

A MADONNA WITH GYPSY BLOOD

The love ideal in Bob Dylan's songs

Jan-Hendrik Bakker

It was during one of the Poetry International Festivals in the early nineties. Students from the academy for cinematographic art were preparing a documentary about people and their poetic favorites. Their approach was to surprise festival attendees by asking them to recite a poem they knew by heart. Later their recitations would be recorded on video. I still remember it really turned out to be a nice documentary. I happened to become one of their victims. Walt Whitman is my favorite poet, but, unfortunately in this case, I do not know by heart the huge amounts of text that this nineteenth century, bearded bard had produced. So I hesitated for awhile, but after a short time these words came up: *Nobody feels any pain,/ tonight as I stand inside the rain/ Everybody knows,/ that baby's got new clothes/ but lately I've seen her ribbons and her bows/ have fallen from her curls...*

One of the young men looked at me as if I had just made a joke. No sorry, this was not what he meant. I said I was sorry too, couldn't help it. This kind of poetry is part of my inner system, more than Nijhoff and Hendrik de Vries¹, who, I have to confess, are beautiful poets as well. It must be due to my generation; while others were exposed to the poetry of Jacques Prévert or Jacques Brel in their childhood days, it was the songs of Bob Dylan, especially his love songs that left their imprints in my blood. So be aware that I am prejudiced, but Dylan's songs are not to be denied. Overall, Dylan's love songs may have had a less overt influence than his mystical, religious, and political work, which have often apocalyptic overtones (for example A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall, Mr. Tambourine Man, Desolation Row, Jokerman, Blowing in the Wind). Nevertheless, these love songs find a way to establish permanent residence in the mind of the romantic idealist.

One of the things that strikes me in Dylan's (1941) autobiography *Chronicles Volume I*, issued last year, is the total absence of factual insight into this poet-musician's personal life. In a spellbinding, fascinating style, Dylan tells about his young years in New York, where he arrived as a boy, still nearly a child, to study folk music and to develop his own ideas in this field. Literally, he absorbs everything one can learn about America's social history, reads hundreds of nineteenth century newspapers, stays for a month in the library of his friend (Ray Geach), where he reads Balzac, Thucydides, Von Clausewitz, Nietzsche, the great American poets, Edgar Allen Poe, and many, many others. He shows us a picturesque parade of freaks, semi-intellectuals, folksingers, club owners, boxers, and artists, but on his personal relationships there is only silence.

In the chapters that follow, Dylan speaks mainly about the crisis he plunged into at the end of the sixties and about his artistic resurrection in the early nineties. Dylan is furious with the fools who intruded on and ruined his private life and that of his family in Woodstock. Stalkers walked on the roof, scrambled around at his

¹ Dutch classic modern poets.

backdoor during the night, and followed him everywhere he went. Everywhere he thought he could hide, the intruders re-appeared. He confesses he would have loved to set his stalkers on fire, and that, because of them, he fled into a bizarre masquerade to free himself of his status as an idol.

As a ‘young’ baby boomer (born in 1953), I was not particularly impressionable at that time. For me, Dylan was not linked with the anti-war (Vietnam) movement nor did his music give me the “The-times-they-are-a-changing” feeling. Certainly, I heard him sing about justice and freedom, but to me, the words are intimately personal and existentialist; anyway, they have little to do with pure politics. And now one reads in his autobiography that by that time, the only thing Dylan wanted was to protect his family against the paranoia that fame brings. And while his fans still wanted the boy who came from Minnesota to New York to make music, to be the Messiah, he preferred to live a private life rather than the public life that would be required to stop the war in Vietnam. Should that be considered betrayal? That same desire was exactly what I, a high school boy from Rotterdam, aspired to—the artistic individualism of what seemed to me a free mind.

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What were we talking about, in those days? One should recall that the sexual revolution was raging at the end of the sixties. Lust was freed from the chains of tradition. It was the first time since probably the Middle Ages, that young people, were told in all openness —sometimes by graduated educators—that sex and pleasure could be strived for for their own sake. There was Jimi Hendrix with ‘Electric ladyland’, and Jim Morrison of The Doors feverously chasing the ecstasy of sex and drugs. There were magazines like *Sextant* and *Aloha*,² in which the very explicit comic ‘Ans en Hans’ of Theo van den Boogaart, very openly could be seen in the schoolbags of average high school students, and during school parties young people danced to an over-sexed, lustful Mick Jagger, singing ‘Honky Tonk Woman’. Much of the soul music in vogue by that time was not far from soft porn. Today, such hedonistic culture has become more or less mainstream. But in my peer group of some 15+ high school kids who were too young to participate in provo³, and already too far away from the tidy fifties, the sexual revolution remained at a distance. For us, love and sex were completely distinct. And while in the past, this distinction was quite normal, today young boys and girls are confused, asking: do you *have* to have sex if you are in love?

