

Introduction: Time to Say Goodbye Again

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Is there any writer or performer more haunting – and more haunted – than Bob Dylan? We recognize his songs, his vision, his inventiveness, his poetry, and especially his distinctive voice nearly everywhere: in music and film, popular culture and politics, global protest movements and intimate moments of self-reflection. As he now turns eighty, it's a shock to realize that, for most us, Dylan has always been there, singing, touring, laughing, snarling, and sometimes even hawking whiskey and underwear. Like the members of the Nobel committee that awarded him the world's most important cultural prize, we know he is a vastly influential artist. But which Dylan is it? The folk-singing activist who shared the stage with Dr. King at the March on Washington? The rocker in Ray Bans and a leather jacket who faced down hostile crowds by ordering his band to “play it fucking loud?” Is it the country boy who went to Nashville and befriended Johnny Cash? Or the Beat-inspired hipster who took to the road with a ramshackle medicine show? The Christian convert? The brilliant curator of folk and blues? The Sinatra-inspired crooner? Or the weary old man who's “standin' in the doorway cryin'?”

Just as we grapple with these many Dylans, so too we can see him as an artist who built a career around wrestling with strong spirits from the past. When he reached New York City in 1961, he was already a young man possessed: walking, talking, and singing like Woody Guthrie – a revenant from another world. He had even half-invented a fake history for himself by lifting bits and pieces from the pages of *Bound for Glory*, Guthrie's semi-fictional account of his life in the Dust Bowl. Not long after Dylan's arrival, however, it became clear that this was not some youthful journey to freedom, but an Odyssean trip into the underworld. When he passed through the iron gates of Greystone Psychiatric Hospital to seek out his idol, Dylan instead discovered a frail man suffering Huntington's chorea who was too palsied to talk or sing. The young man later claimed there had been some spark of recognition, but if so, it would have been hard to

discern and Dylan was haunted enough by what he had seen to try to exorcise this ghost. His first original composition, “Song to Woody” (1962), after all, concludes with desperate hope that he might escape such a world and such a fate – that he would be spared this kind of “hard travelin’.”

That song helped lay Woody to rest in Dylan’s imagination – and thus free him from the often icy grip of the folk music world that clutched at him throughout the early 1960s. He instead set out to explore and then invent the larger, richer, and stranger world this volume seeks to describe. The twenty-seven essays gathered here each offer a different way of understanding the depth, complexity, and legacy of Dylan’s music, while at the same time setting out an entirely new agenda for writing, research, and invention. Although written by experts and scholars, they are designed to be accessible both to long-time fans and those who are curious about how and why this musician has become such a singular figure. The chapters are simply titled and concisely written so that readers can make their way through the book with only their own curiosity as a guide, jumping perhaps from rock music, to the counterculture, to the Nobel Prize. But the book can also be read in order as it moves outward from Dylan’s life then into his music, influence, fame, and legacy. The first section is largely biographical and aims to provide a general introduction to a remarkable story that leads from a small town in Minnesota through New York and out into the world. This is followed by a series of chapters that each look closely at the many different genres of music from which Dylan drew inspiration and which his own work helped to reshape. As the Nobel Prize committee realized, however, Dylan is far more than a musician and his lyrics are now part of a vast historical and cultural web that stretches into the deep past and around the world. The authors in Part III thus offer some sense of how Dylan’s work intersects with literature, theatre, religion, and the visual arts, while those in Part IV look at the extraordinary way his art has shaped our politics and even our idea of justice. The book then ends with a series of chapters that step back to consider Dylan’s legacy, including a closing piece by the director of the Bob Dylan Archive®.

