

“I Is Another”: In Search of Bob Dylan’s Many Masks

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Abstract

The phenomenon called Robert Zimmerman aka Bob Dylan has always intrigued and fascinated the world for decades. The amorphous nature of his musical journey makes it difficult to map and define his career as an artist. Nonetheless, it’s been a while that academia has embraced Dylan and a number of books and research articles have since made their foray to analyse and appreciate a myriad career that has spanned across more than five decades. Through an overall study of Dylan’s musical oeuvre, this paper attempts to trace the diverse, fractured self that lies beneath the mask of the pop-icon.

Keywords: music, songs, self, enlightenment, postmodern, faith, protest.

Bob Dylan. The icon. The man who stirred up a generation into action with his fiery lyrics, but soon withdrew from active spokespersonship. The man who started his musical journey from being Robert Zimmerman, the Jewish folk singer and achieved the cult status of a Christian musical prophet. A singer who constantly changed his musical form- from folk to rock n’ roll to jazz and blues - incessantly deconstructing and reinventing himself. A persona that became as slippery as his constant shifts. Who is he? What is the craze about? The answer is 'Blowin in the wind'. To understand the enigma named Bob Dylan and his phenomenal artistry, it is essential to understand this many-faced man and the evolution of his faces as his music changed in content and texture. In the Introduction to *Bob Dylan: Like a Complete Unknown*, editor David Yaffe (2011) rightly notes:

Indeed, if anything has been constant in Dylan’s career, it’s change. He walks into the car as one guy and exits as someone else. “I’m not there, I’m gone,” he sang, and yet here he is, sort of. (p. xvii)

Here is a man who experienced the 'world gone wrong' and penned the poetics of survival and death, faith and doubt, active participation and passive observation, of existence and apocalypse.

The birth of an artist: from Robert Zimmerman to Bob Dylan

Dylan’s early songs have often been labelled as belonging to the ‘protest phase’ which is marked by his intense attack on contemporary socio-political upheavals. These compositions were not just isolated ramblings of a disgruntled bard; they targeted the existing order and wanted to bring it down by stirring people into action. But curious it is to note that in 1961, when Dylan set foot in New York, he had no voice against the severe repression, racism and militarism that plagued the US in 1960s. Ben Corbett notes:

By all accounts, it was Dylan's girlfriend, Suze Rotolo, that nudged him down the road as an activist singer. The daughter of union organizers, and a volunteer for the Congress of Racial Equality, Rotolo encouraged Dylan to perform at political rallies. At a February 1962 CORE benefit, he introduced his just-written broadside, "The Death of Emmitt Till," his very first "protest" song. (Corbett, 2017)

The marginalised sects of the society, the oppressed, disenchanted youth found in Dylan a voice to cling onto and they embraced Dylan as their own. He became an instant hit, and for a large section of people, Dylan appeared as a messiah, an avatar – which ironically he himself would later look back, loath and move away from. In this phase of popularity and fame, with the young musical genius penning down some of the finest lyrics, Dylan's songs reflect Enlightenment social philosophy which calls for the use of reason in order to continually improve the individual and society. Dylan's active support for the Civil Rights Movement and his stance on the socio-political scenario shaped the contours of his artistry. Eighteenth century German philosopher and one of the key thinkers of Enlightenment philosophy, Immanuel Kant believed that we are far from what could be regarded as the ideal state of being but maintained that human beings have the capabilities to attain that state by using reason (Rocheleau, 2005, n.p.) Therefore, this presupposes a clear-cut role for the individual whereby one should enact one's own duty to lead oneself as well as the entire society towards an emancipated state of existence. Thus here the individual has specific responsibilities, certain roles to perform and act as a vital cog in the wheel in order to transform the society – an outlook which he persistently hammers home all through his early lyrics. In Jordy Rocheleau's words, "Dylan also cries out for social liberty to think and act without censure. Like Enlightenment liberal John Stuart Mill, Dylan fears a tyranny of the majority that restrains individual development" (2005, n.p.).

