

## **We Walk the Line**

### *A Rambler's Guide to the Dylans, Bob and Thomas*

*(The first half of this essay is adapted from a lecture given as part of the Dylan Thomas Celebration 2002 at the Dylan Thomas Centre in Swansea. The second part appeared in the Bob Dylan fanzine 'Judas!', issue 6.)*

Since I have come as a guest of the ghost of Dylan Thomas, to talk about the living poet who borrowed his name, Bob Dylan, it seems right to begin on their common ground, which is to say their shared name. From that narrow meeting place I'd like to look a bit wider, at the relationship and the difference between them as artists, and hopefully cast some light wider still, on the relationship and the difference between songwriting and poetry. But to avoid confusion I think I'll have to avoid the Dylan and refer to them, rather inconsistently, as Bob and Thomas.

In the book I wrote about Bob, *The Nightingale's Code*, I dealt quite swiftly with this issue of the common name. In his early years, Bob was dismissive of the connection, as he had every right to be. Book poetry was not a major influence on what he was doing, at least at the beginning. He even went so far as to remark, somewhat petulantly, that he had done more for Dylan Thomas than Dylan Thomas had ever done for him – which I suppose was true, in that more people got to hear about Thomas through Bob than the other way round. Nevertheless there can be little doubt that Bob did know, when he chose his stage-name, that Dylan was the name of a poet – a wild-man poet with an amazing voice. It was also, of course, the name of a Western hero, Marshal Matt Dillon of the TV series *Gunsmoke*, and I think it was the combination of the two meanings – the cowboy-poet – within one sound that was decisive.

I also point out in the book that there was a third resonance, closer to home. Dillon Road, in Bob's hometown of Hibbing, Minnesota, is a back lane on the outskirts that runs between disused mine-workings and spoil-tips. It was the road that one of his first girlfriends lived on, and it's one of the roads leading to the town cemetery. Like the double echo of the name, that's the kind of yoking together of opposites that's characteristic of Bob. And this particular yoking, of the girl and the graveyard, is absolutely central to Thomas's imagery. In that frame of reference it should be called bluntly the union of sex and death, which recurs in so much of his poetry, especially in the formative notebook poems of his late teens where he found his voice and his symbolism. In Bob's world a better pair of terms would be love and loss – and again they're fundamental themes of his work.

But I wouldn't have presumed to make anything of the cemetery on Dillon Road if it hadn't come up in some striking lines from a song Bob wrote in the early 1970s, called 'Nobody 'Cept You':

Used to run in the cemetery,  
 Dance and run and sing when I was a child,  
 And it never seemed strange.  
 Now I just pass mournfully  
 By that place where the bones of life are piled.  
 I know something has changed.  
 I'm a stranger here  
 And no-one sees me.

They're striking because Bob, unlike Thomas, has not been much of a writer about his childhood (though there were other songs from this time which came out on the *Planet Waves* album that also harked back to memories of youth). There's no mention of a girlfriend or of other playmates in those lines, but we can feel her or their presence. For one thing, a child who danced and sang in the graveyard *on their own* I think we would tend to regard as a bit strange. So there's the implication that that freedom is a shared thing. And then when you hear the change that has come over him, that also has to do with fellowship: the thought that the bones provoke is less about the sadness of death than about loneliness and his lack of a companion: "I'm a stranger here and nobody sees me..." When he was joyful in the presence of the dead, he was not strange to himself; but now that he is mournful as we would expect, he finds himself a stranger.

So if we take those lines as retrospective evidence that he did connect the two ends of Dillon Road in his mind, and suppose that that echo too was part of his reason for taking the name, what does that tell us? Just that the desire to unite or synthesise disparate things was there at the very inception of his imaginative life, as it has proved an abiding feature ever since. Just to give one example, it was Bob, after all, who caused a new compound noun to enter the language – folk-rock – by melding what had been thought of as antagonistic styles.

For a while, Bob tried the 'Dillon' spelling of his new name, and the fact that he eventually opted for the Welsh spelling can only be due to Dylan Thomas. It's fitting in two serendipitous ways. Firstly, because his greatest hero at the time also had a Welsh name.

Last time I was in Swansea, in November 2000, we went on from here to visit a friend in Pembrokeshire. On the way we made our pilgrimage to Laugharne, Dylan Thomas's last home, and then, while I was reading the map, I found another place to which we'd have to make a pilgrimage. St Elvis Farm is on the south Pembrokeshire coast about a mile from a little port called Solva. The farm is on the site of a vanished church formerly dedicated, not to St Elvis, but to St Teilaw, who was a contemporary of St David. Nearby, on the

lane to the clifftops, is a neolithic burial chamber called St Elvis Cromlech.

I'd always wondered where Elvis Presley got his name from, and nothing that I've read about him ever told me. I mean, the immediate source is obvious: it was the middle name of his father, Vernon Elvis Presley. But where did Vernon get it from? It's known that Welsh emigrants left Solva for the New World as early as the 17th century, and were still doing so until at least the middle of the 19th century. It seems likely that one of them carried the name with him. Vernon, then, probably had Welsh ancestry. Elvis Presley's mother had a Welsh name too, of course: Gladys.

Did Mr and Mrs Presley know the origin of the name, though? There's a hint that they did. St Elvis was not actually a Welshman but an Irishman: he was the bishop of Munster who baptised St David. Now, Elvis Aron Presley was one of twins, and his stillborn brother, had he lived, would have been christened Jesse Garon Presley. Jesse in the Bible is the father of King David; so one of the brothers was named after the fleshly father of King David and the other after the spiritual father of St David. Coincidence, perhaps, but surprisingly neat.

Before we leave the subject, notice Jesse's strange middle name, Garon, reminiscent of the Welsh name Geraint; and also that the Preseli Mountains are about 20 miles away from St Elvis Farm. With names like these – Elvis Presley, King Hiram 'Hank' Williams, Jimmie Rodgers, George Jones, Waylon Jennings – perhaps they should call it Country and Welsh music.

The second serendipity about Bob's Welsh name is its meaning, which, as I understand it, is "the sea". Now Dylan Thomas presumably knew the meaning of his name, but he would hardly need that symbolic connection to make the sea important in his poetry, since he spent the large part of his life in sight of it. On the other hand, I doubt very much if Bob knew the meaning of the name when he chose it, and I don't know if he'd even seen the sea until he was nineteen and went to New York. Yet the sea has a particular and powerful place in his symbolism. I've devoted a section of *The Nightingale's Code* to it, and I'd like to quote a passage now:

Carl Jung, in his studies of what he termed the "collective unconscious", saw in the sea the image of the collective unconscious itself. He pointed, for example, to the book of Revelation, where an angel elucidates the vision of the Great Whore of Babylon, saying to St John: "The waters that thou sawest, where the whore sitteth, are peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues."

[So] it is peculiarly apt that Dylan should alight upon this symbol when he came to rename himself as an Everyman, a voice of the people, a dream figure for the masses who would

be “bigger than Elvis” (as he vowed to be in his youth). Given that he’s unlikely to have known the name’s meaning when he chose it, or to have connected it with Jung’s or the New Testament’s symbolism, this significance could not have been a reason for his choice – unless it was a reason beyond reason. Unless, in other words, as he sought intuitively for a name that would speak to the collective unconscious, the collective unconscious proposed one of its own names.

The book goes on to look at some of the important appearances of the sea in Bob’s lyrics, and I’ll try to summarise that survey briefly here.

The single most prevalent symbol in Bob’s songs must surely be the road – which represents, at the simplest level, open-endedness, freedom, possibility, perhaps a quest. But for Bob it means something more. The road is not the same as the journey: it’s not just an individual matter. As he said in one of the first songs he recorded, he’s “walking a road other men have gone down”. The road, then, may represent restlessness and change for the wanderer who makes it his home, but it also paradoxically stands for continuity and tradition. On the road, we are always following in others’ footsteps.

Now to summarise the significance of Bob’s sea as succinctly as possible, I would say that the sea is where the road stops. That could mean death – as in the end of the ‘Ballad of Hollis Brown’, where “seven shots ring out like the ocean’s poundin’ roar”; or it could mean a more general catastrophe. Impending disaster often comes to Bob in the form of a flood, from ‘The Times They Are A-Changin’ in 1963 – “Come gather round, people, wherever you roam / And admit that the waters around you have grown” – right through to ‘High Water’ in 2001: “High water risin’, six feet above my head, / Coffins dropping in the street like balloons made out of lead.” But the sea can also mean coming face to face with oneself, or with some other kind of inescapable and absolute reality.

