

# Reflections on “Dirge”

RAYMOND FOYE

*I hate myself for loving you . . .*

—BOB DYLAN

In what is certainly Dylan’s most arresting opening line since “Positively 4th Street”—“You’ve got a lotta nerve to say you are my friend”—the singer lays bare the tangled roots of ardor. In a simple line of six words, love and hate are boldly struck as two sides of the same coin. In this Dylan has an illustrious forebear—the Roman poet Catullus (circa 84–circa 54 BCE). While it was Sappho who first “invented” love in Western poetry, it was Catullus who invented hate: castigating friends, lovers, and lesser poets, with invective always pointed, sometimes playful, captivating readers to this day:

*Odi et amo, quare id faciam fortasse  
Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.*

—Catullus, *Carmina* LXXXVI

I love and I hate, why you ask?  
I do not know, but I feel it, and I am in hell.

The entire poem is a single elegiac couplet: eight verbs, no adjectives, no nouns. The concision is stunning, as is the scansion and choice of words: *excrucior* alludes to a crucifixion. That Catullus wrote it about his best friend’s wife, well, *nihil sub sole novum*: there is nothing new under the sun. In his own way Dylan achieved something as new in popular songwriting as Catullus did in lyric poetry, when he stripped the sugar coating from the genre and committed such searing and honest sentiments to vinyl and airwaves.

Catullus’s influence in English poetry from the sixteenth to the twentieth century is all-pervading; no classical poet holds a place of equal importance with the possible exception of Virgil and Ovid (and on both poets Catullus was a primary influence). In American poetry, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Ezra Pound, Louis Zukofsky, Allen Ginsberg, and many others are in his debt. (I recall Dylan carefully quizzing Ginsberg about Catullus in his dressing room backstage at Roseland Ballroom in New York in 1994; he also asked about several William Blake aphorisms.)

Although her poetry has a poised and formal air that suggests a conservative sensibility, Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950) was anything but. She was openly bisexual, a feminist, a political maverick, and an occasional morphine addict. She was also so popular a poet that practically any literate person in America in the 1940s and ’50s would have been familiar with her work. Like the rhyming ballads of Poe, many of her poems literally sing off the page:

If I could have  
Two things in one:  
The peace of the grave,  
And the light of the sun . . .

—“Moriturus”

(You'll understand ~~some day~~)  
(This train, that time / No Time)  
(C.O' d' d' d' d' d')

I hate myself for loving you, the wendhouse that it showed  
You were just a painted face on a trip down Suicide Road  
The stage was set, the light blew out, the actors couldn't tell  
I hate myself for loving you & I'm glad the curtain fell  
The whole damn thing exploded & I'm glad the curtain fell

I hate myself for loving you, the head that was expressed  
And the mercy that you showed me, that's what I hated best  
But his truest form upon itself, Love is bound to win,  
In Kingdom of golden Beets ~~the~~ angels play with sin

(Trumpets on my mind) it's part of my nature to be wild  
(with a death of cards)   
Strong-minded individuals never show their cards  
(Songs) (trumpets) he sings the songs

Leonard Cohen, he talks of train depots and men forever straggling  
Playing out his folly while his back is being whipped  
(with a tag which bears his name) slipped

(Like a stone in orbit, He revolves <sup>around</sup> inside the game  
I hate myself for loving you, and it's a dirty cotton shoe  
Strong medicine indeed, He's beaten till he's tame  
There are those who want to be whipped to, I don't think I'm of them

In an age of fiberglass, I'm looking for a gem  
Strong medicine indeed (when) in times of no regret  
The empty mirror upon the wall <sup>says that</sup> showed me nothing yet

(Lust) (empty mirrors) (says no one's out of debt)  
I've paid the price of at least I'm out of debt  
It's the sickness, strong medicine is the cure

I can't recall a useful service you've ever performed for me  
You've taken but you've given <sup>me a god damn</sup> but I'm going free  
I hate myself for loving you, but I won't fall for more  
It's over, you go on your way, it just sometimes that can't be helped  
I'm going for red gain wide and sin gone by myself -

Happiness isn't bought in stores or reeled thro' the mail (like a suit)  
You can't buy happiness in stores or get it from the moon  
You can't see it on museum's walls or it's all that's found in jail  
When the moon is a <sup>toilet</sup> you get to see <sup>about</sup> <sup>the</sup> <sup>fruit</sup>  
I hate myself for loving you, now get outta here you bitch (written)

Her poem "Dirge Without Music" begins:

I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground.  
So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been, time out of mind . . .

