

Dylan the writer at work: On the multiple versions of ‘Dignity’ and the two versions of ‘Ain’t Talkin’

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the different versions of two of Bob Dylan’s key later songs, ‘Dignity’ and ‘Ain’t Talkin’’. Dylan’s penchant for experimenting with multiple versions of his lyrics is well enough known, but in the case of his later work the various lyrical permutations of a number of crucial songs have not been examined in detail. The release in 2008 of *The Bootleg Series Volume 8: Tell Tale Signs*, with its variant and outtake material from the period 1989-2006, has made it possible to investigate the writing process of these two songs, which exercise the fascination of being both visibly similar and tantalisingly different, having in common the theme of the quest or journey, symbolised through a multiplicity of apparently conflicting images. *Tell Tale Signs* includes two takes of ‘Dignity’ that vary significantly from the default version dating back to the *Oh Mercy* sessions in 1989 that appeared on *Bob Dylan’s Greatest Hits Volume 3* in 1994, as well as an early version of ‘Ain’t Talkin’’ that is substantially different from that released on *Modern Times* in 2006 (the latter notably differing by incorporating a series of quotations from Ovid). This paper will compare and contrast the different versions of these two songs with their respective additions, deletions and rewritings, and will consider what can be learnt from their detailed study for the understanding of Dylan’s creative process.

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Bob Dylan’s penchant for experimenting with multiple versions of his lyrics is well enough known. In recent years, it has been highlighted by a number of developments: the Christopher Ricks variorum edition of 2014; the 2018 exhibition catalogue-cum-lyric book *Mondo Scripto*; and, also in 2018, the notebook with variant lyrics that surfaced as part of the accompanying material for *The Bootleg Series vol. 14: More Blood, More Tracks*¹. Despite this, for some of Dylan’s most important later compositions the various lyrical permutations that exist have not necessarily been examined in detail. This paper will endeavour to do so comparatively for two key later Dylan songs, namely ‘Dignity’ and ‘Ain’t Talkin’’.

The release in 2008 of the compilation *The Bootleg Series Volume 8: Tell Tale Signs / Rare and unreleased 1989-2006*, better-known simply as *Tell Tale Signs*, with its variant and outtake material spanning seventeen years, gave rise to the possibility of investigating the genesis of (among others) these two songs. *Tell Tale Signs* includes two takes of ‘Dignity’ that vary significantly from the default version that appeared on *Bob Dylan’s Greatest Hits Volume 3* in 1994. It also features an early version of ‘Ain’t Talkin’’ that is substantially different from that released on *Modern Times* in 2006 (the latter notably differing by incorporating a series of quotations from no less a figure of classical literature than the Roman poet Ovid). This paper will compare and contrast the three versions of ‘Dignity’ and the two

¹ The released box set aimed to reproduce the notebook in full, but accidentally omitted some pages: the missing material was subsequently made available on Dylan’s official site at: www.bobdylan.com/news/missing-notebook-pages/

versions of ‘Ain’t Talkin’’, with their respective additions, deletions and rewritings², and will consider what we can conclude from the analysis of these texts for the nature of Dylan’s creative process.

These two songs have been chosen, firstly as being among the finest compositions of the latter Dylan, and secondly because they are both visibly similar and tantalisingly different. Both are first-person narratives having in common the theme of the quest or journey, symbolised through an abundance of apparently conflicting images. The upbeat ‘Dignity’ recounts a journey that is linear and goal-oriented and seeks a hopeful principle outside the self, while the far darker ‘Ain’t Talkin’’ narrates the circular wanderings of someone trapped in an interior inferno. Both too are characterised by what is, even for the later Dylan, a very high degree of intertextuality, referring back through quotation and allusion to a multiplicity of earlier literary, biblical and song texts.

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To take ‘Dignity’ first, this song started life in 1989 as a outtake from the *Oh Mercy* sessions with Daniel Lanois³. Multiple versions were cut but the song was in the end left off the album. It was finally released on *Bob Dylan’s Greatest Hits Volume 3* in 1994, in what may be considered the standard version - remixed and overdubbed but retaining Dylan’s original vocal and with a lyric of 64 lines divided into 16 four-line stanzas⁴. The next development was the appearance of the original 1989 recording – musically different but with the same vocal track and, therefore, no lyric variations - on a film soundtrack, *Touched by an Angel*, in 1998, and subsequently on *The Best of Bob Dylan Volume 2*, a compilation released on various markets (but not in the US) in 2000⁵. A live version was included on the *MTV Unplugged* album in 1995⁶: here Dylan sang all 16 stanzas, as in the standard version and with no lyric changes of importance. Dylan has performed the song live 60 times, the first being that same *Unplugged* version, recorded on 17 November 1994, and the last to date on 4 May 2019⁷.