It may be noted in passing that Bob’s latest biographer, Howard Sounes, emphasises what he sees as a formative incident in his subject’s early life, when one of his closest friends and musical compadres, Larry Keegan, was left paralysed after diving into shallow water on the coast of Florida. Bob was sixteen at the time and, as I said, he seems never to have been to the sea himself. This catastrophe may have stamped the ocean on his young imagination as both a mystery and a terrible menace. On the other hand, it should be remembered that from his very first years he had known something much like a sea. Lake Superior, which he lived beside till he was six or seven, is well over three hundred miles long and a hundred across at its broadest. To the eye it might as well be sea; and to the imagination it has some aspects of a sea, in that a different country, Canada, lies on the farther shore. Perhaps in

contemplating it, though, you might also be aware that you could go around it; and that, not being briny, it is not a desert to human life, an alien and final limit.

The sea may not be a common symbol in Bob's lyrics, but it appears at some crucial moments. It appears in the first lines of the song that first made him famous:

How many roads must a man walk down  
 Before you call him a man?  
 Yes an' how many seas must a white dove sail  
 Before she sleeps in the sand?

It appears in the last lines of the song that first opened the floodgates of his poetic imagery:

And I'll stand on the ocean until I start sinkin'  
 But I'll know my song well before I start singin',  
 And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, an' it's a hard,  
 It's a hard rain's a-gonna fall.

It appears in the last lines of a song that seems to celebrate some vital moment of enlightenment:

Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand waving free,  
 Silhouetted by the sea,  
 Circled by the circus sands,  
 With all memory and fate  
 Driven deep beneath the waves.  
 Let me forget about today until tomorrow.

It appears in the song that commemorated and also marked the end of his marriage:

I laid on the dune, I looked at the sky,  
 When the children were babies and played on the beach.  
 You came up behind me, I saw you go by.  
 You were always so close, an' still within reach.  
 Sara, O Sara...

(Notice that the chorus spells out the signal for those in peril on the sea, S-O-S.) It appears in the last lines of the beautiful song that summed up his period as a religious devotee:

I hear the ancient footsteps  
 Like the motion of the sea.  
 Sometimes I turn, there's someone there,  
 Other times it's only me.  
 I am hanging in the balance  
 Of the reality of man  
 Like every sparrow falling,  
 Like every grain of sand.

It appears at the beginning of the song in which he returned to and took the measure of the mythic dimensions of being Bob Dylan:

Standing on the water, casting your bread,  
 While the eyes of the idol with the iron head are glowing.  
 Distant ships sailin' in through the mist.  
 You were born with a snake in both your fists  
 While a hurricane was blowing.  
 Freedom, just around the corner for you.  
 But with truth so far off, what good would it do?  
 Jokerman, dance to the nightingale tune...

And what of the sea in Dylan Thomas? Let me quote the scholar Gwyn Williams: introducing his English versions of poetry from the 6th century to 1600 (*Welsh Poems*, Faber, 1973), he identifies a distinctive aesthetic of these poets, who “were not trying to write poems that would read like Greek temples or even Gothic cathedrals but, rather, like stone circles or the contour-following rings of the forts from which they fought, with hidden ways slipping from one to another. More obviously, their writing was like the inter-woven inventions preserved in early Celtic manuscripts and on stone crosses, where what happens in a corner is as important as what happens at the centre, because there often is no centre.” He goes on to cite Dylan Thomas and David Jones as 20th-century exemplars of this same tradition.

Now it seems to me that this interweaving design is itself the central theme of Thomas's poetry: that it is a repeated attempt to articulate, in as close as possible to an unbroken moment, the simultaneity and transubstantiality of the weather and the heart, the blood and the river, the dunghill and the stars, the bones and the rocks, the copulating prick and the corrupting maggot, the grave and the womb. His theme, in a word, is that everything is everything. And if one symbol could be said to stand for this everything, rolling it all along together, swallowing it and pouring it forth, then it is the sea.

In a moment, I'd like to look at how Thomas arrived at this theme, and

from there perhaps we'll see what the two Dylans share in a broader cultural perspective, apart from – or perhaps I should say, underneath – the more or less coincidental connections I've pointed out. But first let me mention a couple of possible direct links from Thomas to Bob.

The first lies in the period in 1964 and '65 when Bob was gestating what came to be called folk-rock – a term he hated. Before the revolutionary move of adding bass and drums and electric guitars to his backing, he had already, though more quietly, revolutionised folksong itself; so this folk to which he supposedly added rock was already well beyond the existing categories.

What he did in the simplest terms was to bring in far more words – more both in the sheer number per song and in their diversity. He had a starting point near to hand in the late, wordy songs of Woody Guthrie and in the performed outpourings of the Beat poets, but there's no doubt that in this period Bob was also absorbing and emulating book-poetry. And one of the most likely sources for the dense, declamatory surrealism of songs like 'Gates of Eden' and 'It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)', or the rolling visionary phrases of 'Chimes of Freedom', is surely Dylan Thomas.

A possible second instance of direct influence is in the structure of Bob's albums. This is something I explain fully in the book, but in simple terms: on his first few records, and particularly his second, third and fourth, Bob developed a mirror-image structure for his LPs, so that the last song responds to or reflects the first, the second-to-last reflects the second, and so on, with the dividing line being the break between the two sides of the LP. It didn't occur to me when I was writing the book, though, that Bob wouldn't have had to look too far into his namesake's work to find a very striking precedent for this. It is exactly the form of rhyme scheme that Thomas used, on a huge scale, for the Prologue to his *Collected Poems*, where he has two stanzas of 51 lines each, the second rhyming with all the line-endings of the first, but in reverse order.

This Prologue, of course, like most Prologues and Prefaces, is actually an Epilogue – an author's look back over what has been written and not a preparation for it. Now I'd like to look at the real beginning of Thomas's poetry.

If the time when young Bobby Zimmerman decided he was going to be Bob Dylan marked the end of his obscure gestation and the moment of his imagination's birth, then the equivalent moment for young Dylan Thomas can be dated quite precisely. It was 27th April 1930, the date on the first poem in the first of the four surviving notebooks in which he developed his poetic voice. These notebooks, edited by Professor Ralph Maud, were published as *Poet in the Making* in 1968, and were republished in 1989 as *The Notebook Poems 1930–34*. It's not a great book of poems by any means, but the story it tells, as you piece it together, is a fascinating one.

When I first started reading poetry and about poetry, in the mid-

Seventies, the idea was floating about that Thomas was a teenage prodigy who'd had all his inspiration before he was twenty and had spent the rest of his life living off the scraps of it and drinking himself to death to make up for his poetic impotence. That was the story these notebooks were supposed to tell, and that, I have to tell you, is a goddam lie. He did write the poems in his first published book in an incredible surge of discovery, and he did come back and mine the same seam for the material of his second, but if he wrote more slowly later, and if he turned back to firm up early hints that he hadn't been able to follow through, he also wrote steadily better as time went on. And far from being worked out, it seems to me that the long poem he'd started on, 'In Country Heaven', promised to be magnificent, and that he had both the plod and the brilliance to see it through. But I digress.

The first poem in the first surviving notebook marks a moment of imaginative birth because at this point Thomas deliberately put behind him his early virtuosity in verse-making and set out to find his own voice. In an essay on 'Modern Poetry' that he wrote in 1929 for his grammar school magazine, the poets he mentioned as models of free verse were Sacheverell Sitwell and Richard Aldington, though a stronger and more lasting influence seems to have been D.H. Lawrence. The first notebook poem, entitled 'Osiris. Come to Isis', is a typically Imagist mix of visual luxuriance, replete with flowers and ornaments from antiquity, with a limpid, but too often just limp, simplicity of diction. You can feel though, just troubling the surface, the more vibrant and mystical sensuality that Lawrence had set off.