I don't know if Dylan knew this poem when he wrote *his* "Dirge," but the concluding phrase in the second line will certainly catch the attention of his closer readers. It is easy to imagine Dylan reading "Dirge Without Music," with its weird blend of the amorous and the funereal, and deciding to add the music. In any case, Millay's skill at cadence and rhyme, her love of paradox, her adroit shifts between metaphor and direct speech, and her defiant stance towards society are all qualities Dylan shares as a lyric poet.

\* \* \*

"Dirge" has been a perennial favorite of Dylan fans down through the years, first and foremost for its words of truthful vengeance. It also contains a staggeringly virtuosic guitar accompaniment by Robbie Robertson, more duel than duet, full of stabbing melody lines, played with an attack that spotlights the stark drama of the lyrics. It is Robertson's finest hour—all the more remarkable given that it was only the second of two takes, of a song he'd never heard before.

"Dirge" also belongs to that special category in Dylan's oeuvre: the piano song, an occasion where Dylan's under-appreciated rhythmic skills always come to the fore. Dylan's rhythm, while always natural, is never ordinary. Rooted in the blues and early New Orleans jazz, the key is syncopation: shifting time by placing stresses where they normally would not occur, occasionally moving the downbeat, and frequently stressing notes not on the beat. (Dylan achieves something similar when he opposes the guitar and harmonica during solos, but the percussive nature of the piano makes the effect far more pronounced.) At the same time there is also a skillful use of rubato in his vocal phrasing—borrowing time from one bar while giving it back in the next, without disrupting the overall rhythmic flow. It is something Dylan does spontaneously, to great expressive effect, and it is one of the reasons why his recorded performances still seem so fresh: the listener is right there with the

Thanks Sam For Jolo Luba Rumi  
Dirge for <sup>1000</sup>dear <sup>medieval</sup>American, <sup>blue</sup>reborn from the <sup>cold steel-eyed</sup>ashes, <sup>wistful</sup>vision from  
of tumult <sup>not black</sup> ~~the streets that span a life~~ <sup>vapor</sup> ~~lights and~~ <sup>ghostly</sup> ~~looney~~ <sup>ghosts</sup>  
— Haymarket Square, Sacco & Vanzetti, Ethel & Julius, <sup>4 Dead in the High-Oh</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~of Chicago~~  
Like the <sup>ghost</sup> said, "it's not what's here, it's what's  
left out" <sup>It's</sup> been a long ride & a lot has been discarded,  
abandoned along the way. What we have <sup>now</sup> we've lucky to  
get, but what's always better is what's left unsaid.

Unpublished Planet Waves liner notes, draft manuscript

singer in the moment of creation. This unique rhythmic sense was also at the heart of The Band's musical style, and is one of the reasons they were such a perfect fit for him.

\* \* \*

The manuscripts in the Bob Dylan Archive in Tulsa pose far more questions than they answer, as one would expect of their creator. The most frequently asked question about "Dirge"—"Who is the song about?"—has no better answer than David Crosby's reply when I asked him who was Guinevere? "Songs are seldom about one person," he said. To which I might add, they are sometimes not about any person, except the songwriter.

But often the Tulsa manuscripts do clarify nagging textual questions that fans have wondered about over the years: in "Dirge," does he actually say, "Like a slave in Ovid, who's beaten till he's tame," rather than the line given in the songbooks, which is often thought to be mis-transcribed as "Like a slave in orbit . . ." Not only would Ovid be a satisfying literary reference, it would make perfect sense in the context of his *Amores*, where the poet decrees, "Desire rules, as a master rules his slaves." Naturally I rushed to find that line. Sorry, it's "orbit." But I did find the following verse, wherein I think lies the key to the song:

*Leonard Cohen, he chases sings of Birds Freedom and man forever stripped  
playing/acting out his folly while his back is being whipped  
Laughing in his cell (Laughing to his cell mate)  
Like a slave in orbit . . .  
There are those who want to be worshipped to, I'm not one of them. . . .*

As it turns out, Leonard Cohen is the animating spirit behind the song, which makes perfect sense, since if you want darkness, he's the perfect guide. The working drafts attempt to nail him down in a variety of ways:

*Leonard Cohen he talks sings of trumpets train depots and man forever stripped  
Playing out his folly while his back is being whipped  
Like a slave in orbit, he revolves around inside the game  
With a number or a name . . .*

In the final song, all of this is simply boiled down to: "Heard your songs of freedom . . ." The name-check has been erased. Mr. Cohen has served his purpose. And as Dylan writes in those still-unpublished liner notes about "Dirge": "What we have now we're lucky to get, but what's always better is what's left unsaid."

