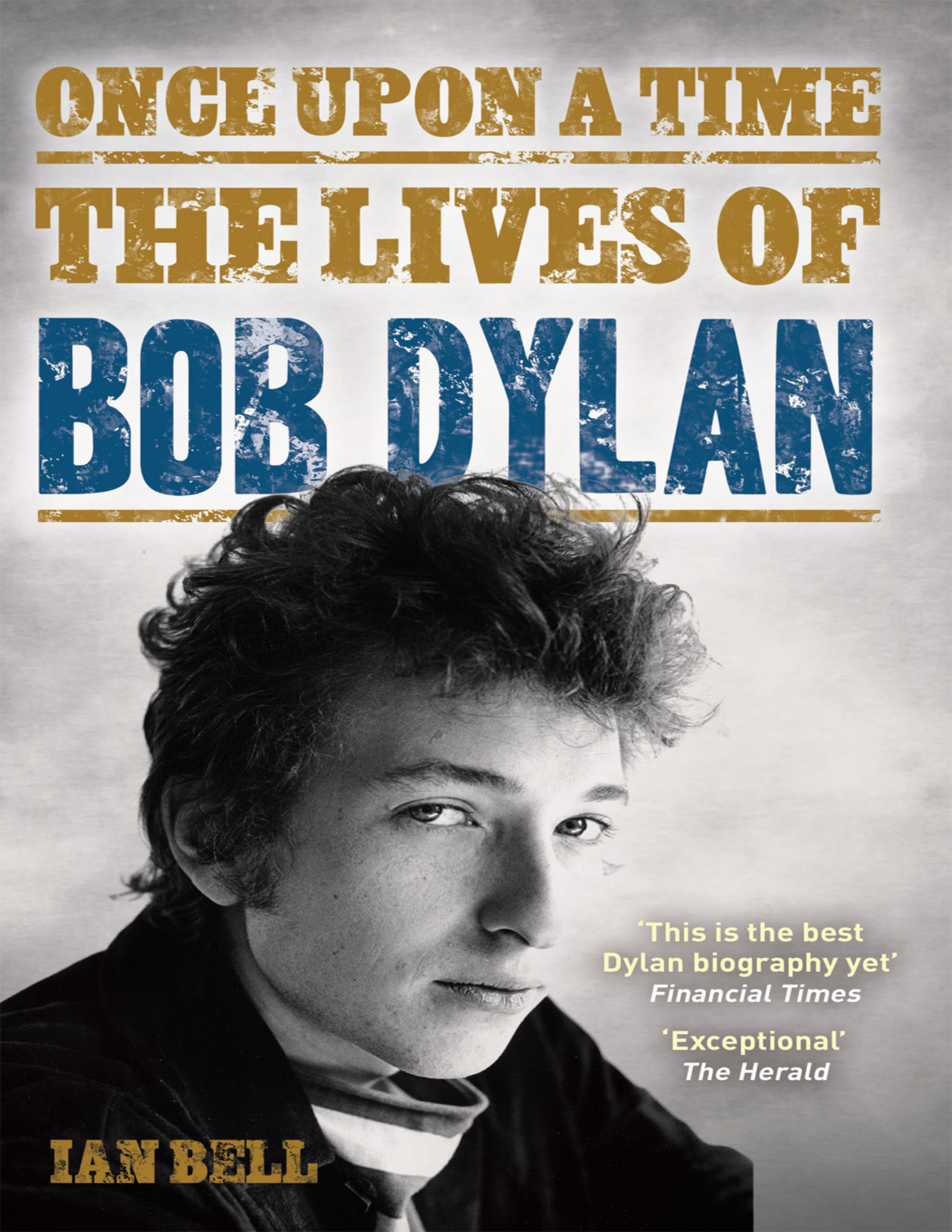


ONCE UPON A TIME THE LIVES OF BOB DYLAN



'This is the best
Dylan biography yet'
Financial Times

'Exceptional'
The Herald

IAN BELL

About the Author

Born, raised and educated in Edinburgh, Ian Bell is a past holder of the George Orwell Prize for Political Journalism and the award-winning author of *Dreams of Exile*, a biography of Robert Louis Stevenson. Formerly the Scottish editor of *The Observer*, he is a columnist with *The Herald* and the *Sunday Herald*.

ONCE UPON A TIME

The Lives of Bob Dylan

Ian Bell



EDINBURGH AND LONDON

For Sean

Contents

About the Author

Title Page

Dedication

A Series of Dreams

I'm Not There, I'm Gone

Beyond the Horizon

Forever Young

Don't Think Twice

I Was Young When I Left Home

Boy in Search of Something

Come Gather 'Round People

'I Think I'll Call It America'

Once Upon a Time ...

Pain Sure Brings Out the Best in People ...

Lo and Behold!

Gods and Gunfighters

Tangled Up in Blue

Acknowledgements

Bibliography

Footnotes

Copyright

A Series of Dreams

SOMEONE HAS JUST USED THE NAME JUDAS. IT IS A SHOUT, NOTHING more, in the protective darkness of a provincial English concert hall a long - long - time ago.

The cry, two vowels stretched, is intended as a kind of remonstrance, a denunciation from the congregation. Instead, it confuses style with substance, sincerity with art, past with present, and worse besides. At a push it might count, if someone is being generous, as the impassioned defence of integrity, real or imagined. It would not be mistaken for wit.