As a piece of storytelling, this Osiris poem is a right old jumble – a kind of drowned mythology. Instead of that clear though winding track that a genuine myth leads us down, this just drifts backwards and forwards among its images. But the images themselves are telling. I'm not going to try and unravel the Osiris myth here, and I haven't the expertise to anyway, but suffice it to say that Osiris was, or became, the god of just about everything. He was one of those giant forms to whom more and more meanings are drawn until there doesn't seem to be anything that they don't represent. He was the fruit of the union of the sky-god and the earth-goddess. His wife was Isis, the supreme goddess, who was also his sister, and in his union with her he is a god of fertility. He was murdered by a jealous brother but brought back to life by his wife and son, so he was the god both of death and resurrection, both a victim and a king. His son was Horus, represented as a falcon, who was himself a sun-god. So Osiris, as the father of the sun, is ultimately a god of the cosmos.

Part of his myth is that his body was dismembered and the parts scattered up and down the Nile, and that Isis and Horus collected and reassembled him before he was brought back to life. So he also symbolised the cycle of the Nile – the annual advance and retreat of whose waters was the Egyptians' most

powerful natural symbol. The voyage beyond this life was always represented as a journey by water.

Now in Thomas's poem the elements of this mythology that come uppermost are, of course, the sex – the longed-for union of Isis and Osiris; and death, of course; and a lot of water. Osiris at the beginning of the poem immerses himself in the river and seems to become one with it; and he seeks his completion, his union with Isis, within or through the waters. In a tentative, fragmented way, Thomas at the very beginning has formulated his own myth – he lays out the story that unfolds in these notebooks. It's the story of someone gradually lowering himself into a watery abyss. He casts off regular verse, though for this first poem he still clings on to rhyme. He sheds that, and as the first notebook goes on, he gradually sheds all outward subject matter, narrative incident or mundane description.

The last poem of the first notebook is also, interestingly, the very earliest of the notebook poems that he reworked to become part of his adult work. In the original version it begins like this:

How shall the animal  
Whose way I trace  
Into the dark recesses  
Be durable  
Under such weight as bows me down,  
The bitter certainty of waste,  
The knowing that I hatch a thought  
To see it crushed  
Beneath your foot, my bantering Philistine!

In a crude and partial paraphrase: how can I express myself, my energetic self, in a restrictive, petty-minded society? This is, in other words, the fundamental question, the quest we saw him set out on: the search for a completeness of being. Here is the beginning of the poem as it appears in the *Collected Poems*:

How shall my animal  
Whose wizard shape I trace in the cavernous skull,  
Vessel of abscesses and exultation's shell,  
Endure burial under the spelling wall,  
The invoked shrouding veil at the cap of the face,  
Who should be furious,  
Drunk as a vineyard snail, flailed like an octopus,  
Roaring, crawling, quarrel  
With the outside weathers,

The natural circle of the discovered skies  
 Draw down to its weird eyes?

The basic question is there still, but obviously this is only a version of the same poem in the sense that an oak is a version of an acorn. It's interesting to see, though, how tiny shards of the sound of the original have survived while nearly all the words and images have disappeared. So "dark recesses" becomes "vessel of abscesses"; and "whose way I trace" becomes "whose wizard shape I trace"; and "be durable" becomes "endure burial". The original question has been recast, however. It's no longer the one that he picked up from D.H. Lawrence, of how the fuller self can survive amid social convention. It's become the bigger question of whether "my animal" can coexist with speech at all – at least I think that's what Thomas means by "the spelling wall, / The invoked shrouding veil at the cap of the face".

The answer to that question, of course, is under our very noses: for how the energetic self endures burial is, by being written like this. Or as Thomas said of this piece in one of his letters: "The poem is, as all poems are, its own question and answer, its own contradiction, its own agreement."

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Here at the end of the first notebook, Thomas has arrived only at the right question. In the second notebook he sheds even more of the forms of language – he sheds sense and then he sheds syntax, and eventually he comes to the bottom of his abyss, and sounds a fundamental note of disgust. He has sunk down below the level of the mental to the purely physical, and found there is nothing pure about it. The animal is only flesh, and the flesh is only corruption; life is death.

No use to run run your head against the wall  
 To find a sweet blankness in the blood and shell.  
 This pus runs deep.

Which brings us nearly to the end of the second notebook, the winter of 1931 and the beginning of Thomas's seventeenth year. On 20th January 1932 he writes an obscure but craftily made sonnet addressed to a skeleton. Then there's silence for a while, and then there are a few spring notes like this, in April 1932:

No man knows loveliness at all,  
 Though he be beauty blessed,  
 Who has not known the loveliness of May,  
 The blossoms and the throated trees  
 Lifting their branches lit with singing birds  
 Into the laden air...

Now there's a touch of reversion to his old pastiching self here – I think he might be doing a bit of a late Yeats – but it's carried on a piece of real blackbird melody. Then suddenly, on 9th May 1932, comes this:

The hunchback in the park,  
 A solitary mister  
 Propped between trees and water,  
 Going daft for fifty seven years,  
 Is going dafter,  
 A cripple children call at,  
 Half-laughing, by no other name than mister,  
 They shout hey mister  
 Running when he has heard them clearly  
 Past lake and rookery  
 On out of sight.

There is a thing he makes when quiet comes  
 To the young nurses with the children  
 And the three veteran swans,  
 Makes a thing inside the hanging head,  
 Creates a figure without fault  
 And sees it on the gravel paths  
 Or walking on the water.

The figure's frozen all the winter  
 Until the summer melts it down  
 To make a figure without fault.  
 It is a poem and it is a woman figure.

Mister, the children call, hey mister,  
 And the hunchback in the park  
 Sees the molten figure on the water,  
 Misty, now mistier,  
 And hears its woman's voice;  
 Mister, it calls, hey mister,  
 And the hunchback smiles.

Professor Maud calls this “essentially the same poem” as the one we know from the *Collected Poems*, but I think there is an essential difference. Apart from all the vivid childhood detail that Thomas added into his final version, there is a major change in the resolution:

And the old dog sleeper  
 Alone between nurses and swans  
 While the boys among willows  
 Made the tigers jump out of their eyes  
 To roar on the rockery stones  
 And the groves were blue with sailors

Made all day until bell time  
 A woman figure without fault  
 Straight as a young elm  
 Straight and tall from his crooked bones  
 That she might stand in the night  
 After the locks and chains

All night in the unmade park  
 After the railings and shrubberies  
 The birds the grass the trees the lake  
 And the wild boys innocent as strawberries  
 Had followed the hunchback  
 To his kennel in the dark.

What Thomas lost was the image of the woman being made of water, and of her being the hunchback's wife, which is the implication when she too calls him "Mister". (And while I'm carping, the later, louder Thomas doesn't make any sound quite as pleasing as that sequence: mister, water, dafter, fifty, mister, mister – water, winter, figure – mister, water, mistier, mister.) What the later version importantly adds – as well as taking the sugariness off the very end – is the idea that the woman *becomes* the park; that the daylight reality – "The birds the grass the trees the lake" – goes away in the hunchback's head and his personification of beauty is left in their place. She is, in other words, the goddess of the park, which is to say of nature.

From both of the versions put together, though not quite in either of them alone, we learn that she is Isis, the white goddess, bringing life to her maimed Osiris, who finds her in the water. Or to put it another way, at this point in May 1932, a seventeen-year-old cub reporter in Swansea gained his first clear view of what he had set out to find.

The next breakthrough in the notebooks comes a year later, in April 1933. Watching the growth of this poet's mind, I'm inclined to accept the theory of evolution that says that living things evolve gradually, accumulating small changes, but that this slow transformation can be punctuated by sudden leaps. "The hunchback in the park" and the little April poems that come

before it seem too gentle and peaceful to mark a revolutionary change, but they are a turning point. In mythic terms, it could be compared to the moment when Dante and Virgil, clambering down the shaggy side of Satan, pass the centre of the earth and find that the way down has become the way up. (In fact, the hunchback's vision is like a foretaste of a later moment in that same myth, when Dante on the top of Mount Purgatory sees the woman he longs for, Beatrice, on the far side of a water, in the middle of a garden of trees, which is Eden.)

It's not that Thomas's poetry after April 1932 was all jolly odes to the joys of spring. On the contrary, the imagery of darkness, poison, contagion, death and futility become steadily more prevalent. But it is as though, moving in the same direction, he is no longer going down into his abyss but coming up from it, as though at this point the horror flipped over and the realisation that Life equals Death has started to unfold its opposite, that Death equals Life. Through the nightmare Thomas begins to burn with what W. H. Auden called "an affirming flame".

