct post-gold rush feeling about the second tour: not only in contrast to the 1960s, but also in respect of the lost intimacy, spontaneity, and creative impetus of the previous tour. The *commedia dell'arte* play with mask and selfhood, and the ramshackle collegiality, that had marked the first gave way in the second to something that had become more nakedly about Dylan as a more isolated and exposed figure. He now shouldered far more the responsibility for the success of the tour. Declining ticket sales led to several shows being abandoned, as the tour now openly targeted large venues and stadiums, performing before audiences who appeared bemused or confounded by the rag-tag army on stage dressed in Arabic

head-scarves. The play with costume had now become more incoherent, as Marcus commented:

The radical chic A-rab outfits were dumb, and it was obvious even while watching that Dylan's presence was overshadowing any questions of musical quality.⁸

Further, while the first tour had been an attempt to escape (and/or resolve) a difficult marital situation (at least when Sara was around), the second tour involved a much more bleak, now seriously failing, marital situation. The 'Hard Rain' TV special, with Sara for once present, shot at the end of the second tour seems a testimony to these various forces and factors. Dylan's performance possesses an off-the-leash ferocity. At times, as on 'Idiot Wind', this is magnificent, and the song exposes what Marcus aptly calls a 'malicious intensity' (Marcus, 71). However, at other times, Dylan's lacerating delivery, particularly on the large band songs, manifests a kind of wounded, bitter aggression that can sound like he is driving the songs into the ground, or tearing them up, and showing what Marcus calls an 'utter contempt for the audience':

The arrangements are pointless ... as with 'Memphis Blues Again', or philistine, as with 'Maggie's Farm'. (Are those long, ridiculously drawn-out pauses after every verse, in which Dylan sounds like a dying horse, meant to give the song impact, or draw applause, which is all they do? (Marcus, 71)

I

The Greenwich Village that Dylan frequented in the summer and autumn of 1975 was very different from the one that he had arrived at, after a short evening subway trip in the snowy winter of 1961 had carried him across town. The down-at-heel, guitar toting beardies and folkies trudging through the dismal gloom of Bleecker or MacDougal Street might have seemed unlikely beneficiaries of the massive artistic heritage of this tiny bohemia, with its coffee houses, cinemas, bookshops, bars and apartments, its tight streets overhung not just by cavernous blocks receding into the city beyond, but by the looming ghosts of every epochal figure and movement in

American culture.⁹ Ironically enough of course, by 1975 or so, the glamour and aura of the Village would be indelibly associated in the popular mind with its early 60s status as the crucible of the folk music revival, at the vanguard of the civil rights movement, and centring on figures like Dylan himself, Dave Van Ronk, Joan Baez, Peter, Paul and Mary, the Clancy Brothers, and Eric Anderson. Shortly afterwards of course too, the counter-cultural power of the Village would continue to expand, with those figures who came shortly after: Jimi Hendrix, Bruce Springsteen, Joni Mitchell, Lou Reed and Frank Zappa.

Yet by 1975, the Village had been totally transformed by rising property values and by commercialization. Many of the early 60s haunts had gone or moved – the Gaslight, the Figaro, Gerdes Folk City, the Café Au go go, the Café Wha? And in their wake, as Larry Sloman, the inimitable chronicler of the Rolling Thunder revue put it:

the sleaze merchants had scurried in, with armful after armful of schlock Indian garments, head-shop paraphernalia, falafel stands, and T-shirt emporiums. The music had gone... The only club that was still thriving in the Village was the Bottom Line, and to get a booking there you usually had to have a record contract and support from the label...¹⁰

The Kettle of Fish and the old Bitter End survived, though the latter had been renamed and reopened in June as the Other End, and Dylan had begun to frequent it again. According to Sloman, Dylan could be seen ‘hanging out, munching on a hamburger, talking to strangers, shuffling across the sawdust-strewn floor over to the cabaret section to soak in some music.’ (Sloman, 8) By the summer and autumn, shortly after the recording of *Desire*, his time in Greenwich Village had begun to shape itself into something more purposive and definite. Dylan’s creative flame was fanned by numerous four o’clock in the morning sessions, and he began to draw one after another of his old friends into the orbit of his burgeoning Rolling Thunder tour plans. According to Larry Sloman’s December 1975 piece for *Rolling Stone*, the starting point was that the Revue would be a reunion of the ‘early sixties Kettle of Fish folk crowd, the Dylan / Blue / Neuwirth/ Elliott/ Ochs axis’. However:

the cast mushroomed, especially because Dylan becomes effusive when he's bar hopping and winds up inviting every bouncer, bartender, juggler or otherwise kindred spirit he meets to come along. Joan Baez was the first addition to the basic Dylan/Elliott/Neuwirth show, followed by Ronee Blakely, on the basis of her strong showing at the Other End jam. Allen Ginsberg came next, with his fog, his natural adrenalin and his harmonium. Roger McGuinn, who was concentrating on a bottle so hard that he didn't hear D the first two times he was invited along, has dropped a few bookings, hopping abroad with his twelve-string and banjo. In fact the only picker who met up with the Thunder crew and didn't get swept up into it was Lou Reed.¹¹

Baez gave up a tour of her own, so 'irresistible' to her was the proposition of rekindling on the road the old, inclusive and collective intimacy, and creative serendipity, of the early Greenwich Village days.¹² Equally unsurprisingly perhaps, given all this apparent randomness, Patti Smith and Leonard Cohen, like Lou Reed, would decide against the tour.