During this time, while associated with the Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee, Dylan was influenced by and attracted to Joan Baez- a collaboration that was magical in its own accord. In his 2004 autobiography "*Chronicles: Volume One*," Dylan wrote that, back in Minnesota, the first time he saw Baez on TV,

I couldn't stop looking at her, didn't want to blink. . . . The sight of her made me sigh. All that and then there was the voice. A voice that drove out bad spirits . . . she sang in a voice straight to God. . . . Nothing she did didn't work" (Corbett, 2017).

Recording the strife of a country hillbilly, the song "Talkin' New York" (*Bob Dylan* (1962)) narrates the tale of "blowing my [his] lungs out for a dollar a day" to survive in the big demonic city. Although not an immediate commercial success, this album unmistakably sets the tone for his early campaigns. Dylan followed this up with *The Freewhilin Bob Dylan* (1963) which consolidated his status as the spokesperson for the downtrodden. The album includes "Blowin' in the Wind" (that later achieved an iconic status) which clearly extols freedom and offers a plea for individual's autonomy in a world paralysed by oppression. With a spirit almost akin to the rebellious grit of the early Romantics like Blake and Byron, the song raises questions about war, peace and freedom: questions that each time culminate into an ambiguous refrain – "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind/ The answer is blowin' in the wind" – suggesting either that the answer is extremely palpable, or that it is as elusive as wind. This dichotomy is continued as Dylan voices his desperate cry for freedom and wonders "How many years can a mountain exist/ Before it's washed to the sea?/ Yes 'n' how many times can some people exist/ Before they're allowed to be free?". By relating washing away of a mountain to people's freedom Dylan acknowledges the fact that complete freedom is an incessant process, while simultaneously implying that it should not deter people from relentlessly seeking the same. He follows this assertion by a call to arms: "Yes

'n' how many times must a man turn his head/ Pretending he just doesn't see?" only to conclude that The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind/ The answer is blowin' in the wind". This ambiguity and incomprehensible tone of the lyrics corroborate with Dylan's own disenchanted, slippery position as a political spokesman. Corbett notes:

While 1963 was Dylan's most active year in politics, it was also his most disillusioning. Feeling co-opted by white movement leaders and despising their expectations of him to become its star champion, Dylan began his retreat. Although he never stopped supporting the black struggle, becoming a Pied Piper for liberal guilt-afflicted whites was a hypocritical role he was unwilling to play (Corbett, 2017).

"A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" is another song where the prophetic, if not almost apocalyptic refrain "And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard/ And it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall" is once again equivocal in its implications. It has often been interpreted as referring to the Cuban Missile Crisis; but this seems implausible given the fact that Dylan wrote it more than a month prior to the incident. Nevertheless, the song is once again about individual's fight against the world fraught with violence where the condition of the modern individual is akin to a "newborn baby with wild wolves all around it"

"Masters of War", however, is more direct and compelling in its approach. It is marked by an absolute disgust and unqualified protest against the war and its votaries. This song too portrays the individual as part of the entire mankind who has been oppressed, tortured, brutally murdered and should raise his voice against the oppressors. The last lines are especially forceful in its contempt against the 'masters of war' and Dylan cries out: "And I hope that you die/ And your death'll come soon/ I will follow your casket/ In the pale afternoon/ And I'll watch while you're lowered/ Down to your deathbed/ And I'll stand over your grave/ 'Til I'm sure that you're dead." These songs articulated the sentiments of many, and Dylan found himself as a brand ambassador of protest, a poster boy of the folk community, a voice for the oppressed. But, soon Dylan turned his back on all of these and standing over the grave of his past, adopted an entirely distinct poetics for his art.

It is interesting to note in this context that Dylan was originally called Robert Zimmerman who renamed himself as Bob Dillon in 1960 which once again changed to Bob Dylan- apparently because the later spelling looked cooler (Spargo & Ream, 2009, p.90). According to Daniel Mark Epstein in his biography, "*The Ballad of Bob Dylan*," the switch from Zimmerman to Dylan began back when Dylan was 17 or 18. (Corbett, 2017) At the time, wrote Epstein,

He was a great fan of Matt Dillon, the sheriff of the television series "*Gunsmoke*." In 1958, he confided to his high school sweetheart [Echo Helstrom] that he planned to devote his life to music, adding that 'I know what I'm going to call myself. I've got this great name— Bob Dillon.' That was how he told new friends to spell his (assumed) last name. He also told them that Dillon was his mother's maiden name (it wasn't), and that Dillon was a town in Oklahoma (it isn't) (Corbett, 2017).

