

Fixtures, Forces, and Friends: The Twin Odysseys of René Girard and Bob Dylan

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First the actors exchange threats. Then they exchange roles.

- René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*

Well I try my best to be just like I am
But everybody wants you to be just like them

-Bob Dylan, *Maggie's Farm*

Note: For an introduction to Girard's ideas, see the compendium [All Desire is a Desire for Being](#) by Cynthia Haven (Penguin); Girard's essay "[On War and Apocalypse](#)", published by First Things in August 2009; or the five part series [The Scapegoat: The Ideas of René Girard](#) by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's IDEAS series with David Cayley, located on multiple streaming services and at the link provided.

I: The Second Draft

This is a story of two explorers, a theorist and a troubadour sailing the same vast seas, charting the same dark territories, and doing it at exactly the same time.

Though Bob Dylan was born nearly twenty years after René Girard, their careers, until Girard's death in 2015, were exactly contemporaneous. Girard's first major work was published in 1961. Dylan's was recorded in '61 and released in early '62. I don't know if the two knew of each other, but I will treat their discoveries as uncanny to the point of mutually reinforcing. In different disciplines, they were skipping over each other's wakes.



November 1963, President Kennedy is shot.

Less than a month later, Bob Dylan, aged 22, attended a meeting of the National American Civil Liberties Committee, a leftwing group of clergy and educators. Dylan was there to accept their "Tom Paine Medal of Freedom." The invitation makes sense: Dylan was the most celebrated leftist prosecutor in music.¹

¹ George Dunn. "Bury the Rag Deep in Your Face": Retributive Justice in the Songs of Bob Dylan. A talk given at the World of Bob Dylan Symposium in Tulsa, OK, May 31, 2019.

He'd made magisterial, often rhetorical denunciations of the powerful who preyed on the weak. He'd pointed the finger at senators, callous aristocrats, racists. He asked the jury to convict and the judge to render the harshest possible punishments. This won him widespread acclaim, some hits, even a performing spot at Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington.

So there he was with clergy and educators twice his age or more. He could have said "Thank you" or "God bless," but instead, he scandalized the audience. He said,

I see some of myself in Lee Harvey Oswald

He went on:

...there's no black and white, left and right to me anymore; there's only up and down and down is very close to the ground. And I'm trying to go up without thinking about anything trivial such as politics... they...got nothin' to do with it...I'm thinking about the general people and when they get hurt.²

Less than a year later, in a *New Yorker* interview, he declared that he's finished with writing "finger-pointing songs":

There aren't any finger-pointing songs in here...You know, pointing to all the things that are wrong. Me, I don't want to write for people anymore. You know—be a spokesman...From now on, I want to write from inside me....³

The young troubadour is thinking about his second draft.

In René Girard's first book (*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* was its title in the US, *The Romantic Lie and Novelistic Truth* was its title in France), ostensibly a work of literary criticism, the theorist had begun to think about the writer's second draft. He declared that great writers must undergo a painful conversion as they realize they may "no longer...choose between [themselves] and Others...[I]n the mystery of the novel [or song] the Self and the Other have become one."⁴

This searching, almost mystical language becomes more specific and pointed 35 years later, in a 1996 interview with James Williams. Girard said the writer's first draft is an attempt at self-justification and is devoted to "the romantic lie" that was the subject of his first book: the idea that our desires are our own, that we are all "thoroughly original" and "autonomous."⁵ The writer focuses on a wicked or heroic other and plots his fall or vindication in terms that gratify the author's sense of self. But,

² A transcript of the speech is widely available.

³ Nat Hentoff. What Bob Dylan Wanted at Twenty-Three. *The New Yorker*. October 24, 1964.

⁴ René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. The Johns Hopkins University Press. 1961, 1965. pp. 299-301

⁵ René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. pp. 15-16

“...if the writer has a potential for greatness, after writing his first draft, as he rereads it, he sees the trashiness of it all...his distinction between good and evil will not stand self-examination. The [writer] comes to realize that...he and his enemy are truly indistinguishable. The [writer] of genius thus becomes able to describe the wickedness of the other from within himself...”⁶

Such was the achievement of Gustave Flaubert, who, when asked how he came up with Emma Bovary, the tragically imitative character par excellence, replied, “Madame Bovary, c’est moi!”

When Dylan said there aren’t any finger-pointing songs *in here*, he was referring to the pending recording of his fourth album, the aptly-titled *Another Side of Bob Dylan*.

The album includes the song “My Back Pages.” Looking back—aged 23—at his illustrious career to this point, his first draft, he sings these lines:

*Half-wracked prejudice leaped forth
“Rip down all hate,” I screamed
Lies that life is black and white
Spoke from my skull. I dreamed
Romantic facts of musketeers...*

Note the denunciation of “the romantic,” and how Dylan links it to just the kind of self-justification Girard spoke of. He goes on:

*In a soldier’s stance, I aimed my hand
At the mongrel dogs who teach
Fearing not that I’d become my enemy
In the instant that I preach.*

“My enemy.”

“...if the writer has a potential for greatness...his distinction between good and evil will not stand self-examination. He comes to realize that...he and his enemy are truly indistinguishable.”

Released in August 1964, *Another Side* is the bridge to what is often referred to as Dylan’s “golden era.” The songs of the period have been described as more “interior” or “impressionistic” than the grand statements of the earlier period, but, in a Girardian sense, they are more fundamental and urgent. Dylan is less prosecutor, more physician, less interested in the crime than in what causes it in the first place.

The album begins with what amounts to Dylan’s Philosophy of Friendship. It’s jaunty, even giddy, simple, and plainspoken. Like Mosaic and American law, it assures freedom by prohibition. Each verse begins with “I ain’t lookin’ to...”

⁶ René Girard. “Anthropology of the Cross.” *The Girard Reader* (James G. Williams, editor). The Crossroad Publishing Company. 1996. p. 284.

or “I don’t want to...” and then lists what he ain’t lookin’ or wantin’ to do.

*I ain’t looking to compete with you, beat or cheat or mistreat you/
Simplify you, classify you / Deny, defy, or crucify you...*

I don’t want to analyze you, categorize you / finalize you, advertise you.

It goes on and on like this. He sums it up in the final verse:

*I ain’t lookin’ for you to feel like me
See like me or be like me
All I really wanna do
Is, baby, be friends with you*

A few songs later, in the plaintive and sincere “To Ramona”, the troubadour is suffering a crumbling friendship or romance. Ramona is succumbing to some kind of deep sadness and the speaker is losing her to it. It’s no transient melancholy or chemically-induced dysphoria. It’s deeper than that. He searches for a diagnosis as he sings:

*It grieves my heart, love
To see you trying to be a part of
A world that just don’t exist
It’s all just a dream
A vacuum, a scheme,
That sucks you into feelin’ like this...*

He searches, he tries rhetoric and pleading. Then he puts his finger on it. He makes his diagnosis: Ramona has become trapped in the adoption of the desires of others. He sings:

*From fixtures and forces and friends
Your sorrow does stem
That hype you and type you, making you feel
That you must be exactly like them*

Dylan has discovered what Girard called “mimetic desire”: the tendency of human beings to imitate each other not only in the functionally useful behaviors of speaking or tying one’s shoes, but in the often-dysfunctional drive to imitate each other’s desires. Like the child who has no interest in a certain toy until another child picks it up, we want what we want because someone else wants it. We are imitative, “mimetic.” All variation of treachery and loneliness proceed from this common condition, from coquetry and fashion to demagoguery and war.

Girard also called the phenomenon “triangular desire,” as if the object of desire—transcendence, metaphysical status, “being”—exists at the apex of a triangle, and we mortals, perceiving the direct route to be closed, model ourselves on those we think are closer to the object, or on those we perceive to be blocking the route. But those Others are of course aligned on the triangle’s base and imitating everybody else. We have all misperceived.

Mimetic, imitative, mimic, mime, meme. It's a prison.

The insight seizes the young troubadour. Imitative desire, its perpetrators and victims, the love it denies and the identity it strips, is now the foundation of his inquiries and becomes the fuel for his so-called golden period.

Like the theorist, the troubadour is a kind of physician-anthropologist. He describes the mean streets where mimesis rules and finds

*advertising signs [that] con you into thinking you're the one
paupers chang[ing] possessions, each one wishing for what the other has got
the rat race choir
society's pliers
Horsemen holding ceremonies where even the pawn must hold a grudge...*

He says you'll get "branded on your feet," bloodied by the "human gods aim[ing] for their mark." You'll "follow [and] find yourself at war."

We'll have two "promoters" trying to cook up World War III. They realize

*...it can be very easily done
Just put some bleachers out in the sun
And have it on Highway 61*

It's the serpent's trick. Like any adman tasked with moving an undifferentiated or poorly understood product, the promoters make no attempt to describe the virtues of the thing; they only need to show their mark that others possess it.

"But the gods have eaten of it," said the serpent. Only then does Eve see that it is a good fruit, pleasing to the eye, and a thing to be desired. Put some bleachers in the sun. They'll come.