What was indisputable was Dylan's energized intensity and sense of esprit de corps. He set off on the first day before dawn, appearing excitedly on the bus, 'like a cross between a Seventies rocker and a football coach' 511. The whole 'crazy quilt tour',¹³ in Sloman's words, had been mostly designed for 1800 to 3000-seater stadiums (with two shows designed for 12000) but soon escalated to larger venues, largely to recoup costs. Baez would later describe the Rolling Thunder Revue as 'an incredibly happy family' (Shelton, 309), though she would also come to rail against the hierarchies involved, insisting that the shunned bus driver lunch with the stars. Given how intimately connected the major figures had been, the tour (initially at least) offered an irresistible promise of time regained, of new creative and collaborative possibilities, as well as the pleasures of a huge jaunt. Lou Kemp, Dylan's boyhood friend, would be the main manager, while Rob Stoner would oversee the main band made up of

Howard Wyeth, Luther Rix, Mick Ronson, Scarlet Rivera, T-Bone Burnett and a 19-year-old mandolin/Dobro wizard named David Mansfield. The lead singers would be Dylan, [Bobby] Neuwirth, Ronee Blakely, Roger McGuinn, [Rambling Jack] Elliott, and Joan Baez. (Shelton, 309)

The group in particular was rather a strange *mélange*, and over the years the backing on the tour has garnered mixed reviews. At times, the band offers supple, irresistible support for Dylan's often driving vocals, and can carry the song along like some exhilarating white water ride with its layered texture, and striking shifts in tempo and dynamics. Too often though, it sounds much less than the sum of its parts: Howard Wyeth's vigorous drumming can seem all too irrepressible, while the other elements of bass, slide guitar, and violin – never properly mixed, arranged, or blended - often vie for attention too much.

In such respects, the nature of the band and the arrangements bear out the exploratory and uncontrolled nature of the tour (as well perhaps as the easy access to cocaine) and its blind trust in serendipity. Ian Bell has pointed out how far this is true of its origins. Like its name, these are lost in a welter of surmise, rumour and counter-claim:

One problem is that several of the suggestions intended to explain the origins of Rolling Thunder contradict several of the other suggestions. (Bell, 106)

The first tour, documented so memorably by Sam Shepard and Larry Sloman, began with two shows at the War Memorial Auditorium in Plymouth, in Massachusetts on October 30 and 31 1975. Over the next month or so, another 29 shows would take place, sometimes two a day, mostly along the northeastern coast of the United States – in towns like Providence, Springfield, New Haven, Niagara Falls, Rochester, Cambridge, Boston - before visiting Canada - with shows in Quebec City, Montreal, and Toronto – before winding up down south. To ramp up the mystique and tap into the creative dynamic of the early 60s that the shows were attempting to recapture, the shows would not be announced until the day, and the revue structure meant they would run usually for three and a half hours so, sometimes for five. This tour had the benefit of surprise also in the inclusion of material from *Desire* that had not yet been released, as well as the reunion on stage of Dylan and Baez, whose often riveting duets throughout the tours would be central. As Ian Bell pointed out, fairly quickly 'venues capable of containing audiences ranging in size from 10,000 to 16,000 ... became the rule rather than the exception' (Bell, 122), though the venues would include Universities, Civic Centers, Conventions Centres, Gymnasiums, Memorial

Auditoriums, small theatres, and in one case, the Correctional Institute for Women in Clinton New Jersey. On December 8 the tour famously culminated, with the benefit for Rubin Carter, the black boxer controversially imprisoned for murder, at Madison Square Garden. A further Carter benefit would be held in Houston on January 25.