2008 saw the release on the *Tell Tale Signs* box set of two alternate versions of ‘Dignity’. The release’s accompanying editorial material offers for both the not very specific recording date of ‘March-July 1989’. One, a clearly unfinished piano demo with nine four-line stanzas, had previously had limited release on promotional or tie-in discs accompanying the release of *Chronicles, Volume One*⁸. The second had never been released: like the standard version, it has 16 stanzas of four lines each, but with considerable lyrical variations. The standard lyric text has been published in the last two editions of Dylan’s *Lyrics (Lyrics 1962-2001 and Lyrics 1961-2012)* and appears on the official website; those for the two *Tell Tale Signs* versions are included, in addition to the standard version, in the Ricks variorum.

² This paper will thus not venture outside the officially released recordings and the official print or on-line lyric texts of the two songs.

³ For the recording history of ‘Dignity’, see the *Oh Mercy* section of *Chronicles* (Dylan (2004a), 145-221, *passim*), and Heylin (1996), 179.

⁴ This version was also released as a single, again in 1994.

⁵ The same version resurfaced on the 2001 avatar of the mutable compilation *The Essential Bob Dylan*.

⁶ The same live performance reappeared in 2001 on the Japanese release *Bob Dylan Live 1961-2000: Thirty-nine years of great concert performances*.

⁷ ‘Dignity’ first appeared on the setlist for Dylan’s Spring/Summer 2019 European tour at his concert of 26 April in Barakaldo (Bilbao, Spain): it had not been played live since 12 November 2012 (see Greenblatt (2019)). He performed the song a total of 6 times (Barakaldo included) on the Spain/Portugal leg of that tour.

⁸ For example, on a double tie-in CD which appeared in France in 2005 under the title *Chroniques, volume I*.

The standard version of the song is related from start to finish by an unnamed first-person narrator defined by his search for ‘Dignity’. Twelve of that version’s sixteen stanzas end with that word (the other four have non-rhyming terminations), but who or what is meant by ‘Dignity’ - a person, an allegorised abstraction or a quality – is never revealed.

Dylan himself seems to have sensed there was something inevitably unfinished about the song. Recalling its making in *Chronicles*, he says: ‘I’d always be able to remember this song. ... On a song like this, there’s no end to things’⁹, yet admits that despite laying down over 20 takes, he and Lanois failed to complete a version that satisfied: ‘We were going to forget about "Dignity" for a while. We never did go back to it’¹⁰. It may be added that Dylan’s account of the song in *Chronicles* names a number of additional characters – The Green Beret, The Sorceress, Virgin Mary, The Wrong Man, and more¹¹ – none of whom appear in any of the three official song texts, and who may be apocryphal, a similar invention to the alleged ‘discarded lyrics’ from various *Oh Mercy* songs that stud that section of *Chronicles*. What Dylan says in his memoir does nonetheless confirm the fascination of the song’s very unseizability, its status as an unending work-in-progress.

In the world of Dylan studies, ‘Dignity’’s merit has been recognised by Michael Gray, in a detailed and suitably intertextual reading unearthing the song’s biblical, musical and literary sources¹², as well as by another British critic, Mark Ford, who offers an extended comparison with Ralph Waldo Emerson and his concept of ‘self-reliance’. Qualitatively, Gray sees ‘Dignity’ as ‘meticulously assembled, beautifully worked-out and thrillingly well-crafted’¹³, and, indeed, as a ‘revisit to a mode of writing you might otherwise call mid-1960s Dylan’¹⁴, while Ford similarly finds in it ‘all the resonance and panache of classic mid-60s songs such as ... “Highway 61 Revisited”’.¹⁵

The piano demo, even if cut short, clearly introduces certain characteristics of the song. It begins with a ‘fat man looking at the shining steel’, the first character in a gallery whose features inscribe Dylan’s text under the sign of intertextuality: literary (a ‘hollow man’ out of T.S. Eliot; a ‘blade of grass’ suggesting Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*), musical (a ‘cottonfield’ evoking Leadbelly; ‘somebody got murdered’, title of a song by the Clash), and biblical (‘lookin’ through painted glass’ suggests I Corinthians and its famous phrase ‘we see through a glass darkly’¹⁶). Two of this version’s stanzas do not appear in the final version, and of this rejected material the strongest are the lines: ‘Soul of a nation is under the knife / Death is standing in the doorway of life / In the next room a man fighting with his wife / Over Dignity’: the image of Death in the ‘doorway of life’ line recalls the Gothic climax of Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’. At that promising point, the demo version fades out.

⁹ Dylan (2004a), 170.

¹⁰ Dylan (2004a), 191.

¹¹ Dylan (2004a), 170.

¹² Gray’s analysis of ‘Dignity’ has in effect been published twice, in *Song and Dance Man III* (2000) and, subsequently and for the most part unchanged, in *The Bob Dylan Encyclopaedia* (2006). The quotation below is from the *Encyclopaedia*.

