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BOB DYLAN'S AMERICAN ADAM

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BOB DYLAN'S AMERICAN ADAM

A song on Bob Dylan's second album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963), calls attention to his interest in origins and antecedents, newness and repetition. The album itself was a second beginning for Dylan, marking his swerve away from his first incarnation as a folk and blues singer (only two songs on his first album, *Bob Dylan* (1962), were his own compositions; on *Freewheelin'* they all are). It is not that *Bob Dylan* was a false start, but it didn't tell the whole truth, just as the name 'Bob Dylan' said something different from 'Robert Allen Zimmerman'. For an American artist, at least of Dylan's generation, these fault lines matter: the New World is still defined against the Old, Americans still in search for the one thing that resolutely distinguishes them from their European heritage. Like the country *Freewheelin'* encompasses, "From the Golden Gate Bridge all the way to the Statue of Liberty" ("Down the Highway"), Dylan wasn't *sui generis* but remade in his – *its* – own image. Such staged beginnings are inevitably concerned with the very beginning, as well as to start to end, and much of *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* is given over to the friction between forward motion and where such motion might lead.¹ In this context, the alternating pull of the utopian and dystopian in "Talking World War III Blues" carries more than ordinary force. New York, rather than Eden, is burning here, but the notion of Eden is summoned forth:²

Well, I spied me a girl and before she could leave

I said, "Let's go play Adam and Eve"

I took her by the hand and my heart was thumpin'

She said, "Hey man, you crazy or somethin'?"

You seen what happened last time they started"

The satirical tone is in keeping with the lyric of the song as a whole. The euphemistic pass the singer makes toward the girl in the second line, and the rationale she gives for its rejection in the last (the accusation isn't that he's 'crazy' in the casual sense of 'mad'—'You want to do what? We just met!'—but reckless) are of a piece with the punch lines of other verses. "He said it was a bad dream" is the psychiatrist's (reported) response to learning of the singer's nightmare in the first verse (Dylan, in a manner characteristic of his talking blues songs, delivers the line deadpan); two verses on, the singer reacts to thermal radiation thus: "I peeked out from a manhole cover / Wondering who turned the lights on us";³ verse ten has the singer, desperate to hear "a voice of some kind," phoning the "operator of time," and getting less than he bargained for: "'When you hear the beep it will be three o' clock' / She said that for over an hour / N' I hung up." There are more; but his Adamic riffing reaches back to a much older wit.

The language Dylan uses in this Edenic vignette is tightly compressed from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and from the Bible. The verse is steeped in Miltonic diction—"spied" (a modernisation of "espi'd"), "leave," "play," "took," "hand," "heart," "started"—and particularly the diction that is associated with the moments Dylan is reimagining: Adam and Eve's first meeting, and their sexual union. "Well, I spied me a girl and before she could leave," is rendered from Eve's account of her first sight of Adam, "I espied thee, fair indeed, and tall" (iv. 475), and Adam's account of first meeting Eve:

seeing me, she turned;

I followed her, she what was honour knew,

And with obsequious majesty approved

My pleaded reason. (viii. 508-10)⁴

Dylan's singer has learned from the experience of Milton's Adam; he gets in his "pleaded reason" before Eve can "turn," before "the girl" can "leave".⁵ The knowing comedy of the singer's "pleaded reason," "Let's go play Adam and Eve," has both surface and depth. Dylan is playing at playing ("I spied" with my little eye...) and the game is seduction; we need not have read our Bible or thumbed the pages of *Paradise Lost* to get the gist; but these lines are all the more knowing for what they know of Milton. Here is Adam, after following Eve in consuming the forbidden fruit:

"But come, so well refreshed, now let us play,
As meet is, after such delicious fare;
For never did thy beauty since the day
I saw thee first and wedded thee, adorned
With all perfections, so inflame my sense
With ardor to enjoy thee, fairer now
Then ever, bounty of this virtuous tree." (ix. 27-33)

"Let's go play"; "now let us play": to play is not to play at all, but to get down to business. Milton's double imperative, "come," "now," has its alluring charm, but is also impatient for the sort of action Dylan generates in the idiomatic elision of the conjunction from "go and play" to "go play." Dylan's reconfiguration, however, reorders the Miltonic line: "I said, 'Let's'" *prefaces* the proposition to follow with an address of common purpose; where Milton's Adam is free to express his subjective demand, Dylan's understands the necessary negotiations of a chance seduction.

Such images of carnality are not straightforward when considered against the wider patterning of Miltonic association compressed within this single Dylan verse. The image of the singer taking the girl by the hand leads us back to the very next sequence from book IX:

Her hand he seized, and to a shady bank,
Thick overhead with verdant roof imbow' red
He led her nothing loath... (ll. 137-9)

Eve is complicit, and both abscond to the “shadie bank” to take “their fill of love and love’s disport” (l. 1042). But the carnal desire inherent in Adam seizing Eve’s hand recalls a contrasting want in the moment of their first, still unfallen, physical contact:

“Part of my soul I seek thee, and thee claim
My other half”: with that thy gentle hand
Seized mine, I yielded... (iv. 487-9)

These instances both lead to sexual intercourse—to that “transported touch” (viii. 530) that sets the “heart” “thumpin’” in anticipation—but of very different kinds. The seizing of the hand here is not an image of lust but an aspect of blessed union, further compelled by the physical search of Adam’s body for what was once its own. Such searching is fused into Dylan’s verse-tableau as the image of seizing hands finds its original separation in the verb “took.” This is the biblical exposition of the moment of Eve’s inception:

And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the LORD

God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. (Gen 2: 21-22)

He took one of his ribs: if Genesis provides the warp for Dylan's verse, Milton provides the weft: though sleeping, Adam's "internal sight" grants him the vision of Eve's beginning as God "Who stooping opened my left side, and took / From thence a rib" (viii. 461-465); later, immediately after his conjugal union with Eve, when "weak / against the charm of beauty's powerful glance," Adam supposes nature "from my side subducting, took perhaps / More than enough" (ll. 530-6).