This isn't felt at first in the form of assertions, but in the pulse of the verse itself. Having stripped his easy music down to a grating fractured sound, through the first couple of notebooks, now Thomas accumulates a music of his own. The rhythms start to spring; he begins to build up those coiling lines with one image turning into another and another, or turning back on itself. But all these changes are slight and gradual, as he keeps playing and playing his instrument of words, finding phrases and riffs but not quite a whole tune. Then, as I said, suddenly, in April 1933, just before halfway through the third of the notebooks, there comes something thrilling like a trumpet blast. In its original notebook form, the poem was published in the *New English Weekly* in May 1933 and marked Thomas's debut on the London literary stage. Surprisingly, given its power, Thomas was in two minds about including it in his second book, *25 Poems*, in 1936, but Vernon Watkins persuaded him that he should and so he produced the revised version that entered the canon:

And death shall have no dominion.  
 Dead men naked they shall be one  
 With the man in the wind and the west moon;  
 When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,  
 They shall have stars at elbow and foot;  
 Though they go mad they shall be sane,  
 Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;  
 Though lovers be lost love shall not;  
 And death shall have no dominion.

And death shall have no dominion.  
 Under the windings of the sea  
 They lying long shall not die windily;  
 Twisting on racks when sinews give way,  
 Strapped to a wheel, yet they shall not break;  
 Faith in their hands shall snap in two,  
 And the unicorn evils run them through;  
 Split all ends up they shan't crack;  
 And death shall have no dominion.

And death shall have no dominion.  
 No more may gulls cry at their ears  
 Or waves break loud on the seashores;  
 Where blew a flower may a flower no more  
 Lift its head to the blows of the rain;  
 Though they be mad and dead as nails,  
 Heads of the characters hammer through daisies;  
 Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,  
 And death shall have no dominion.

There's an interesting biographical background to this poem and through it I can bring my essay back round to the Dylan it's supposed to be about. 'And death shall have no dominion' was written in response to a challenge issued by Thomas's friend Bert Trick, to see who could write the best poem on the subject of immortality. If Mr Trick had any sense, and he seems to have had, I suspect he knew what the result would be. His effort is worthy, if not terribly distinguished. It begins:

For death is not the end!  
 Though soul turns sour  
 And faith dry-rots,  
 Let maggots feed on flesh  
 That once was blossom pink  
 And memory sink  
 Beneath the dust of falling years,  
 Yet death is not the end!  
 For death is not the end!

By a peculiar coincidence, the text of this poem, which first appeared in the *Swansea and West Wales Guardian* in 1934, was republished in 1988 in the notes to a new edition of Dylan Thomas's *Collected Poems*, and in the same

year Bob Dylan put out a sad little song, one which he'd written and recorded five years earlier which goes like this:

When you're sad and when you're lonely  
 And you haven't got a friend,  
 Just remember  
 That death is not the end.  
 When all that you hold sacred  
 Falls down and does not mend,  
 Just remember  
 That death is not the end.  
 Not the end – no, no,  
 Not the end – no, no,  
 Just remember  
 That death is not the end.

I should point out that one of Bob's critics refers to this song as "irredeemable" and a "death-knell to inspiration". Now, it may not show him at his peak, but I don't think it's as bad as that.

One aspect of 'Death Is Not the End' that is very characteristic of Bob is its underlying ambivalence. The implication of the refrain is that a reward awaits us in the afterlife – but none of the verses actually says that. What they actually say is: when your life is really miserable, just remember – it's not going to stop. Thanks, Bob.

The counterbalance to all the verses is the middle eight, which does finally spell out why 'death is not the end' is supposed to be some consolation:

For the tree of life is growing where the spirit never dies  
 And the bright light of salvation shines in dark and empty skies.

The middle eight weighs against the rest of the song in another way as well – by having a different rhyme. All the other lines in the song have one rhyme only, which is 'end': friend, mend, comprehend, bend, descend, lend; and then in the last verse, having broken up the rhyme in the middle eight, "burning flesh of men" and "law-abiding citizen". For a song about not ending, it certainly hammers home its ends heavily enough.

But the meaning of a song is something different from the meaning of its words. Though the verses don't give us any reason to be glad that death is not the end, we still feel a consolation in that phrase because of the way that Bob's small, weary voice is embraced by the strong and tender singing of Clydie King in the refrain. It's as though he's singing half of a harmony on the verses which only makes sense when she joins him. And the first time this

happens is after the line “you haven’t got a friend” – then there she is, as good and true a friend to Bob’s voice as could be. There’s a similar effect in the use of the little choir in the chorus. All the sense of comfort, faith and affirmation in the song are concentrated in the words they sing, which are: “No, no. No, no. No, no.”

Now I may seem to have got by a trick from Dylan Thomas, via Bert Trick, to Bob Dylan. But there is a good reason for introducing the subject of songs with ‘And death shall have no dominion’. The writing process that we were following in Thomas’s notebooks was private, inward-seeking and obscure. When Bert Trick issued that challenge to him, he was challenging him to write for an audience, even if it was only an audience of one, and Thomas rose to it – as I think Trick thought he might – by finding almost at a stroke what came to be recognised as his public voice.

The sources of this rhetoric must surely include the tradition of firebrand Welsh preachers. It can be no coincidence that Thomas takes off from a biblical quotation just like a preacher with his text, and he keeps reiterating it in that incantatory way that we associate with the preaching of the black churches, which share a common ancestry with the Welsh chapel tradition. Thomas, however, brought this rhythmical speech a little higher, towards song. What he discovers in ‘And death shall have no dominion’ is not so much a speaking as a singing voice. He discovered the power of the refrain, and unlike the moment of spiritual discovery in ‘The hunchback in the park’, when he made this technical discovery he knew what he had found. He quickly tried the same thing again, experimenting with repeated lines and phrases, with repetitions with variation, and with regular stanzas, loosely tied with half rhyme but strongly marked by recurring cadences. He soon learned how to keep his tunes going while changing the words completely.

For example, here are the last two syllables of the first line, and the seven syllables of the second line from each of the stanzas of ‘I dreamed my genesis’, one of the poems in Thomas’s first book:

breaking / Through the rotating shell, strong  
 shuffled / Off from the creasing flesh, filed  
 costly / A creature in my bones I  
 shrapnel / Rammed in the marching heart, hole  
 harvest / Of hemlock and the blades, rust  
 second / Rise of the skeleton and  
 fallen / Twice in the feeding sea, grown

The last breakthrough recorded in the notebooks comes on 12th October 1933 with the writing of 'The force that through the green fuse drives the flower'. From there – about halfway through – the fourth notebook is effectively a working draft of *18 Poems*, Thomas's first collection. So that great lyric is what it says, a "green fuse", which sets off the flowering or explosion of his poetry, and which finally fuses its themes and elements in one piece.

What had Thomas found on his journey of 20,000 leagues under the sea? He had found the theme which is also his method, of joining everything to everything. But more importantly, or as importantly, he had found in the strength of that muscular, musical voice the incorporation of his physical with his mental being, the completeness he had sunk into the waters in search of – the way that his "animal" could "endure burial under the spelling wall".

It is in this respect that Bob is an heir to Thomas and Thomas a precursor to Bob. He reasserted the energy of sound in poetry, as Bob has carried on doing, in a different way. Thomas took a highly articulate and intellectual form, Modernist English poetry, and invested it with a bodily vigour that is both new and ancient. Bob took rock, a bodily form whose vocabulary was generally limited, and gave it a language which is also both innovative and ancestral.

Or to put it another way, what they have in common is that they both made great records. I think Thomas's recordings – of his own poetry, especially – will be as much of a lasting treasure as his books. His actual voice seems identical with the voice of his poems, in a way that doesn't seem to be true of any of his contemporaries. I have grown to like the recordings of W.H. Auden reading, for example, but the voice I hear there bears little resemblance to the one – or the ones – that I hear in my head when I read his poetry to myself. The closest parallel to Thomas's readings that I can think of is James Joyce's reading from *Finnegans Wake*, which lends us a key to that weird music.

Of course, Thomas was not original in his sense of sound as such. It is the very definition of poetry, as far as I'm concerned. If you told me you were a poet but you didn't care if your poems rhymed, I would believe you. If you told me you didn't care if they had regular metre, or any form at all, or whether they made sense, or used syntax, or even recognisable words, I would still believe you. But if you told me you were a poet, but you didn't care how your poems sounded, I would think you were a fool or a charlatan, and probably both.