It is a common idea that Zimmerman was inspired by Dylan Thomas which made him adopt it in his name. But in a 1978 *Playboy* interview, Ron Rosenbaum asked Dylan, "By the time you arrived in New York, you'd changed your name from Robert Zimmerman to Bob Dylan. Was it because of Dylan Thomas?" Dylan's response was:

No, I haven't read that much of Dylan Thomas... It wasn't that I was inspired by reading some of his poetry and going "Aha!" and changing my name to Dylan. If I thought he was

that great, I would have sung his poems and could just have easily changed my name to Thomas... I just chose that name and it stuck.(Corbett, 2017)

This constant search for the perfect name, a perfect image to consolidate his individual persona was an externalization of the insecurities, doubts and anxieties of an artist who was trying to find the perfect medium for articulation of his kind of poetry, attempting to strike the right chord. It was the attempt of a performer trying to don the perfect hat – a hat that fits him and conceals him. Once the stage name of the artist was finalized, so was the final goal of his artistry. This self-assurance, if not self-assertion, that he gained became the hallmark of this phase of Dylan's career. Now he is more certain in his approach.

But Dylan was not going to stop here, and the portrait of this artist was going to have strokes of different shades as he was going to travel a long way in constantly changing and reinventing himself.

“The Times They Are A-Changin”

As an artist, Dylan has always resisted easy appropriation and categorization. Just when his artistic persona was assuming a particular shape, he diluted it and metamorphosed into a new avatar altogether by embracing rock n' roll. This sharp turn baffled not only his fans but his critics as well. However, this made little impact on Dylan. He was going to sing his own song, least bothering about the response it garnered. Philosophically and ideologically speaking, this phase can be seen as offering a critique of the Enlightenment principles of his early days. Tony Fluxman (1991) argues that the complex nature of Dylan's works can be fruitfully analysed in the light of Adorno and Horkheimer's exploration of the late capitalist society. Adorno and Horkheimer, in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* show how the ideals of the Enlightenment have paradoxically produced a new framework of myth, fear and domination instead of moving away from it, thus rendering complete freedom impossible (Fluxman, 1991, p.92). This paradigmatic shift in Dylan's career saw him withdrawing from active spokespersonship. He jettisoned everything he stood for and grew disillusioned with his own protest songs of the past. Although "The Times They Are A-Changin" is often labelled as a protest song, it also seems to mark the transition where Dylan would espouse a different version of protest and its outcome. Dylan unerringly grew sceptical of complete enfranchisement. The refrain of the song does not hail a joyous future, but it is just an arbitrary change, which is underway. Although many young Americans interpreted the lyrics of the song as a about the gap between liberals and conservatives, Dylan himself said in an interview, "I didn't mean "The Times They Are a-Changin" as a statement ... It's a feeling" (Heylin, 2010, p. 153). Therefore, the forceful "hard rain" seems to have given way for a truism, that the time changes.

Another Side Of Bob Dylan was released in 1964 and sung about another side of Dylan's multifaceted persona where he turns away from the socio-political concerns and focuses more on personal relationships. The album includes "All I really want to do" where Dylan, unmoved by any other earthly concern, sings: "All I really want to do/ Is, baby, be friends with you". More strikingly, the album also includes "My Back Pages" which discards and even pokes fun at his earlier war cry. He finds that "Ah, but I was so much older then/ I'm younger than that now." In a self-admonishing tone, he says, "A self-ordained professor's tongue/ Too serious to fool/ Spouted out that liberty/ Is just equality in school/ "Equality," I spoke the word/ As if a wedding vow/ Ah, but I was so much older then/ I'm younger than that now." This is the new Dylan who can look back at his past self, not with anger but with a changed perspective. His lyrics are changing, his social dissection giving way to presenting his personal self. He is turning inwards.