Dylan hasn't really left off finger-pointing, but now he's pointing *at his own group*, like the ex-lover or false friend who wound up on the wrong end of mimetic prestige. You know the song. It's the one about

*...the princess on a steeple and all the pretty people drinking
Thinking that they got it made
You better take that diamond ring,
You better pawn it babe...
How does it feel to be all alone...like a rolling stone?*

A lot of angels dancing on the head of that mimetic triangle. By calling them out, the troubadour shows us who's really on top: *him*. As performed in 1965, "Like A Rolling Stone" is a sneering, pitiless diatribe, as is its twin, "Positively 4th Street", released a little more than one week later:

*I wish that for just one time
You could stand inside my shoes*

*And just for that one moment I could be you
... You'd know what a drag it is to see you.*

This is the troubadour as snob. The snob, writes Girard,

astounds us with his clear understanding of those like himself—in other words, his rivals—and his complete inability to see himself. The lucidity and blindness both increase as the mediator [or imitated one] becomes nearer.⁷

As mimesis and rivalry increase, writes Girard, we lose whatever identity or *differentiation* we had or could have hoped to gain. We'll imitate our imitators and lose sight even of the object of our desires, so blinded and fascinated are we by the rivalry itself. It's a dizzying hall of mirrors.

From *Tarantula*, Dylan's book of hallucinatory poetry written in the golden period (spelling and caps are Dylan's):

Justine was always trying to prove she existed as if she really needed proof—Ruthy—she was always trying to prove that Bo Diddley existed & Zonk he was trying to prove that he existed to himself—me? i started wondering about whether anybody existed but i never pushed it too much—especially when Zonk was around—Zonk hated himself & when he got too high he thought everybody was a mirror⁸

As Hannah Arendt wrote in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*,

...the old and troublesome question, "Who am I?"...always appears with redoubled persistence in times of crisis.⁹

Or as Girard colleague and interpreter Paul Dumouchel explains, "If Girard is more interested in the theme of identity than in difference it is...because for him identity is the truth of difference."¹⁰

Listening through Girardian headphones, an obscure phrase from 1965 jumps out:

Statues made of matchsticks crumble into one another

Dead heroes, their adoring aspirants, dried of life and indistinguishable. One spark – poof! Conflagration. Contagion. "[Y]ou're going to be able to set fire to the whole thing with a single match."¹¹ And in the fire, the obliteration of the identities and institutions of the living.

⁷ René Girard. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. p. 74.

⁸ Bob Dylan. *Tarantula*. Scribner. 2004. Originally published in 1971. p. 105.

⁹ Hannah Arendt. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. 1950. Harcourt, Inc. p. 331.

¹⁰ Paul Dumouchel, Andreas Wilmes. René Girard and Philosophy: An Interview with Paul Dumouchel. *The Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence*. Vol. I, Issue 1/2017

¹¹ René Girard. *All Desire is a Desire for Being*. Edited by Cynthia Haven. Penguin 2023. p. 276.

Writes Girard:

*Mimetism is indeed the contagion [or conflagration] which spreads throughout human relationships, and in principle it spares no one... In the last resort, there are no genuine differences left between [the rivals]... There is no longer any way of differentiating partners from one another.*¹²

So it is with “Desolation Row,” an 11-minute Dantean hellscape. Upon entrance to the Row, a harbor town, the unnamed “they”—always the most menacing of all—are “selling postcards of the hanging and painting the passports brown,” erasing identity and foreclosing the possibility of escape.

As we descend its rings, we find character after character masked, disguised, and locked in imitation of and rivalry with another, like “Ezra Pound and TS Eliot fighting in the captain’s tower” and “The Phantom of the Opera in the perfect image of a priest”. Violence and duplicity are everywhere. It’s overwhelming, exhausting, claustrophobic - a portrait of a society in the advanced stages of a mimetic crisis. If you get hip to the scene, a “superhuman crew” will incinerate you in a factory. Or you can try to escape by sea: the Titanic sails at dawn. The Titanic. Mimetic metaphor maximus.



“Desolation Row” is a dead-on depiction of what Girard believed to have been the archaic society of our ancestors, and a condition we unknowingly replicate all too often: everybody imitating and attacking everybody else. No way out.

“Men create their own hell and help one another descend into it,” wrote Girard.¹³

During the mimetic crisis, the doubling of doubles proceeds exponentially. Some outside catalyst sparks the crumbling matchsticks into flame: a famine, a war, a new technology, an *idea*. In the time of Oedipus, it was a plague, that biologically mimetic and endlessly replicating disease that spares no group or class.¹⁴

The intensified conflagration melts all distinctions and institutions. Yesterday’s roles—the prince, the merchant, the baker, the priest, the kings of Tyrus, Cinderella, Robin Hood—no longer matter. Nothing seems or is legitimate. Previously benign institutions become sinister. Everything menaces. Special powers are ascribed to outsiders, insiders, the governing, the governed. Women are witches. Secret Jews, covert Catholics, child-killers, and pedophiles proliferate. Small-scale violence either increases or seems to. Everyone’s on edge, everyone’s on Desolation Row.

¹² René Girard. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. P. 299-301

¹³ René Girard. *The Scapegoat*. Trans. Yvonne Franco. Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 1982. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986. p. 134.

¹⁴ Girard often reads plagues in myth as symbolic renderings of a social crisis. See “The Plague in Literature and Myth” from “*To double business bound*”, an essay collection published in 1978.

How does a culture pull itself out of it? How do they keep from killing each other until the last calypso singer is standing?

There is a mechanism, writes Girard, a most profound mechanism. A kind of magic trick. The magic trick is first explored in the monumental *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) and will obsess Girard for the four decades to come. In this new period, the theorist adds to his close readings of novelists the vast library of anthropology, myth, and drama.

In 1999's *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, a title taken from the Gospel of Luke, Girard recounts a story told in Philostratus's *Life of Appolonius of Tyana* from the third century after Christ. The story goes like this:

Appolonius, a kind of magical healer, is summoned by the Ephesians to rid the city of a plague. After surveying the situation in Ephesus, Appolonius leads the citizens into the circular space of a theater. In the theater is a poor, blind, wretched beggar. Appolonius tells the crowd that this wretched man is the source of the plague and that if he is killed, the plague will end. Convincing the citizens takes some work, for Appolonius can offer no proof of the man's actual guilt. But at some point, someone hurls a stone. Then another hurls another stone. When the beggar is hit, he flashes a look of pain or fright or insolence. The look can be interpreted however you like. For the citizens, the look is monstrous - fiery eyes in a wretched face. It is sufficient evidence of guilt, so they all join in and the man dies under a mound of stones.

Riven by mimesis, pain, and fear, the people finally come together. They let off steam, transfer their guilt, reify their hatred, achieve catharsis. Call it what you want: they had someone but themselves to blame. They find they can solve their social problem when "suddenly the opposition of everyone against everyone else is replaced by the opposition of all against one..."¹⁵

They create the scapegoat. That's the magic trick.

The first act of scapegoating is unknowable, but Girard finds in the book of Isaiah an early and pure distillation of the phenomenon. Following the Babylonian captivity, God appoints among the Hebrews an unnamed figure who has come to be called *The Servant of Yahweh* and the "Man of Sorrows." We are told in Isaiah 52 that his appearance "astonishes." His visage and form are "marred more than the sons of men," and yet, he speaks the truth. "He had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth." He is, in other words, innocent. And yet, he becomes, in Girard's words, "the receptacle for all violence."¹⁶

¹⁵ René Girard. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Stanford University Press. 1978. p.24.

¹⁶ The story of the Servant of Yahweh mirrors the stories of Oedipus, which Girard cites frequently, and Job, to which Girard devoted an entire book: *Job, the Victim of His People*. Girard rereads both Job and Oedipus as sacrificial victims rather than tragic heroes or pawns in a supernatural game.

The servant of Yahweh is killed, “cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of [the people].” He is subjected to a passion before his death, and we are told that throughout this passion he “opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth.” It is as if this disfigured and lowly but exalted-of-God servant knows there is no reasoning with the mob, so he remains silent. The purgative role of his scapegoating is brought home in chapter 53, verse 5:

*But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities:
the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are
healed.*

The scapegoat has healed the community.

II: Town Square, Blast Radius

Listen close. Can you hear the marching band? They're coming down the street. Sounds like a marching band of the high school variety. A little out of tune. Doing their best. Learning the art. They seem to be approaching the town square. You can hear them now, can't you? The drumline's in the lead.

Dum dum dum dum
Dum dum
Dum dum...

A trombone blares. Now the bandleader sings:

Well, they'll stone you when you're tryin' to be so good
They'll stone you just like they said they would
They'll stone you when you're trying to go home
Then they'll stone you when you're there all alone
But I would not feel so all alone
Everybody must get stoned

It goes on like this. Wherever you are—in public or private—they'll stone you.

Long speculated to be a drug song, the Girardian reading is the right one: this is a song about an act of collective violence against a scapegoat, reciprocated until it consumes *everybody*. The presence of the marching band makes me wonder if this is the archaic ritual itself, indoctrinating its young. That the song is titled “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35” seems like a nod to the undifferentiation that characterizes Girard’s reading of the mimetically obsessed.

Nearly fifty years after this song was made, in a 2012 *Rolling Stone* interview, Dylan was asked point blank whether the song was indeed about drugs. He replied,

*It doesn't surprise me that some people would see it that way. But these are people that aren't familiar with the Book of Acts.*¹⁷

The Book of Acts, in which Stephen—a distributor of food to the poor—is executed by stoning.

