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Bob Dylan's Vignette Form

The transition period between Bob Dylan's folk and electric periods is a contentious period amongst Dylan fans and scholars. In just a few years, Dylan completely changes his modus operandi and creates three albums universally acknowledged as masterpieces. The nascent *Bringing it All Back Home*, the surreal landscape of *Highway 61 Revisited*, and the personal nuance of *Blonde on Blonde*- these divergences from Dylan's past work necessitate a reevaluation of Dylan's artistic impulse. All three of these albums share incredible thematic heft and complexity, augmented by the structural innovation of Dylan's "vignette form". These surreal, picturesque vignettes use unique characters, locations, and redolent imagery to make Dylan's message hold literary heft. The electric accompaniment, often harmonically simple, acts as an environment for these vignettes to thrive in. In his "Electric Trilogy," Dylan begins exploring these surreal vignettes as a means of displaying complex thematic observations, ranging from political to personal, of the world around him.

The structure of the vignettes that Dylan uses through his trilogy share some commonalities that need to be understood to facilitate analysis. These songs share length and a lyrical density that make them almost impenetrable on first glance, but by creating a template to approach each song, patterns start to arise. The first characteristic shared between the songs regards Dylan's means of thematic application: his characters. Every song has notable characters

that typify aspects of the particular theme of that vignette. Of course, to weave together these characters is a location, the second characteristic. This location is an environment in which each of these characters can live in. Whether this is “Highway 61,” or the town of “Mobile,” each of these places specifically represents the overarching thematic narrative that Dylan wishes to explore in the vignette. To make the image of these locations clear, each of these songs will utilize evocative imagery, which can often seem nonsensical- but this surrealism increases their potency. The initial impact of the image, and what it draws in the listeners mind, is often all that is necessary to be effective. Finally, each of these songs share a refrain- something that ties all of the aspects of the vignette together, serving as a lyrical destination or a written cadence, something that all of the writing prior cascades into.

The lyrical structure shared by many songs on the “Electric Trilogy” is a new invention of Dylan’s. Each of these “vignette songs” brings nuance to each situation to allow Dylan to approach his themes in a more layered and literary manner. As such, the musical accompaniment does not overburden the listener and complements his words. Harmonic changes are very simple, in a major key, and rarely lead listeners out of the safety of the home key. The use of chord substitutions or modal mixture never supersede lyrical importance. It is necessary to remember that the hierarchy of meaning in these songs rests on the music empowering the lyrics, and never the other way around. This is not to say that the accompaniment on any of these songs is weak- quite the contrary- but simply that the background music is intrinsically tied to Dylan’s words. It creates something for the meaning of the words to rest on.

Working chronologically will allow us to observe Dylan’s exploration in the form. *Bringing It All Back Home* immediately demonstrates this style of writing as soon as the record starts playing, with the classic “Subterranean Homesick Blues”. This song has been considered

by Clinton Heylin to “presage the advent of rap,” (Heylin 181) and it is not very difficult to see why. The incessant speed of the lyrics, combined with the blaring accompaniment make it one of Dylan’s most hyper songs. More importantly, however, this song is the very first to typify the “vignette style”. Note first how the background musicians in the song have very few chord changes. The entire song is composed of four chords in the key of A major, and uses the fundamental harmonic motion of moving through the subdominant, to the dominant, and ending on the tonic. Somehow, the song maintains a blistering pace, but feels laidback- likely due to the constant duple rhythm in the drums, combined with the intermittent electric guitar poking out of the homophony and Dylan’s relaxed vocal cadence.

Lyrically, the song fits the structural style of Dylan’s early foray into the vignette structure. Numerous characters are introduced: including Johnny, Maggie, a man in a trench coat, and man in [a] coonskin cap. The characters all serve conflicting interests, and to Mike Marqusee serve outwardly political intentions:

“In ‘Subterranean Homesick Blues,’ the experience of growing up is depicted as an empty ritual designed to produce compliant servants of the system” (Marqusee 165).

It is hard to argue with Marqusee here, as the entire vignette seems designed around the dialectical conflict between those who handle the system and those who work within the system. The main characters are more than likely involved in some questionable activities, as their “phone’s tapped anyway,” but the line after drives home how that regardless of the illicit activity that the characters must “walk on their tip toes”. Clearly, these characters are living on the edge, whether or not their actions were correct. This creates a hilarious contrast between the bombastic accompaniment and the tragicomic implications of the characters lifestyles, adding to the vignette’s effectiveness. Maggie coming “fleet foot/face full of black soot” is another image that

not only makes the listener picture Maggie having coming out after completing something illicit, but doubles as an image of a “hard working” younger generation being forced to act in a system that they have not chosen to be in. The “wind blows” in an obvious direction, and if you are caught doing something slightly off kilter for your livelihood, the system forces you underground. Of course, Dylan’s vignette in this song is a much more heightened reality of the 60s, but Dylan’s refrain, “Look out kid,” is timeless in application. To tell someone to “look out” may mean that you are warning them of something, and it does seem to be used that way in the song when it is followed with “you’re gonna get hit”. However, the second line of the refrain changes in each verse and in the final verse, the refrain gains a very different meaning when the kid is told that “they keep it all hid”. Instead of a warning, Dylan is speaking more from a perspective of someone who has lost naïveté- someone who has realized the intentions of those in power. This simply adds to the “homesick” and lost feeling of the characters in the song.