This book is occasioned, in part, by the extraordinary riches of those archives. Purchased by the George Kaiser Family Foundation and resting now in Tulsa, Oklahoma alongside the lifetime works of Woody Guthrie, the Dylan collection contains some 100,000 objects, including notebooks, session tapes, photographs, letters, and page after page after page of lyrics. They spill out everywhere: some neatly typed and others hastily scrawled on advertisements or worked out in tiny handwriting on pocket

Introduction

3

notebooks. On these pages, we see evidence of a restlessly creative mind, one deeply engaged with all the complexity and confusion of being human in a messy, ever-changing world.

One of the things that makes Dylan's work so extraordinary, in fact, is precisely our inability to slot it neatly into categories, genres, or cultural histories. In his songs, the civil rights movement can somehow cross with the work of obscure Confederate poets, while the electric energy of rock melds with the plaintive honesty of folk and the smooth sophistication of the American Songbook. The world of Bob Dylan is defined by such fault lines. It is an art of thresholds and doorways, of arrivals and departures, full of restless farewells and the fear that he might stay just a day too long. There always seems to be another world that calls to him, tugging him Gatsby-like into the past or propelling him into a future the rest of us didn't quite see coming.

In "Song to Woody," Dylan learned to live with the past so that it might possess but never overpower him. He then built an astonishing career around a relentless series of similar farewells: first to Guthrie, then to his folk audience on a steamy Newport evening, to rock fans in a Nashville studio, to his devout Christian believers with an album called *Infidels* (1983), and – more recently – to the very idea of himself as a singer-songwriter in five long LPs packed with crooning covers. Again and again, Dylan uses his albums to imagine and even enact the end of one musical world in order to clear the way for another. Some of his most astonishing albums – *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965), *John Wesley Harding* (1967), *Blood on the Tracks* (1975), "Love and Theft" (2001) – might even be seen as murder ballads: attempts to kill off a public persona that had become burdensome, even dangerous. Such deaths, however, create entire musical and imaginative worlds that we critics, musicians, scholars, and fans continue to explore. Meanwhile, Dylan himself slips away, refusing once again to be entombed in vinyl.

In order to introduce this volume, I want to compare two of his most powerful farewells as a way of demonstrating his ability to both make and shatter imaginative worlds. The first is his infamous envoi to the folk world, which we can date not to that distant Newport evening when he plugged in his sunburst Stratocaster, but instead to "Restless Farewell" – the song and poem that he hurriedly added to *Times They Are A-Changin'* in 1963. The second is one of his more recent gestures of farewell: the 14-minute epic recounting of the *Titanic* disaster that appeared in 2012 on *Tempest*. Although he has disavowed any allusion to Shakespeare in the

album's title, it's impossible not to hear the voice of the old wizard now exhausted by decades of "rough magic."¹

The first of these farewells is now an integral part of Dylan's myth. In November 1963, just on the eve of his Carnegie Hall concert, *Newsweek* published a two-column note buried in its arts and culture section titled "I Am My Words." Dylan, his manager, and his PR team all expected this to be a major profile, on par with the recent *Time* profile of Joan Baez that had occupied the cover, a photo spread, and a dozen pages in the magazine. Instead, it was a short exposé that deftly revealed the truth about Dylan's past: that he was a middle-class kid from Hibbing and not a latter-day hobo poet. More troublingly, it wrongly suggested that his landmark hit, "Blowin' in the Wind," had been cribbed from a kid in New Jersey. Dylan was furious and the article became a kind of wound – one that still ached, as we'll see, some fifty years later. At the time, an angry Dylan first refused to talk to the press before beginning what became a lifelong attack on every erstwhile journalist or interviewer who tried to get a quote from him or gain some insight into his music.

Shortly after the Carnegie Hall concert, he returned to Columbia's New York studios and added an additional track titled "Restless Farewell" to an album that otherwise contained his most politically activist songs – the kind of music that led Pete Seeger to champion his work and that still makes critics and historians alike insist (despite Dylan's many protestations) that he is the voice of the 1960s. Derived from a Scottish folk tune, this last-minute addition aims directly at the folk world from which these songs grew as well as at the many writers, critics, and editors who had sought to shape and therefore constrain him. His lyrics are soaked in the imagery of martyrdom, and by the song's end, he envisions himself facing what seems to be defeat, an effect heightened by the tune's derivation from a ballad tradition that romanticizes doomed rebellions: "I'll make my stand," he proclaims, "And remain as I am / And bid farewell and not give a damn."