A few songs later we have “Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again.” Note the twinning title. Note also that the song is itself a parody of Stephen Foster’s “Oh! Susanna.” But for a slight reduction in the dynamics of Foster’s melody, it’s the same song. It scans perfectly, and its images are likewise violent and absurd.¹⁸

¹⁷ Mikal Gilmore. “Bob Dylan Unleashed.” *Rolling Stone*. September 27, 2012. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/bob-dylan-unleashed-189723/>

¹⁸ Michael Sport Murphy. *Buckaroo Holiday*, a terrific podcast radio show on Podbean and Patreon.

Unlike the plainspoken “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35”, this song is a phantasmagoria of impressionistic images. Listening again through Girardian headphones, we hear evidence of another stoning:

*Grandpa died last week
And now he's buried in the rocks
But everybody still talks
About how badly they were shocked
But me, I expected it to happen
I knew he'd lost control
When he lit a fire on Main Street
And shot it full of holes*

“Shooting something full of holes” is cultural shorthand for exposing the flaws in an argument. For grandpa to light this fire then shoot it full of holes is, in a Girardian reading, to show that the sacrifice will no longer work. “Your burnt offerings are putrid to me,” said the prophets in one form or another, always in the voice of God, over and over for millennia.

I think Grandpa is our old Grandpa Abraham, the one whose hand God stayed. But in Mobile Alabama in 1966, for revealing the mechanism, Grandpa was stoned.

These two acts of collective violence against an individual are on an album whose title sounds like a riddle encapsulating the entirety of the mimetic theory: imitation of an objectified other, rivalry for a resource that is perceived to be scarce but which if possessed will gain its possessor metaphysical status and identity, only to result in sameness and violence: *Blonde on Blonde*.¹⁹

The follow-up album to *Blonde on Blonde* is the extraordinarily bloody *John Wesley Harding*. Compared to the magisterial blood of the early albums, the blood of *John Wesley Harding* is strange blood, wise blood. More Flannery O'Connor or William Shakespeare, more René Girard. It is stranger still for its comparative simplicity.

Gone is the roar of the amplifier, the throbbing organ. It's all drums and bass, insistent but softened. Guitars and piano come in and out like the wind “beginning to howl” all along the watchtower. The customary harmonica is the only true sonic throughline from the troubadour's previous work. Even the singer's voice is different. It's higher, less sneering, more attentive to melody.

Where the troubadour's earlier stuff is verbose—huge, Homeric, and beat—*John Wesley Harding* is decidedly laconic. The whole thing—all twelve tunes—clocks in at just over half an hour. Most of the songs come in at under three minutes. There are no anthems. Not a single song (with arguably one exception) even features what could be considered a chorus.

¹⁹ For fascinating analyses of the mimetic nature of bloneness, see Tressie McMillam Cottom's “The Dolly Moment” on Substack and the essays in *Thick*. The New Press. 2019.

The title track opens the album. Three verses, third person narration.

*John Wesley Harding was a friend to the poor
He traveled with a gun in every hand*

Immediately we have an instrument of violence, a potential victim group or a potential mob, and a dubious at best—but obliterated at its most accurate—distinction. John Wesley Hardin (the man's real name lacked the "g" added by Dylan) was an actual outlaw of the old west who claimed to have killed scores of men, including Black men, Indians, a Mexican sunbather, and a guy in a saloon whose crime was snoring too loud, which must make us question the assertion that "he was never known to hurt an honest man." What could be more honest than snoring? Questions abound: is no man honest? Can an honest man not be hurt? Did he hurt plenty of honest men, but was never *known* to? Misperceived persecutors and misperceived victims riddle this album.

Where Dylan had once mimetically idolized Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, Ramblin' Jack Elliot, and so many other folk troubadours, now he seems to murder everything they stood for. Now the "hobo" and "the immigrant" are scorned. A Christlike messenger is "evil." We meet a "damsel" in chains on the property of Tom Paine. Paine, presumably the bloodthirsty (or is it freedom-loving?) anti-Christian, anti-slavery, proto-socialist, early American patriot founding father whose nation also enshrined slavery. Paine, the man for whom Dylan's award from the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee was named. The damsel approaches the speaker and begs him to help her escape her bondage. He won't do it. Not on this album. He knows "that very instant...she meant to do me harm."

"I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine" may as well be a retelling of the stoning of the beggar at the Theater of Dionysius, and now the troubadour is part of the murdering mob. Dylan dreams he saw St. Augustine

*...alive as you or me
Tearing through these quarters in the utmost misery
I dreamed I saw St. Augustine alive with fiery breath
And I dreamed I was amongst the one who put him out to death*

The theorist held the archaic culture, having murdered its scapegoats, retroactively saw the scapegoat as both fully guilty and divine, because it was the scapegoat himself who finally brought the culture together and solved its social crisis. That the troubadour changes the historical Augustine's death into a sacrifice is to anticipate Girard's reading on the root of our divinities or semi-divinities, and that he situates the action as having occurred in a dream is consistent with Girard's insistence that the scapegoaters are unaware of what they are doing.

But still, something passes from the dreamworld to the waking. The original, founding murder of our archaic past must have seemed like some kind of

dream, but upon awakening from it, the culture that committed the act found to their surprise that it had worked: further violence had been—temporarily—forestalled. Violence delivers us from violence. Satan expels Satan. And with it, religion is born.

We can imagine a return to solidarity, or at least a return to the respect of differentiation, in the aftermath of the “Founding Murder”.²⁰ Now the baker can be the baker, and the merchant the merchant. The denizens of Desolation Row, having buried grandpa ‘neath the rocks, may put away their weary tune and start the marching band.

In the wake of the salvific violence, everything is made sacred. For the Greeks and Romans, household gods abound. Gods of the hearth, the garden, the doorway, the atrium. In Catholicism, a saint or an angel comes to preside over everything. Protestantism tried to abandon such idols but ended up in the same place: all is holy or fraught with potential evil, down to the buttons on the shirts of the Amish. Nothing is simply banal, everything has religious, mystical import.

The collective, even during the idyll, understands that while it repairs its institutions, it must create new and better institutions to prevent whatever happened from ever happening again.²¹ New rules, rituals, and taboos are created, and the Abrahamic moment of substitution is discovered, or discovered anew.

Christians eat the body and drink the blood of the victim. The minor commemoration occurs weekly or more, but the major, annual commemoration includes not only the sacrifice but the passion of suffering—Lent—that precedes it.

In some parts, the Christian tradition goes even farther by reenacting the mimetic crisis that led to the Passion. During Carnival and Mardi Gras and plenty other pre-Lent rituals, the society reenacts the obliteration of differences and distinctions that marked the crisis with role-switching, masks, masques, taboo-breaking sexual deviance, consumption of ecstasy-producing chemicals, and more. We turn Desolation Row and the pending collapse of Jerusalem into a Bacchanal, echoing, of course, the Greek and Roman sacrificial rituals from which ours sprang. “Neo-pagan” rituals tend to run the same playbook: we have a couple weeks of erased distinctions and bacchanal, then we burn a giant man in effigy in the desert.²²

²⁰ Girard borrows the term from Freud, with whom he has great disagreements and great agreements, as he does with Nietzsche and Marx

²¹ Girard, like his respected forbear, Emile Durkheim, wanted to understand what allows a society to function, but where Durkheim sought to understand what drove social solidarity, Girard sought to understand what prevented social crisis. A degree of difference.

²² Cynthia L. Haven. “We Do Not Come in Peace.” From *All Desire is a Desire for Being. Essential Writings of René Girard*. Edited by Haven. Penguin Classics. 2023. p. ix.



Immediately following *John Wesley Harding*, Dylan the writer seems like an embodiment of the archaic culture itself. We have the post-violence caesura: several albums of peace. Lovely albums, all the more so for how little happens, for their depictions of bucolic normalcy.

We have a graduation scene (“Day of the Locusts”) and happy hymns to passing time (“Time Passes Slowly”, “Winterlude”, “New Morning”, “Forever Young”, and more). We are not on the sordid 4th Street or in the frenzied, sacrificial American south (“you could smell the lynching,” Girard once wrote of his semester reading Faulkner in the 1950s south²³), but rather in the Arcadian mountains and fields where birds sing, snowflakes fall, and a hearth is always there to warm.

“Sign On the Window” is uptempo, rollicking, piano-driven gospel-pop. More Laura Nyro than Robert Johnson. When the troubadour sings of the titular sign on the window, we understand mimesis to be in the rear view, and the troubadour wants to make sure it doesn’t return. The sign says “No Company Allowed,” “You Don’t Own Me,” and “Three’s a Crowd.” After recalling a girlfriend who ran away, the troubadour hatches a plan:

*[I’m gonna] Build me a cabin in Utah
Marry me a wife, catch rainbow trout
Have a bunch of kids who call me "pa"
That must be what it's all about*



The Old French *sacer* roots both *sacrifice* and *sacred*. When we sacrifice the first victim, we make the victim holy. Cities are named for martyred saints or conquered tribes. No sooner is Christ dead on the cross than a centurion—one of the persecutors—says, “Surely he is God.” Writes Girard:

*When a victim has been killed he belongs to the sacred; it is the sacred itself that permits its own expulsion or is expelled in the victim's person.*²⁴

The victim, then, becomes what Girard calls a “monstrous double.” He is both pure evil and pure God. He is both at the heart of the community and foreign to it. Like the bacchanalists at Mardi Gras, Carnival, and Burning Man,

*[h]e partakes of all possible differences within the community, particularly the difference between within and without; for he passes freely between the interior to the exterior and back again.*²⁵

²³ Cynthia L. Haven. *Evolution of Desire: A Life of René Girard*. Michigan State University Press. 2018. P. 64.