As insults go it is oddly old-fashioned, Sunday school prim, strangely neurotic. Even in a nominally Christian country the idea that a popular entertainer could resemble the betrayer of the Saviour-of-all-Mankind is beyond stupid. Such seems to be the entertainer's opinion.

It happens, though, and then it's famous: *Ju-das!* Christ-killer. Yet in this case, for a novelty, the apostate has somehow managed to murder his own sanctified self. Without even trying. At a pop concert. Things are about to become legendary.

This cry, this bubble of emotion, is pique expended on trivia. The heckler, like all the people applauding his indignation, has just paid good money to be outraged. Yet there are no surprises here: the blasphemy in question - let's render that one unto little Caesar - has been well advertised. The miscreant has toured the world affronting his audiences. It's been in the papers and Britain is his last stop. But two things are really taking place.

First, the accused has never claimed allegiance to the thing betrayed. He is not – and he insists on this point – an adherent of the near-comical cult that has formed like a cyst around his name. Not interested.

Second, he has a history of his own. Among other things, he was born a Jew. Where else but in provincial England, as the century passes its middle age, could someone libel a Jew as Judas?

The accused, no doubt narcotised – many would like to believe it – certainly assailed, currently existing within the still centre of the cold flame of his own artistic firestorm, has a precise line of response to such attacks. It is almost a matter of rhetorical principle.

He says: 'I don't believe you.'

He adds: 'You're a liar.'

Then, turning to his musicians, all but inaudibly: '*Play it fucking loud.*'

One way or another, art is in the room. One thing ends, another begins. From that, and then, to this.

*

The noise that follows, 'bootlegged' for decades, dishonoured by abysmal reproduction on cheap stereos, mythologised and misrepresented, denied and embraced and denied, is like the sound of a crashing wave. There is fury, too, in the music and the words, as though the singer is disputing gravity itself while it hauls him down, inch by inch, among those sullen listeners *who are just like the character in his song*. And they don't even know it. How about that?

In another mood, on a different night, he would have seen the humour, but now he's tired, exhausted. After fewer than five years as a recording artist he has evolved from an ingratiating impersonator, the grubby sprite echoing a sick man, the prodigy stealing the histories and songs of others,

into something without obvious precedent. He has been both lauded and misconstrued (and that *is* funny), congratulated and conscripted. Many want to believe he is *sui generis* yet 'universal', fashionably subversive but, for them at least, always reliable. And, above all, *a leader*.

Of what? They act as if they own him, especially when he sings about freedom. They say he is wholly new. Yet somehow he seems to know all about an old tradition that binds things together, the perverse tradition that obliges him to seem to break, and break decisively, with all that is purportedly traditional.

Even that isn't really what's going on. This performer, this night, is still more evidence that everything comes from somewhere. Originality, says the cliché, is the ability to see afresh, and hear afresh, things that are familiar. In truth, the music that has baffled a jeering section of his English audience could be traced like veins beneath the skin all the way to a heartland. Sometimes he says as much. Sometimes he claims that it all adds up. Periodically throughout his career he will talk mysteriously of the underlying 'mathematical' logic of his music. Here, in these monstrous, blazing songs, is a progression – not necessarily progress – founded on first principles.

The skinny young man with the wild hair, sharp suit and glowing eyes did not invent rock and roll, or R&B, or the blues, or the structures of popular song. The auditory hallucinations promised by an electric guitar's pick-ups have been explored many times before, by better players. The division of labour within small bands of musicians, 'rhythm' and 'lead', is a practice born of economic necessity, not revolutionary intent. On the face of it, there is nothing – barring a voice that sometimes causes eyebrows to rise – that's new about this noise.

Besides, only a handful of years before these events the smart record-industry money was declaring the 'pop group' passé, the boom ended, a flash in the pan. That might have

been one reason why this ferociously ambitious performer became a singer of 'folk' music to begin with. As the '50s became the '60s it had seemed as though the fires of rock and roll were going out one by one. Pastiche and inanity, harmless music controlled by cynical old men, had become the residue. The word was *phoney*. Hence the reverent fidelity, currently fashionable, to folk's older gods. Even for him, in the beginning, old songs had been the new wave, 'the underground'.

Now a lot of people are aggrieved, even furious, because the performer has seemed to abandon - how best to put this? - the musical settings appropriate to properly serious and 'literate' songs of the folk type. Specifically, they hold that a hollow-bodied guitar derived from the Spanish original sounding into a free-standing microphone is good, honest, authentic and true. An instrument with a solid body and embedded transducers is the howling symbol of venality, vacuousness, mere cash and tawdry thrills. It's offensive. It sounds like a betrayal. They say he has bartered away that precious integrity. The tab runs to 30 pieces of silver (and then some). Hence the tantrum in the dark.

But offensive is good for someone, and scandal is better: at this moment that might as well be the only law in pop's little world. No record sales will be harmed in the making of a famous concert. Perhaps this is one reason why a section of the crowd have paid to be disgusted: the bedlamite's horror has admirers too. Some people, very shallow people, actually like this *new stuff*.

On this English night, in any case, the performer cuts an ambiguous figure. He doesn't much enjoy being insulted, but he will defy anyone for the right to make music as he chooses. He doesn't have to suffer the abuse, yet he persists. He has been backed into a corner, yet he does not retreat. Bob Dylan is mulish, but no one's fool.

There's more. These days, as though by nameless instinct, he seems to sense a need to split and scatter his audience, to provoke and challenge them, if he is to make any headway. Just as he has taken the familiar elements of American popular music and rearranged them into strange kaleidoscopic configurations, so he expects his listeners to reorder their preconceptions. Or boo him. As he sometimes tells his band: if people have paid hard cash for their tickets, they can boo all they like.¹ That's their privilege. They get it or they don't. It is that sort of decade.