Then after some respite, the second tour would begin in mid-April, after four nights limbering up in the Belleview Biltmore Hotel in Clearwater, Florida. Two weeks or so playing venues in Florida, were followed by a movement south and west to Alabama, then on to Mississippi, New Orleans, Houston and Fort Worth and other Texas venues, then on to Oklahoma and Kansas, before winding up in Salt Lake City, Utah. On this tour the venues were much larger, though the uncomprehending nature of the audiences is unforgettably evident in the comically insentient stoners or stolidly unimpressed audience faces that figure in the 'Hard Rain' TV special, where the desire not to miss a Dylan gig clearly coexists with stupefied indifference and zero pleasure. Bound up with this, Dylan's performances on this leg of the tour have a strange tension to them. At once forceful and exorbitant, he can appear at times gloriously empowered by his re-arrangements, and intent on refusing to conform to an audience attracted by celebrity. However, all too often this same recalcitrance can mean that he appears to be struggling against both his audience and the re-workings of his songs, so that what seemed exploratory on the first tour now seems merely perverse. Ian Bell describes these arrangements as being 'seemingly arbitrary', citing how on the first tour the words of 'Tonight I'll Be Staying Here With You' had been wholly re-written while the 'wistful melody had been pummelled into the shape of a rock song' and 'A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall' had been retooled as a 'ferocious, straightforward piece of rock and roll' (Bell, 120).

II

One anecdote has Dylan tossing a basketball around with Roger McQuinn in the spring of 1975, before enthusing about a tour that would be 'something like a circus' (Wilentz, 142). Certainly, Dylan's feeling for the glamour of the circus life went way back, to 'Dusty Old Fairgrounds', or the early fables about his adolescent carnival life. A telling passage in Martin Scorsese's *No Direction Home* describes how as a

boy he was transfixed by the carnival or circus performers, since they made him feel that you could be two people, hence that you need no longer be yourself, that identity could be remade and projected. Wilentz (whose account probes the ‘many-layered entertainment ... the all-American carnny’ that was the first revue [Wilentz, 170-71]) attended the New Haven show on November 13 1975, and was struck by the trompe *l’oeil* curtain, ‘covered with cartoony pictures of a he-man lifting barbells, a trained seal, and other carnny acts’ including ‘a man and a woman, painted in 1890s-style gymnasts’ suits and flying-trapeze boots’.¹⁴ However, there are different images that also that swirl around for this nomadic crew, particularly for the more intimate first tour: a vaudeville or *commedia dell’arte* troupe, a gypsy caravan, a wagon train, a cowboy gang, a rodeo, a hobo boxcar, a shaman’s tribe, a strange pageant, a crazy pilgrimage ... Sam Shepard (who had been brought along to write the film and wrote *The Rolling Thunder Log Book* instead) described the members of the revue as ‘like French clowns, like medicine show, like minstrels, like voodoo’ (175), while Sloman, inimitably described it as ‘a caravan of gypsies, hoboes, trapeze artists, lonesome guitar stranglers, and spiritual green berets who came into your town for your daughters and left with your minds’ (Sloman, 1).¹⁵

Such imagery, associated with the conscious staging of identity, is clearly inseparable from the gypsy or tribal dress adopted by Dylan that became the default garb of the tribe: the peacock feather or floral arrangement in the white, wide-brimmed hat, the exotic trailing scarf, the strange ritualistic pancake white make up, the patch-worked or black leather-jacket or waist-coat, the sometime plastic Nixon mask.... Daniel Mark Epstein offers wittily describes the clothing of the first revue tour as that of ‘a collision of gypsies with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and the cast of *La Bohème*’,

With their head scarves and bandannas, their ten-gallon hats and black berets, buckskin fringes, black leather, beads and gold chains, their Navajo ponchos, embroidered scarves and vests. The uniform was only below the belt: a consensus of blue jeans and pointed cowboy boots.¹⁶

More important perhaps, a similar outlandishness and diversity also informs the performances. Concert footage and Renaldo and Clara bear out that on stage Dylan

was always wired to an extraordinary degree, at the centre of the stage, in various ways comparable indeed to a strong man, ring-master, trapeze artist, conjurer, or juggler (or the white-faced clown, mime, harlequin, or troubadour of *commedia dell'arte*). Moment by moment through his own, often ferocious, efforts he is bent on providing the focal point for what could so easily become chaotic. Inevitably, this spectacle can be likened to the circus performer's spectacles of agility, timing, improvisation, impersonation, or strength. Stick thin, he is hyper-agitated and mobile: an assemblage of tendons, bones, nervous system, eyes, and frantic gestures – one moment intently strumming or stroking the strings of his guitar, or blowing into his harmonica, the next stomping, clawing, preening, gliding, bowing, turning, shouting or whispering the lyrics.