The change in lyrics and content resonated itself in his change of musical medium as well and in 1965, his move to go electric created a major ruckus among his admirers and critics alike. Dylan gradually stopped playing to the gallery, and started catering to his inner self – a move which possibly stems from his own consolidated position as an artist. Songs in this era do not reflect any pre-established truth but present the society as it is. It is almost as if the rebellious early Romantics in Dylan has given way for an Eliot like scepticism and a dim view of the world. He is disillusioned, aware that the world is a “heap of broken images, where the sun beats,/And the dead tree gives no shelter” (Eliot, 2004, p.61) and no “hard rain” can bring salvation.

The journey without – the journey within: “I’m still on the road”

The subsequent years witness Dylan’s shift from a sceptical, disillusioned modern bard to a more distant postmodern observer. The tone that he adopts now is no longer that of a social critique but of an objective participant. Many postmodern thinkers have questioned the very concept of social criticism opining that if someone’s perception is biased because of one’s own cultural and ideological preconditioning, it nullifies any scope for objective judgment and renders all ‘truth’ relative to individual’s perspective. Such ‘truth’ is but a hackneyed perspective. Rocheleau argues that “Dylan, who is of the same generation as Lyotard and Derrida, shares the French philosophers’ scepticism about rational understanding” (2005, n.p.).

This decade traced the change in Dylan who will not point his finger at the decaying and disintegrating society but accept the ‘nothingness’ and call it existence. He accepts: “We always did feel the same/ We just saw it from a different point of view/ Tangled up in Blue” (“Tangled Up in Blue”). From commenting about the anarchic world order and attempting to find a meaning, he enters the meaninglessness where “Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot / Fighting in the captain’s tower/ While Calypso singers laugh at them/ And fishermen hold flowers” (“Desolation Row”). And thus continues Dylan’s lyrics which grow more and more incomprehensible. The images in his lyrics are distorted, symptomatic of the celebration of anarchy that typifies postmodern artistry. In “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)” he sketches: “Advertising signs that con you / Into thinking you’re the one/ That can do what’s never been done/ That can win what’s never been won/ Meantime life outside goes on/ All around you”- thereby painting a picture of the ‘hyper-reality’ that defines and accommodates human existence. When he pens the lines “It Takes A Lot To Laugh It Takes A Train To Cry” or “Well Mack the finger said to Louie the King/ I got forty red white and blue shoe strings/ And a thousand telephones that don’t ring” (“Highway 61 Revisited”) – he does not provide an explanation, nor any clarification. In a true postmodern sense, he debunks any fixity, any formulation of a stable meaning of his lyrics. Such liberation generates a free play - with the meaning getting constantly ‘deferred’, entering an incessant regression.

Redemption and Salvation: “I and I”

If we fast forward a few years and stop at 1979, we witness Dylan suddenly converting to Christianity; a move which caused tremendous furore among his admirers. Within this span of time, Dylan had suffered a failed marriage, a failed movie – *Renaldo and Clara* (1978) which, in the words of David Yaffe (2011), “tried to achieve a collective correlative... but failed to achieve it” (p. 34). His conversion seemed to have a healing impact and provide him an ephemeral reprieve. Dylan sang, “I lost every dime/ But I’m richer by far with a satisfied mind” (“A Satisfied Mind”) and more categorically: “I was blinded by the devil/ Born already ruined/ Stone-cold dead/ As I stepped out of the womb/ By His grace I have been touched/ By His word I have been healed/ By His hand I have been delivered/ By His spirit I Have been sealed/ I’ve been saved” (“Saved”). He has found a solace: “Well, I’m hanging on to a solid rock/ Made before the foundation of the

world/ And won't let go"("Solid Rock"). In an interview in 1976, on being asked how he perceived Divinity, Dylan replied:

I can see God in a daisy. I can see God at night in the wind and rain. I see Creation just about everywhere. The highest form of song is prayer. King David's, Solomon's, the wailing of a coyote, the rumble of the earth. It must be wonderful to be God. There's so much going on out there that you can't get to it all. It would take longer than forever. (Pichaske, 2010, p. 105)