Many writers have offered definitions of poetry, though most of them are not workable. One of my favourites is Wordsworth's: "Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science." The definition I'm going to offer is more pedestrian: Poetry is the linguistic art which places a special emphasis on the sound of words. In other words, poetry works particularly with the aspect of language that is arbitrary, irrational, meaningless. By focusing on the physical

medium of words, which is sound, poetry can harmonise those higher, more abstract levels of consciousness that deal in signs with the deeper and more immediate ones that relate to our senses and our feeling states, and also with the biological rhythms that underlie consciousness itself, linking the functions of the brain that we experience as 'non-physical' with the body as a whole. This is not just because the vibrations of speech originate in the body, but because the patterning of word-sound into something analogous to music seems to mirror the communication of brain and body, which is also a kind of music, a harmony of interlocking cycles.

The neurologist Oliver Sacks reported how patients with extensive brain damage who had lost or never acquired the physical coordination to perform everyday tasks like tying a shoelace or even walking properly, sometimes found they could carry them out to music. They couldn't walk but they could dance. What they lost, then, when they lost coordination was a kind of inner tune which choreographs our movements. Music itself, it seems to me, is an image, rendered in vibrations of air, of this inner pattern of vibrations which is how we know our presence in the world. By making music with language, poetry reconnects the furthest reaches of our minds to the pulse of the flesh – or, since they cannot really be disconnected, it deepens our awareness of their connection.

Now by my own definition of poetry, in the part of Bob's art where he works with words, rather than being a guitarist, a harmonica player, a bandleader, a stage performer, he is certainly a poet. His words may not make first-rate poems when we read them in a book but that isn't their purpose. He has to attend to the sounds they make along with music, and especially in his case, to the patterns his voice makes with them when he sings them. If the words made too much music among themselves, they would drown out the other parts.

A passable analogy is the score of a film. You wouldn't judge a film just by listening to its music – though a film couldn't really be good, obviously, if it had terrible music. And although some soundtracks are listenable in their own right, that isn't a measure of how well they do their actual job. Likewise, a soundtrack that is musically self-sufficient doesn't necessarily provide the best accompaniment to its film.

This simile goes against the way that song lyrics have conventionally been discussed, in terms of settings or accompaniments. The conventions stem from classical song and its 'light music' relations, such as Gilbert & Sullivan, where the composer usually set words that were already written. This order of things became less predominant in the era of Tin Pan Alley and the show tunes that provided the bulk of the so-called jazz standards. Ira Gershwin, for example, almost always followed his brother George's music with his lyrics – though the tunes themselves, of course, were often written for a preordained point in the 'book' of a show.

From his own generally elliptical accounts of his art, we know that Bob has worked both ways. For example, he said that the songs on *John Wesley Harding* (a favourite of mine) were written as lyrics first. From other statements, and from anecdotal and recorded evidence, it's clear that he often – and, I would guess, most often – works from music to words. That covers a range of techniques: putting new words to an existing tune is one, which was quite common in the early years of his composing. As the researchers dig deeper into his sources, it becomes apparent how many of his melodies were taken over entire or marginally adapted from folk tradition or earlier composers. The practice – inheriting is a better term for it than taking – has been long established and was a particular habit of Bob's mentor, Woody Guthrie. (Not so warranted, in folk tradition anyway, though all too common in the commerce of popular music, is the claim of exclusive property rights over the result.)

The period when Bob was most inclined to these borrowings (or inheritances, or thefts), in his 'folk' years, was also the time when he was most likely to be writing to a 'point' – that is to say, about some subject, telling some story or dramatising some situation which he had decided on beforehand. I wonder, though, how pragmatic these 'decisions' were. I mean, did he select the story of Hollis Brown's massacre of his family and subsequent suicide because, as social documentation or political propaganda, it seemed the most likely to be effective; or was it that the harrowing incident inspired in him a 'vision' of that unyielding musical landscape, almost without relief in melody or harmony or dynamics, that became the 'Ballad of Hollis Brown' – reflecting both an unremitting oppression and the unrelieved South Dakotan landscape, familiar to Bob's youth, in which it took place.

Similarly, was the story of the 'Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll' chosen because it best illuminated the nature of racism in the southern United States, or because a contemplation of the painful image of the repeated falling of the blows of the cane that killed her found an outlet first in the repeated slow-motion falling of the song's melodic line?

This seems to be the genesis of much of Bob's poetry: the following of some musical form – perhaps a sequence of chords or a riff actually played on guitar or piano, perhaps only a phrase or fragment in the mind – with a corresponding sequence of vocal sounds. (Although again they may be only 'vocal' in the head.) These may be an actual line or lines of words in sentences, or a jumble of disjointed words and phrases, or a mere smear of vowels and syllables, or most likely a mix of all three. This pre- or semi-articulate vocal version of the musical shape establishes the speech-like tone and cadence and rhythm which the words themselves can attach to. The perfect illustration of the process is 'I'm Not There (1956)' from the Basement Tapes, which may have been a song Bob intended to finish and just never got back to, but which

I'm inclined to think he deliberately arrested in an embryonic form. Perhaps because the tantalising phantom of a lyric that he sings best matches the one refrain line that he had fixed – 'but I'm not there, I'm gone'. And perhaps because the ghost-drama into which this speech appears to be shaping seems to be another episode of the forsaking, wounded kind that had recurred in the songs of 1965 and '66 – and that was a scene in which the newly released, repenting and forgiving singer of 1967 was no longer 'there'.

This pre-verbal practice of Bob's is not uncommon among songwriters, I believe. Paul McCartney famously wrote the tune of 'Yesterday' with the words 'Scrambled Eggs' for a refrain. What's intriguing about that story is that he felt he needed *some* words – even ridiculous ones – as a midwife to the tune, to guide it in the way of the cadences of speech. Bob's writing – and my speculation about his procedures may suggest just how misleading that term is – Bob's writing often seems to cleave as closely as possible to the original coherence of words and music, their common fount, and to trust in that for the coherence of the finished song – a coherence of 'feel' – rather than pushing the words to 'make sense' and conform to an extrinsic logic. In other, perhaps no clearer words, he tends to favour intuitive over rational form. He spoke in an interview a few years ago about how important it is for him, once a song is under way, to keep his conscious mind from taking control of it. Perhaps if he had written it, we would still be singing 'Scrambled Eggs'.

The methods of the non-musical poets may not be so different. Consider, for example, Thomas's reworking of 'How shall my animal', where sound-patterns had more staying power than the actual words. The idea that a poem primarily conveys a 'meaning', decorated as far as the poet is able with incidental effects of rhyme and rhythm and so on, is belied by the testimony of a number of poets. One of the more provocative is T.S. Eliot in one of his lectures on 'The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism':

The chief use of the 'meaning' of a poem, in the ordinary sense, may be... to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him: much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a bit of nice meat for the house-dog.

I take it that the "ordinary sense" of " 'meaning' " that Eliot is referring to is the larger, paraphrasable content of a poem, and that he is saying that the poet makes the poem appear to advance an argument, say, or recount an experience according to rules such as we would follow in 'ordinary' language, in order to quiet the part of consciousness which demands information from what it reads. I don't propose, and I don't suppose that Eliot was proposing, that the "work" which the poem "does" upon us is done purely by the

movements of tone and rhythm in the words, and that all construable meaning in its sentences is secondary to these sounds – that all poetry, in other words, is nonsense poetry in disguise. Nor am I suggesting that a poem is always started off by some inwardly audible pattern, whether of words or non-verbal sounds. Of course the poem may spring from an incident, an emotion, an idea, a sight, a reminiscence or whatever. But what makes this the impulse for a *poem*, rather than for something else, or for nothing at all, is when it gives rise to a form, inwardly apprehended.

But here is where trying to write this genesis starts to try the limits of language – or of mine, anyway. For this form as yet may have no form. Purely speculatively, I would say it may be a kind of phantom reflex – a complex reaction such as arises in response to speech, but produced in reverse, as it were, produced autonomously, without language, and seeking the language that would give rise to it. This impulse is not just a matter of word-sound or proto-word-sound. It may be imbued with any, and maybe many, of the elements that make up our response to language, such as emotional nuance, visual imagery, and so on. Hence the feeling that poets have often recorded – and Bob Dylan in particular has often stated – of a poem (or a song) already being ‘there’. Wallace Stevens put it well in his lecture ‘The Irrational Element in Poetry’:

While there is nothing automatic about the poem, nevertheless it has an automatic aspect in the sense that it is what I wanted it to be without knowing before it was written what I wanted it to be, even though I knew before it was written what I wanted to do.