Mick Ronson (like many others) has described how exasperating Dylan was to accompany, changing keys and tempos without warning, and 'never play[ing] the same thing twice'. Rob Stoner glosses the changes as stemming more from a deliberate desire never to play it the same way twice: 'For instance, 'Isis' – we did a reggae version, we did funk versions, we did the waltzy one, we did the fast metal version'.¹⁷ Perhaps both aspects were about a need to exert control, whether creative or otherwise. Sam Shepard remarked on Dylan's performances in terms that suggest he was charging himself with holding together a crazily eclectic ensemble. It was 'like each guy on his own' was 'a whole band', while Dylan in the midst of possible mayhem, made 'all this madness coherent just by his presence'.¹⁸ Similarly Anne Waldman wrote:

I saw Bob Dylan in performance as the metaphoric shaman. His orality and imagination on stage were transforming. The conduit, the transformer, the "antennae of the race," in Ezra Pound's definition of the artist. He was at the centre of the show, his pulse was the pulse of the entire entourage.¹⁹

Certainly, the creative intensity of Dylan's performances is marked, and indeed listening to both tours the images that often come to mind are of his creating a kind of space where something like a conflagration can take place, on songs 'It Takes a Lot to Laugh', 'Stuck Inside of Mobile' or 'A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall', 'It Ain't Me, Babe', 'Hurricane' or 'Isis'. The moment is stretched out, and as it were divided

within itself, as if the past is being consumed in fuelling a movement of escape. Arguably, this corresponds to tropes and themes in the songs Dylan was writing at the time – the fugitives in ‘Romance in Durango’, Carter in his cell, or the singer in ‘Isis’ cutting off his hair and leaving his marriage, so as to ride off ‘to the wild unknown country where I could not go wrong’ (‘Isis’, Lyrics,).

Certainly, the intensity and centrality of Dylan’s performances are undoubted. Nik Cohn (no Dylan acolyte) in a New York review described Dylan on stage similarly as if he were on the verge of spontaneous combustion: ‘Dylan ... in white-face ... vagabond clown ... In ten years, I’d never seen him work with more intensity ... no poetical postures ... he rasped and roared, he burned.’ During instrumental breaks, he wrote, ‘he caromed all over the stage, stomping, rocking, as if even a moment’s silence or stillness would cause him to blow sky-high’.²⁰ Allan Ginsberg, who had likened the Dylan of 1965 to an expressive column of air, talked of how Dylan played “music with his whole body, foot tapping to knee to thigh to his hip, as well as his right arm and neck,” so that “he’s like a conductor’ for the whole event, though whether a lightening conductor or a musical one, or both, is unspecified’ (Sloman, 122). Shepard drew on mythological imagery that also encompassed Dylan’s own quasi-mythological status at the time, in describing how Dylan’s driving, ‘hard cowboy heel’ rhythmically channeled larger forces, as if he was a shaman, a medicine man. Shepard is describing a performance of ‘Simple Twist of Fate’ in Durham, New Hampshire”:

As I’m watching this heel of his and seeing the precision of it and hearing the way it resonates clear down through the floor, up through his body, through the song, into the microphone and out into the hall, it suddenly flashes on me that this thing is way beyond pop music. This thing is ancient ritual. The snake dancers of the Hopi ... had, at the heart of it, the idea that the dancers were messengers from this world sending for help to the spirits of another world. A world below the earth, inhabited by snakes. The medium was the dancer’s heel as it pounded down in a steady rhythm and sent its human vibrations to the ‘ones’ below. If the heel was heard, then the prayer was answered, usually in the form of a rainstorm. Rolling Thunder is making a sound. (Shepard, 74-75)

Shepard's evocation of ancient shamanistic ritual is perhaps another way of revisiting this point about the Dylan's work being most effective when it expressed a subjectivity leaving its former identifications behind. In various ways, the very different kinds of performance that mark out the tour betray this desire to transcend the moment. Firstly, there is the style of vocal that tries to generate exhilaration or rage from screeching, pounding, twisting, band arrangements - as if Dylan were riding a runaway train, or singing in fury from the bottom of a well... Secondly, there are the more minor-chord arrangements and songs where Rivera's violin cultivates its gypsy effects, if the mystic melancholy yearning of the music were a gateway to some transcendent realm, a means of escaping time itself (often a trope in the songs):

Your sister sees the future
Like your mama and yourself (Lyrics, 361)

Time is an ocean but it ends at the shore (Lyrics, 362)

Ironically enough, nothing about the tour or *Desire* dates it so much as such mid-70s attempts to transcend time. In songs like 'Oh Sister', and 'One More Cup of Coffee', the oblique implorings and mystic elaborations of the lyrics suggest someone whose relationships and identity transcend the mundane world, while the mid-eastern flourishes and curlicues of Dylan's singing create a vocal style that is also continually mimicking and invoking this break with the everyday. These songs usually address a mystical female muse, while his singing sounds as if the tendrils and spirals of Rivera's playing have infiltrated his mind, like *Persian Ivy*. But, in purely musical terms, the effect is seductive and highly effective, and Sloman brilliantly describes Dylan on stage, 'straining, squeezing out the words like some kind of Turkish taffy, with Ronson wailing a chorus of sighs in the background' (Sloman, 397-98). Ginsberg expressed his admiration of 'One More Cup of Coffee' in more reverent terms. Describing it as the 'high point' of the show, he surrenders wholly to its minor chord, esoteric flummery: 'It's sacred and the mode of music is Hindu-Arabic. He uses cantillation. That's the ohohohohohohoh, the wavering note.' (Sloman, 121)