Listening in those years to Bob Dylan’s love songs could reveal something that was far removed from the sexual revolution. His love songs were not expressions of horny sensuality, but rather melancholy poetic reflections on not being able to share life with somebody else. For me this insight helped; these songs offered a point of identification, even if only for the time being. But it was something. Much of Dylan’s early love poetry is, in fact, disguised odes to individual freedom. His words speak of resisting the beloved who he longs to possess, and they advocate a drifter’s life. *Go away from my window, leave at your chosen speed/ I’m not the one you want babe, I’m not the one you need.* (From: ‘It Ain’t Me Babe’, 1964) Was it not most remarkable, in an era of free sex and something later called

² The first one was a magazine of the Dutch sexual reform movement, the other one an underground monthly.

³ Provo was the Dutch equivalent of the international nonviolent sixties revolt.

“flower power,” that Dylan behaved as an Occitan troubadour, a singer with a love ideal, (even if in the early years that ideal was formulated in the negative)?

That a love ideal was at stake here seemed very clear to me. Later I listened to his work again and again, comparing the lyrics to other lyrics and reading other’s opinions about them. The most interesting aspect of Dylan’s work for me was the romantic aspect. Dylan’s work can split up into three parts. There are the hundreds of more or less traditional songs, written in the footsteps of American folk, blues, and country tradition. There are the mythical/metaphysical songs, from ‘Blowing in the Wind’ and ‘A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall’, to the religious work. His love songs belong to the third category. They likely are outnumbered by the other two categories. Their peak we find in the seventies, during and after Dylan’s divorce in 1977. (I keep wondering why there isn’t a single word about his marriage in *Chronicles*.)

The development of these love songs follows a clear line. The early lyrics generally stem from an individualistic point of view. Although these early lyrics convey much tenderness, they also portray a firm, self-convinced attitude towards the girl, whom he cautions to avoid trying to gain a complete hold on him. The words sometimes harbor almost preacher-like warnings to not have false expectations. Here are some lines about the *tristesse* of his girlfriend (undoubtedly caused by the fact that her boyfriend does not want to make real commitments).

*Your cracked country lips,
I still wish to kiss
As to be under the strength of your skin
But 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, babe
A vacuum, a scheme, babe
That sucks you into feeling like this.*

The poet is not prepared to give help. *For deep in my heart/ I know there's no help I can bring/. Everything passes, everything changes/ Just do what you think you should do...* (From: ‘To Ramona’, 1964) Dryly summarized, one could say that in these rather existentialistic love songs, young Dylan’s main concern is to warn against an unauthentic way of life. Love endangers freedom. He who is in love surrenders to the Other and surrenders the conventions which life with that other entails.

In fact I must mention that, in American folk and blues tradition, the image of the mean, imperious wife is a *topos*? Many sad songs have been written about the partner’s (most often female) bad behavior toward the suffering subject of the song. In the work of the young Dylan this cliché is interconnected with an individualistic and often playful-rebellious drive for freedom, as in the funny ‘I Shall Be Free no.10’ (1964): *I gotta woman, she's so mean/ She sticks my boots in the washing machine/ Sticks me with buckshot when I'm nude/ Puts bubblegum in my food/ She's funny, wants my money, calls me 'honey'*. But many times, the singer himself seems to be speaking to a woman with whom the relationship must come to an end because his own individuality is at stake. The words reflect pain and a sense of torture.

Hard and sneering words ensue when the singer feels obliged to rid himself of the ladies who threaten his very existence. The women in his songs become symbols

of a detested, that is, an untrue, way of life. At this point, tenderness has all but disappeared. Sometimes between the lines one can sense a notion of rivalry, so that who is leaving whom in fact is not clear. Joost Zwagerman (in: 'The Death of an Uptown Girl', *De Gids* jrg. 166, nr 2, 2003, written in Dutch) suggested that Andy Warhol (the 'Napoleon in rags' from 'Like a Rolling Stone' and maybe, I add, the 'orphan with his gun' from 'It's All Over Now, Baby Blue', 1965) is the person who is impetus of all this. A certain sensual intimacy is still left in 'Just like a woman' (1966), the first lines of which I quoted in the beginning of this essay. But sarcasm dominates: *Nobody has to guess/ that baby can't be blessed/ 'till she finally sees she's that she's like all the rest/ With her fog, her amphetamine and her pearls.*