This heroic declaration of independence, however, is complicated by the lines just before it. Plainly invoking the *Newsweek* article, he describes the dirt and dust of gossip that cover him, before imagining an arrow in flight: "if the arrow is straight / And the point is slick / It can pierce through dust no matter how thick." Crucially, we cannot tell if Dylan himself has loosed this missile. If so, then it becomes a metaphor for his art and the underlying truths that cannot be obscured by gossip or the press. Alternatively, or maybe simultaneously, Dylan imagines himself as the martyred Saint Sebastian, in

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, V, i.

Introduction

5

which case that arrow is the truth about his own past, punching through the false stories he has told in order to land fatally in his own breast. The restless farewell thus does not come from a troubadour heading once more for the road (as is in the original Scottish tune), but instead marks the death of the Guthrie-esque persona that Dylan had fashioned. This Dylan had to be killed to make way for a new world, created by an artist who has learned to not give a damn.

In addition to penning “Restless Farewell,” Dylan also added the ominously titled poem “11 Outlined Epitaphs” to the album – heightening the sense that the song may be laying to rest some older version of himself. One of the sections directly invokes the *Newsweek* interview and the larger mechanisms of fame it represented to him:

I don't like t' be stuck in print
 starin' out at cavity minds
 who gobble chocolate candy bars
 quite content an' satisfied.²

He then adopts a clever rhetorical trick that he will return to consistently throughout his career, suggesting that what he says and sings only makes sense within the moment and context of performance itself. Reporters and fans, he writes,

have no way of knowin'
 that I
 'expose' myself
 every time I step out
 on the stage.

There is no deeper meaning behind the lyrics, these lines suggest, no other way of understanding the man or the music than in the moment of the performance itself. In performance, at least, the world of Bob Dylan shrinks for a moment to encompass only the singer and his audience.

Such is his hope anyway, but this is a strategy doomed to failure since the past cannot be so easily banished. The boos and slow claps – first at Newport in 1965 and then on the 1966 tour – demanded the revenant return. This refusal to accept Dylan's various farewells and the accompanying demand that he thus freeze one of his many worlds in amber has plagued him throughout his career. And so he has to keep saying goodbye, keep trying to exorcise the spirits that might otherwise overwhelm him.

² Bob Dylan, “11 Outlined Epitaphs,” reprinted in Bob Dylan, *Writings and Drawings* (New York: Knopf, 1973), p. 107.

His attempts to escape, however, are never fully successful and one of his most recent farewells offers a glimpse of a man still struggling with the past, but now determined to live amid the cascade of imaginative worlds he has left in his long and winding wake.

A Sinking Feeling

In 2012, Dylan released *Tempest*, his thirty-fifth studio album. Shortly afterward, he sat down for an interview with *Rolling Stone*'s Mikal Gilmore, who starts the conversation by trying to goad the singer into admitting that his fame essentially rests on those early albums from the 1960s. Not surprisingly, Dylan reacts pugnaciously. He resorts first to his old claim that his words and songs have meaning only in the moment of utterance. When Gilmore presses him to at least explain what he meant when he told an audience that “It looks like things are gonna change now” just after Obama’s election, Dylan insists that “whatever was said, it was said for people in that hall for that night.”³ He seems, in other words, to be managing the ghosts the same way he did in 1963 – by insisting that the old songs, indeed entire performances, die the moment the house lights come up.