The embryonic form, in this theory, is a precognition of the effect that the finished poem should produce in the reader, which the poet aims to reproduce in actual words. “In my beginning is my end” as Eliot put it. The seed-matter may not be sound itself, but since sound is the first sensory apprehension of language, it seems to provide the thread that leads the poet from impulse to opus. The parallel between this account of a poem’s becoming and that initial myth of Dylan Thomas’s, of Osiris seeking completion and embodiment, or re-embodiment, through his Isis, seems to me not fortuitous.

But in trying to lead my argument towards a conclusion, I feel I have only brought it to a crossroads where each path leads on to a far larger unknown territory. In lieu of a finale, then, I’d like to sketch out a couple of ideas on the difference between the music of words in poetry, and the poetry of words for music.

The poets we tend to think of as most musical often achieve their rich effects through large cumulative or nested sentence structures – sentences

much bigger than we would ever construct in normal speech, and which test the limits of our linguistic power to absorb them as a whole. Milton is an example, Gerard Manley Hopkins is another, and Dylan Thomas is obviously another. (Think back to those last three verses of ‘The Hunchback in the Park’, which are all one sentence, moving from the hunchback, to the boys, to the trees, to the woman, and back through the trees, and the boys, to the hunchback.) I think that with some part of our attention, when we are reading, we are able to refer back to earlier parts of the sentence, or to keep its earlier parts in the back of our minds, as it were, in order to keep our syntactical bearings. And it is because we are keeping different phrases reverberating in our minds simultaneously, some parts more to the fore than others, that we get the effect of rich, orchestrated sound from writers such as these. If the structure becomes so complicated that we actually have to stop and turn our focus back on earlier parts of the sentence, then the effect breaks down (though this need not be a fatal fault, since with a second or subsequent reading we may be able to sustain the whole sequence in one go).

The effect doesn’t work with the simplest kind of big sentence, which is a list, because each succeeding item tends just to cancel out the one before it. In order for a list to work, the kinds of things in it have to keep changing, which is how Whitman’s best lists work, and why his worst ones don’t. As an example of the former, from the ‘Song of Myself’:

Where the laughing-gull scoots by the slappy shore and laughs  
her near-human laugh;  
Where beehives range on a gray bench in the garden half-hid  
by the high weeds;  
Where the band-necked partridges roost in a ring on the  
ground with their heads out;  
Where burial coaches enter the arched gates of a cemetery;  
Where winter wolves bark amid wastes of snow and iced  
trees;  
Where the yellow-crowned heron comes to the edge of the  
marsh at night and feeds upon small crabs;  
Where the splash of swimmers and divers cools the warm  
noon...

We’re never quite sure where any one ‘where’ begins and ends – is the garden with the beehives near the shore with the laughing-gull? Are the woods with the wolves within sight of the cemetery gates? And as the items interpenetrate, what would be rather garish in isolation – “Where winter wolves bark amid wastes” – is absorbed into a much richer tonality.

And as a brief example of Whitman's dull lists, of which the list itself is long, this from 'A Song for Occupations' is far from the worst:

The pump, the pile-driver, the great derrick, the coal-kiln and  
brick-kiln,  
Coal-mines and all that is down there, the lamps in the  
darkness, echoes, songs, what meditations, what vast native  
thoughts looking through smutch'd faces,  
Iron-works, forge-fires in the mountains or by river-banks, men  
around feeding the melt with huge crowbars, lumps of ore,  
the due combining of ore, limestone, coal,  
The blast-furnace and the pudding-furnace, the loup-lump at  
the bottom of the melt at last, the rolling-mill, the stumpy  
bars of pig-iron, the strong clean-shaped T-rail for  
rail-roads...

In song, big sentences are almost impossible, though lists, albeit on a much smaller scale than Whitman's, have had a good run. The prime form of the list in rock'n'roll and related musics is the itinerary, or more loosely just the gazetteer, like 'Route 66' or James Brown's 'Night Train'. Chuck Berry's fond of that form, too, as in 'Promised Land', and 'Sweet Little Sixteen':

They're really rockin' in Boston  
And Pittsburgh, PA,  
Deep in the heart of Texas  
And round the Frisco Bay,  
All over St Louis  
And down in New Orleans...

Bob Dylan's produced one very good example of the place-name list in 'Wanted Man', and a more Whitmanesque list-song in 'Gotta Serve Somebody':

You may be an ambassador to England or France,  
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance,  
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world,  
You might be a socialite with a long string of pearls...

The one who's closest to a Whitman of rock'n'roll, though, is Van Morrison (if rock'n'roll he be). Like Walt at his best, he can build an ecstasy from an accumulation of the ordinary, "afoot with his vision" as Whitman says in the opening of that great "Where" section I quoted earlier. The conclusion

of 'A Sense of Wonder', and 'Rave On, John Donne', and parts of 'Summertime in England' all take this form of transcendental trainspotting, while 'Cleaning Windows' combines two lists – the agenda of a window-cleaner's day, and a roll-call of the favourite musicians and writers of his youth – in a luminous whole. When Van collaborated with another inveterate lister, the poet Paul Durcan, they came up with 'In the Days Before Rock'n'Roll', one of the best and oddest things he's done.

When the list works well in rock'n'roll (and the more I think about it, the more quintessential it seems, like 'Blue Suede Shoes', the perfect early rock'n'roll song – as distinct from performance – which piles list on list, first the 'one for the money, two for the show', and then the 'burn my house, steal my car, drink my liquor') – it works the opposite way to Whitman's good lists and along the same lines as his bad ones. The good Whitman catalogue is only masquerading as one: it's in the nature of the form that its items should be discrete and equal, but when Walt is on a roll, the elements start to chain-react, firing bits off and fusing into each other. But the rock'n'roll list is the opposite of cumulative – it erases itself as it goes along. Who cares what the next town is in 'Wanted Man', or what the last one was? The early rock'n'roll songwriters hit on the form, I think, because it made words match the sheer pace but also the carefree, momentary, self-forgetting charge of the music. Bob Dylan combined the two effects in one in 'Subterranean Homesick Blues' – like a fireworks display where the succeeding flashes stay etched on the sky in an overdose of illumination.

In a way this is an equivalent effect to the big, nested sentences in poetry, something Bob did even more spectacularly later on the same album, in 'It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)'. But complex as it is in imagery and stanza-form, the syntax of that lyric remains, by poetic standards, relatively simple. By piling up masses of short, rhymed, telegraphic phrases, it creates the impression, or the illusion, of the gigantic, coiling, Dylan-Thomas-like, multi-clause sentence. In practice, complex grammar doesn't seem to work in songs – and doesn't have to, because, as in 'It's Alright, Ma', not very much complexity creates the effect of a great deal. For example, Billy Strayhorn's song 'Lush Life' seems – like the creatures it depicts – a creature of mind-boggling sophistication, which taken as a whole it is. The cunning stunts of rhyming and enjambment, carried on an exquisite serpentine melody, make the poetry of the lyric, at first listening, seem impossibly baroque. But set down on paper, it is fairly straightforward (again, I mean by poetic standards; as a lyric it has scarcely been equalled for ingenuity):

I used to visit all the very gay places,  
The come-what-may places  
Where one relaxes on the axis of the wheel of life

To get the feel of life  
 From jazz and cocktails.  
 The men I knew had sad and sullen grey faces  
 With distingué traces  
 That used to be where you could see that they'd been washed away  
 By too many through the day –  
 Twelve o'clocktails.  
 Then you came along with your siren song  
 To tempt me to madness.  
 I thought for a while that your poignant smile  
 Was tinged with the sadness of a great love for me.  
 Oh yes, I was wrong...

This I think approaches the limit of grammatical complexity in a lyric, which is clearly well short of that in a poem. Parenthetical clauses and the like, the devices that enable the kind of spiralling, knotting, “Celtic” sentences that Dylan Thomas favoured, tend to fall apart into their constituent lumps when set to music. Though their are beauties to be gained by going against the grain of this tendency, generally the phrases of a lyric need to be more or less self-contained.

