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Dylan

GOENAWAN MOHAMAD
Translated by Jennifer Lindsay

I don't understand Bob Dylan. Maybe that's how it should be: Something that fascinates is something that does not have to be, or cannot be, understood. I read Dylan's book of poetry, *Tarantula*, which he wrote in 1966 when he was 25. In it, words move not like letters, not like vessels of meaning, but as sound, in their repetition, consonants, emphasis, and syllable length:¹

mother say go in That direction & please
do the greatest deed of all time & say i say
mother but it's already been done & she say
well what else is there for you to do & i say
i dont know mother, but i'm not going in That
direction—i'm going in that direction & she
say ok but where will you be & i say i dont
know mother but i'm not tom joad & she say
all right then i am not your mother

We live in a time when there is no longer any hierarchy between meaning and sound, between words and notes. We live in a time when the literary and the nonliterary are not clearly separated—and Dylan's award of Nobel Prize for Literature shows the collapse of the imaginary structure that separated the two. *Tarantula* itself shows the

moment when chaos appears in the cracks of form. The chaotic is not tamed by the ordered, and the ordered continues to exist among the chaotic.

This column, limited in space as it is to forty-eight hundred characters, cannot give Dylan the homage he deserves. If I have something to say, it is this: His phrases do not all impress me; his stirring, plain voice, with its melancholy contradicted by fracture and irony, fascinates me. But the power of Dylan's resonance does not surprise me; one can read or listen to him—the recordings of his simple but moving voice, his harmonica around his neck and his guitar in his arms—while events are flung across headlines or blasted on television. But we are fascinated because of something not lost there: questions.

How many seas must a white dove sail

Before she sleeps in the sand?

In the 1960s, this song was the voice of protest. But today that same protest is probably no more than a poem that continues to haunt us.

"Blowing in the Wind" was popularized by Peter, Paul and Mary, the folk music trio that represented the American mood of the 1960s when that country sent its young men to the Vietnam War, when Black Americans started to challenge the behavior of the white majority, when a generation was torn—between worry and love, between tumult and taking it easy, when so many questions about life were unanswered. War, death, injustice, cruelty, but also loyalty and sacrifice: would it ever end? Why? *The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind ...*

The melody came to Dylan from an old Negro Spiritual, "No More Auction Block"—a chilling song of folk formerly enslaved expressing thanks for their freedom at the time of the American Civil War in the nineteenth century: "No more auction block, no more driver's lash, no more pint of salt for me, many thousands gone."

But "Blowing in the Wind" gives the impression of being an older song, with its more timeless words. Dylan, whose childhood name was Bobby Zimmerman, was raised in a Jewish family. His parents ran a furniture and hardware store in Hibbing, Minnesota. Probably there were snippets of Genesis and Ezekiel running around in his head. But this does not mean that poetry and song were complaisant. They violated maps and scoffed at genealogies.

Bob Dylan's image was that of a young rebel. He looked like his idol, Woody Guthrie, who composed songs when he toured poverty-stricken areas of America during the Depression. After Dylan moved to New York and immortalized Guthrie's name, he seemed to move away from his roots, bury them, and appeared in a persona that changed from time to time. The 2007 film *I'm Not There*, "inspired by the music and lives of Bob Dylan" tried to capture that, with six actors playing aspects of his character, including that amazing female actor, Cate Blanchett.

With his soft, feminine face, his thick, tousled hair, with his voice that seemed to hide sadness, and his nonlinear poetry, Dylan—as in his album *The Freewheelin' Bob*

Dylan—is both adapter and composer, as when he draws on folk music idiom while turning it into something different.

But there is something that comes deep inside him: his sensitivity to life that is hurt. Even though he cannot be a guide. He finds something else. “I find the religiosity and philosophy in the music. I don’t find it anywhere else [...] I don’t adhere to rabbis, preachers, evangelists, all of that.”

Strangely, his voice sounds truer than sermons:

Yes, and how many ears must one man have

Before he can hear people cry?

Notes

- ¹ Original publication details: Goenawan Mohamad, “Dylan,” *Tempo*, October 23, 2016; English translation by Jennifer Lindsay originally published under the title “Dylan,” *Tempo* (English), October 23, 2016.

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