Near the end of the interview, however, things take a turn as one of Dylan’s oldest ghosts suddenly materializes. Gilmore asks about the humorous moment when a young New Jersey cop arrested the musical superstar while he was out looking for Bruce Springsteen’s house. Dylan playfully relates the story and the whole thing feels a bit Guthrie-esque; after all, here’s an international celebrity, who started his career pretending to be a drifter, now planted in the back of a squad car on suspicion of vagrancy. But things take an abrupt turn. The problem, Dylan tells Gilmore, is that he cannot ever be mistaken for someone else, that someone always sees through his act and gives him away. “That’s the side of people I see,” he snarls. “People like to betray people They want to be the one to do it I’ve experienced that. A lot.”⁴

Gilmore hits a nerve here and when he next asks about Dylan’s unacknowledged borrowing from Civil War poet Henry Timrod on “*Love and Theft*” (2001), the songwriter returns unexpectedly to that now ancient *Newsweek* article: “People have tried to stop me every inch of the way,” he bitterly complains.

³ Mikal Gilmore, “Bob Dylan Unleashed,” *Rolling Stone*, September 27, 2012. ⁴ *Ibid.*

Introduction

7

They've always had bad stuff to say about me. *Newsweek* magazine lit the fuse way back when. *Newsweek* printed that some kid from New Jersey wrote "Blowin' in the Wind" and it wasn't me at all. And when that didn't fly, people accused me of stealing the melody from a 16th-century Protestant hymn. And when that didn't work, they said they made a mistake and it was really an old Negro spiritual.⁵

Can those two narrow, yellowing columns in *Newsweek* still be haunting him all these years later? His outlined epitaphs, the lines of "Restless Farewell," the insistence that the songs live only in the moment, and his various attempts to bid us farewell appear not to have worked after all. Dylan's many revenants still roam through his imagination and he admits that they cannot be forgotten, ignored, or exorcised. Fifty years on, it turns out, he still does give a damn.

And this brings us to the title track for *Tempest*, itself another kind of farewell, fashioned by a man in the crowded company of ghosts. This haunted song rambles through fourteen minutes of sounds, images, and characters from the past, all presided over by an enigmatic watchman who nightly dreams their doom. Like his other sprawling epics – such as the eleven-minute "Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" from *Blonde on Blonde* (1966) or its reprise, the sixteen-minute "Highlands" from *Time Out of Mind* (1997) – this one too is built around a looping musical structure that could seemingly go on forever. It differs in one key way from those earlier songs, however: it tells the story of the *Titanic* and thus a tragic, predestined ending awaits from the moment it begins. In those earlier songs, length fills time as the singer waits for something to happen. In "Tempest," however, it delays the inevitable moment of death's victory.

The song's forty-five four-line stanzas unfurl without a chorus over an up-tempo waltz that belies the descriptions of terror, death, and violence woven through the lyrics. Dylan wrote the song amid the frenzy of *Titanic* mania that marked the centenary of the maritime disaster and it jumbles together a disparate collection of fictional and historical source material. As is so often the case in Dylan's late songs, "Tempest" is also laden with literary and musical references that reflect the writer's deep yet wildly disparate reading. It first quotes the Carter Family's 1956 song about the disaster – itself one of the very last singles released by country music's most influential group.⁶ Dylan also invokes Shakespeare's final play – even though he limply tried to deny it, saying the Bard's work was called *The Tempest*, while his was merely "Tempest." This is the play in which

⁵ Ibid. ⁶ The Carter Family, "The Titanic," Acme, 1956.

Shakespeare uses the character Prospero to bid farewell to his audience on the shores of the last fantastical world he fashioned.