The date in question is 17 May 1966; the place is Manchester, a monochrome industrial city in the north-west of England. Dylan and five musicians have been around the world in eight months with only a very few short breaks. It has been hard, heavy going. The scandal – some truly think in those terms – has been unfolding bit by bit since the folk and blues festival at Newport, Rhode Island, in July of the previous year. Three ferocious songs performed with a high-class pick-up band at that event have set off derisive echoes (and some handy publicity) at every other stop on the latest tour. Audiences have been placated, even lulled, with 'acoustic' numbers in the first act of the little touring melodrama, and have applauded accordingly. The least of them have betrayed the poverty of their borrowed opinions by taking it for granted that the choice of instruments alone guarantees folk music. But if they have missed the point it is because they had no pressing interest in finding the point. They know what they like.

In fact, if lyrics alone are the issue, these solo performances, with their phantasmal harmonica passages endlessly sustained, are scarier than anything you might hear from a Fender Telecaster. 'Visions of Johanna', 'It's All Over Now, Baby Blue', 'Desolation Row' and the rest are thick with dissociated imagery, dark with foreboding or ecstatically vivid, but bereft of 'messages'. Sceptics say they are bereft of any meaning. They say these songs are

just a juvenile's ill-digested idea of poetry beneath a patina of 'significance'. Try reading the verses, they say. They say that a lot. Then they set to work on the performer's so-called singing voice.

Yet these songs, like the old folk blues, arise from psychic deeps. They share that ancient sense of supernatural mystery and fundamental truth while breaking apart the familiar linkages between image, metaphor and meaning. They are old/modern, weird/familiar. No one, fan or not, says they are anything other than strange. This is no accident. These are no more the folk songs of audience expectations than Dylan is a Peace Corps volunteer.

Still, thanks only to his choice of guitars, the singer, a few days shy of his 25th birthday, gets away with the opening half of the Manchester show. At this juncture the customers keep their bafflement to themselves. Many are even prepared to tread gingerly on the path being marked out: the 'Mr Tambourine Man' tune remains an infinitely seductive thing, after all. What's it 'about'? That's the funny part. Those who don't mind the voice can never quite say why, or to what, they respond. A few have *theories*, though, and even in Manchester the crowd will accept novelty if it doesn't sound heinously 'commercial', or just too bloody loud. They are not yet ready to notice the deconstruction and reconstruction of the entire art of songwriting.

In Manchester, the first set goes well. An intermission follows. Afterwards, as though in response to a supernatural dog whistle or a malign secret chord, all hell erupts. The annals, wherever they are kept, acquire a new chapter.

When recordings from the night are released to the wider public a generation later, one legend will be extinguished and another encouraged. The former is a slight matter: the bootleggers got it wrong, as many had long since known or guessed. Illicit copies of the tapes were ascribed for years to London's Royal Albert Hall - all spoke of 'the Albert Hall concert' - not Manchester and its century-old Free Trade

Hall, with its ghosts of Mr Charles Dickens and *his* theatricals. But there were no regal Beatles in the audience to encourage Dylan against the groundlings on 17 May up in the North-west. Hence the second legend. When, in 1998, Columbia issues *The Bootleg Series Volume 4: Live 1966*, the packaging on the handsome box asserts that 'Dylan blazed a trail of confrontational' - red ink for that word - 'performances that changed rock and roll' - more red ink coming - 'forever'. Partly true.

The sleeve notes themselves observe that though 'some cheered' others barracked the band or 'simply walked out'. In the usual story, opinions were less evenly divided: they hated it. So how did that work? Why is anyone still talking about Bob Dylan in the twenty-first century when the received account tells of a majority reaction so baleful, so murderous, in Britain and around the world, that it should by rights have destroyed his career? If so many people detested the second half of the 1966 shows so much, surely no one would remember the artist or the concerts, far less care. When you fail to keep the customer satisfied you go out of business. Someone must have enjoyed those performances enough to grant the Manchester concert and the artist an abiding legend and a singular reputation. Or was it his bad luck that only fools were buying tickets that year?

The 1998 release had the effect of setting a myth in stone. This, it said, was the unparalleled moment. Here was the transformative gesture, the confrontation, that defined Dylan's pre-eminence in his generation, and in his art. This artefact above all others needed to be heard and understood with the urgency that attended its making. But the surviving contraband evidence differs. It says that the previous night's performance at the unglamorous Gaumont in Sheffield was just as remarkable - arguably the superior concert, in fact - and that the show given at the Liverpool Odeon on the 14th was also better than pretty good.

Manchester was just another stop on a long tour, its set list - in 1966 an oddly rigid thing by Dylan's later standards - no different from all the other set lists. What marked out the date, the place and the recording was only partly to do with music. This was the *Judas* album, and the moment.

Another thing. What did separate the supposedly acceptable acoustic set from the ensuing electric heresy? Mere noise? By the standards of what was usual in 1966 Dylan opened with a performance a thousand degrees of separation from his old folk-minstrel civil-rights persona. Those spooky, angular songs, that harmonica like the sound of an animal refusing to die, that voice with its precisely mangled timing, every word bent and twisted, and each number going on forever - they went for all that without a murmur? So the recorded evidence seems to suggest.