“Subterranean Homesick Blues” is arguably Dylan’s first foray into the vignette form, but from this point, his writing grows in magnitudes of complexity. On the next album, *Highway 61 Revisited*, we begin to see the absurdity of reality tinge in his songs, especially in the second, named “Tombstone Blues”. On its outset, it seems like a simple blues song, but each verse makes the song feel like a film negative. Numerous characters are in this song, too many to name, but of more significance is how in every verse each character interacts with authority. This interaction, and the complexities regarding it, are the conflict that Dylan was likely exploring. The verse regarding the “hysterical bride” has her interact with a doctor after she “had just been made”. Whether or not the verse references rape, the advice given by the doctor is useless, to “not let the boys in”. This deliberate misunderstanding of the situation and subsequently unimportant advice provided is exactly Dylan’s problem. The increasingly progressive world that

Dylan inhabits is held back by an authority composed entirely of relics who do not care about the changing times. Combined with the relentless pace of the accompaniment, which uses only two chords for the entire song, the chaos of the vignette is easy to picture. Determining a specific location for this hyperbolic vignette can prove challenging- a clue to it being a dystopian United States can come from all the references to the “Commander-in-Chief”.

An interesting observation in the dystopian vignette of this song is Dylan observes a perversion of history and knowledge, something noted by Christopher Ricks:

“he had once rhymed, in of all places *Tombstone Blues*, ‘the old folks home and the college ‘ with ‘your useless and pointless knowledge’.” (Ricks 199).

While the “old folks home” is not explicitly referencing historical elements, it is composed of people who have lived their lives in history - clearly Dylan is disavowing the beliefs of this generation. Additionally, note how each verse utilizes various historical characters in completely paradoxical ways, something exemplified by “Ma Raney and Beethoven unweave[ing] their bed roll”. Both of these characters are mentioned only once throughout the song, but typify how the vignette shows a loss of coherence. To put Ma Raney and Beethoven together would create outrage amongst their respective followings, but in this vignette, this is normal. The outrage might as well be “sent out to the jungle”. Marqusee agrees, viewing this strange juxtaposition as an image of putting “elite and popular art in bed together [while] identify[ing] their common enemies in nationalist conformity” (Marqusee 150). Dylan refers to this pervasive nationalist conformity when he describes tuba players playing around a flagpole. The boisterous nature of the instruments disrupting the relative peace of a waving flag is an absurd- pythonesque. “Tombstone Blues” is a perfect example of the evolution of Dylan’s approach to his politically charged language. Songs regarding issues with authority, especially political authority, in the

early parts of his career would have most been an acoustic folk song (something similar to “Masters of War”). However, with the tools of his electric accompaniment, and a new structural approach, the song gains lyrical nuance that make his dire interpretation of the world clearer.

Perhaps the most mature and complex vignette constructed by Dylan, “Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again,” is on *Blonde on Blonde*. Marqusee’s succinct summary of the song is a phenomenal means of analytical entry:

“The mysteriously impassable distance between Mobile and Memphis is the distance between depression and elation, isolation and community, anonymity and recognition, fatalism and freedom. The journey [...] in the end, like the circles of the ragman, returns to its starting point.” (Marqusee 195).

Interesting how Marqusee notes the structural complexity of the song- and its derivation from the first line. What is shocking, however, is that he misses how each of the characters is so effortlessly connected with the next, something that many Dylan’s other vignettes do not do emphasize. On top of this, while his thematic observations are salient, Marqusee misses that the juxtaposition inherent in the themes is due to the timeless nature of the song. When listening to “Stuck Inside of Mobile,” the characters’ fluid interactions and thoughts makes listeners lost inside the world and lose sense of time, something few other Dylan songs actively achieve, save “Desolation Row” and “Visions of Johanna”. Vignettes where Dylan plays with perception of time have a decidedly different narrative purpose than others. They do not aim to be a social observation, or an exploration of a fictional dystopian narrative, rather seeking to make the listener a member of the location described in the vignette. Thus, these vignettes are replete with surrealism. Simply describing a scenario, or a world, to someone is not enough make them live within it. To put a listener into “Mobile” is impossible without incisive description.