In those songs, all stemming from the period of *Blonde on Blonde* and *Highway 61 Revisited* from the mid sixties, the women do take vampire-like forms. They parasitize the singer/poet, sucking his blood and sapping his mental strength. This view is sometimes literally obvious, as in the drug song 'Just like Tom Thumb's Blues', in which sad and pathetic girls personify the temptation of hard drugs. "*They got some hungry women there/ they really make a mess outta you.*" In that black song, the women have become pure metaphor. And where love is still at stake, the singer bitterly regrets he ever let himself go. Out of anxiety and weakness, he confesses: *When we meet again, introduced as friends/ please don't let on that you knew me when/ I was hungry and it was your world.* (from: 'Just like a woman'). The singer states this even more cruelly a few years later in 'Dirge' (1974) *I hate myself for loving you and the weakness that it showed/ you were just a painted face on a trip down suicide road,* with a sarcastic phrase about the price of loneliness: *I've paid the price of solitude, but at least I'm out of debt.*

These words are bitter, almost the words of hate songs, but at any rate, anything but the words of love songs. I never considered these to be Dylan's strongest and most powerful lines. Of course, they we're impressive, especially when they connected themselves with biting satire such as in 'Like A Rolling Stone', which criticizes the New York bohème. What exactly the autobiographical sources of this type of songs may have been (and there must have been many of them) is unclear, especially for a man who at that time possessed a messianic status comparable with that of the soccer player Diego Maradona nowadays in Argentina. What interests me is the reason for the rejection, and the power with which it is expressed. The singer fulminates against a would-be artistic *milieu*, where the psychic disorder drips, so to say, from the walls. I think these songs all have had to do with the spiritual search that can be found everywhere in Dylan's work, in all kind of lyrics.

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However, at the very same time another sort of love song emerges. These portray a positive, romantic, almost courteous love ideal. Dylan finds his Beatrice, one could say. This ideal is already partially evident in the lightheartedly meant 'All I Really Wanna Do' (1964), in which he tries to convince his beloved that he seeks only her friendship, he does not claim or demand anything, nor does he wish to force her in any particular direction. You are allowed to be who you are. The song is simple and full of ingenious rhymes, but also full of meaning with respect to love and freedom. This concept is more elaborated in the beautiful, serene songs 'Love Minus Zero' and 'She Belongs To Me', both from 1965. These songs express love in a different, very personal way. Rather than fear of commitment, these songs show that

soulmate-ship and trueness are what's it's all about. Like a courtly troubadour, Dylan praises the woman who can give her love without illusion and unconditionally.

*My love she speaks like silence
Without ideals or violence
She doesn't have to say she's faithful
Yet she's true like ice like fire
People carry roses and make promises by the hours
My love she laughs like the flowers
Valentines can't buy her at all,*

he sings in 'Love Minus Zero.' (And I am certain this 'my' also means 'according to me'.) And in 'She belongs to me' (1965) the often quoted lines: *She's got everything she needs,/ she's an artist,/ she don't look back.* The beloved is a woman who is complete in her very self, someone who demands nothing; all she has to offer is her being there. She does not block the window view on reality (cf. 'go away from my window'), but in fact is a resting point and a symbol of natural pureness, just in front of that very same window, an eye on the world

*The wind howls like a hammer
The night blows cold and rainy
My love she's like some raven
At my window with a broken wing
(From: 'Love minus zero').*

What speaks to us here is a form of intimacy and safety. The image of the broken wing tenderly evokes the vulnerability of love. The woman who is behind all these friendly lines is not only the poet's personal love, but also the reflection of his existential ideal. She incorporates pureness and independence, a sort of quiet individuality that takes life for what it's worth, true to herself and her beloved. Trueness and faithfulness are the same here. She is not only a lover but also an artist, an existential artist, she does not look back but lives the present. (D.A. Pennebraker referred to this line in his filmed portrait of Dylan: *Don't Look Back*).

Many years later, this wisdom will return in the Psalm-like context of 'Every Grain of Sand' (1981). There Dylan formulates, although not as love ideal, most concisely what it is all about: *Don't have the inclination to look back on any mistake,/ Like Cain, I now behold this chain of events that I must break/ In the fury of the moment I can see the Master's hand/ In every leaf that trembles, in every grain of sand.* We can find deliverance from history and from our own weaknesses only in experiencing the moment, only here is an encounter with God possible. In a single movement Dylan mixes here Buddhism and Christian-Jewish mysticism. Behind much of Dylan's apocalyptic songs a longing for deliverance from Time is hiding. Such is the case in his love poems.