²⁴ René Girard. *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 270.

²⁵ René Girard. *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 271

This double quality applies also to the persecutors, as in the Christian story. The centurions—and the mob itself—are both murderers of the divine and creators of divinity. Hildegard of Bingen linked Eve and Mary as two sides of a divine double: “bearer of original sin [and] agent of redemption.”²⁶

Isak Dinesen writes of the Somali who

*...had preserved a knowledge that was lost to us by our first parent...that God and the Devil are one, the majesty coeternal, not two uncreated but one uncreated, and the Natives neither confounded the persons nor divided the substance.*²⁷

If the sacrificial crisis is the final (for a time) obliteration of distinctions from which distinctions may be constructed again, the god, at least at first, is the totalizing incarnation of all the contradictions - the ultimate double. This is the condition of Dionysius: defender of divine and human laws, the “jealous guardian of legality” in Girard’s phrase, *and* the “agent-provocateur” whose identity-switching antics inflame the crisis.

A totalizing god is a dangerous one, but it is also dangerous to define a god, because in defining it we may strip away layers of its evilness or goodness or both, and we may then be susceptible to mistaking the violence or benevolence that attends its reappearance.

The taboos we create are specifically intended to preclude the arrival of doubles, those symptoms and accelerants of the sacrificial crisis. The Pentateuch defines no fewer than 613 mitzvot, or commandments, many of which are taboos against doubling or the erasure of distinctions. Dietary and sexual laws—some of which are still practiced today—are intended to create purity, and purity is a guarantor of distinction. *This* blood is untainted by milk, *this* milk is untainted by blood, *this* genetic line is untainted by *that* genetic line, *this* child is *that* man’s daughter, and so on. Each of the Ten Commandments, from “have no other God but me” to “don’t covet” seem intended to ward off the rivalry, envy, and doubling that defines a mimetic crisis. The ancient Jews’ and Zoroastrians’ insistence on monotheism is deft, for unified gods, like those perpetually rivaling Olympians, may suffer their own mimetic crises and rain pain down on the mortals.

Girard shows us in the anthropological literature a fascination with and deep fear of twins (and that twin-creating technology: the mirror). Our forebears saw twins as being born into a state of undifferentiation, so they violated a taboo at their birth. And so we see evidence and stories of the murder of one or both twins the world over. Some cultures even ate the murdered twins as we eat the body of Christ (one member of a triplet?) even now.

²⁶ Alex Ross. Hildegard of Bingen Composes the Cosmos. *The New Yorker*. February 6, 2023.

²⁷ Isak Dinesen. *Out of Africa*. 1937. p. 19-20.

And yet, in the strange world of totems and taboos and sacralization, twins are also disproportionately rendered amongst the world-founders, from Romulus and Remus to Jacob and Esau.

Along with twins, the disfigured are both reviled and disproportionately represented as world-founders, as divine. Homer is blind. The Servant of Yahweh is “marred.” Oedipus is named for the disfigurement inflicted upon him before he was left to die. Moses, the bringer of the law, probably had a speech impediment.

Another found text—a story from the Aztecs—is recounted in Girard’s *The Scapegoat*, a major text from 1982. The story neatly combines the dual-natured, disfigured God, the sacralization of nature, and the creation of culture.

In the story, the primordial gods gather to bring light to the world, to create the sun and moon. Two gods are needed. It is a heavy, fearsome task, for these gods will need to throw themselves into a fire. One god gamely volunteers. The others fall silent. After a while, they look to “a little god...one to whom no one was paying attention...one who did not speak but only listened...a little, pustule-covered one.” The gods ask him if he will be the second god to create the light. He agrees to the task.

When the time comes to do it, the first god—the brave one—becomes afraid and rescinds his offer, but the little pustule-covered one heroically volunteers. He flings himself into the fire and is consumed. Finally, the cowardly god also flings himself into the fire. The two are joined by a primordial eagle and a lion, who are given their distinctive markings by the fire. As all the gods kneel, the little pustule-covered one emerges as the sun, while the one who hesitated is made into the moon. In time, the wind will come and kill all the rest of the primordial gods, turning them into stars, but the little pustule-covered one—the disfigured, quiet, and ignored one—reigns as the sun to this day.²⁸

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In the Girardian reading, Dylan’s arcadian idyll ends because the problem of mimetic desire was not eradicated at the root. When it returns, it’ll slap the troubadour and the listener in the face, and it will come now not with the tawdry resentments of the fashionable elite, but with the anguish of an Ahab, seeking, not finding, wracked by the storms of fate, destiny, numerology, mythic beasts, twins and doubles galore. Everything is sacralized.

The laconic lyrical style and delivery of the idyllic period is gone, replaced by an even grander Homeric style than the one from the golden period, and the vocals match it in intensity. The music and the tours of the time—especially the *Rolling Thunder Revue* tour—becomes maximalist, even brutal. The swirling organs and electric guitars of Highway 61 are back and turned up. Electric violins, horns, and a new insistence on backup singers frequently add to the

²⁸ René Girard. *The Scapegoat*. p. 57-60

chaos. Gone are the urban settings of the previous mimetic period with their attendant list of grotesqueries—the Manhattan streets, the vandals and thieves and Buicks. Gone are the trips to the South in crisis. We’re going exotic now, to Mozambique, to Basque country, to the Caribbean, to invented locales like Black Diamond Bay and “the valley below”.

The epic love-gone-wrong album that is *Blood on the Tracks* features doubles galore. In “Simple Twist of Fate” (“fate” is of course a sacralized and Homeric notion, and one that has not figured prominently in the troubadour’s earlier works), the speaker refers to a lost love as his “twin” - that forbidden or deified thing, marked for violence. In *Idiot Wind*, quarreling lovers are also described as twins, both idiots, destroying each other and others. A man is murdered, a fortune-teller predicts a lightning strike. Everything’s “a little upside down...what’s bad is good, what’s good is bad.” The speaker has been “double-crossed” by his woman who is both god and devil. Her “corrupt ways have made her blind,” but she has “holiness,” a “kind of love” that the speaker abandoned when he kissed the “howling beast on the borderline.”

This duality is repeated in “Buckets of Rain”:

*I like your smile and your fingertips
I like the way that you move your hips
I like the cool way you look at me
Everything about you is bringing me misery*

In “Shelter from the Storm,” it is the speaker who is monstrous - a creature “from the wilderness,” “void of form.” This monstrous creature is also Christ himself, the “majesty coeternal” of Dinesen, the one who “partakes of all possible differences” as Girard put it:

*In a little hilltop village, they gambled for my clothes
I bargained for salvation and they gave me a lethal dose
I offered up my innocence and got repaid with scorn...*

The woman who has taken him in is also ascribed sacred qualities: she was born on the same day as God.

Next is an album called, simply, *Desire*. A more Girardian title is just impossible. We have the appearance of the face of God, fortunes told. The speaker marries Isis, the Egyptian goddess of fertility who resurrects her murdered husband and brother and wears a sun disc and cow’s horns. The symbols multiply and grow in grandeur and confusion, as does the music.

The final album of the period is *Street-Legal*. Note the concern with the law in the title. But it is a dubious law. The law of the street.

The album is *obsessed* with sacrifice and duality. We’ll have a woman marked for collective murder. She has a shaved head and is “torn between Jupiter and Apollo.” We’ll have another woman rendered as a beast named Lucifer.

No one can be trusted. Everyone is desperate, divided, and bent on violence.
The speaker wails that there is

...no time to prepare for the victim that's there
No time to suffer or blink
And no time to think

We say this in times of crisis. "There's no time to think." "This is not the time to think." We must act.

Mimetic, sacralized, and mythological themes mark every song on the album. Mixed-up confusion and doubles everywhere. But sacrifice—either self-imposed or imposed from the outside—is the cord of blood.

III – The Train by Which Scandal Comes, The Courthouse Out Of Shape

Street-Legal was recorded and released in 1978, the year Girard's *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* was published. *Things Hidden* is a mammoth text. For some, it is Girard's masterwork. For others, it's where they get off the train. Written in dialogue form with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort, the book tries to synthesize the theorist's works into a defensible whole. But *Things Hidden* adds something new: Girard's Christian faith is made explicit and centralized.

Christian ideas had surfaced in his earlier works, as they would in any work trying to understand the history of violence, the sacred, culture, and literature. But never before had Girard espoused the Christian scriptures as unique in the annals of myth, and never before had he said that he himself *believed*.

His conversion, it turns out, had happened back in the late 1950s, when he was nearing forty and writing *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. In those days, he spent a lot of time on a train, traveling back and forth from his home to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore and Bryn Mawr in Pennsylvania. He'd had a mortal cancer scare. It turned out to be benign, but it shook him. He was convinced his life was coming to an end as he was writing this book that was in so many ways about both rereading and beginning anew.

