
Opening Extract from...

Dylan's Vision of Sin

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Published by Canongate Books Ltd

Sins, Virtues, Heavenly Graces

Of the seven deadly sins, Roger considered himself qualified in gluttony, sloth and lust but distinguished in anger.

Kingsley Amis, *One Fat Englishman*

Any qualified critic to any distinguished artist: All I really want to do is – what, exactly? Be friends with you? Assuredly, I don't want to do you in, or select you or dissect you or inspect you or reject you.

Maybe so. Anyway, Bob Dylan has made it clear that he is not favourably disposed towards critics in general (for all his being a favourite of so many of them), and – in particular – not favourably disposed towards critics who "dissect my songs like rabbits".[1]

Pulling rabbits out of hats, on the other hand, provided that he provides the hats: this may on occasion be something else.

As a student at Cambridge long ago (1928?), the young William Empson impressed his teacher, the not much older I. A. Richards, by his spirited dealings with a Shakespeare sonnet. "Taking the sonnet as a conjurer takes his hat, he produced an endless swarm of rabbits from it and ended by 'You could do that with any poetry, couldn't you?'" But only if the poetry truly teems, and only if the critic only *seems* to be a conjurer. What, then, is the critic's enterprise? To give grounds for the faith that is in him, in us, in those of us who are grateful. It is a privilege.

Dylan is not the first artist to clarify his responsibilities as he does: "I'm the first person who'll put it to you and the last person who'll explain it to you."[2] William Empson himself had a comically modest turn of phrase for the thing he needed first of all: *the right handle to take hold of the bundle*. Dylan handles sin. Manhandles it, sometimes, as burly burlesque.

Jeremiah preached repentance
To those who would turn from hell

[1] He says as much, and more, on *Biograph*, the anthology of his work that came with a commentary by him.

[2] Interview with Jonathan Cott, *Rolling Stone* (16 November 1978).

> But the critics gave him bad reviews
> Even threw him to the bottom of the well
> (*Yonder Comes Sin*)

Jeremiah's in the well. "And they let down Jeremiah with cords. And in the dungeon there was no water, but mire: so Jeremiah sunk in the mire" (Jeremiah 38:6).

She opened up a book of poems and handed it to me, written by an English poet from the fourteenth century: *Handling Sin*.[1] Handling sin is for me the right handle to take hold of the bundle. My left hand waving free.

"Fools they made a mock of sin."[2] Dylan's is an art in which sins are laid bare (and resisted), virtues are valued (and manifested), and the graces brought home. The seven deadly sins, the four cardinal virtues (harder to remember?), and the three heavenly graces: these make up everybody's world – but Dylan's in particular. Or rather, his worlds, since human dealings of every kind are his for the artistic seizing. Pride is anatomized in *Like a Rolling Stone*, Envy in *Positively 4th Street*, Anger in *Only a Pawn in Their Game* . . . But Dylan creates Songs of Redemption (Allen Ginsberg's phrase), and so – hearteningly – Justice can reclaim *Hattie Carroll*, Fortitude *Blowin' in the Wind*, Faith *Precious Angel*, Hope *Forever Young*, and Charity *Watered-Down Love*.

What, in Dylan's eyes, are the words of his to which people have mostly turned a deaf ear? "The things I have to say about such things as ghetto bosses, salvation and sin, lust, murderers going free, and children without hope –"[3]

"The glamour and the bright lights and the politics of sin": this wide-sweeping fiercely lit line was held aloft by an interviewer. The line is from *Dead Man, Dead Man*. Interviews can be a form of living death, and Samuel Beckett once declined to be interviewed, saying to his friend: Not even for you, and in any case I have no views to inter. The politics of sin?

> It just came to me when I was writing that's the way it is . . . the diplomacy of sin. The way they take sin, and put it in front of people . . . the way

[1] A verse translation, by Robert Mannyng, of a manual of the sins, by William of Wadington.

[2] *In the Summertime*. Proverbs 14:9: "Fools make a mock at sin."