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By the time the double LP 'Blonde on Blonde' is released, the hungering sounds of 'I want you' (1966) can be heard, in which love is celebrated as a wholesome counterpoint to life in the dirty, treacherous metropolis Here the beloved offers hope.

*The drunken politician leaps
Upon the street where mothers weep
And the saviors who are fast asleep
They wait for you
And I wait for them to interrupt
Me drinkin' from my broken cup
And ask me to
Open up the gate for you.*

The celebration culminates at last in the long love hymn 'Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands' (1966). If one desires an example of modern, considerate, and courteous love, this song is the one. The beloved is chanted at as a saint, while Dylan is singing draggingly 'Sad-Eyeeeee Laaaaady of the Looooowlands'; she is an example of inner and outer pureness, Madonna and gypsy (*with your gypsy hymns*) at once. The metaphors are full of religious symbolism and references to the mystical, but also of autobiographical elements. The song is about much more than a private 'amour'; a world of metaphors is dragged in the open (which by the way has led to some strange interpretations, for example, one says that in fact this song is about Catholic Church). Nevertheless, its allegoric character is hard to deny, and that Dylanologists will have something to speculate about for the rest of their lives. Personally, I dislike this kind of reckless construction of meaning. I am more enchanted by the concrete, sensual images. And there are many of them in 'Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands'.

Every Dylan lover knows who the impetus was for this portrait of the sad-eyed lady. Her name is Sara Lownds (hidden in the title), who married Dylan in 1965. In the years before, she had been working as a bunny in Playboy Bars and was married to the magazine-photographer Hans Lownds (*your magazine-husband that one day just had to go*). For this reason, Dylan calls himself a 'thief' in this song. One can find more very direct references to autobiographical circumstances, but there is always both a symbolic aspect and a realistic aspect, for example, *Now you stand with your thief, you are under his parole*, sung by the poet-singer, in more than one sense. The lady depends not only on his parole, but she is partly and literally created in his words as such. Immediately after that follow the lines, *With your holy medallion which your fingertips fold/ And your saintlike face and your ghostlike soul*. Idealization of the beloved, so special for courteous poetry, is working here. We are in fact approaching holy Maria, which is most remarkable, given that Dylan is Jewish. Ten years later, he will identify his beloved with the pagan mother goddess Isis. The line *And with the child of a hoodlum wrapped up in your arms* creates associations with a pieta, a pieta of a misused woman; in this poem, it refers to the difficult circumstances young mother Sara endured when she left her first husband. Again, many of the associative images in the song are private and metaphorical at the same time. As a real troubadour, Dylan magically changes his beloved in the quintessence of the world. And again and again the chorus is there.

*Sad-eyed lady of the lowlands,
Where the sad-eyed prophet says that that no man comes
My warehouse eyes, my Arabian drums,
Should I leave them by your gate,
Or, sad-eyed lady, should I wait?*

The image of the gate appears elsewhere throughout Dylan's work. The gate from 'The gates of Eden,' from 'I want you,' from 'Knockin' on Heaven's door,' and here the gate that provides entrance to the Lowlands, where one is not admitted unless one leaves his warlike manhood (Arabian drums) and material desire (it is also possible to hear 'warehouse' as 'whorehouse' so that the desire is sexually colored). And the lowlands themselves? Interpreting them simply as 'Paradise' would be a mistake. For me, the image has a receding meaning, representing a metaphorical rather sad space, personified in the melancholic image of this woman, a rejected saint and gypsy all at once; but entering the lowlands is out of the question, the prophet says. All that's left is this longing for what the poet may have seen as a true and faithful life. Moreover, drugs are mentioned. Later, Dylan sings, in the simple, autobiographical 'Sara', that 'Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands' was written for his young wife, shortly after he 'had taken the cure and just gotten through'. So the sad-eyed lady has become in a way the substitute of the hallucinating seductions of the vamp, i.e., the needle with its heroine dreams.

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Dylan and his wife Sara divorced in 1977. They raised five children, four of whom were born in their marriage. Perhaps the marriage could not withstand the rigors that fame brings. Nevertheless, the two have remained in contact, or so it is reported. The love songs that Dylan wrote during the period with Sara Lownds are among the best material the Electric Troubadour ever voiced. 'Tangled Up in Blue,' 'Sara,' 'Isis,' 'If You See Her Say Hello,' 'Oh Sister' (all from 1975-76). After all these years, the songs still move me. I often ask myself why. One could argue that these lyrics harbor much self pity and self complaint. But at the same time, and that is what makes them great, all these songs and hymns transcend the psychological. First, the motif of these songs is *tristesse d'amour*, the old story of the broken heart, but at the same time, they bring together an enormous strength. Second, they tell of how a love ended, yet a mystical continuation remained, a transformation or metamorphosis, almost like when the relatives of a deceased person say that he or she will always be with us. At the same time everything remains uncertain.