He spoke later of mystical experiences on this train. His entire "mimetic theory" came to him in "one extremely dense insight"²⁹, as did his conviction that Christianity was both a myth and the final demystification of myth. "The myth that reads all myth," as he would call it, settled into him and gave him a new paradigm for thought and feeling.

Raised in a default and nominally French Catholic household, he had long ignored his ancestral faith and considered himself simply a secular, agnostic intellectual. But in his heavy readings of Proust, Cervantes, Dostoevsky, and others he saw not what made these great texts distinct, but what made them *the same*. Among their similar features was a conversion at the end, a kind of death to and release from authorial solipsism. He was not ready to personally claim Christianity in his academic writings, but his conversion compelled him to rethink the conclusion to *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, and this post-conversion conclusion remains.



When Dylan made *Street-Legal*, he was approaching forty, as Girard was when he had his conversion experience. "Where Are You Tonight (Journey Through Dark Heat)?" is both the final song of this period and the first song of the next period.

²⁹ René Girard. *When These Things Begin*. Conversations with Michel Treguer. Michigan State University Press. 2014. pp. 128-129.

Like the rest of the album, it is anguished, veering wildly between the personal, the political, and the existential. He sings of a “lion in the road” and “a demon escaped.” He tells us he is lost and fighting “with my twin, that enemy within...while the law looks the other way.”

In the middle of the song, he sings this most Girardian verse:

*The truth was obscure, too profound and too pure
To live it you have to explode
In that last hour of need we entirely agreed
Sacrifice was the code of the road*

Dylan 1978: “The truth was obscure, too profound and too pure”

Girard 1978: *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*

Dylan 1978: “To live it you have to explode:”

Girard 1978: “The victory over desire is extremely painful...[We must] ‘give up our dearest illusions.’”

In *Street-Legal*’s final moments, the Dylan character, spent, broken, weeping, and obsessed with sacrifice, is accompanied by two texts: “Marcel and St. John.” Marcel is probably Gabriel Marcel, Girard’s French-Catholic predecessor whom Girard cites thus:

*Evil is the mystery of a pride that, as it condemns others, unwittingly
condemns itself.*³⁰

“My twin, the enemy within.” The enemy he feared becoming in the instant that he preached. The same enemy Dylan had been investigating since at least 1963.

In late 1978, when Dylan was by all accounts exhausted, even physically sick, someone threw a silver cross onstage. Dylan, 38 years old, picked it up, put it in his pocket, and soon thereafter converted. He took classes for new Christians at the Vineyard Fellowship, an epicenter of the burgeoning Southern California born-again scene.

For the next several years he was the hardest-working itinerant preacher riding the circuit. He produced three albums devoted to Christian salvation. The first of these picks up where *Street-Legal* had ended: with a train. The album is called *Slow Train Coming*. As Girard, so Dylan. There is just something about a train.

As Girard had scandalized his audience with his expression of Christian faith in *Things Hidden*, Dylan now scandalized *his* audience by refusing to play anything but spirituals and his new Christian material.

³⁰ René Girard. Camus’s Stranger Retrieved. *To Double Business Bound: Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology*. The Johns Hopkins University Press. 1978. p.34.

From the stage, he castigated the audience for their sins, often in mimetic terms.

*...Are you thinking for yourself
Or are you following the pack?
Are you ready to meet Jesus?
Are you where you ought to be?*

He quotes Christian scripture frequently, including this Giradian reference to the Book of Matthew:

*Well, I'm hanging on to a solid rock
Made before the foundation of the world...*

It's another second draft, a new novitiate period, and the finger-pointing *to an outside group*—in this case, non-Christians—is back. He's on top of the mimetic triangle again. He's got it figured out.

His music of the era so closely follows other Christian artists of the time—particularly Keith Green—it's tempting to allege plagiarism. The similarity, however, owes more to the orthodoxy of the born again movement. Obligation, except to warn the wicked, to put 'em on notice, is eschewed. Personal purity is paramount because the eschaton is imminent. The God of love will finally have his vengeance and forsake his Son's dying plea to "forgive them, for they know not what they do." In the evangelical end times, every unbeliever is a demon in the Theater of Dionysius. May plague, earthquake, fire, flood, and virus take them down.

The mythology of the mob. Same as it ever was.

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Book 2, Chapter 2 of *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* is titled "A Non-Sacrificial Reading of the Gospel Text." This is exactly what Girard provides, and it is radical. It begins:

*The Gospels only speak of sacrifices in order to reject them and deny them any validity...the sacrificial interpretation of the Passion must be criticized and exposed as a most enormous and paradoxical misunderstanding...*³¹

Girard sees this anti-sacrificial reading of the Gospels as "explicit," even obvious, so he regards mankind's inability to understand it as "most revealing." To make sure we understand how serious he is, Girard writes, "Of all the reappraisals we must make...none is more important."³² He means reappraisals

³¹ René Girard. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. p.180.

³² René Girard. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. p.181.

of *anything*. This, to Girard, is the most important reappraisal in human history.³³

The “things hidden since the foundation of the world” were not really hidden. They were revealed, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, in parables and stories collected in the scriptures and, often unwittingly, in the anthropological and psychological literature of the 19th and 20th centuries, and they demand a rereading. As he had previously seen not what separated but what united the great novelists, now Girard saw what united the myths and rituals of man: mimetic desire, the social crisis, and the throughline to the collective murder of an individual.

It's there in texts obscure and world-famous, if only we reread them.

Recall the primordial Aztec gods gathered to decide who would fling himself off the cliff to create the sun. After the “brave god” chickens out, the “little pustule-covered” god volunteers for the task. The pustule-covered god now reigns supreme as the sun.

And a world-famous one: King Oedipus of Thebes unwittingly kills his father and marries his mother. This heinous double sin plunges Thebes into a plague (reread: social crisis). When the sin is revealed and Oedipus is immolated, the plague abates.

To Girard, each of these myths and many more require reinterpretation. Could the origins of these stories be not of heroic bravery, hubris, or the mystical and anthropomorphized genesis of natural phenomena, but rather of primordial collective violence against an individual? Whether due to shame at the act or the process of sacralization itself, could the collective over generations of telling and retelling the stories have embellished the tales and the victims at the tales' hearts with ever more monstrous qualities - the pustules, the club foot, the mark of Cain, the semi-divine births of the fratricidal twins Romulus and Remus? A retelling of an old tale is not necessarily a *re-reading* of an old tale.

All the mythic stories feature a crisis scenario: a world without light in the Aztec story, or, in most others, the threat of an attack or an ill-defined plaguelike thing that threatens the existence of the entire community. And they all reach the same conclusion: the victim really was guilty, his punishment was entirely necessary, and his death or immolation restored the world to right.

The theorist saw that the Judeo-Christian story has the formal and narrative qualities of a myth like all others. Divine births, signs and wonders, miraculous healings, natural catastrophes, supernatural interventions. Prophets and seers, captives and captors. But in the scriptures, something is fundamentally

³³ In his later years, Girard slightly tempered his view, finding in some vestiges of sacrifice something akin to holy renunciation, but his strong language in *Things Hidden* remains, I believe, valid. The tempering has been over-emphasized by some of his commentators for whom the renunciation of sacrifice seems too great a sacrifice.

different: the victims or would-be victims of collective violence are unmistakably innocent.

Abel is without fault when Cain slays him. Moses is without fault when Pharaoh orders him and all the other newborn Hebrew boys to be killed. Isaac is without fault when God stays Abraham's hand. The faithful servant in Ezekial is without blame. John the Baptist is innocent when Herod's daughter has him slain. Stephen is innocent when he is stoned by the elders.

In a 2001 radio interview with the Canadian broadcaster David Cayley, Girard spoke of the parallels between the Oedipus and Joseph stories. Both heroes are left for dead in the wilderness, both arrive as outsiders to a community in crisis, both scale the rungs of power, both are accused of incest. But the conclusions to the stories differ as drastically as possible. Says Girard:

You see how close Joseph is to Oedipus, how related the two stories are, how easy it would be to see that obviously the Bible is a myth, too. But there is one question [in each story] which is answered differently. Every time the myth asks the question, Is Oedipus guilty?, the answer is yes. Has he killed his father? Yes. Is he responsible for giving the plague to the Thebans? Yes. Has he slept with his mother? The answer is yes. Guilty, guilty, guilty, guilty. Joseph? Not guilty, not guilty, not guilty, not guilty. That's a huge difference because the "not guilty" is not arbitrary but is a reading of mythology. It's a reading of the fact that the unanimity of mythology is crowd contagion and not reason.

Girard finds a further reading or rereading at the conclusion of the Joseph story, that longest and most self-contained in Genesis. Joseph has essentially captured all his brothers save one, the youngest, Benjamin. Joseph gives his brothers the option to scapegoat Benjamin, who could plausibly be considered guilty of a minor crime, and save themselves. The brothers are about to take the option when the eldest, Judah, finally asks Joseph to let him—Judah—take the place of his brother. Because the offer is made, and even though the other brothers are guilty, Joseph forgives them all. Says Girard:

So you have substitution there which is the reverse of a sacrificial substitution. If one acts right, everybody is saved. So the whole story, I say, is anti-myth and anti-sacrifice. That's absolutely obvious. Now, of course, they didn't know the Oedipus myth—or maybe they did, who knows?—but they knew similar myths and they were writing against them. And what genius to write the story like another myth, but to make it an anti-myth, the opposite of a myth, which reveals that mythology is the opposite of that love Joseph still ultimately feels for his brothers.