This sudden shift to Christianity was interesting and complex in ways more than one. He "has epitomised the longings of those who seek something salvic from popular music", and "served this function against his will" (Webb, 2006, p.26) but ironically, his desire for privacy intensified his iconicity with his fans and critics trying to find out the real man beneath the mask. Webb (2006) notes: "When he converted to Christianity, he broke the cultural mirror that had threatened to imprison his image...He was saved, but his fans seemed lost" (p.26). Dylan had typically been the 'prophet' who articulated his anti-establishment rhetoric, and as we have seen, his postmodern persona, by its own definition, was essentially anti-institutional. However, the artist in him needed institutions to criticise; his art needed them in order to exist as the existence of grand narratives is indispensable for counter-narratives to evolve. This 'Catch-22' situation animates most of Dylan's lyrics of this period. The media branded him as a harbinger of chaos, and Dylan himself popularised it. In his 2004 60 Minutes television interview, Dylan called himself "the Archbishop of Anarchy" and in his constant jugglery of the man and the mask, the art and artist, performer and performance, truly became the "Kierkegaard of rock and roll" (Webb, 2006, p.31).

Of further interest is Dylan's own remark on his conversion, "I've never felt Jewish. I don't really consider myself Jewish or non-Jewish. I don't have much of a Jewish background. I'm not a patriot to any creed. I believe in all of them and none of them. A devout Christian or Moslem can be just as effective as a devout Jew" (Spargo & Ream, 2009, p. 91). This remark further problematizes the notion of faith and offers a rather indifferent attitude towards religion where faith has been rendered meaningless. If we accept this perception, religion, in a world which is devoid of meaning and significance, offers no respite. In 1965, in an interview by Joseph Haas, he had claimed "I just don't have any religion or philosophy. I can't say much about any of them" (McGregor, 1972, p.112) and yet again in February 1966, when asked by Nat Hentoff, as to what does he look forward to, Dylan had replied: "Salvation..just plain salvation" (Route TV, 2017). What is worth remembering is that religion, while providing an alternative narrative for the ideals of Enlightenment and reason, was an institution in itself, predicating upon certain myths, beliefs and structure. Thus Christianity could offer Dylan only a temporary refuge from postmodern discontents, but not dole out unfaltering and perpetual solace.

Dylan's 1983 album *Infidels* appears at this complex stage. Jonathan Lethem argues, "on the part of an audience ostensibly still feeling betrayed by Dylan's public avowal of born-again Christianity in 1979, for proof of his reversion to a figure who could support the romantic projections of a counterculture (one meandering, with its idols, toward middle age, making romantic projections all the more urgent). *Infidels* was taken for that proof, and a great sigh of relief was issued in reply" (2009, p. 161).

Nevertheless, reference to Jesus and Christianity still remains in *Infidels*, as well as in many of his later albums. However, his unwavering faith has suffered a disjuncture, he questions: "Freedom just around the corner for you/ But with truth so far off, what good will it do"("Jokerman"). What we have now is a tentative mix of faith and disillusion, of a fractured 'I' who desperately searches for its nucleus, only to be nonchalantly accept an oafish mishmash of its

many halves. In the words of Lethem again, the song "'I and I' allegorizes a journey from home and hearth, but here Dylan never returns, ...In a sense, this song presents *Infidels's* paradigmatic face, declaring an important statement and withholding it at the same time. The revelation "'I and I' never quite delivers is worth going back to try for" (2009, p. 163).

"World Gone Wrong"

The period from 1981 up until the advent of the new millennium traced the ambiguities in Dylan's career and life, something that seeped into the lyrics of his songs during this time. Marshall comments:

"As the eighties developed, however, wider social changes involving a reconceptualisation of both 'rock' and 'the sixties' meant that Dylan gradually began to lose the battle with his history. During this period Dylan became understood almost entirely in nostalgic terms and his live shows and public appearances functioned as living reproductions of past glories" (Marshall, Chp. 6).