The reason for this, I believe, has to do with the different movements of time in a poem and in a song. Although Bob Dylan has spoken of songs that can stop time, this seems to me one of those beauties against the grain. When we are listening to a song we have to keep going forward in time with it – which is why folk-song, in the English-language tradition anyway, is so predominantly narrative. Likewise, John Hinchey's excellent new study, *Like a Complete Unknown*, reveals how many of Bob's songs, even when they appear to have no storyline, have this narrative or, more accurately, dramatic development. In a poem, on the other hand, I think our minds can move more freely in time – we feel ourselves to be in a verbal space, looking back and around as well as ahead.

But this is one of those paths that leads into a far larger territory, so I'll conclude with a couple of examples of poetic effects of ambiguity and complexity achieved in song with the plainest words, and particularly through colloquial imperfections of language. One is from Van Morrison's latest album, *Down the Road*, in the song 'Steal My Heart Away', where he sings:

There's a place way up the mountainside  
 Where the world keeps standing still.

Stands still or keeps still we would normally say, but to *keep* standing still carries a suggestion of its very opposite – a repeated coming to a halt which is

not stillness at all. It also suggests, however, something of persistence or endurance – something that “keeps standing”, as a mountain does. In other words, the mountain is a place where the world is still standing as well as standing still. And a third suggestion is that this is a place where “the world” – not in the sense of the planet but in the old sense of ‘the world, the flesh and the devil’, the world of human affairs – keeps coming in order to stand still – a viewpoint, a breathing-place where you stop as you climb the mountain. And all of this suggestion springs from the ‘mistaken’ insertion of that one word “keeps”.

And to conclude, and to return to my starting point, an example from Bob Dylan:

You will search, babe,  
At any cost,  
But how long, babe,  
Can you search for what is not lost?  
Everybody will help you,  
Some people are very kind,  
But if I  
Can save you any time,  
Come on, give it to me,  
I’ll keep it with mine.

This song, ‘I’ll Keep It With Mine’, as befits its subject of seeking, or keeping, or saving, something, but we know not what, is itself an enigma. It appears to have been recorded, possibly as a demo, at the sessions for *Bringing It All Back Home* in January 1965. When it was first released, on the *Biograph* box-set in 1985, one reference in the accompanying booklet gave this date, and another placed its recording six months earlier, at the session in June 1964 that produced *Another Side of Bob Dylan*. During the years that it had circulated on bootlegs, this was the provenance usually given for it, because Bob’s piano playing is reminiscent of his playing on some of the tracks from that session.

The riddle grew when a tentative attempt at a version with full band accompaniment appeared on *The Bootleg Series Volumes 1-3* in 1991. Why the song was abandoned at this point, when a beautiful, fully-realised performance seems only one more take away, is another mystery. This version was recorded in January 1966, when Bob was laying the groundwork for what would become *Blonde on Blonde*. Although they are separated by little more than a year, the artistic distance between *Bringing It All Back Home* and *Blonde on Blonde* is considerable, and the fact that ‘I’ll Keep It With Mine’ should have survived that distance gives it a unique distinction. What is strange in all this is that the song has no apparent relations among the tracks on *Bringing It All Back Home*,

but its combination of colloquial casualness and unfathomable elusiveness is typical of the shorter pieces on *Blonde on Blonde*. So here was a song that Bob, very uncharacteristically for that period, did indeed keep with his.

The life-story of the song is peculiarly parallel with its meaning, in ways that will become apparent. So what is it about? It takes the form of a speech addressed by a man to a woman, who is either a lover or a former lover for whom he still feels tenderness, or a close friend, or someone with whom he adopts a mentor/pupil or elder/junior relationship. These are the connections in which “babe” seems likely to be heard.

The tone is solicitous: he is offering to help her, in a gentle, unassertive way, and it is this tone that sets the song apart from others of the same period that share a similar scenario. I am thinking in particular of ‘It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue’, ‘Like a Rolling Stone’ and ‘Queen Jane Approximately’, though this general form of conversation, of the singer giving instructions to a lover or ex-lover, is found in several key songs: ‘Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right’ and ‘It Ain’t Me, Babe’ and ‘To Ramona’, for example.

In a range of tones from the pleading to the imperative, the same form of address has appeared in plenty of love-songs. Elvis, for example, proved fond of the ‘directive’ approach, in ‘Don’t Be Cruel’ and ‘Treat Me Nice’ and just plain ‘Don’t’, in ‘Love Me’ and ‘Love Me Tender’, tending as time went on to be more wooing than commanding, as in ‘(Let Me Be Your) Teddy Bear’. The Beatles too took this approach, with more urgency, for their first two singles, ‘Love Me Do’ and ‘Please Please Me’. These pop precursors probably have something to do with the form’s recurrence in Bob’s early folk-rock phase.

In the songs of his I cited above, his instruction has roughly the same goal each time, which is to free his addressee from a form of false consciousness. Their tone runs a gamut from the tenderest counsel, in ‘To Ramona’, through the compassionate but commanding oracles of ‘It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue’, to the wrath of ‘Like a Rolling Stone’, which has been called ‘vicious’, ‘crowing’, ‘gloating’ and so on. I agree with John Hinchey, though, that the tone is a good deal deeper and richer than that. (I am indebted throughout this critique to the intelligence of Hinchey’s book *Like a Complete Unknown*.) As many and various performances have proved, it shows different colours as it’s turned in different lights, from triumph to grief to righteous anger. As Bob put it: “In the end it wasn’t hatred, it was telling someone something they didn’t know, telling them they were lucky.”

Within this spectrum, ‘I’ll Keep It With Mine’ belongs at the softer end, though a step or two above the infra-red of ‘To Ramona’. In that encounter “I” reminds “you” of what you already know, and have forgotten you know, though not really through any fault of your own. “I” invites you to withdraw with him into a freedom which is an interior, as it were, to the external “forces

and fixtures and friends”. In ‘It Ain’t Me, Babe’, you must withdraw from “I”, into your own unshared freedom: “Go melt back into the night”. In ‘It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue’ you must leave: the direction of freedom is no longer inward or “back into”, but outward and onward. The tone is kinder than in ‘It Ain’t Me, Babe’, but the catastrophe is more comprehensive. Your whole world is about to collapse, though you’re not necessarily to blame, and you have to get out of it. In ‘Like a Rolling Stone’, you can’t get out of it, and it is your fault. It’s a false world of your own creation, and your liberation must lie in letting it come crashing around your ears.

The tone of ‘Queen Jane Approximately’ is harder to place. A fabric of false relations is shown collapsing, but not in the “now” of ‘Like a Rolling Stone’ and ‘Baby Blue’; rather in a “when” that may not be purely predictive. It is something like the “when” of Paul Simon’s ‘Bridge Over Troubled Water’: “When you’re weary, feeling small”. In other words, if ever this should happen to you (as it could to anyone, as it has to me). For all the satirical bite with which Queen Jane’s dealings with others are portrayed, there is an empathy too in the outraged tone that seems to partake of her own feelings of outrage – a sense that these are mistakes the singer knows all too well. And it is this empathy that he will *then* be able to share with her.

‘I’ll Keep It With Mine’ seems to stand about midway between ‘To Ramona’ and ‘Queen Jane Approximately’ in the degree of sympathy it offers and in the distance between “you” and “I”: neither the physical intimacy of the former nor the definite separation of the latter. ‘To Ramona’ we picture as an actual conversation, while ‘Queen Jane’ seems cast in the form of a letter. (The apparently direct address of ‘It’s All Over Now’ is paradoxical. There would be no need, one would think, for someone actually standing by to point out to ‘Baby Blue’ that the carpet is moving under her, or that the sky is folding. Trying to visualise a setting for this address, I see someone speaking in a kind of divinatory trance, or gazing into a crystal ball – so the emphatic “now” is actually more of a future. The “you” of ‘Like a Rolling Stone’ is distanced in a different way. It’s like the “you” sometimes used in narrative – ‘you get up, you go to the door, you go outside and find yourself walking down a strange street’ – in other words, a displaced first person.)

‘I’ll Keep It With Mine’ is realisable as a conversation – just. In ‘To Ramona’ the conversational tone – consoling, advising, encouraging – and the setting – a room in a city – are clear. The elusive aspect of the song is its twisted dramatic course, which starts from a warm physical intimacy – “Ramona, come closer” – and works its way round to a note of existential isolation, almost of desolation:

For deep in my heart  
I know there is no help I can bring.