We should not miss the gravity of this insight. These are the seeds of our modern concept of victimology. If the "arc of justice" has a beginning, it is here. The name "Satan" in Hebrew is the "accuser" or "adversary." He need only point his finger and assert guilt. The mob will take over. *Satan*, says

Girard, “is the name for the mimetic process seen as a whole.”³⁴

Joseph, the stories above, and plenty more from the biblical text obviously prefigure Jesus, whom Girard calls “the victim par excellence, in whom the previous history of mankind is summed up, concluded and transcended.”³⁵ The gospel writers assert Jesus’s innocence from a variety of points of view, even from the points of view of the persecutors themselves. Pontius Pilate, of course, “washes his hands” of the guilt of inflicting punishment on Jesus.

The story of the high priest Caiaphas is the most instructive. Related most comprehensively in the Gospel of John, the Pharisees hold a meeting to discuss the problem of the pending siege of Jerusalem—a social crisis—and this mysterious rabbi—Jesus—at its center. They have no crime to pin on Jesus, and they wonder what to do. It is Caiaphas, the chief priest, who utters the immortal words from the eleventh chapter of John:

You fail to see that it is better for one man to die for the people, than for the whole nation to be destroyed.

The text continues that Caiaphas meant that Jesus was to die

*...not for the nation only, but to gather together
in unity
the scattered children of God.*

By rendering so explicitly the sacrificial logic of Caiaphas and by showing us the same drama over and over since Genesis, says the theorist, the biblical writers demystify the myth of the guilty, invent the concept of the collective victim, and begin the process by which peoples—Christian or not—adopt the moral and legal idea that one must be “innocent until proven guilty.” Satan is the accuser, Christ is the defender of the accused.

In the tenth chapter of Luke, as Jesus is gathering his disciples and leading them toward Jerusalem, he tells his disciples to “spread the news of the kingdom of God,” to heal the sick, and to greet the people they encounter with, “Peace to this house!” When James and John ask if they should “call down fire from heaven to burn” those who refuse their message, Jesus, the Paraclete, the witness for the defense, rebukes them. Vengeance, after all, is reserved for the Lord.

When the disciples’ message is greeted favorably by the people, Jesus says, “I see Satan fall like lightning....”, the phrase that gives the theorist’s 1999 book its title.

The law of the accuser is changing to the law of the accused.

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³⁴ René Girard. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. p.162

³⁵ René Girard. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. p.209

Before his born again period, in the days when he was dreaming of St. Augustine and reversed sympathies, the law was on the troubadour's mind. "Drifter's Escape" was the first track released as a single from *John Wesley Harding*. Three verses, no chorus, no bridge, of few words. Uptempo but with a sense of pulsing dread.

We're back in that same theater of Dionysius where a culture seeks union through the mechanism of collective violence.

The song begins:

*Oh help me in my weakness,
I heard the drifter say
As they carried him from the courtroom
And were taking him away...*

The drifter in this forlorn courtroom tells the judge he does not know the substance of the accusation. The judge vacates the bench and cries to the drifter, "You fail to understand, why must you even try?" This construction, "You fail to understand," recalls the words of Caiaphas. But this judge, it seems, cannot stomach the murder of an innocent on his watch. Nor, however, has he the bravery to serve as a witness for the accused.

A mob gathers outside the courthouse and clamors for the drifter to be delivered to them. The members of the jury end the trial. They want to get straight to the Passion over the objections of only two—an "attendant" and "a nurse"—who cry, "The trial was bad enough, but this is ten times worse."

As the jury carried the drifter to the mob, something strange happens:

*...a bolt of lightning
Struck the courthouse out of shape
And while everybody knelt to pray
The drifter did escape*

A bolt of lightning struck the courthouse out of shape. I see Satan fall like lightning and the law is forever changed. The lightning shoots holes in the law.

The born again Christianity the troubadour had found was not the Christianity the theorist reread. I don't know that there is a post-Christian Dylan, but I know the preaching stopped. Or changed, and radically.

In the final song on the final album of Dylan's so-called "born again era", perhaps the preacher-prophet-troubadour smelled the singe of the scapegoat's flesh upon his own hands when he likened himself not to Christ but to Cain.

Like Cain, I now behold this chain of events that I must break...

*...I hear the ancient footsteps, like the motion of the sea
Sometimes I turn, there's someone there, other times it's only me*

*I am hanging in the balance of the reality of man³⁶
Like every sparrow falling, like every grain of sand*

The seed of doubt, or the seed of deepening faith?

³⁶ "...the reality of man" is the phrase that appears on the album. On the "bootlegged" recordings and in the ensuing decades of performance, he has usually used a different phrase - "a perfect finished plan." Are "the reality of man" and "a perfect finished plan" opposites? Are they the same? Always rewriting.

IV: Armageddon On My Mind

Girard's final period, and Dylan's current period (may it never end), began on September 11, 2001, when acolytes of an archaic, sacrificial, violently religious sect attacked a country being run by what turned out to be another archaic, sacrificial, violently religious sect who responded—as Girard may have predicted—“with interest,” making of itself a twin of its rival, killing many soldiers and civilians alike.

René Girard begins reading and rereading Carl von Clausewitz, and Bob Dylan releases a masterpiece with a twinning title - *Love and Theft*.

Love and Theft opens with “Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum.” The song is mixed, unusually in Dylan's catalogue, as a fade-in. A quick, vaguely polyrhythmic 4/4 beat with jangly guitars pushed to the far ends of the audio spectrum, it conjures the primitive, the archaic, the inevitable. It seems, like sacred violence, to have been occurring for eons, just thrumming away until some engineer decided to plug in a mic. The gnarled voice of age enhances the effect. The song narrates no beginning, its first line the millionth of some dug-up epic whose beginning has returned to sand or been buried 'neath the rocks. “Mashed Potatoes started long time ago,” said Dee Dee Sharp via Nick Tosches.

Two men, the doubles Tweedle-dee Dum and Tweedle-dee-Dee, are throwing knives into a tree. There is no stated purpose to this act, they're just doing it. They got two bags of dead man's bones. They're living east of Eden, in the land of Nod, the land without Yahweh to which Cain was exiled in Genesis 4. And yet, the twins are “trusting their fate to the hands of God.”

Over the next three minutes of this bridgeless and chorusless tune, the troubadour relates a series of scenes that seem, like the title of the album, to unify the opposites, to sever the unified, to obliterate the distinctions.

Tweedle-dee Dee and Tweedle-dee Dum are “like babies sitting on a woman's knee,” but Tweedle-dee Dee is also a “lowdown, sorry old man”. They're “a dollar short” and “lying low,” but they have a “parade permit and a police escort.” These are violent men, throwing knives, boiling brains, and ready to “stab you where you stand.” But they “live in a happy harmony,” and they “know the secrets of the breeze,” which might be to say they know the answer blowing in the wind. They're together through life, but still, says Tweedle-dee Dum to Tweedle-dee Dee, “Your presence is obnoxious to me.” They ride, of course, that streetcar on train tracks, the one with the most Girardian *and* Dylanesque of all names: *Desire*.

A couple songs later, Dylan sounds like an anti-Romantic Girardian hero, or perhaps the worldly lost, which may amount to the same thing - the one no longer shackled within the mimetic triangle. He merrily sings:

I'm paintin' the town

*Making my last go-round
Well I'm scuffling and I'm shufflin' and I'm walking on briars
I'm not even acquainted with my own desires*

“The victory over desire,” wrote Girard in the conclusion of *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*—the conclusion he rewrote after his Christian conversion—“is extremely painful... we must forgo the fervent dialogue endlessly carried on by each one of us at the superficial levels of our being.”³⁷

Invoking the Greek notion of *epochē*, a suspension of judgment, as the great victory “over Promethean pride,” he says “the true artist no longer has to choose between himself and Others...the Self and the Other have become one.”³⁸

Tweedle-dee Dum and Tweedle-dee Dee are like Abram/Abraham or Saul/Paul: one, but more than dual. *Multitudinous*. Implicit in Girard, I think, is the idea that we all must have a nearly illimitable capacity for good and evil, creation and destruction, damage and repair, and everything in between. This must be a precondition of the mimetic theory. I and Thou? Yes. And also, I *am* Thou. And Thou art *me*. Neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, for the one inescapably shapes the other.

In his earlier voyages, Dylan had conceived of himself in a series of singular roles — a Romantic musketeer, a penitent, a prosecutor, a defender, a defendant, crucifier, crucified, hero, villain, alms-giver, mercenary. In his late period, he is everything at once: multitudinous. He borrows the phrase from Whitman, of course, who, like Dylan and Girard, dwelt in paradox and contradiction, and constantly revised his drafts. Whitman scandalized the audience in his time. How’s this for a scandalous line in ours?

I am Anne Frank and Indiana Jones

Dylan tells us he’s vain: “I fuss with my hair.” And vengeful: “I fight blood feuds.” As Flaubert said of his creation, “Madame Bovary? C’est moi!”

Julius Caesar? Lee Harvey Oswald? The howling beast on the borderline? “C’est moi!,” says Bob.