\* \* \*

In "Dirge," as in "Positively 4th Street," Dylan is telling somebody off, or "needling them," as he more gently (and punningly) phrased it in a 1965 press conference. And he clearly relishes doing so, as a draft of the first line attests:

*I hate myself for loving you, the need that was expressed  
and the mercy that you showed to me, that's what I hated best . . .*

Robbie Robertson remembers the song as originally titled “Dirge for Martha,” addressed to a woman who had accused Dylan of going soft, after he played her the track of “Forever Young.” True or not, in the discarded song-by-song liner notes in *Tulsa*, Dylan makes it clear just who is on the receiving end of this song:

*Dirge for dying America, the dream gone cold, cold blue steel eyed women of death, rising from the ashes of tumult black vapor, lights out [...] Haymarket Square, Angola, Tombstone, Saco + Vanzetti, Ethel + Julius + the 4 Dead in Oh-HIGH-Oh. Like the Master said, 'it's not what's here, it's what's left out.' It's been a long ride and a lots been discarded, abandoned along the way . . .*

What strikes me as especially interesting about “Dirge,” based upon an examination of the manuscripts, is that Dylan seems to be doing the exact reverse of his normal writing process, where he usually begins with the most personal and specific details of a situation and then gradually writes them out, such that the trajectory goes from the personal to the general. In “Dirge” the flow is reversed: Dylan begins with the general and evolves into the personal. What we assumed was a song about an old flame is in fact a song about his country. And as we know from Dylan’s interviews in Scorsese’s *Rolling Thunder Revue* film, the American Bicentennial for him was an ominous time, full of portent.

Time and again while researching in *Tulsa* I find my long-standing interpretation of any given album to be diametrically opposed by the drafts and fragments in the notebooks. I always considered “Dirge” to be the exception to an otherwise upbeat and buoyant album, full of fond childhood memories, and exquisite haiku-like nature imagery of his Minnesota youth. Yet Dylan’s notes and drafts for *Planet Waves* reveal virtually the entire album to be a dark lament for a country where things have gone seriously wrong, “ten years of decadences” as Dylan calls it in his notebook. Although the album title *Planet Waves* has always been considered an allusion to Ginsberg’s 1968 City Lights book *Planet News*, I couldn’t help but think what was really on Dylan’s mind was Ginsberg’s next book, *The Fall of America: Poems of These States, 1965–1971*, published in April 1973, seven months prior to the recording of *Planet Waves* (November 1973). *The Fall of America* is Ginsberg’s prophecy of the undoing of the American empire at the hands of a war machine that runs on money and political corruption, a landscape poisoned from chemicals and fossil fuels, psychically scarred from the holocausts of the Native Americans and the African slave trade, and the burlesque of the media dumbshow eager to turn it all into entertainment.

The abandoned liner notes to “Dirge” continue:

*Drink to it, another bottle of rot gut, and gonareah exploding from Yankee stars, wither the white rider on the Mississippi River + the poison factory. Down another bottle of Tequila and thank your Yankee stars for the gonhorea exploding into the 21st century. Twisted skeleton remnants of the shabby past . . .*

And Mr. Dylan is only getting started, but you get the idea.

In the highly truncated liner notes that were eventually printed on the back cover of the album, Dylan refers to the “Gone World,” a reference to another of his Beat heroes. Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s first book, *Pictures of the Gone World* (1955), deals with many of the same themes as *The Fall of America*, albeit from a gentler, wittier, more surrealist angle, yet no less pointed. One wonders if in the end Dylan didn’t favor this approach to Ginsberg’s Old Testament wrath.