In the third type of song though, as mentioned above, Dylan demonstrates an abiding attribute of his art, whereby he can convert the disintegrative energy of

sadness, isolation and art, into something expansive as well as intensive. Against the different forms of mid-70s excess that are evident in the other two types of songs there is a contrasting reduction in these songs. So, when he sings with Baez - 'Railroad Boy' or 'Never Let Me Go', 'Dark as a Dungeon' or 'Deportees' – or alone - 'Spanish is the Loving Tongue', 'Tangled Up in Blue' or 'Sara', there is the mesmerizing sense in the song's performance and scenario of the moment as a knife-edge that cuts between present and past. The intensive strumming and phrasing, the shifting timbre, timing, and dynamics of the singing enact these songs' scenarios of a life cut down to fatal essentials. In such features, the songs express a perennial alchemy of Dylan's art as an interpreter, whereby the expressive acknowledgement of dislocation and loss automatically generates a corresponding strength that fights free in the moment, and that surfaces through the vigour or restraint of a voice that discovers in loss its capacity for endurance and self-renewal.

III

Dylan had recorded *Desire* between mid- to late-July 1975, and it was released on 5 January 1976, between the two tours. Seductive as the album is in so many ways, one might describe it as sounding better than it is. Which is to say that so much in the album appears front-loaded for effect, with soul-leading violin from Scarlet Rivera, and plaintive backing vocals from Emmy-Lou Harris, as well as minor-chord or driving effects, and melodies often full of sensory or mystic curlicues and embellishments. Lyrically too, there is much that is bent on exciting or seducing the listener (or inciting him or her in the case of 'Hurricane'). The difficulty is that the album's modes and motifs taken together make for a kind of unevenness, and individual songs can veer between powerful effects one moment, and sounding portentous or pretentious the next.

Possibly this is bound up with Jacques Levy's collaboration. What appears more certain and distinctive about his contribution are the auteur's cinematic effects that run through the songs he co-wrote, the sense of a camera moving in or cutting away continually on 'Hurricane' (or 'Romance in Durango', 'Black Diamond Bay', or 'Joey'), converting a song into a filmic or novelistic tour de force in which what

counts is the mastery of transition and effect. 'Hurricane' is the archetype of this filmic method, as when it spins away from the opening mis-en-scene to the title shot, 'Here comes the story of the Hurricane' (Lyrics, 355). By such means, the songs switch between microcosm and macrocosm, as the human cut and thrust opens into the long view of tragedy: in 'Hurricane', the emptied-out cash register in the hot Jersey night trails the long view of tragedy, with Rubin in his cell and the abstractions of injustice and indignation; in 'Black Diamond Bay', the white panama hat of the lady on the white veranda is reprised at the end of the song, while the stars fade and the volcano erupts; the opening cut of 'Romance in Durango', of 'hot chili peppers in the blistering sun' leads to seeming death at the hands of vigilantes (Lyrics, 365); in 'Joey', a baby born in Brooklyn leads to a gangland assassination and a mobster funeral...

Ian Bell is undoubtedly right to show all the reasons why a song glamorizing Joey Gallo was a bad idea (for all its skillful, quasi-cinematic evocation). But it is at one with the way that the protagonists in the co-written songs are all fugitives, drifters, losers, or lovers who are hard-bitten by world and attempting some escape, in songs that are themselves are perpetually mobile, sharp-eyed, street-wise, smart-talking, hard-bitten, fleet-footed, capable of turning on a dime. Yet for all their vital perception and their expressive facility in cutting their losses and departing in another direction, these figures are all shadowed by a world that closes in, extinguishing life and expression. So there is this sense of songs that are in the midst of events, while the net closes, and whose values evoke the desire to escape being mastered. This is evident with the singing on 'Hurricane' that evokes the jabbing and weaving of a boxer while the song sets itself up as a kind of judicial review by other means, an anarchist's appeal court of the street, the voice homeless and indignant while it rails against its eventual end: 'Don't forget that you are whiiiiiiiiittttee', 'guilty mannnnnnn'. Each extended syllable appears to show how the real tips into tragedy, and in this case to make America confront again its contaminated ideals.

Indeed, on other songs the commerce is more directly between the quotidian and the world of ideas, myths and symbols. 'Isis' compellingly offers a quasi-mythological quest narrative, in which the everyday - drizzling rain or cutting off one's hair - intersect with phrases that allude to some other mysterious plane of being.