...the Self and the Other have become one...

As Dylan’s realization of multitudes within the multitude increases, so does the violence *and* the compassion. The current era—twenty years strong now—is Dylan’s most tender *and* most violent by far. In “Workingman’s Blues #2” he sings like the kindly grandfather he is:

*My cruel weapons have been put on the shelf
Come and sit down on my knee
You are dearer to me than myself*

³⁷ René Girard. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. P. 300.

³⁸ *ibid*

As you yourself can see

Then he says he'll punch his spear "right straight through half-ways down your spine."

"Has your sense of faith changed?" a *Rolling Stone* interviewer asked him a decade ago. His reply:

*Certainly it has, O ye of little faith. Who's to say I even have faith or what kind? I see God's hand in everything. Every person, place, and thing, every situation. I believe in the Book of Revelation. I believe in disclosure, you know?*³⁹

In their late periods, our twin sailors indeed have Armageddon on the mind.

In the introduction to his final masterwork, *Battling to the End*, written in his eighties, Girard considered in detail what follows from Christianity as the myth that reads all myth: the victimage mechanism, the magic trick, won't work. We understand it too well. Now every adversary can claim victimhood and justify the next attack on those grounds. Paradoxically, the potential for total violence is unleashed. He writes:

*...Christianity is the only religion that has foreseen its own failure. The prescience is known as the apocalypse [or Revelation, or disclosure]... [T]he word of God...at its most forceful, repudiating mistakes that are entirely the fault of humans, who are less and less inclined to acknowledge the mechanisms of their violence...once in our history the truth about the identity of all humans was spoken, and no one wanted to hear it...*⁴⁰

In *Battling to the End* (the French title is *Achever Clausewitz* ("Completing" or "Achieving" Clausewitz), Girard reads and rereads Carl von Clausewitz, the Napoleon-worshipping Prussian general whose much-esteemed *On War* was unfinished at his death. Girard's stated aim is to finish the book. It represents a kind of closing of the Girardian circle. Girard, who began as a historian before sailing like Odysseus to the wild lands, returns to his original discipline.

The theorist had written elsewhere that, in keeping with the logic of mimetic desire, each act of violence is an imitation of and response to a previous violent act. As I write this, Vladimir Putin's Russia is trying to destroy Volodymyr Zelensky's Ukraine (Bob Dylan's ancestral homeland) for a wrong Putin perceives Russia to have suffered 1,000 years ago. No matter that there was no such thing as Russia when the harm was inflicted, Vladimir victimizes Volodymyr in the name of Vladimir's victimhood. All is pretext for the next violent act.

³⁹Mikal Gilmore. "Bob Dylan Unleashed." *Rolling Stone*. September 27, 2012. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/bob-dylan-unleashed-189723/>

⁴⁰ René Girard. *Battling to the End*. Michigan University Press. p. x.

Girard sees in von Clausewitz a kindred realist, comprehended in the following quote from Clausewitz from *On War*:

*Even the most civilized of peoples, in short, can be fired with passionate hatred of each other...Each side, therefore, compels its opponent to follow suit: a reciprocal action is started which must lead, in theory, to extremes.*⁴¹

Von Clausewitz is a theorist of the duel, that “gentlemanly” act in which two rivals attempt to settle their differences by facing off and shooting each other. This is, to Clausewitz, the root of war. But Clausewitz stands at the precipice of modern warfare and anticipates what is to come. The duel will, indeed, escalate to extremes - to genocide. The capacity of modern man to destroy itself with nuclear weapons would not have surprised him. According to Girard, it would not have surprised the writer of Revelation either. As Girard “completes” Clausewitz, he performs another act of rereading that final book of the canonical Christian scriptures, the one that has bedeviled so many for so long. The theorist finds it “perfectly intelligible.”

He sees in Revelation a prophetic imagination of the ability of humanity to exterminate itself that should have been impossible for its time. But here we are, says Girard, living in the time Revelation conjured, teetering on the edge of self-inflicted self-oblivion. Writing in *First Things*, Girard asserts that what the demystification Christianity achieved was

*good in the absolute... [but] bad in the relative, for we were not prepared to shoulder its consequences. We are not Christian enough.*⁴²

The theorist reads apocalypse as a fitting end to that collection of ancient wisdom that proceeds from scapegoating rituals to prohibitions against scapegoating rituals to the first clear and precise demystification of the scapegoat mechanism in the story of Christ. And he sees in the demystification of collective violence a great danger, for the culture that loses this great and awful mechanism may—another paradox—will have no way to control its spread. Writes Girard:

*The great paradox in all this is that Christianity provokes the escalation to extremes by revealing to humans their own violence. It prevents people from blaming the gods for their violence and places them before their responsibility.*⁴³

We may hear echoes here of Jesus’s famous and mysterious statement in Matthew 10: “Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but to bring a sword,” or Dylan’s “This is how I spend my days, I came to bury not to praise” from “Pay in Blood.”

⁴¹ René Girard. *Battling to the End*, p.5.

⁴² René Girard. “On War and Apocalypse.” *First Things*. August 2009.

⁴³ René Girard. *Battling to the End*. p. 118.

We may also hear echoes of Dylan's Nobel acceptance speech. He devotes a significant portion of his speech to a vivid consideration of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a book, he says, in which "you lose your childhood, your faith in a meaningful world, and your concern for individuals." Reciprocal violence, the escalation to extremes, and the mystification that all our philosophy has failed to prevent these things, is, as it was to Girard in his last days, central. Says Dylan:

You're stuck in a nightmare. Sucked up into a mysterious whirlpool of death and pain. You're defending yourself from elimination... This is the lower region of hell...

Who knows how long this mess will go on? Warfare has no limits.

Death is everywhere. Nothing else is possible. Someone will kill you and use your dead body for target practice. Boots, too. They're your prized possession. But soon they'll be on somebody else's feet...

You kill twenty of 'em and twenty more will spring up in their place... You fight for a week or a month, and you gain ten yards. And the next month it gets taken back.

All that culture from a thousand years ago, that philosophy, that wisdom - Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, what happened to it? It should have prevented this... The common grave. There are no other possibilities.

I put this book down and closed it up. I never wanted to read another war novel again, and I never did.

Cynthia L. Haven, Girard's astute biographer, interpreter, and friend, asserts that Girard was not a pacifist, and Girard himself refers to the "aporia of pacifism."

But hawks should take no comfort in the theorist, for if he indeed is not a pacifist, he is the most exacting of just war theorists. *Battling to the End* covers broad territory, including lengthy forays into reclusive poet Friedrich Holderlin, Germaine de Stael, Pope Benedict, Islam, and the Iraq War. None of its conclusions are easy, none of its answers pat or politically predictable. It prays no rosary to false hope, nor does it sink to cynicism. Like so much in Dylan, it sums itself up in a moral that is as obvious as it is difficult:

To make the Revelation wholly good, and not threatening at all, humans have only to adopt the behavior recommended by Christ: abstain completely from retaliation, and renounce the escalation to extremes.⁴⁴

Δ

The final song on Dylan's most recent album of all original music, released in plague year 2020, when Dylan was 79, is "Murder Most Foul." It's 18 minutes

⁴⁴ René Girard. *Battling to the End*. Michigan University Press. p. 216

long. Its main characters are JFK and MLK. We're back where we began, but rereading. The troubadour sings:

*The day they blew out the brains of the king
Thousands were watchin', no one saw a thing
It happened so quickly, so quick, by surprise
Right there in front of everyone's eyes
Greatest magic trick ever under the sun
Perfectly executed, skillfully done*

*They killed him once, they killed him twice
Killed him like a human sacrifice
The day that they killed him, someone said to me,
"Son, the age of the anti-Christ has just only begun."*

A magic trick and no one saw a thing.

*...[we] are less and less inclined to acknowledge the mechanisms of [our]
violence...once in our history the truth about the identity of all humans was
spoken, and no one wanted to hear it...*

And this, from *Battling to the End*:

*Violence can no longer be checked. From this point of view, we can say that the
apocalypse has begun.*

If we are to have any hope at all, however, there must be another possibility.
Writes Girard:

*"Recognizing imitation...seems to be the only way of feeling that it is still
possible to go from reciprocity to relationship, from negative contagion to a
form of positive contagion. This is what the imitation of Christ means."*⁴⁵

"To relationship." Not just renunciation, but positive, proactive relationship.
Friends in the joyous and difficult sense of Romans 12: leave vengeance to the
Lord, practice charity and love, and respect the differences between us, which
were given in grace.

"Forgive them, they know not what they are doing," must be the greatest
philosophical statement of all time, encapsulating everything that came before
and everything since. "The time has come for us to forgive one another. If we
wait there will not be time enough", writes Girard in the conclusion of *The
Scapegoat*.⁴⁶

For all of the troubadour's famous sneering and the theorist's denunciations,
the twin sailors arrive at the simple, irreducible, golden rule conclusion that we
are all most bound together and our fates and happiness depend on recognizing
it. Sings Dylan:

⁴⁵ René Girard. *Battling to the End*. Michigan University Press. p. 109

⁴⁶ René Girard. *The Scapegoat*. The Johns Hopkins University Press. p. 212.