The word 'counter-culture' wasn't yet in use in 1966,² but most of the legend of Manchester arose from its vainglorious assumptions about art. All true art had to be - didn't it? - novel, 'challenging', dissident, 'out there' and always, above all, misunderstood. The whole point was that the straights would never get the point. Thus (apparently) would the world be transformed. So Dylan's difficulties with audiences and electromagnetic induction that year were taken to be symbolic, whether he liked it or not, of a bigger quarrel. Given the choice, he might have preferred enraptured applause.

Clearly, outrage made a bigger spectacle of itself in Manchester than appreciation. Yet the fact is that Dylan won through in the end, his rising star undimmed, his sales of vinyl increasing. The song that followed his exchange with the accusing voice in the darkness, performed in the teeth of the storm, had already provided him with his first top-five single almost a year - so who was really shocked? - before the fracas at the Free Trade Hall.

The concert recordings show, nevertheless, that many in the crowd were truly, thoroughly pissed off, despite being

forewarned, by those drums, keyboards and guitars. If they knew anything at all, they knew that Bob Dylan was the most unusual talent in the music business and knew, as all the critics agreed, that he was to be taken seriously. Yet in Manchester and in many other places a large part of the hip, educated demographic went nuts, and not in a good way, when he and his band plugged in.

Perhaps the crowds were merely dedicated audiophiles who deprecated abysmal sound systems. Perhaps the loudest noise most of them had ever heard robbed them of their wits. Or perhaps they wanted the fight.

There are still some old leftish folkies who mourn the Dylan they lost, missing in inaction, in the pop-culture wars. For a few brief years he really mattered, and mattered deeply, to them. It wasn't just the changing-the-world stuff, or the decision to exchange a pristine, truth-telling gift for mere wordplay, Top 40 hits and fancy boots. It went deeper. Their Dylan was antithetical. In the first wave of his creativity he dissented from all the fraudulent capitalist games of the music industry and the denatured society it represented and sedated. This was an article of faith. His art was pluralist, of 'we' and for 'us'. Protest songs had been written because, as it happened, there were a lot of things to protest against. That had been his story, too, for a while.

Some of those same people would soon be wondering how Dylan could keep his mouth tight shut while Vietnam descended into a bloodbath, or while a president of the United States conspired against his country's constitution. As the years passed the singer would make a virtue of his indifference, of being (in the proper sense) disinterested. His social conscience would re-emerge intermittently, but as often as not he would appear to believe that formal politics was, is, beside the point. His aversion to the political press gang ran deep.

In 1966, the committed and the disappointed - generally one and the same - were asking aloud what Woody Guthrie

would have made of the spectacle unfolding at his protégé's behest. Rock and roll? The automaton Presley, with his wilfully dumb movies and dumber tunes, was what remained of rock and roll's fading memory. Pop groups? Beatlemania - prepubescent hysteria and trite little words you could scarcely hear - was the best bid from that quarter in 1966.³ Small wonder the born-old crowd wanted a fight.

And perhaps Dylan wanted them to want it. At this distance in time it seems likely that he was thinning his audience deliberately in order to win a new sort of listener for a new sort of music, the never-defined thing clumsy journalists were about to call 'rock'. He wanted a career on his own terms. He wanted rid, you suspect, of the sort of people who would yelp 'Judas!' and they, those six-string Stalinists, were happy to oblige. At the Odeon in Glasgow on 19 May, and at the ABC 'Theatre' in Edinburgh (both venues were movie houses) on the 20th, Dylan was to be subjected to slow handclapping and walkouts, in part the alleged result of a solemn decision by Scottish Communists to punish the singer for his manifest betrayals.⁴ *Let's teach the sell-out a lesson*, concluded alert Marxist thinkers, *by paying him money*. The tale is all too plausible. When this writer first came to Dylan, some three years after the Manchester event, there were still plenty of older, none-the-wiser types insisting that it had been downhill all the way since *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*. That was his second album, recorded when he was just 21.

There is an odd fact, too, that gets overlooked when the legend of '66 is invoked. The barracking was anything but universal. In some places, by all accounts, the show went over well, with no fuss and a lot of applause. There was no booing. So some people thought the latest Dylan was abominable and some, a few dozen miles away, thought he was just terrific? That doesn't make much sense. Years later, nevertheless, it would give rise to the belief among astute commentators that some of the dissent was indeed - to

some extent – organised, ‘political’, the calculated revenge of a British folk scene under stern Communist influence. The influence was a demonstrable fact; the sheer comedy of it all a matter of taste. So here they were chastising an individual as a matter of *political principle*, and all because he had apparently lost his taste for politics. Then he had picked up the wrong sort of musical instrument: *blasphemer*. Amidst it all the useful idiots, the people who just liked ‘the old stuff’ best, had joined the chorus. How bourgeois can you get, exactly?⁵

Having travelled the world for the sake of these indignities, Dylan had acquired a broader view. On the 17th it was as though the Mancunian crowd were being made to answer for the insults from all points of the compass that he had suffered since Newport. The sort of people liable to walk out or treat him to a slow handclap were the sort of people he didn’t desire or need – who in their right mind could? – and would never persuade.

Nor would they alter his course. Those around him in 1966, the musicians in particular, have vouched for the fact that Dylan showed not a single sign of self-doubt about the course he had adopted. He knew what he was doing. Or rather, he knew why he was doing whatever it was he was doing. Had they thought twice, some among the disgusted folk-left would have recognised a version of a theatrical technique then in vogue: *Verfremdungseffekt*, alienation.