[3] Interview with Scott Cohen, *Spin* (December 1985).

sin is taken and split up and categorised and put on different levels so that it becomes more of a structure of sin, or "These Sins are big ones, these are little ones, these can hurt this person, these can hurt you, this is bad for this reason and that is bad for another reason." The politics of sin; that's what I think of it.[1]

But it is in Dylan's music, not in his musings, that what he most deeply thinks of sin can be heard and felt. The word "sin" haunts the songs, with a range of insinuations such as should make us think.

People tell me it's a sin

Because he sinned I got no choice, it run in my vein

And there are no sins inside the Gates of Eden

That hollow place where martyrs weep and angels play with sin

Where charity is supposed to cover up a multitude of sins

To the sin of love's false security

I didn't commit no ugly sin

I'm gonna baptize you in fire so you can sin no more

They like to take all this money from sin, build big universities to study in

Well, if you can't quit your sinnin' . . .[2]

And if Dylan can't quit your sinnin'?

Desolation Row is a masque of the sins, worthy (in its pageant of unworthiness) of the Seven Deadly Sins who cavort in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* – Doctor Faustus, otherwise known as Doctor Filth, aided and abetted by his nurse:

She's in charge of the cyanide hole
And she also keeps the cards that read
"Have Mercy on His Soul"

[1] Interview with Neil Spencer, *New Musical Express* (15 August 1981).

[2] *Simple Twist of Fate*, *Pressing On*, *Gates of Eden*, *Dirge*, *Something's Burning, Baby*, *Ballad in Plain D*, *Who Killed Davey Moore?*, *Bye and Bye*, *Foot of Pride*, and *Quit Your Low Down Ways*.

Her sin is her life-threatening officiousness. She has been preceded in the parade by Ophelia: "Her sin is her lifelessness."

Desolation Row sees and shows a Vision of Sin. Tennyson saw and showed *The Vision of Sin*:

> I had a vision when the night was late:
> A youth came riding toward a palace-gate.

The hour is getting late. One rider was approaching. The wind began to howl:

> Then the music touched the gates and died;
> Rose again from where it seemed to fail,
> Stormed in orbs of song, a growing gale.

There are seven deadly sins, but only four cardinal virtues (Justice, Prudence, Temperance, and Fortitude). Seven to four? But do not despair, for here come the three heavenly graces: Faith, Hope, and Charity. Seven-a-side, then. But there is imbalance still. The antonym of guilt is innocence, the antonym of a virtue is a vice – but what, pray, is the antonym of a sin?

Furthermore, isn't it rather bewildering that the sins, as they mount their masque, enjoy masquerading as one another? For lust can be seen as one form that may be taken by greed or gluttony, as can covetousness or avarice. "One sin very naturally leans on another": there is something appropriately creepy about this seventeenth-century description (by Thomas Wilson) of the pleasure that sins take in their leanings, in their *overlapping*.

A sin will have to be set, first and foremost, in opposition to the goodness that opposes it. Gratitude will have no truck with envy. Thomas Wilson again:

> Every virtue consists in denying some corrupt inclination of our depraved nature; in opposing and resisting all temptations to the contrary vice; charity, in opposing continually self-love and envy; humility, in resisting all temptations to pride, etc.

But some of the discriminations that need to be made are more elusive. How confident can we be, for instance, in distinguishing a sin from the goodness to which it is immediately adjacent? Envy, bad: emulation of an honourable

kind, good. Sloth, bad: relaxedness, good. Pride, bad: pride, good.

And then there are sins of omission. "Forgive me, baby, for what I didn't do" (*Maybe Someday*). *In the Summertime*, before it came to shake its head sorrowingly ("Fools they made a mock of sin"), had asked:

> Did you respect me for what I did
> Or for what I didn't do, or for keeping it hid?

Waltzing with Sin is not a Dylan song, but it danced along on *The Basement Tapes*. Dylan likes setting to music our besetting sins. He likes company in doing so, and he likes the comedy that company encourages. Which is one reason why *7 Deadly Sins* was issued by a joint stock company, the Traveling Wilburys.