Marshall further notes how this dramatic phase of Dylan's life drastically changed him, his artistry and the reception of his music. He is no longer the champion of the oppressed, a social reformer nor is he the preacher, singing songs of God's mercy- he is confused and this shaped the chart-topping yet uninspired songs by Dylan. 'Caribbean Wind', 'Angelina', 'Every Grain of Sand' and 'Jokerman' were some of the major songs by Dylan in this period.

The new millennium: "Things Have Changed"

With the advent of the new millennium, Dylan's songs change tonal quality owing to his age and choice of subjects. The content continues to become a pastiche of multiple influences. In accordance with the content, the music also takes the form of nineteenth century minstrel show music. He has become a "hybrid", as Yaffe (2011) terms him, a mass entertainer at one minute and a "gospel singer" the next. He was becoming many faces at the same time, adopting many masks, many personae each of which are unique and exclusive. Ironically, Dylan was fond of Rimbaud's maxim: "Je est un autre" which can be literally translated as "I is someone else". According to the Barnes and Noble Review: The Bootleg Series Volume 8: "The mess of the thing ultimately goes back to his own uncertainty about what his music is and what it is for; he was coming out of a long period of contrived writing, fallow orchestration, more than ten years of desperate flailing for a something that not only could be put on the market but demanded to be brought into the world." It further comments, "There's no soul in the performance, and nobody" (Marchus, 2013, n.p.).

In 2001, he released the album *Love and Theft*, the title of which can be regarded as a multidimensional metaphor. The sound of loss and trauma reverberate in his lyrics and is accentuated by the loss of his mother whereby he enters into a Freudian state of melancholia. At one point, he cries out, "I wish my mother was still alive" ("Lonesome Day Blues"). Considering this, the words 'love' and 'theft' finds a poignant, personal context – that of Dylan's mother being stolen away. His inner disjointed self mirrored itself and shaped his dislocated artwork. It was a patchwork, an amalgamation of various musical forms that he has been influenced by. In 2010, Joni Mitchel said that "Bob is not authentic at all...everything about Bob is a deception" – referring to Dylan "embodying the cultural pastiche he wove together by yoking incongruous elements" (Yaffe, 2011, p. 93).

The older Dylan became, the more he lost the upper part of his vocal range and this naturally resulted in a further change in choice of musical forms. Today there are arguments,

opinions and disagreements related to Dylan being awarded the Nobel Prize for literature with many questioning whether his music can be called “literature”. Dylan himself said: “...like Shakespeare, I too am often occupied with the pursuit of my creative endeavours and dealing with all aspects of life’s mundane matters. ‘Who are the best musicians for these songs?’ ‘Am I recording in the right studio?’ ‘Is this song in the right key?’...not once have I ever had the time to ask myself, ‘*Are my songs Literature?*’” (Bob Dylan – Banquet Speech, 2016). Well, Dylan is a man who has always blurred boundaries of artistic form and content, shaped his lyrics by constantly deconstructing and reconstructing himself. So it’s natural for his music to bend the boundaries of conventional ideas and opinions about what is literature and carve out a niche for itself. He may no longer be the fiery, iconic voice of protest shouting out to stir some action but is more distanced in his observation. He knows:

Everybody going and I want to go too
 Don’t wanna take a chance with somebody new
 I did all I could, I did it right there and then
 I’ve already confessed, no need to confess again (“Thunder on the Mountain”).

Note: All the lyrics quoted in this paper are taken from the official website of Bob Dylan: <https://www.bobdylan.com/>

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Even then, Dylan knew there were more masks yet to come. "The Elston Gunn name thing was only temporary," he adds in *Chronicles*. "What I was going to do as soon as I left home was just called myself Robert Allen." Later, another theory posited that his pseudonym grew out of an early appreciation for the Matt Dillon character in the TV series *Gunsmoke*. The ever-enigmatic Dylan — who told *Playboy* in 1978 that "I just chose the name and it stuck" — was typically of no help. In *In Search of the Real Bob Dylan*, childhood friend Larry Kegan remembered Dylan "usually had a poetry book in his hand" — sometimes the poems of Dylan Thomas.