As the mysterious Isis appears to embody the physical and the mystical, so within the song the everyday and the archetypal endlessly entwine, as if wholly oblivious to each other, the singer doing his laundry one moment, and happening upon a pyramid of ice the next. He seems forced to yoke together the everyday and the eternal, committing himself to some kind of penitential purgation that is an embrace both of contingency and indetermination ('I cut off my hair and I rode straight away / For the wild unknown country where I could not go wrong' [Lyrics, 358]). In such ways, a song like this resembles some reflexive allegory of identity, invoking into a quasi-Jungian narrative register as a way of playing out in a new, spiritualized, way the split between the actual and the ideal, eventual self, that had always been integral to Dylan's subjectivity, as we have seen. To pursue this a little further (and such interpretations are treacherous clearly), one might argue that the other man in 'Isis' appears as a kind of Jungian alter-ego or shadow, who manifests to the self that it must die to itself, before he can return to Isis. Surviving death in the frozen country, and running the risks of recklessness, he returns across the line, but unlike the ancient mariner he is renewed, capable of embracing the necessity of loss and self-death, in renewal and perhaps remarriage to Isis ('the next time we wed' [Lyrics, 358]).

I invoke such interpretative speculations not because I believe them so much as because I think the song invites them, and certainly, life at the end of 'Isis' is experienced as a hard-won affirmative moment of reciprocity and harmony, of a vitality expressed through internal repetition and the gusto and pleasure of sheer sound and phrasing: 'I still can remember the way that you smiled / On the fifth day of May in the drizzlin' rain.' Risking destruction is the way to overcome the frozen self, to recover love. 'Blinded by sleep [...] with the sun in my eyes' (Lyrics, 359). Less successful are those songs in which the transcendent and the everyday come unstuck from each other, and where the indefinite is not a movement into the future but a kind of cheap transcendence of the everyday: 'Mozambique', 'Oh Sister' and 'One More Cup of Coffee'. The first celebrates the magic of the pleasure of the senses, and of rhythm and rhyming, while the second occupies an uncertain zone – who is this sister, and what kind of repudiation, and rebirth and salvation are being suggested here? Again, in 'One More Cup of Coffee', the known world is evacuated, and everything is portentously evocative of the '[m]ysterious and dark' spiritual world, outside of time, to which the woman's heart is a privileged conduit (Lyrics,

361). At such moments the modal minor chord safeguards lyrics that on the page come all too close to pretentiousness, and absurdity. It is after all easy enough to parody how Daddy is a kind of idealized gypsy, an outlaw with a kingdom, given to throwing knives and calling out in a trembling voice ‘for another plate of food’ while sister and mama can also see the future, and the singer calls out for another cup of coffee before going ‘to the valley below’ (Lyrics, 361). Like most of the songs on the album, these must have been great songs to sing, and Dylan will sing them powerfully on the Rolling Thunder tours.

Even on ‘Sara’, clearly one of the very few clearly autobiographical songs in Dylan’s archive, specific memories (the family holiday shots, the beach-scene, Lily Pond Lane in the warm weather) are interleaved with the quasi-mystical, with pleas for forgiveness and deliverance, and with Sara imagined as a ‘[g]lamorous nymph with an arrow and bow’ (Lyrics, 370). Perhaps the most tellingly effective song on the album, though, is ‘Black Diamond Bay’ in its interleaving of the everyday and the apocalyptic. Against the backdrop of the island eruption, poignancy and pathos inform the sharply-drawn characters who are given independent life through some vivid and deft touches:

Up on the white veranda
She wears a necktie and a Panama hat
Her passport shows a face
From another time and place
She looks nothin’ like that
And all the remnants of her recent past
Are scattered in the wild wind
She walks across the marble floor
Where a voice from the gambling room is callin’ her to come on in
She smiles, walks the other way
As the last ship sails and the moon fades away
From Black Diamond Bay (Lyrics, 367)

In this song what transcends the everyday is not some other dimension that cuts across it, but the ultimate shrouding and disintegrative work of death, as the volcano leaves only ‘a Panama hat / And a pair of old Greek shoes’ (Lyrics, 368). In such ways, from the retrospect of the song’s end and its spectacular annihilation, the

woman and the and the Greek take on the pathos of people seen sub specie aeternitas, all the more vividly and movingly for their transitoriness. So against the desire for conservation in 'Sara' there is the roving, mobile, inhuman acknowledgement of time in 'Black Diamond Bay' where stray details appearing momentarily like indices of common humanity and contingency picked out against the vanishings of time.