> 7 deadly sins
> That's how the world begins
> Watch out when you step in
> For 7 deadly sins
> That's when the fun begins
> 7 deadly sins
>
> Sin number one was when you left me
> Sin number two you said goodbye
> Sin number three was when you told me a little white lie
>
> 7 deadly sins
> Once it starts it never ends
> Watch out around the bend
> For 7 deadly sins
>
> Sin number four was when you looked my way
> Sin number five was when you smiled
> Sin number six was when you let me stay
> Sin number seven was when you touched me and drove me wild
>
> 7 deadly sins
> So many rules to bend
> Time and time again
> 7 deadly sins

One of the endearing things about the song, tucked up in all innocence, is that there don't actually seem to be seven sins on the go at all. Just one good old one. Touching, really.

The claim in this book isn't that most of Dylan's songs, or even most of the best ones, are bent on sin. Simply that (for the present venture in criticism) handling sin may be the right way to take hold of the bundle. Dylan himself may make a mock of the idea that songs are *about* things, but he did speak of the "things I have to say about such things as ghetto bosses, salvation and sin". And even in his travesty of owlishness (the notes accompanying *World Gone Wrong*), he heads these comments of his on other men's songs with the words:

ABOUT THE SONGS
(what they're about)

Of *Broke Down Engine*, Dylan remarks (in a way that may freewheel, but is not out of control) that "it's about Ambiguity, the fortunes of the privileged elite, flood control – watching the red dawn not bothering to dress". So I shall take Ambiguity as an excuse for returning to the author of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, William Empson.[1]

Empson explained why he came to do the explaining in which he took delight. His method, verbal analysis, started simply from the pleasure of his response to a poem.

> I felt sure that the example was beautiful and that I had, broadly speaking, reacted to it correctly. But I did not at all know what had happened in this "reaction"; I did not know why the example was beautiful. And it seemed to me that I was able in some cases partly to explain my feelings to myself by teasing out the meanings of the text.[2]

Empson's example is crucial to me, not only in its happiness, but in his not being dead set upon convincing anybody else that a particular poem

[1] Coincidence is one of the few pleasures left in life. So: Dylan, "fortunes . . . the red dawn"/Empson, "for the Red Dawn" (*Note on Local Flora*). Dylan, "flood control"/Empson, "Glut me with floods" (*Aubade*). And Dylan, "the privileged elite . . . not bothering to dress"/Empson, "In evening dress in rafts upon the main" (*Your Teeth are Ivory Towers*). But it is time for flood control.

[2] *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930, second edition 1947), p. x.

is good. The idea was not so much to show someone that a poem is good, as to go some way towards showing how it comes to be good, so very good.

> You think that the poem is worth the trouble before you choose to go into it carefully, and you know more about what it is worth when you have done so.[1]

In the same spirit, I think of what I am doing as prizing songs, not as prising-open minds. (Most people who are likely to read this book will already know what they feel about Dylan, though they may not always know quite why they feel it or what they think.)

> I think that nowadays we can explain why Milton was right, but the explanations usually seem long and fanciful; they would only convince men who believed already that the line was beautiful, and wanted to know why.[2]

Literary criticism – unlike, say, music criticism or art criticism – enjoys the advantage of existing in the same medium (language) as the art that it explores and esteems. This can give to literary criticism a delicacy and an inwardness that are harder to achieve elsewhere. But, at the same time, this may be why literary critics are given to competitive envy: What I'd like to know, given that he and I are working in the same medium, in the same line of work, really, is why *I* am attending to *Tennyson*, instead of *his* attending to *me* . . .

And then there is the age-old difficulty and problem of *intention*. Briefly: I believe that an artist is someone more than usually blessed with a cooperative unconscious or subconscious, more than usually able to effect things with the help of instincts and intuitions of which he or she is not necessarily conscious. Like the great athlete, the great artist is at once highly trained and deeply instinctual. So if I am asked whether I believe that Dylan is *conscious* of all the subtle effects of wording and timing that I suggest, I am perfectly happy to say that he probably isn't. And if I am right, then in this he is not less the artist but more. There are such things as unconscious intentions (think of the unthinking Freudian slip). What matters is that Dylan is doing