This doesn’t mean that ‘Like a Rolling Stone’, the actually perfect riposte to the semi-biblical curse, was anything other than vicious as a whip that night. It doesn’t mean that Dylan wasn’t angry: the song, as he said once of its composition, is a song about revenge. If his reaction was merely theatrical, on the other hand, the act was immaculate. But no one, for or against, had heard anything like this music before. On this night, they get it or they don’t.

*

'Like a Rolling Stone': four brutal verses explaining to someone, a Miss Lonely, what her life has been and will become. Down the years various women in the public eye will be nominated as the song's victim, but that's a parlour game. The internal rhymes that agitate each stanza, false endings dramatically and metrically, are more interesting than the list of suspects attached to a song that has come into existence as 20 (or thereabouts) 'pages of vomit'. Thanks to his chosen medium, Dylan has managed the trick that eludes much of twentieth-century American poetry, combining common speech, fast and loose, with the ribbed structures of verse. Out of an incident, an idea or a mood, he has created a cinematic drama, complete with a cast of enigmatic characters sprung from some perverse *Pilgrim's Progress*, in 36 lines (less chorus). He has demonstrated that a pop song can be any length it needs to be. (This one is a breath beyond six minutes, or forever.⁶) He has made a morality play from a once-upon-a-time fairy tale, like Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* done for real, and forced it to a conclusion that is part tragedy and part farce. He has shown what is possible (at least for him) in a juvenile medium. This song is his breakthrough.

You can tell as much by a simple test: everything else in pop music has been the clear outcome, more or less predictable (in hindsight at least), of prior events. Styles have developed almost organically, one thing growing into the next, through influence, imitation and shameless theft. This one, whatever its deeper roots, whatever the debts it owes, was impossible to predict. It was actually unthinkable.

Furthermore, 'Like a Rolling Stone' satisfies one of art's usual demands: it renders the particular universal. That would be the chorus, the question. You might remember: '*How does it feel?*' The song's victim is being forced to ask this of herself, as few ever do, for the first time. The genius

of the thing, what with humanity's persistent condition, lies in the fact that 'it' can be almost anything: success, degradation, applause, pain, pride, loss, betrayal, obscurity, the final surrender of the self. The irony, a fine one, is that Dylan will feel the backwash for decades to come as exultant audiences – never a lonely miss among them – shout the question back at him. Will it still mean anything by then, to either party? By the summer of 2012 his own website will claim – though who really knows? – that the 70-year-old has performed 'Like a Rolling Stone' in concert on 1,953 occasions. The song goes on and on. And how does that feel?

Countless songs have told stories. 'Frankie and Albert', from the dreamtime of the blues, tells its story over and over. Woody Guthrie told of Tom Joad and Pretty Boy Floyd and numberless others. The ballads of the British islands evolved as common stories edging into myth. Miss Otis will never cease to regret her passion's story. One way or another, there is a tale for every tune: humanity craves narrative, even when there is nothing more at stake than the old, predictable story of romantic love, the immense legacy, unmatched in art, of some Provençal troubadours. *Once upon a time ...*

All of that flows beneath and through 'Like a Rolling Stone'. The difference is that a myriad of the old lyrics can be caught and held. One way or another, they still abide by the courtly conventions. This song shifts and blurs even as Miss Lonely's fate is being told to her face. There's one reason: in its best-known version, the one plucked from the air, manifested like a spasm of the subconscious in a New York recording studio amid a rainstorm in the summer of 1965, the song, this bitter and vengeful song, is joyous.

Those who got it responded to that before they began to delve, if they ever did, into the things going on in the lyric. It had the mark of pop's fugitive greatness within it, the ineffable sense that one recording only is *right*,

unimprovable, definitive, a life force. But that's not what the words intend: they mean harm.

The paradox is in Dylan's performance. He is enjoying Miss Lonely's ruin, glorying in every second of his own spitting anger. He is destroying her utterly and taking pleasure in his ability to do so. Do we draw conclusions from that? The Manchester performance of 'Like a Rolling Stone' is a man lashing out at the world: the statement is general. The studio original is venomously specific. Even if we neither know nor care who she is, Dylan sings with the adrenalised contempt of one who can see a certain face crumpling before his eyes. And he loves it. Hatred and anger give this song, above all pop songs, its majestic energy. So where does that leave us?

At no point in 'Like a Rolling Stone' does Dylan (or the imagined speaker; let's remember a possibility) begin to doubt his right to judge a person, to put her down and take her apart. 'He' grants himself every moral privilege. There is no possibility that he could be unjust or wrong. Yet imagine this hyper-cool, groundbreaking piece of song-poetry 'rock and roll' in another setting and the performer could be any seventeenth-century Puritan branding and casting out a fallen woman.

Who says he is entitled to loathe anyone in this fashion? He says. Who says he's the only truth-teller among liars? He does. That thread, the moralising rhetoric, the sense of entitlement, will run through Dylan's entire career. It is one reason why he will be compared so often in the 1960s to the callous, unparalleled, irresistible, fuzzy-haired French poet Arthur Rimbaud. You could call it lacerating honesty - why not? - but you could also call it mere self-righteousness. One who is without sin (apparently) is casting, to confuse a metaphor, the first rolling stone. And he will retain the habit: listen only to some of those religious songs of praise for the selected saviour written at the wrong end of the 1970s and

you hear the hanging judge of 'Like a Rolling Stone'. It seems he missed the class on mercy and forgiveness.

So vicious is the song you forget even to ask: what has she done to deserve this? Failed to gather moss, forgotten to form lasting attachments, fallen in with the bad-faith crowd? And this has earned her a verbal beating as bad as the ones Dylan used to hand out to those masters of war?