IV

Sean Wilentz described how by the second tour 'the novelty of the gypsy caravan' had 'worn thin', and 'frivolity and magic of the New England tour [had] faded away', producing 'some fine music ... but without the multilayered theatrics and overpowering performances of the previous year' (Wilentz, 170). One of the striking features of Dylan's accentuated centrality in the second Rolling Thunder tour is a vocal intensity that appears to derive from a self who is seeking to shake off the emotion that invests the timbre and intonation of his singing. At times this makes for singing that rises or falls around a self-excoriating vocal firestorm. Signature songs in this respect are the versions of 'Shelter From the Storm', 'I Threw it All Away' and 'Idiot Wind' where the voice appears split by a kind of raw, annihilating sense of experience that it can only escape by purgatively expressing it. Once again the logic is reflexive, of a self that can only escape itself by confronting itself and attempting to shake off the past. On many performances on this second tour, Dylan's voice – unappeased, hard-bitten, bitter – appears capable of turning every song into a desperate rant or furious plaint, as if singing, and the meaning of the words and the niceties of intonation, even the quality of what is being produced, were secondary to some process of creative destruction. It appears often as if he is burning through the song, or falling out of it, so that 'I Threw It All Away', 'Isis', 'Lay Lady Lay', or 'Shelter from the Storm' or 'Positively 4th Street' become borderline-crazed vocal assaults, dispatched by a voice that growls or howls. In the process, the quality of the material can be really variable, though Dylan's investment within it is total, as Marcus observed in commenting on the 'Hard Rain' TV special, filmed at the end of the tour:

Dylan's presence was overshadowing any questions of musical quality. But that presence was so strong, so nasty, that it cut through everything in its way. The man

came across. I was shocked when the credits ran; nothing like an hour seemed to have elapsed. As far as I was concerned the show could have gone on all night. (Marcus, 70)

Appropriately enough, the shows were to end with 'Gotta Travel On', a song introduced following the awful suicide of Phil Ochs that shook Dylan deeply, and made him increasingly withdrawn, according to band members.²¹ It was as if the desire for regeneration and revisiting origins in the first tour had been replaced by the desire simply to escape and leave painful beginnings behind. Dylan on the second tour is like some shaman who is furiously subordinating himself into making the most public incantation out of something otherwise inalienably private. And in the process purging himself, as much as assuming (as Ginsberg would have it) the mantle of expectation and image. The yelling makes the songs an assault on the audience, as 'Maggie's Farm' 'I Pity the Poor Immigrant' becomes turned into some other kind of song altogether, and scoots off into the distance or crashes and burns as the music accelerates or stops.

At times the music is painful listening for these reasons, as Dylan the artist and Dylan the man come increasingly into contact in the second tour. It times it is as if Dylan's always combustible ratios of self-rejection and self-renewal, of privacy and publicity, were now approximating to a spiritual demolition derby, with the music evoking the whining of brakes, the rapid crashing and shifts of gears, the abrupt changes of direction, everything stopping, starting, accelerating and then sometimes smashing to a standstill. Selfhood appears now to seek equivalence for its whirlwind modalities of rage, pain and mere survival, as in the scenarios of 'Isis', 'Hurricane' or 'Romance in Durango', songs which walk a tightrope between being overblown, saved by the intensity of Dylan's delivery. The songs offer a tapestry. Less successful The 'magic carpet ride', of the 60s, in Dylan's words, with its intimations of the incalculable thermals of the time, conjuring a magical inspiration, has become a white-knuckle big-dipper ride, on 'It Takes a Lot to Laugh', and even on 'A Hard Rain's a Gonna Fall' where the reined in apocalyptic intensity of the earlier version has become becomes a rebarbative assault, with yowling guitar and switchback changes of pace, on the audience's sensibility, an extinction of the song's essential capacity to make the listener conjure visions. Contrastingly, the duets with Baez on

‘The Times They Are A’ Changing’, ‘I Shall Be Released’, or ‘Blowin’ in the Wind’ enact the song’s sense of collaborative completion in responsiveness, and extend it to the audience, while in ‘Never Let Me Go’ and ‘The Water is Wide’ Baez’s contralto creates a wonderful foil for Dylan’s voice, as he vanishes into the songs’ scenarios of longing or heartbreak, and makes them come alive.

On more solo versions of ‘Mr Tambourine Man’, ‘It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue’, ‘Spanish is the Loving Tongue’, or ‘Just Like a Woman’ the voice, at once husky and lyrical, is striped with pain and something durable and expressive, as if its very tones were enacting a drama of heart-break. Again on ‘Sara’ the sense of pleading and heart-break alternate with something rebarbative, unyielding, yet regretful, but there is no doubt that this is the emotional bedrock of the shows. The impossibilities of modulation and moderation in life and art, the expression of exorbitance, of unmediated feeling. The first shows had been collective rituals of remembrance and survival, their nuanced and flexibly accommodating sense of the collective, of a theatre of tenderness and human regret but the second, often amidst larger venues, showed a roar of loss and self-excoriating, self-flailing ambivalences of someone who is exorbitant to himself because he couldn’t care because caring is a burden, and he can care too much. ‘Visions of Johanna’ at Lakeland – this version inseparable from the singer’s own sensibility and feeling, and the absence of a woman, whereas the earlier 1966 versions was music of the night, transcending the personal. At the same venue, the version of ‘If You See Her, Say Hello’ is utterly raw, Dylan sounding manic, borderline crazed – ‘I’ve never gotten over her, / I don’t think I ever will ... It’s one of those reckless situations / Which nobody controlled... Right now I’ve got not much to lose/ So you’d better stay away’.²² The version of ‘I’ll be Your Baby tonight’ is similarly not reassuring. ‘Seven Days’ is magnificently powerful and impatient, the song’s ratios of duration, impatience and longing for once totally inward with the values of this music, as it stretches and stops, falls apart and turns inside out. The real high spots though, as have been said, and the abiding testaments of the tour, are the songs of longing and loss – ‘Railroad Boy’, ‘Deportees’, ‘Never Let Me Go’, ‘Dark as a Dungeon’, ‘Spanish is the Loving Tongue’, ‘The Water is Wide’, ‘Tangled Up in Blue’, ‘Idiot Wind’.