Most of the songs recorded for *Tempest* made it quickly into Dylan's concert sets and many of them, such as "Pay in Blood" and "Early Roman Kings," have become immediate favorites performed at nearly every live show.⁷ The title track, however, like "Restless Farewell," joins a handful of recorded songs that Dylan has almost never played live. The 1963 song has only been performed twice – once just after he recorded it and then again at Frank Sinatra's eightieth birthday party. And it has been covered only rarely – itself another oddity for a Dylan song.⁸ If we can indeed read it as Dylan's attempt to bid the folk world an angry goodbye, then this makes sense. The jabs it lands, after all, only sting when he can deliver them directly, then turn and walk away. "Tempest," however, has never been covered – indeed, has never been performed in public at all. There are, of course, sound technical reasons for this, since just remembering all those verses would be daunting. Still, if it is something like a final farewell, then it makes sense that he has no interest in performing it live – no interest in saying goodbye more than once. Like the sinking of the *Titanic*, this particular ending is both fated and final: death will come to silence his voice and give the lie to the idea of a "never ending tour."⁹

But is this really the end? Like "Restless Farewell" some five decades earlier, "Tempest" too is beset by a crucial ambiguity. In the original Carter Family tune, the disaster unfolds after a careless watchman falls asleep. In Dylan's version, however, the watchman becomes a double for the songwriter, who invents this catastrophe. "The watchman, he lay dreaming," Dylan sings, "He dreamed the Titanic was sinking / And he tried to tell someone." The song becomes that telling, each new verse an act of both creation and destruction as Dylan engages in a fury of invention. Just as it's unclear in "Restless Farewell" if Dylan is firing the arrow of truth or is instead felled by it, so too in "Tempest" we cannot tell if Dylan the watchman sinks with the ship or instead presides over its destruction. At one point, the watchman sits at forty-five degrees, seemingly poised to slip beneath the waves, but in the final verse he's safe and simply dreaming

⁷ According to bobdylan.com, "Early Roman Kings" has been performed 498 times since November 7, 2012 and "Pay in Blood" 477 times.

⁸ Curiously, those covers have only been performed by people who have been relatively close to Dylan at various points in his career, including Joan Baez (on *Baez Sings Dylan* – Vanguard, 2006), Mark Knopfler (on the 2012 tribute album, *Chimes of Freedom: The Songs of Bob Dylan Honoring 50 Years of Amnesty International*), and Liam Clancy (*Clancy, O'Connell & Clancy* – Helvic, 1997).

⁹ This is the popular name fans and critics have given to Dylan's rigorous touring and performance schedule since 1988.

Introduction

9

again “of all the things that can be.” So maybe this isn’t the final farewell it appears to be.

After complaining to Gilmore in that *Rolling Stone* interview about constantly being betrayed, Dylan summons his old familiar snarl. “Fuck ’em,” he concludes, “I’ll see them all in their graves.”¹⁰ That’s not the voice of resignation or of a latter-day Prospero content to drown his book and break his staff. Instead, it’s the credo of an artist who has learned to live with his ghosts. Where “Restless Farewell” mixes martyrdom with a desire to destroy a restrictive public persona, “Tempest” seemingly accepts, even welcomes, the many worlds Dylan has made for himself and for generations of listeners. Unlike Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, which concludes with Prospero’s gentle plea that the audience “let your indulgence set me free,” Dylan’s song ends on a braver, if more bitter note.¹¹ Its cascade of verses might be an attempt to literally clear the decks of his mind, but through it all, the figure of the watchman endures, a double for Dylan himself who also returns to the dream-like space of the stage night after night. Up there, he is surrounded by the ghosts of his many other selves – both those that stalk him and the ones that each new audience brings with them. As that sudden explosion of anger about a 50-year-old *Newsweek* article suggests, he has decided *not* to make peace with the past, but neither does he hope to escape it. Instead, he faces down the ghosts that might crowd him out, content to wrestle with them – and with us – through one more performance. Like the watchman, he may well see them into their graves, but the songs will summon them again in a potentially endless loop. “Fuck ’em” he says as he takes the stage – it’s time to say goodbye again: an act of farewell that clears the way yet again for another of Dylan’s many worlds.

¹⁰ Gilmore, “Bob Dylan Unleashed.” ¹¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, V, i.