In Manchester, 'Like a Rolling Stone' acquires an entirely different set of resonances simply because it pitches Dylan, standing alone, against a sea of hostility.⁷ This 'put-down' song, this extended act of vengeance, renders him heroic. Those people were judging *him*. They justified his anger. To keep things simple: they asked for it.

Who does that?

*

Still, a question: why should anyone really care about this famous Manchester 'confrontation'? It's a tiny rhetorical war. No one's dead. Pop songs and singers come and go: like mayflies, that's their purpose. Why the sense - and on this there is general agreement - that this singer matters, or could matter, and that these songs are something out of the ordinary, for better or worse? Seriously: who in any crowd gets quite so angry, even in damp Lancashire, even in a self-involved decade, over a bad night out? And how does that individual's indignation become part of the founding myth of what we are pleased, these days, to call an art form?

Anyone can make a guess and call it a theory. Let's say that in 1966 there is something uncanny about Dylan, something to do with his instincts and his speeding intellect. He seems connected to people and things and places he could not possibly know. He appears to believe that the public face of his society does not begin to represent its older, deeper, mysterious nature. His talent is a root

system, his personality a lightning rod. He can flip between the personal and the universal in a phrase. His wit could flay you alive. Jean-Jacques Rousseau on a good day could not have contrived this savage boy, or a gift as seeming certain as a compass needle. He has arrived out of nothing and nowhere, so it seems, with a fully formed idea that what he does is art. Where did the belief come from?

Others have written and performed songs of political dissent. Others have encouraged the idea that poetry – or the strategies and metaphorical density of poetry – might be possible in popular music. Plenty of people have felt the need to write of love and loss, hate and death. There is nothing new, either, in stylistic eclecticism over the piece: it's the American way. The idea that an artist can embody and represent his national community is also, like the necessary creative revolution, old hat. Why Dylan? Good question.

To this day there is something dreamlike about his long career. He likes (or needs) to be elusive, but that fact doesn't explain much. Wounded former friends, dropped like litter down the years, tend not to offer glowing character references. They say – and they have been saying it since the early 1960s – that he does not give a damn. That doesn't seem relevant either. If artists were to be disqualified from the cultural steeplechase on the grounds of obnoxious behaviour, few would make the starting line. That's probably why nature's groupies advance the faintly preposterous idea that a true creator is obliged – the Rimbaud thing again – to be a cold-hearted son of a bitch. Geniuses: what can you do?

You do not arrive at a body of work like Dylan's inadvertently. Others have sustained long careers, have piled up the honours, racked up the platinum and gold discs, and commanded the loyalty of paying customers decade after decade. Dylan is a different case. Most of those who achieve professional longevity do a few things supremely

well, year after year. They carve out a space and stick to it. He has staked innumerable claims, worked the seams and moved – or drifted – on. Sometimes he has emerged empty-handed from the labour, but equally he has escaped with treasures too often for anyone to confuse his successes with luck.

What's so special about Bob Dylan? You could offer the minimum, Pulitzer or Grammy award style: a greatly gifted songwriter who through a long and distinguished career has influenced ... etcetera. You could invent a citation for one of those honorary degrees, and remember to paraphrase a title or two: voice of a generation ... and every generation ... touched us all ... winds blowing, times a-changing ... Etcetera and etcetera.

All the strands of American popular music save one (jazz⁸) come together in Dylan. Most of the concerns of American literature, stretching back to Whitman and Twain (and arguably before), form a confluence in his work. American history, the kind that moves through the back roads and battlefields and city streets, is in the fabric of his songs. He has knocked out stick-in-the-skull tunes – never mistake this for a small matter – to match old Tin Pan Alley's finest. He has taken a by-product of the entertainment business, the pop song, and turned it into a literary form. He is – should the dry dust ever settle over definitions – the central poet of the long, fading American century and the pre-eminent songwriter of his period.

Yet there is, too, a European cast to the mind under that big, ironic twenty-first-century show-time Stetson, and a British folk consciousness, and a French Symbolist awareness, and old European Jewry's sense of continuity and discontinuity, virtue and sin. This makes him utterly American, in the old sense, and anything but parochial.

When he was very young, back in his first days in New York's Greenwich Village, everyone, even his devoted girlfriend, called him 'a sponge'. They said he seemed to

absorb influences and ideas as though from the air. Others said, in so many words, that he was a plagiarist, a master thief. Both characterisations have persisted down the years. Challenged once to explain his 'influences', he answered that you only have to open your eyes and ears to be influenced. But his embrace is vast, continental. More to the point, he has never ceased to reach. And Dylan has meantime done the writerly work that tends to be remembered, the unending job of exploring, without maps, what it means to be alive on the planet.

He is a moral artist and a rowdy artist, a spiritual writer and a sexual writer, a political creature without politics, a believing sceptic and a sceptical believer, an improviser and a craftsman. He gives a lot of concerts, too, which pleases a lot of people. Dylan is a public artist who keeps himself to himself, the self-effaced screen on which his society, America and the world, projects its presumed realities. Then he sings, and ignores all this stuff.