*In the still of the night, in the world's ancient light...
 We all wear the same thorny crown
 Soul to soul, our shadows roll
 And I'll be with you when the deal goes down*

And this confession of the God-given mimetic reality of man:

*Thunder rolling over Clarkesdale, everything is looking blue
 I just can't be happy, love, unless you're happy too*

Even that signature song—that pitiless diatribe “Like a Rolling Stone”—has changed. In recent performances, it’s slower, more tender. When he sings “How does it feel to be on your own?”, it’s like he really wants to know.

The words of Paul in Romans 12:

*“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of
 your mind...”*

Write another second draft.

In “I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine”, Dylan uses the phrase, “No martyr is among ye now...” This is lifted from the same chapter of Paul, who wrote:

*“For I say...to every man that is among you now, not to think of himself more
 highly than he ought to...For...we have many members in one body, and all
 members have not the same office.”*

Dylan rewrites the sentiment in “Dear Landlord”:

*Now, each of us has his own special gift
 And you know this was meant to be true
 And if you don't underestimate me
 I won't underestimate you*

A sense of menace haunts this line: don’t underestimate me, let us treat each other with respect and gladness. Or don’t underestimate how I can repay you seven times if you wrong me once.

“Murder Most Foul” is a kind of prayer of mourning, of grief, a Psalm for the dead. Maybe Girard, in his focus on how collective violence brings us together, underemphasized how grief can do the same thing. Maybe we should just share raw, simple grief. “Blessed are they that mourn,” Matthew comforts coldly.

But the troubadour does not stop with grief. Nearly the entirety of the second act of “Murder Most Foul” is a litany of and thanksgiving for...music. From the dead and the living, the high and the low—Mozart to The Eagles, the obscure to the Number 1 hits—the troubadour praises and calls upon the Psalmists who came before.

It is an act of amor mundi, amor amici, and amor dei, for when two or more are gathered—and especially if they are singing—isn't that where God is?

Another point of uncanny similarity and hope: in their late periods, our sailors kept showing up. It seems like Girard never refused an invitation to a panel discussion, a radio show, etc. He would patiently clarify aspects of his theory, and, almost invariably, his hosts would try to seduce him into moral and political judgments. They would gnash their teeth at the awfulness of everything and say, "What shall we do, René?!" René would smile and say, "Be more Christian."

As I write this, tonight, Bob Dylan, aged 82, is scheduled to play in Boston, at the Orpheum Theater, named for Orpheus, the Thracian Bard and Poet who traveled all the way to hell to bring his beloved back.

Good night, bonne nuit, and thank you for reading.

APPENDIX

RAMONA AND THE STRUCTURALIST CONTROVERSY

They walked in Structuralists, they walked out post-structuralists.

In October 1966, four months later after the release of *Blonde on Blonde*, a major academic symposium was held at Johns Hopkins University. Officially called “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man,” it featured and in some cases introduced so many French intellectual giants to the American scene it became known as “The French Invasion.” It was the stateside debut of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. Roland Barthes, Lucien Goldmann, and Jean Hyppolite were there. It was to be the debut of Michel Foucault, but, characteristically, he bailed at the last minute. Claude Levi-Strauss blessed but could not attend the event.

It was the brainchild of Girard, and he was one of its three co-organizers.

While Girard himself presented a paper on the mimetic themes in the Oedipus trilogy, his countrymen tore down—or attempted to tear down—what they saw as the myth that language itself can marshal meaning. Prior to the conference, as Structuralists, the thinkers had all in some way attempted to discover the hidden architecture of history, society, etc. Their works, especially Lacan, Levi-Strauss, and Girard himself, recalled the grand unifying field theories of Freud, Darwin, Marx, and, arguably, the biblical texts. It was Promethean work, their heavy texts concrete cast.

During the symposium, they took hammers to their own and their forebears' texts, shattering them into a million pieces - a million narratives and points of view. Everything became subjective except the idea that unifying field theories themselves were instruments of misunderstanding at best, oppression at worst.

In a representative pronouncement, the Belgian literary theorist Paul de Man, whose pro-Nazi writings would later be discovered to significant controversy, proclaimed that “death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament.”

Cynthia L. Haven quotes one of Girard's colleagues and co-organizers, Richard Macksey: “It wasn't clear whether it was a wedding gown for structuralism in America, or a winding sheet for structuralism in American. Did we know what happened? No, but there was a sense.”

Now we know what happened. Post-modernism—that blanket term for whatever follows grand narratives—was born. Haven again:

For structuralists, systems were all—they emphasized the importance of systems

in structuring our worldviews, our sense of ourselves, our own thoughts. They sought “universal truth” through structures that bind people together. Post-structuralists had given up that search, and instead focused on difference and on the individual reader or speaker operating within a structure. Rather than seeing coherent systems, they saw incoherence and a mushrooming plurality of meanings.

We live in the house this symposium helped build. Or in the valley where the structuralists’ house used to stand. In any case, the act of demolition was, to some, thrilling.

I wonder if this kind of thinking is what was getting the first Ramona so down. Many have claimed that her sadness is a response to the major hurdles facing the march for civil rights, but I don’t buy it. She’s torn between “staying” and going “back to the South,” which, in the civil rights reading, means going back to demonstrate. The south is where her despair should overwhelm her, but it is the city that causes her anguish: “the flowers of the city though breathlike get deathlike sometimes.”

“To Ramona” is recorded in New York City in 1964 - the physical and temporal nexus of the progressive intellectual, artistic, and political vanguard. The project of this vanguard is, in one interpretation, relativism, or an obliteration of distinctions. Folk is pop, jazz is classical, classical is folk. There is no difference between races and genders. No society is more “advanced” than another, no country “greater” than another. All texts—from the Bible to indigenous myths—are equally illuminating and obfuscating. Language itself is untrustworthy.

While we may agree on the aims of much, most, even all of this demolishing, it is still a demolition. The troubadour and Ramona, given their context, would certainly have been aware of this intellectual revolution, but Ramona, it seems, bought it in a specific way. Is it too much to say she became a victim to the common phenomenon of high-minded concepts trickling down in warped version into everyday life? The rigorous philosophy of Epicurus becomes “Eat, drink, and be happy.” The complex notions of eastern karma or Einsteinian physics become “Everything happens for a reason.” So too can the “structuralist,” “post-structuralist,” “deconstructivist,” or “postmodern” intellectual/academic movements become “I’m better than no one and no one is better than me.”

In certain moods or moments, such credos may be liberating or consoling, but they can also be terribly defeating and depressing, along with being untrue or true only on an entirely unworkable cosmic scale. Why do anything? Why practice? Why speak? Why try?

The conference was a major success and therefore a laurel in his cap, but Girard—a Structuralist through and through—soon distanced himself from it, and distanced himself far. Many of the presenters and the symposium’s heirs—notably Michel Foucault—quickly became brighter stars than Girard, but

Girard could not assent to the degree to which intelligibility was challenged. Explaining why, Girard said years later:

I have always been a realist, without knowing it. I have always believed in the outside world and the possibility of knowledge of it. No new discipline has ever produced any durable results unless it was founded on common sense realism...Language is a problem, of course, but one that can be resolved. I'm sure that the engineers who managed the flooding of the Nile in Ancient Egypt and agronomists in present-day California, after some initial introduction, would understand each other perfectly.

To me, this sounds a lot like Dylan. For all his wordplay and surrealism, he insists on a kind of common sense, plain-spoken realism. Take a terrific interview with Jann Wenner of *Rolling Stone* in 2007. Wenner is trying to get Dylan to speak on politics and current events.

Dylan: I think what you're driving at, though, is we expect politicians to solve all our problems. I don't expect politicians to solve anybody's problems.

Wenner: Who is going to solve them?

Dylan: Our own selves. We've got to take the world by the horns and solve our own problems. The world owes us nothing, each and every one of us, the world owes us not one single thing. Politicians or whoever.

Wenner: Do you think America is a force for good in the world today?

Dylan: Theoretically.

Wenner: But in practical fact...

Dylan: The practical fact is always different than theory.

Wenner: What do you think the practical fact is right now?

Dylan: With what's going on? Human nature hasn't really changed in 3,000 years. Maybe the obstacles and actualities and daily customs change, but human nature really hasn't changed. It cannot change. It's not made to change.

I am not claiming that Dylan is a "structuralist," but his distrust of revolutions in meaning is clear. If we actually live in the house the post-structuralists built, the talk of underlying structures and systems seems more prevalent now than then. Structures of thought, of prejudice, of politics, or religion, of the body, and on and on...maybe I just don't get it, or maybe stuff like "death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament" was just so much mimesis - the apex of the triangle was academic acclaim, and the route to it was the murder of whatever moderator came before.

Either way, as Charles Olson wrote and Nick Tosches endlessly quoted, "Who controls rhythm, controls." Dylan's control of rhythm, melody, mood, thought,

and image, seems to restore if only for an evening the cracked tablet of individual interpretation into a solid document of shared understanding. After a week's time, I bet those Nile engineers transplanted to modern day California would understand perfectly well the thought and feeling conveyed in "I Want You" or "Knockin' on Heaven's Door" or "Mother of Muses," and I bet if those California agronomists were transplanted to the Nile Valley of ancient Egypt, they could entertain Pharaoh's men quite well with a lively rendition of "House of the Rising Sun" or "Isis" or "One More Cup of Coffee (Valley Below)".