The dragging 'Oh Sister' tells about a couple that followed the path of life like brother and sister, from the cradle to the grave. After their death, they were even reborn, and *most mysteriously saved*. However, this rebirth was not meant for eternity, the poems darkly concludes: *Time is an ocean, but it ends at the shore/ You may not see me tomorrow*. In the raging 'Tangled Up in Blue', a story about a couple who divorces but nevertheless continue following each other, the last lines sound: *We always felt the same/ but just saw it from a different point of view*. Soulmate-ship yes, but everyday life differs from that. 'Isis' also is about a break-up, but in this poem, the breakup occurs shortly after the wedding. Even so, a renewed wedding is close at hand. The male protagonist, a vagabond, must go out in the world to steal and rob, just to re-win his Isis. He must go for Evil, and then commits grave robbery. 'Isis', (the mother of love and life) is full of Egyptian mysticism. At the end the song, the vagabond returns to his goddess. Isis, so the Egyptian myth tells us about the mother goddess, created her own husband Osiris! And it is not very likely that the poet-musician overlooked that detail. Finally, there is the ballad 'One More Cup of Coffee (Valley Below)'. The purpose of the pseudo trivial title is to relieve the pain of loss. It refers to the man who cannot force himself to go. But he must, because she does not want him any more: One more cup of coffee to postpone this moment. Her beauty is still blinding, but her loyalty is not for him, but *to the stars above*. And the

rejected lover describes where his beloved came from. Father used to be *an outlaw and a wanderer by trade*. And the others of her family are like that.

*Your sister sees the future
Like your mother and yourself
You never learned to read or write
There's no books upon your shelf
And your pleasure knows no limits
Your voice is like a meadowlark
But your heart is like an ocean
Mysterious and dark.*

The symbols from Dylan's former love poetry are still operative here. Obviously, the metaphors of the rover and the fortune teller are never meant negatively in Dylan's words. On the contrary, the gypsy symbolizes the true instinctive way of life that is common throughout romantic rock mythology. *Let me rock your gypsy soul/ just like in the days of ol'*, Van Morrison sings. In 'One More Cup of Coffee (Valley Below)' the tragedy, of course, is that this time the 'I' is expelled from this natural freedom.

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In his later work Dylan has remained the storyteller, the interpreter of an old American idiom, but also the gloomy visionary and tormented god seeker he was in his younger years. The apocalyptic-religious is the nucleus of that work, which stays embedded in the tradition of folk. But although rare, echoes of his personal love ideal, chanted in 'Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands' have remained. Even if the older singer imagines his forthcoming mental darkening, such as in 'Not Dark Yet' (1997), there is still a glimpse of mild, understanding, and unforced love. In the middle of a melancholic lyric about an old man who is stranded in the swampy, hot-moist night of the southern marshlands, there is for a moment a reminiscence of a letter with friendly words. But then the chorus makes it clear: *It's not dark yet, but it's getting there.*

Love ideals are something to strive for—they are never fulfilled. Not long ago, I listened to Dylan's love songs again, during a long car ride through Germany. I realized that their singer has, himself, become the gypsy on whose behalf he used to sing about love—or to curse it. Nevertheless, the feeling that true love is sacred has never disappeared. It is like the love ideal described in Platon's dialogue 'Symposion' – love is longing for unification with the soul-mate, a striving for wholeness. That motivation will never leave us. And rejecting it is a wrong. In the Jewish-Christian sense, it is also a longing for redemption. In 'Sugar Baby' (2001) the complaint resounds that love seems so long ago, but also that love is still the truth.

I got my back to the sun 'cause the light is too intense/ I (can see what everybody in the world is up against/ You can't turn back - you can't come back, sometimes we push too far/ One day you'll open up your eyes and you'll see where we are/ Sugar Baby get on down the road/ You ain't got no brains, no how/ You went years without me/ Might as well keep going now

This chant is beautiful, dark and intensely sung. In the end there is even that glimpse of the divine porter (Archangel Gabriel) at the gate of Eden's Gardens, which also appeared in the early work. *Look up, look up, seek your Maker, before Gabriel blows his horn.* And indeed, if your beloved no longer responds, you can call her up to face the Lord. Is there anything left for an old poet to do who has sung all his life about love as the great possibility for deliverance?

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