Everything passes, everything changes  
Just do what you think you should do...

The conversation of 'I'll Keep It With Mine' is without a tangible location. For no particular reason, I imagine it taking place across a café table. There is a sense of physical distance between them, and also that his encounter with her is brief, a sideshow in her preoccupied life; and that it is public – attested by that edge of urgency (“Come on, give it to me”) with which he seeks to hold her attention among “people”, among “everybody”.

The reality of the conversation is undermined, however, by the almost ungraspable nature of the offer he makes. Anyone to whom this was actually said might understandably answer, what on earth are you on about? End of conversation. And it's presumably to avert this that he begins the second verse, “I can't help it if you might think I'm odd...”. We get the tone – the gallantry, the tenor of concern, the superiority softened by self-depreciation – but what is he saying?

But if I can save you any time...

We expect his offer of help to relate to her “search”, her quest. To save someone time when they are trying to find something means to tell them where it is, or at least to tell them where it is not; which is what he did in the opening lines, telling her she is searching for “what is not lost”. His offer in the chorus is something else though:

Come on, give it to me,  
I'll keep it with mine.

On its own this is clear enough: I'll look after it for you, as well as I look after my own. But what is “it”? The phrase just before seems to make “it” be “time” – and then the offer is a conundrum. How can she give him time, and how can he keep it along with his own? Before we go further into this one, consider a second conundrum that coexists with it: the “it” of the chorus could be the “what” of the verse – “what is not lost”. So if she could give it to him, she would discover that she still had it; and if he looked after it for her, she wouldn't lose it again through not realising that she hadn't lost it. (Still with me?) In this way he might not only save her *time*, he might save *her* (any time), since what she has lost (or not lost) is obviously so vital to her that it is worth “any cost”. Indeed it may well be her *self* that she thinks she must find.

But to return to time: there is one sense in which she can give her time – which is that she can spend time with him. And there is one way that he can keep time – which is in music, in a song. The offer then would be that the time she

spends with him will become the time he keeps in his music. And this time, in the piano version of the song, is something wonderfully free and unpredictable.

Time could also be the “what” that she thinks she has lost; and in this sense it is also her true self – the life she lives when she is not wasting or losing time. “Everybody will help you, / Some people are very kind”: but help that is given to search for something you already have is only helping you to waste time. Hence the shade of sarcasm in the “some people” line, which conveys also the opposite of what it says: many people are not kind at all, or some people who seem to be kind, or think they are, are not really so, since to prolong a pointless search, even well-meaningly, is not truly kind.

There is a kind of disproportion, a mismatch, between the help offered in the chorus here and the weight of “your” problem, which we find also in ‘Queen Jane Approximately’, where to “come see me” does not seem a very adequate recompense for the scale of unhappiness that befalls her in the verses. The precedent for this was set in ‘To Ramona’, of course: “there is no help I can bring”.

Her search in ‘I’ll Keep It With Mine’ is obviously crucial to her – she will carry it out “at any cost”. But usually you seek to *find* something at any cost, or strive to accomplish something at any cost: the seeking or the striving themselves are not normally said to be done “at any cost”, because they *are* the cost, they are what is expended in achieving the goal. The implication here is that the search itself has become her goal.

This leads us into the second verse:

I can't help it  
 If you might think I'm odd  
 If I say I'm loving you  
 Not for what you are but what you're not.  
 Everybody will help you  
 Discover what you set out to find  
 But if I...

On one level what she is not is what she thinks she has to find. Here then his attitude to her search seems to turn around. He loves her for her questing nature, her dissatisfaction with what she is. It is not the search that he finds pointless, but its end. The thing that “everybody” can help her find is not worth the finding – or so he implies, in the very flatness of his statement, the pointless verbal variance of “discover” and “find”. We discover what we find, we find what we discover – what’s the difference? With its approach to tautology, the line itself fails to discover anything (an effect reinforced, of course, by the echoing of the same portion of the verse before).

The love of you for “what you’re not” ties in with – and perhaps helped

to prepare – something that John Hinchey sees in ‘Like a Rolling Stone’. He quotes the end of the last verse – “You’re invisible now, you’ve got no secrets to conceal” – and comments (I quote him fragmentarily):

a visionary “now”... breaks the spell of the rage-filled “once upon a time” out of which the song arose. This “now” is identified with the emergence of your “invisible” self from the social covering that has made its nakedness a “secret”. To be “invisible”... seems to be Dylan’s ultimate image for an authentic being-in-the-world. “You’re invisible now”, then, is a statement equivalent to “I see you” ...

The song’s ending, Hinchey adds a little later, is “a revelation of a naked self beyond identity, beyond personality, beyond its own creations”.

This key surely fits the lock of our conundrum: this is what you are right to seek “at any cost”, but which we can never really have “lost”. The personality in this context is what you “are” – wherein you are like “everybody” (which is what they can help you to discover); and in this sense of “are”, the true self is what you “are not” – which is not like everybody, or even like “some people”; it is that in which you are not a “kind”, and in which you can be truly loved.

In this courteous kind of conversation, however, the singer cannot force open the door. He can only lay his offer on the table. Which is why the song discovers it cannot get any further, and begins to repeat itself in the second verse. In the third, it becomes aware that it cannot do more than repeat itself, and begins to speak about this in parables:

The train leaves  
At half past ten  
But it will be back  
In the same old spot again.  
The conductor  
He’s still stuck on the line,  
But if I...

Musically, the first four lines do what they say: at the word “again” the voice has returned to the same note as at “ten”. The train seems to be the music itself, the rickety-tick clattering of the piano keys, running up and down. (I may be pushing the bounds of plausibility, but the reference to the number ten, and to half of it, makes me think of the two hands we hear going back and forth on the keyboard.) If the music is the train, then the conductor seems to be the words, “stuck on the line” in order to come in on time with a rhyme for “mine”.

The train is so appropriate musically that we're not pulled up short by its sudden, unprepared appearance. (It's interesting to see, in passing, how this musical fitness corresponds in effect to Eliot's "meaning": thorough it, the lyric gets past our guard without us even noticing.) But how did this train come to be here? Can it, for a start, be part of the same conversation as in the first two verses? It's hard to see him saying these lines to her: he seems to be musing to himself – musing, perhaps, as he watches the train go with her on board. That sets the rest of the song in a rather different light. It becomes a song of parting; her "search" is an actual journey, and his plea in the chorus is for some sort of keepsake (albeit an intangible one).

This train, then, seems connected to one of the immortal trains of American song – the one that Robert Johnson watches leaving in 'Love in Vain':

When the train it left the station  
with two lights on behind,  
The blue light was my blues  
and the red light was my mind.

If this song stands somewhere in back of 'I'll Keep It With Mine', it perhaps provided the cue for the latter's unusual tone of gallantry, and the idea of holding on to something for her, through the unique and touching image that Johnson begins with:

I followed her to the station  
with her suitcase in my hand.

The train may be the actual vehicle of her search; it may also be, as I said before, a parable of it. His confidence in its return is a counterpoint to the irrevocability of departure for Johnson in 'Love in Vain'. Hence the very unforlorn tone of this farewell, if that's what it is.

The parable could be parodic, the search, like the train, just coming back to "the same old spot again". But this is true only from the point of view of the conductor: while the passengers get off elsewhere, using the train as a means to an end, he sticks with it, in the same way that she attaches herself to her search.

The return of the refrain, "But if I – ", seems to differentiate "I" from the conductor, as it does in the earlier verses from "some people" and "everybody". But by its nature the refrain also shows the parallel between conductor and singer, who must keep to the timetable of his song and come back to the same old spot.

He makes his offer again, politely, but he now knows he cannot "conduct"

her any further: after all, if she was going to accept his offer, you would think she'd save him the time of repeating it thrice. Nevertheless the offer stands, and he has made it good: he has kept the time she has given him in the time of his song.

Now we can see how fitting it is that the song should have remained 'unfulfilled' for so long – and why the search for its fulfilment was, apparently, abandoned. The band version, as it gradually comes together, seems to take away the freedom of time we hear in the solo performance, the freedom through which it escapes being a statement merely of futility. It sounds as though Bob, in the very act of seeking the song's completion, realised that he sought something that had not been lost. And rather than let "everybody" help him, he kept it with his.

Could all this be too much to find in so few simple words and a simple tune? That I'll have to leave to you.