The masterful second verse is an example of this- the narrator, Dylan, begins to discuss how a “Shakespeare” is in an alley near him. Flaunting his “pointed shoes and bells,” he is heartlessly charming girls around him. “Shakespeare,” is clearly pejorative. Dylan is likely using the term to describe someone who thinks he is much more than he really is a pompous artist entrenched in ego. Michael Coyle and Debra Rae Cohen observe the contrary:

“The pointed shoes and bells suggest that Dylan means for us to see Shakespeare himself, rather than a modern [man] who simply carries that nickname. (Coyle & Cohen 146).

This observation, while a possible interpretation, seems flimsy. When viewing the verse on its own, this interpretation makes more sense, but when observing it through the lens of the entire vignette, it seems to fall apart. The fictional town of Mobile is replete with characters who are surreal in nature (a violent Grandpa burning a street, and shooting holes through it, for example). Clearly, Dylan is using the term “Shakespeare” as an accurate, incisive means of making the audience meet the character. It is impossible not to picture a pompous man, hands in his pockets, waiting in alley cat-calling naïve women, such as the “French girl”. To picture Shakespeare, would be adding a historical literary figure who would obfuscate the flow of the narrative. Most importantly, notice how in less than four lines two completely new characters are fleshed out. Their intentions, personalities, and the way that they carry themselves clarify with few words.

This narrative motion also carries within the words “French girl”. The next verse, starting with the name “Mona,” a plausibly French name, can lead listeners to draw a connection harkening back to the last verse. More evidence of this narrative connection is in how Dylan says the French girl “knows [him] well” and the how the nature of the surreal conversation in the third verse is not one strangers would have. This is what Marqusee would place under the thematic umbrella of “anonymity and recognition”: the second verse is written such that the girl seems

unknown, but only through the timeless flow of the narrative is it clear that the woman is someone that the narrator has already known. Dylan has reversed the order of events here intentionally, because the interactions in reverse add more clarity to the actions of the characters, and place them more deliberately in listeners' memories. Surrealism, then, can be considered a "topping to the cake," (Coyle & Cohen 146) of the vignettes narrative- used to make the characters intentions more subconsciously clear- a stance directly in opposition to Coyle and Cohen, who see surrealism in this song as aiming "to conceal rather than reveal" (Coyle & Cohen 146).

The magnificence of the refrain of this song, identical to the title of the song with an added phrase, compounds the complexity of its narrative structure. Regardless of the events of the verse prior, a pattern begins to emerge in listeners' ear- namely that the narrator is longing "To be stuck inside of Mobile/with the Memphis blues again." Why should the narrator be longing? Thankfully, Dylan has structured the narrative as to give the response before the events of the song has taken place, before "Mobile" has even been described. Note these lines in the first verse:

"And the ladies treat me kindly

And furnish me with tape

But deep inside my heart

I know I can't escape"

The narrator is not longing as much he is suffering from Stockholm Syndrome- while the ladies treat him kindly, he is trapped the timeless reality of Mobile. Imagine if the song had ended with this verse, rather than started it. The reasoning for being trapped would be given after the

evidence, making the narrative flow relatively chronological. Dylan contorts this by providing listeners with reasoning before the fact, imploring the listeners to listen to why he is stuck in Mobile. This makes the whole song structured around an interrogative pursuit. A structural innovation unique to this vignette.

None of the facets of this song, however, could exist without the musical accompaniment. While the musical accompaniment is by no means the highlight of the work, the bubbling instrumentation helps create a landscape for the words. The chord progression remains simplistic, hovering through the submediant and subdominant, but the choice in ending each phrase with a decisive descending chord progression is fascinating. Each verse will conclude safely in the home key- leading listeners to have numerous feelings of resolution. This, while likely not being an active artistic choice, creates a feeling of being “stuck,” and makes each verse seem like a different iteration of itself, like *déjà vu*.

The three songs discussed here are not the only “vignette” songs that Dylan has ever written. Each of these songs were chosen because they exegetically demonstrate the progression of Dylan’s work with the form. Also of importance is that this form is never hinted at by Dylan- nor should it be. The “vignette form” suffers from the same problem that the “sonata form” of classical music faces- it is an observation through hindsight. When Dylan was writing these songs, the music was simply pouring out of him. Heylin writes:

“‘Like a Rolling Stone’ opened up that unseen levee, out of which poured many of his greatest songs. Dylan required a sound that lent meaning to the words, enabled them to cohabit without conflict.” (Heylin 202).

This levee is through which this vignette structure was created. The complexity of his verse, combined with a newfound electric sound, allowed him to write such tremendous music. Gone was the early Dylan, playing in the shadow of Guthrie. The times were changing, and this required a complete change in his songwriting approach. Simply writing protest songs could not fully serve his artistic desires, and the use of a new lyrical structure would become one of his many penchants in exploring complex thematic territory.

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