[1] *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, p. xiii.
[2] Empson, *Obscurity and Annotation* (1930), in *Argufying*, ed. John Haffenden (1987), p. 78.

the imagining, not that he be fully deliberatedly conscious of the countless intimations that are in his art. As he put it:

> As you get older, you get smarter and that can hinder you because you try to gain control over the creative impulse. Creativity is not like a freight train going down the tracks. It's something that has to be caressed and treated with a great deal of respect. If your mind is intellectually in the way, it will stop you. You've got to program your brain not to think too much.[1]

A shrewd turn, this, the contrariety of "You've got to program your brain" and the immediate "not to think too much".

T. S. Eliot, who knew that it "is not always true that a person who knows a good poem when he sees it can tell us why it is a good poem", knew as well that "the poet does many things upon instinct, for which he can give no better account than anybody else".[2]

Still, there are many admirers of Dylan who instinctively feel that adducing Mr Eliot when talking about Dylan is pretentious and portentous. So let me take an instance of a Dylan/Eliot intersection that is not of my finding (though I shall do a little developing). The *Telegraph* (Winter 1987) included a note:[3]

> On a more literary level, had you noticed that *Maybe Someday* quotes from T. S. Eliot? In *Journey of the Magi*, Eliot has:
>
> And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
>
> Later in the same poem there's mention too of "pieces of silver". So in Dylan's lines:
>
> Through hostile cities and unfriendly towns
> Thirty pieces of silver, no money down

I remember the excitement I felt when I myself noticed Dylan's debt (*many* pieces of silver) – and then the unwarrantable disappointment I felt when I later discovered from the *Telegraph* that I was not the first to discover

[1] *USA Today* (15 February 1995).
[2] *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933, second edition 1964), pp. 17, 129–30.
[3] By Graham Ashton and/or John Bauldie.

it. Mustn't be hostile or unfriendly about this not-being-the-first business. (The first shall be last.) But then the song is a tissue of memories of the poem. Here are a few more moments.

Eliot	*Dylan*
an open door	breakin' down no bedroom door
the voices singing in our ears	a voice from on high
it was (you may say) satisfactory	when I say / you'll be satisfied
I remember	you'll remember
all that way	every kind of way

Take what you have gathered from coincidence, yes, but these are not coincidences, once you concede that the likeness of Eliot's "And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly" to Dylan's "Through hostile cities and unfriendly towns" goes beyond happenstance. Such a likeness, then, may give some warrant for taking literarily the art of the man who imagined Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot fighting in the captain's tower.

Note

I wrote about Dylan in the *Listener* in 1972 (1 June); I gave a BBC talk, *Bob Dylan and the Language that He Used*, in 1976 (22 March); over the years there were talks, some of them again for the BBC, and one that was printed in the *Threepenny Review* in 1990.[1] Much of this, it's all been written in the book, but there are some further thoughts about Dylan not included here, to be found in my essay on *Clichés* and in the one on *American English and the inherently transitory*, both in *The Force of Poetry* (1984).

The words of the songs are quoted here in the form in which he sings them on the officially released albums on which they initially appeared. The Index of Dylan's Songs and Writings, at the back, is supplemented by a General Index and by a list, Which Album a Song is on.

The new edition of the lyrics, *Lyrics 1962–2002*, unlike the original *Writings and Drawings* and the later *Lyrics 1962–1985*, is apparently not going

[1] Later in *Hiding in Plain Sight*, ed. Wendy Lesser (1993).

to include Dylan's *Some Other Kinds of Songs . . .*, or his other poems and miscellaneous prose, so for these I give references to the earlier collections.

The discrepancies between the printed and the other versions (whether officially released, studio out-takes, or bootlegged from performances) are notable. Sometimes they are noted in the commentary here. Clearly they are of relevance to Dylan's intentions or changes of intention, and I have to admit that sometimes one performance decides to do without an effect that another has, and that I had thought and still think exquisite – for instance, the plaiting of the rhymes at the end of *If Not For You*. Oh well. I think of Shakespearean revision. Sometimes I read (or rather, listen) and sigh and wish.