*

Manchester is a determining moment. Henceforth, it will shape Dylan's career. Henceforth, everything he says and does will be pored over amid arcane calculations designed to identify a sum greater than all the parts. Fame - notoriety, genius, celebrity, unrequited global affection - will ensure that each instant in his life, private or public, is analysed for the meanings it might yield. In any human sense, this is bizarre. Casual statements will be treated like pronouncements. Stolen recordings - the 'electric' set at the Free Trade Hall among the first - will pass among the faithful like relics. Bad performances will gain as much attention - for what could they portend? - as great performances. The circumstances of his birth, childhood and youth, his studies, habits, loves and beliefs, will be written about (yes, I know) at encyclopedic length. Before long, for some, nothing trivial

will remain. Each new album of songs will be treated as a cultural event and a guide to his interior life. This too is stupid, but entirely of its times.

It will leave him aghast, as often as not. Hopelessly, helplessly, he will say over and over again that all he ever meant to do was write songs and perform. The disavowals, too, will be analysed. A great many of his admirers will see nothing even slightly funny in that. His name will become a magnet for comment on anything - spiritual, political, literary, philosophical, historical, sociological - that happens to preoccupy his fans. Soon enough, books will begin to appear. Saints and presidents and historic villains will never earn his shelf space. In time, the phenomenon of his fame, the fascination it exercises, the obsessions it allows, will also attract a book or two. Ironic, that.

*

With the 1966 performances he stages a hit-and-run version of the modernist rite of passage, alienating an old audience for the sake of the new. The act may be instinctive, born of anger and impossible stresses, public and private, but it is not reckless. Drugged or not, Dylan knows what he is about.⁹ And he knows full well what certain of his hitherto most devoted fans, those who have become so very angry, are about.

At the Odeon in Liverpool, three nights before the Manchester show, there had been that wry, nose-wrinkling distaste after another accusing shout from the crowd. 'There's a fella up there looking for *the saviour*,' Dylan had drawled. 'The saviour's backstage. We have a *picture* of him.' 'Ballad of a Thin Man', a song about explanations (and other things), had followed. Enough was enough.

This, the gesture of repudiation and all, is what must be. Everything is urgent. Manchester will become his Armory Show, his *Rite of Spring*, his 'Heartbreak Hotel': the

comparisons are not even slightly fanciful. In 1966 he is moving so fast his personality resembles a torrent of misrelated images caught and frozen by a spectral camera's motor drive. Which one is him? Yet again, the several selves named Bob Dylan are collapsing inwards, one upon the other. And it is, all of it, wearing him out, shaking him to pieces.

*

Manchester almost finishes him. It comes near the end of a trip that will have packed forty-three stops into four months and a day before Dylan drags himself back to the starting point, the kick-off, at the Westchester County Center in White Plains, New York, on 16 June. By then, he will have been *around the world and back again*. For a time, for its star, this will have seemed like the only never-ending tour. Then he's gone: he's not there. Over the following seven years he will perform on a public stage on precisely five occasions.

When he and The Band agree to face audiences again for a fast 40-date American tour and a ton of money early in 1974, the changes wrought will be plain. The kid who started out with a guitar and a harmonica in Greenwich Village was a joker, a droll, chattering and laughing, starry-eyed, with the crowd. In '74, he doesn't waste time on pleasantries, even on words. A face has begun to turn to unyielding leather.

Dylan's hide was cured between February and June 1966. That process is part of this story. America, Canada, Hawaii, Australia, Sweden, Denmark, Ireland, England, Scotland and France, all in 132 days, all to learn, the hard way, how adulation can become possessive contempt, how art must fight for its survival. It stood Dylan in good stead when he returned to large-scale touring in the 1990s, perhaps, but in Manchester things crystallised. It was, by any stretch, a hell

of a ride. Or simply a season in hell. The San Franciscan poet Kenneth Rexroth had written:

The last time I saw Dylan, his self-destruction had not just passed the limits of rationality. It had assumed the terrifying inertia of inanimate matter. Being with him was like being swept away by a torrent of falling stones.[10](#)

The avalanche metaphor is nice. A little uncanny, too, since Rexroth was writing in 1957, and writing about the *other*, Welsh Dylan. In 1966, the singer who shared the name had also passed the limits of rationality. He too had been swept away. If he had nothing else in common with a semi-namesake he had this: the art of poetry imposed a price, and paid a price.

Was he a poet? It is long past time to settle that argument. You can begin, perhaps, with a simple question. If Bob Dylan isn't a poet, what is he, exactly?

*

Three years and less of fame: a blur, a delirium, something unstoppable. He had not banked on that. They sold his soul while his back was turned. They handed him the keys to the kingdom. They gave him everything he thought he wanted and demanded everything he had, and then a little more, in return. That was a surprise. Now he trembles before his own shadow.

So: Play it fucking loud.

I'm Not There, I'm Gone

A picture - you buy it once, and it bothers you for forty years; but with a song, you sing it out, and it soaks in people's ears and they all jump up and down and sing it with you, and then when you quit singing it, it's gone, and you get a job singing it again. On top of that, you can sing out what you think ...

Woody Guthrie, Bound for Glory

LATE IN NOVEMBER OF 1961, IN COLUMBIA'S STUDIOS IN NEW YORK City, a raggedy 20-year-old college dropout with a taste for inventing fantastic tales about himself is trying to make a long-playing record. For this, he is the envy of friends and rivals alike. Down in Greenwich Village, where the weightier issues of the folk movement are decided, some people are wondering aloud why the great John Hammond is granting an unequalled opportunity to a coffee-house beginner who can 'barely play', the one who calls himself - a joke, surely? - *Dylan*. Certain executives of the mighty Columbia Records are wondering over the same thing. A *five-year* contract?