Dylan's use of Biblical allusion is drawn through that of Walt Whitman; Whitman had recycled it—*Americanised* it—before him. Under the title *Children of Adam* Whitman dedicates a whole section of *Leaves of Grass* to "Adam, as central figure and type."⁶ Whitman's Adam is the subject of the first and last poem, framing the grouping in an arrangement that places him as its controlling symbol. Yet even in "To the Garden the World", Whitman's first poem about the first man, his theme is that of recurrence. This is the complete poem:

To the garden the world anew ascending,
Potent mates, daughters, sons, preluding,
The love, the life of their bodies, meaning and being,
Curious here behold my resurrection after slumber,
The revolving cycles in their wide sweep having brought me again,
Amorous, mature, all beautiful to me, all wondrous,
My limbs and the quivering fire that ever plays through them, for
reasons, most wondrous,
Existing I peer and penetrate still,

Content with the present, content with the past,
By my side or back of me Eve following,
Or in front, and I following her just the same.

The governing motif is that of Adam's phallic potency, a potency of *origination* but not of *origin*; not a 'new world ascending' but "the world anew," recreated once more—not Adam but the *American Adam*.⁷ Erection is cast as "resurrection," "the revolving cycles" having returned Adam, "*again*," to maturity, to his essential state of manhood and of self. From such state all things will flow, "daughters, sons," their "love, the life of their bodies, meaning and being," but the crucial relationship of procreation is not between Adam and Eve but between Adam and "the garden." The imagery and complex syntax of the first line suggest this mutuality: whether we read phallic rise as a response to the garden, or as meeting the garden's own growth, or of their shared growth, or symbiotic abundance, the figures reject clausal separation, their union sealed in the phrase "Potent mates" (a phrase made all the more emphatic for its being turned-down to begin the next line). Such mutuality is set against the reciprocity of Adam's interactions with Eve, first him leading, "By my side or back of me Eve following," then "her in front," "and I following," but never pressing forth in shared purpose. Indeed, from here Eve is left behind, these lines marking her only appearance in *Children of Adam*.

Returning to Dylan, the heft of his portrayal of the creation myth in "Talkin' World War III Blues" lies beneath the surface of its allusion, the weight of which isn't felt until the song's denouement. The girl's retort is as witty a rebuttal as the singer's proposition is knowing, perhaps more so as Dylan puns on the colloquialism "man" and its universal homophone 'Man,' but even with this wider application the tone is light and it is not until the comic mask slips that Dylan's allusions reveal their serious face. Such allusions, fallen or not,

are of union and reunion. But in Dylan's rendering, like Whitman's before him, Eve turns away from Adam—whose figure, in the guise of the singer, is left to pursue companionship in vain. The image of hands in conjunction with the verb “took” appears one last time in *Paradise Lost*, in the very last lines:

They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way. (xii. 648-9)

As when “hand in hand” they first met in “love's embraces” (iv. 221-2), Milton's Adam and Eve remain joined, the searching of their bodies quieted in their palpable grip. Dylan's singer, however, is left to reflect on the homogenised alienation of his modern American Eden:

Well, now time passed and now it seems
Everybody's having them dreams
Everybody sees theirself
Walkin' around with no one else

“Everybody...Everybody...no one else”: such is the line that gives the lie to the dream and rights the myth.

¹ The ‘beginning’ is a recurrent theme in Dylan, no more so than in “Man Gave Names To All The Animals” (1979), a song that transplants the biblical story, from Genesis, of Adam's naming of the animals on to American native soil. The refrain of the song, itself repeated, repeats the phrase “in the beginning” three times.

² Dylan, “Changing of the Guards”, 1978: “But Eden is burning, either get ready for elimination / Or else your hearts must have the courage for the changing of the guards”.

³ In the 1964 Halloween concert at Philharmonic Hall Dylan drops the “us”, pausing before “on” to emphasise the pun on the more common phrase, ‘who turned the lights off?’

⁴ Spying forms part of an extended correlation that pairs Eve with Satan.

⁵ The rhyme of “leave” with “Eve” foreshadows Eve's role in the fall of Man, while the image of the girl contemplating leaving recalls Eve's lament for her own fate: ““Must I thus leave thee Paradise? thus leave / Thee native soil...”” (xi. 269-70).

6 The quotation is taken from Whitman's second note on the *Children of Adam* section in the Trent Memorial Collection held in the Library of Duke University, quoted in *Notes and Fragments*, 1899, ed. R. M. Bucke, and reproduced in Whitman, 2002, p. 78, n. "*Children of Adam*".

7 This recurrence is echoed in the final poem of the section, "As Adam Early in the Morning". The simile affirms difference: not "Adam" but "*As Adam*", not original man but original man reconstituted. "The American Adam" is R. W. B. Lewis's eponymous phrase (1955).

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