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¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'The Poet', in *The Portable Emerson*, ed. Carl Bode with Malcom Cowley (London: Penguin, 1981), 261.

² Mark Ford, "'Trust Yourself': Emerson and Dylan", in *'Do You, Mr Jones?': Bob Dylan with the Poets and Professors*, ed. Neil Corcoran (London: Pimlico, 2003), 130.

³ Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic* (London: Picador, 1997), ix.

⁴ (Note to be added after review stage.)

⁵ <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/on-the-road-with-bob-dylan-joan-baez-and-the-rolling-thunder-revue-19760115?page=2>

⁶ Bob Dylan, 'Tangled Up in Blue', *Lyrics 1962-2001* (London: Simon and Shuster, 2004), 332.

⁷ Ian Bell, *Time Out of Mind: The Lives of Bob Dylan* (London: Mainstream, 2013, 46).

⁸ Greil Marcus, *Bob Dylan, Writings 1968-2010* (New York: Perseus, 2010), 70.

⁹ The Village had been the nineteenth-century domain or sometime residence of Poe, Whitman and Twain, and latterly the haunt of all the giants of mid-century jazz. Even more recently, it was the favoured stamping ground, not only of the beat writers, surrealists, Dadaists, dancers, Trotskyists, anarchists, and jazz musicians, but of major artists and poets of all stripes: from Marcel Duchmap to Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, from Frank O'Hara to W. H. Auden, Allen Ginsberg, and Delmore Schwarz.... Finally too, in a glorious sunset, the decade would end with what is commonly considered the 'Boston Tea Party' moment of LBGT liberation, as ugly police bullying at the Stonewall inn fomented an explosive succession of riots that spilled out into in Christopher Street and beyond.

¹⁰ Larry Sloman, *On the Road with Bob Dylan* (London: Helter Skelter), 7.

¹¹ Larry Sloman, 'Bob Dylan and friends on the bus – like a Rolling Thunder', *The Dylan Companion*, ed. Elizabeth Thomson and David Gutman (New York: Da Capo, 2001), 199-200.

¹² Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (London: Omnibus, 2011), 309.

¹³

¹⁴ Sean Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America* (London: Bodley Head, 2010), 134.

¹⁵ Was the name 'Rolling Thunder' adopted in homage to John Pope from Oklahoma who re-invented himself as a native American shaman and medicine man? Somewhat dubiously claiming Cherokee or Shoshone provenance, this self-named 'Rolling Thunder' was the subject of a mid-1970s book by journalist Doug Boyd *Rolling Thunder: A Personal Exploration into the Secret Healing Powers of an American Indian Medicine Man* (New York: Dell, 1976). The native American explanation sits perhaps uneasily with the claim that Dylan was surprised, if understandably struck, when he was told that 'Rolling Thunder' was native American for 'speaking truth'. Or perhaps it was, on another account, adopted by Dylan on hearing a spectacular series of thunder-claps across the sky? Or perhaps it was a celebration of no-holds-barred drum and bass driven arrangements, or a reference to Rolling Thunder as the code name for the mid-60s sustained bombing campaign in South Vietnam. And what of the diverse ways in which the tour itself invited parallels from American mythology?

¹⁶ Daniel Mark Epstein, *The Ballad of Bob Dylan: A Portrait* (London: Souvenir Press, 2011), 238.

¹⁷ Clinton Heylin, *Dylan: Behind the Shades* (London: Viking, 1991), 275.

¹⁸ Sam Shepard, *Rolling Thunder Logbook* (London: Penguin, 1977), 74, 56.

¹⁹ Anne Waldman, 'Bob Dylan and the Beats', in *Highway 61 Revisited: Bob Dylan's Road from Minnesota to the World*, ed. Colleen J. Sheehy and Thomas Swiss (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 257.

²⁰ Cited by Shelton, 515.

²¹ Heylin cites Rob Stoner on how badly shaken Dylan was by Ochs's death: 'A month and a half of this, and the boss won't talk to anyone.' (Heylin, *Behind the Shades*, 287).

²² This is my transcription from the audience recording of the concert.