"What's that I hear now ringing in my ears?" Phil Ochs sang. To which Dylan answers to himself: "Could it be the bold new authoritarian anthem?" And then, in a typical moment of "It's Alright, Ma" levity, he informs the imaginary listener:

*Is this the death of America? Or the sprouting of a new land, the suggestion of a new beginning? Well, whatever, rest easy, it is the sound of no more than the phono . . .*

**PLANET WAVES**

Bade to the Starling  
Pier! The Kickoff, Webster  
Letters on the wall, Victor Hugo,  
house in Paris, NYC is early  
Inhuman, League flying in the park, the  
clock strikes eight, Bang - I Av'pped a  
double brandy & tried to recall the events...  
beer holes & pin balls, park's bands, barwire  
& thrashing clouds, objects, headwinds &  
Sawsterns, family outings with strangers -  
Furrow gals with garters & smeared lips  
on bar stools that stank from sweating  
pussy - done, the Hula - perfect,  
Dress in ~~expensive~~ glazy and,  
Isstania. Space guys off duty with  
big dicks & duck-tails all wind up &  
waiting for Eisenhower, waving flags  
jumping off of fire engines, getting  
killed on motorcycles whatever  
we sensed each other beneath  
the mask, picked a fist in the  
Street & joined the traveling circus,  
love at first sight! History  
became a lie! the sideshow took  
over - what a sight!... the thresh-  
hold of the Modern Bomb,  
Temples of the Psyche, the  
Cowboy Sax, the ~~Arpeggio~~  
Snapshots of - Apache party  
Searching thru the ruins for a  
Glimpse of Buddha - I lit out  
for parts unknown, found Jacob's  
Ladder up against an adobe wall &  
bought a serpent from a passing Angel -  
Yeah the old days are gone  
forever and the new ones not far behind, the  
Lamp is fading away, echoes of a storm,  
of energy Vampires in the Game World going  
Wild! Drinking the blood of innocent people,  
Innocent Lungs! The Wretched of the Earth,  
My brothers of the flood, Cities of the flesh -  
Milwaukee, Ann Arbor, Chicago, Bismarck, South  
Dakota, Duluth! Duluth - where Bards have lived  
& Goya called in his Chaps, where Joshua brought  
The horse down! From there, it was straight up - Little  
Jule of Mexico, and some good LUCK, &  
Little power over the Grave, some  
Wave brandy & the teeth of  
a lion & a compass

BOB DYLAN  
GUITAR, HARMONICA

(with)  
THE BAND

ROBBIE ROBERTSON  
GUITAR

RICK DANKO  
BASS

LEVON HELM  
DRUMS

GARTH HUDSON  
Organ

RICHARD MANUAL  
DRUMS, PIANO

ON A NIGHT LIKE THIS  
GOING GOING GONE  
TOUGH MAMA  
HAZEL There is About You  
SOMETHING ~~ABOUT YOU~~  
Forever Young

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Forever Young  
DIRGE  
You Angel You  
NEVER SAY GOODBYE  
WEDDING SONG

Recorded November 5, 6 & 9  
Village Recorder, 1616 BUTLER, West LA  
Engineer... Bob Frabon,  
Assistant... NAT Joffery  
Special Assistance... Robbie Robertson

Planet Waves songbook featuring back cover of album, with Dylan's original liner notes

# BOB DYLAN

## MIXING UP THE MEDICINE

Written and Edited by  
MARK DAVIDSON and PARKER FISHEL

**B**ob Dylan: *Mixing Up the Medicine* is the most comprehensive book yet published on the work of Nobel Prize-winning musician and cultural icon Bob Dylan.

This sumptuous, 608-page tome spans the arc of his life, music, and art, from his childhood in Hibbing, Minnesota, and the first recordings made in the 1950s to his most recent albums and every important career milestone in between.

The publication unlocks treasures from the Archive of the Bob Dylan Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It reveals a trove of Dylan's manuscripts, letters, notebooks, song lyrics, recordings, photographs, films, artworks, and ephemera, never before seen by the public.

More than 1,100 images by 135 photographers, artists, and film directors are showcased on these pages, brilliantly curated from hundreds of thousands of still and moving images held by the Archive, including such luminaries as Richard Avedon, Daniel Kramer, Annie Leibovitz, D. A. Pennebaker, Jerry Schatzberg, Mark Seliger, and Hedi Slimane.

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The words and pictures form a multi-layered, prismatic portrait of Bob Dylan from his earliest years to the present day. They eloquently convey for the first time the scale and scope of Dylan's monumental creative achievement as an artist.

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Reverse: Bob Dylan, *Blonde on Blonde* album cover shoot outtake, NYC, 1966.

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