Approaching 51, the tall, close-cropped and patrician Hammond has seen it all, so they say, and done most of it. He has empathy, taste and the gift, sometimes, of prescience. This is the moneyed New Yorker, great-grandson of a Vanderbilt, who first saw Bessie Smith sing back in the 1920s, who later presided over the last recordings the Empress made, and who, in 1936, prodded Benny Goodman into recruiting a black vibraphonist named Lionel Hampton to the ranks of a white band. As though for a needless encore the executive has just persuaded Columbia to reissue the ethereal works of Robert Johnson, long-lost 'King of the Delta Blues Singers'. Everyone from Count Basie to

Billie Holiday, Big Bill Broonzy to Aretha Franklin, owes something – in certain cases everything – to John H. Hammond II.¹

His eminence is founded in part on the vast knowledge acquired during a long career, but in another part on an enduring passion. Where black music is concerned, Hammond gets it, has always got it. He has also done as much to oppose racism in the industry and beyond as any other Ivy League-educated white man. Hammond knows the blues. Yet here he is producing an act turned down by every label in town with even the slightest interest in folk or blues, and Hammond is doing so on the strength – so it appears – of a single press review. And the kid is terrible.

Raw talent is one thing. It is a producer's job to find, cut and polish the diamond within the dull stone. So where's the gem? Robert Shelton's catalytic *New York Times* review – another occasion for envious muttering in the Village – has spotted 'a bright new face' on the stage of the Gerde's Folk City 'cabaret' on West 4th Street. The journalist has described 'a cross between a choir boy and a beatnik' beneath 'a Huck Finn black corduroy cap', a slight individual who is 'vague' – or lying through his teeth – 'about his antecedents'. Shelton has also admitted that 'Mr Dylan's voice is anything but pretty'.

'Consciously,' and predictably, the singer is 'trying to recapture the rude beauty of a Southern field hand musing in melody on his porch.' Busily musing, the youngster's 'scarcely understandable growl' and 'highly personalised approach toward folk song' stray close, sometimes, to 'mannered excess'. There is, nevertheless, 'the mark of originality and inspiration', whatever those might be currently, upon him. The heading on the *Times* piece mentions 'a distinctive stylist'. An ill-lit single-column half-tone shows 'Dylan' with his puppy fat still evident. It isn't much to go on.

In the studio on 7th Avenue, in fact, there is less than that. This Dylan resists even the elementary disciplines of the recording process. As Hammond will one day recall, the youngster pops every 'p' and hisses every 's'. He wanders off the microphone. Time is money; timing is music. Does he want to make a record? This one can't even be bothered to take an interest in retakes. Worst of all, Dylan refuses to accept basic instruction from people - and that would be everyone - who know better than him. The Columbia executives who damn this signing as 'Hammond's folly' might have called it right.

So what is it, exactly, that John Hammond hears?

*

In fact, he has already heard Dylan play, just a little, first at an apartment rehearsal, then in the studio while producing the third album by a rising singer named Carolyn Hester on the day after the appearance of Shelton's review on 29 September. The youngster contributed some harmonica to the session thanks to Hester's urging, the advice of the Village veteran Liam Clancy and the enthusiasm of John Jr, the producer's teenage son. As legend will relate, a cursory audition, plus the news that the young man tries to write his own songs, prompted Hammond to offer both the session job and, verbally, the contract 'on the spot'.

Years later, in his long-delayed biography of Dylan,² Shelton will offer his own memory of a Friday night at Folk City just after the *Times* review has hit the streets and drawn a big, inquisitive crowd to the club.

Later in the evening, Dylan steered me to a quiet corner and said: 'I don't want you to tell anybody about this, but I saw John Hammond Sr this afternoon and he offered me a five-year contract with Columbia! But, please, man, keep it quiet because it won't be definite until Monday. I met him at Carolyn's session today. I shook his hand with my right hand and gave him your review with my left hand. He offered to sign me without even hearing me sing! But don't tell anyone, not one single soul! It could

get messed up by someone at the top of Columbia, but I think it is really going to happen. Five years on Columbia! How do you like that?’

Something of the sort must have taken place. On the other hand, biographers and autobiographers tend to forget that the verbatim conversation plucked magically from memory is about as trustworthy as a standard recording contract. Or a Dylan tale. It juices up a narrative, no doubt, but it flirts with fiction. Did Shelton truly recall every legendary word, just like that? Didn’t he once say, ‘What do you mean, *without even hearing you sing?*’

Accounts of Dylan’s big break will be at odds ever after. Hammond, for one, will always be impatient with the idea that he could have offered a deal without, in fact, listening to the kid. Later he will *seem* to recall that a studio audition of some description took place. Looking back – though this doesn’t really count for much – Dylan will mention no such event. Hammond will also dispute the suggestion that he was influenced by Shelton’s review: in his recollection the decision to sign the beginner was made before the *Times* review had appeared. Yet the producer, his memory ‘fuzzy’, will one day remember that the boy’s guitar playing was ‘rudimentary’ – the harmonica too was ‘barely passable’ – but claim to have believed, simultaneously, that ‘Bob was a poet, somebody who could communicate with his generation’.³ In the late autumn of 1961, at the moment the famous contract manifests itself, neither description fits the bill. Dylan, who will never be a virtuoso in the usual sense, is a musician capable enough to hold down club jobs. But a *poet*? Not yet.

*

This, though, is how it will be: episodes in this career will become luminous, burnished, told and retold. Dylan himself will wind up as a folk tale. Each event in his life will become a kind of fable, each fable with its own concordance, its