¹³ Gray (2006), 181.

¹⁴ Gray (2006), 177.

¹⁵ Ford (2002), 141.

¹⁶ I Corinthians 13:12.

The second *Tell Tale Signs* variant is, in its sixteen stanzas, as long as the final version – but not as strong. Its fat man looks at a ‘ferris wheel’, an image surely less challenging than the earlier ‘shining steel’ or the final ‘blade of steel’¹⁷, and some of the lines introduced here (and later dropped) seem a shade thin, e.g. ‘I’m lookin’ East, lookin’ West / See people cursed, see people blessed’. Dignity three times appears in the guise of a woman (‘Dignity is a woman unspoiled’), an effect which might seem an excessive personalisation or allegorisation, and which was later dropped. There are, however, some evocative additions, correctly retained in the final version; the ‘blind man breaking out of a trance’ has Dylan quoting himself, recalling ‘Desolation Row’ and its ‘blind commissioner ... in a trance’; and more musical intertext appears in the ‘crowded room’ image that harks back to the Broadway number ‘Some Enchanted Evening’, which Dylan was to cover years later¹⁸. Also introduced (and kept in the final version) is the classic line in which Dylan eloquently slaps down the cult of the image, ‘Dignity never been photographed’. Here too appears a stanza finally rejected but no less evocative for that, beginning: ‘Don Juan was talkin’ to Don Miguel / Standing outside of the gates of hell’, combining Dante, Mozart and/or Byron, and, most likely, Don Quixote’s creator (Don) Miguel de Cervantes. As for the ending of this version, it is certainly open (‘Looking at a glass that’s half filled’), but oscillates a shade confusingly between despair (‘Looking at a dream that’s just been killed’) and hope (‘Askin’ everybody that’s strong-willed / “Have you seen Dignity”’?).

The closely-worked, densely intertextual final lyric retains nearly all the best of the new material from the second text, also eliminating the weaker lines and adding fresh allusions – again variously musical (‘home of the blues’ from Johnny Cash; ‘chilly winds’ from the traditional song of that name performed by Odetta), literary (now extending to ‘every masterpiece of literature’) and biblical (I Corinthians again, with ‘the tongues of angels and the tongues of men’¹⁹; Ezekiel with the ‘valley of dry bone dreams’)²⁰. It ends on a cautiously hopeful note, reiterating the theme of the quest and leaving narrator and listener in suspense – temporarily resting beside a lake (perhaps that of Avalon out of Arthurian legend), the quest not yet over and its difficulty recognised, but still searching unbowed: ‘So many roads, so much at stake / Too many dead ends, I’m at the edge of the lake / Sometimes I wonder what it’s gonna take / To find Dignity’.

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The standard version of ‘Ain’t Talkin’’ was released in 2006 as the closing track on *Modern Times*. It was hailed by Greil Marcus as that album’s best track, and as a song ‘without an ending ... the opening and closing of a fist, over and over again’²¹. Dylan has performed it 118 times, between 20 November 2006 and (to date) 7 November 2013. The variant which appeared on *Tell Tale Signs* in 2008 is an outtake from the *Modern Times* sessions and, according to the box set’s editorial material, was recorded in February 2006. It visibly antedates the released version, being shorter and sketchier. Most important, it does not include the substantial quotations from Ovid’s *Poems of Exile*, in the 1994 verse translation by Peter Green, which, it has been established in Dylan lore, figure prominently in the *Modern Times* version.

¹⁷ ‘Blade of steel’ may be considered the strongest image of the three, since, as Gray points out (2006, 179), it also connects with the ‘blade of grass’ of the second stanza.

¹⁸ On *Shadows in the Night* in 2015.

¹⁹ See I Corinthians 13:1.

²⁰ See Ezekiel 37:1-3.

²¹ Marcus (2010), 365.

The lyrics of the standard version were published in *Lyrics 1961-2012*, albeit inexplicably shorn of a stanza (the sixth of the nine sung on the album). They also appear in the *Mondo Scripto* catalogue, copied and signed in manuscript but again with stanza six missing; on Dylan's official site; and in the Ricks variorum, in both of the latter with the errant stanza restored. The variorum also includes the lyrics of the *Tell Tale Signs* version. The standard version consists of nine four-line stanzas, each of them followed by a four-line refrain, and thus totals 72 lines. The refrain has a unusual structure: its first and third lines ('Ain't talkin', just walkin'' and 'Heart burnin', still yearnin'') are always the same, but the second and fourth vary each time. The shorter outtake version has a similar structure, with seven four-line stanzas plus mutable refrain. The refrain's four base lines come straight from the Stanley Brothers' 'Highway of Regret' – a song of disappointed love which otherwise has little to do with Dylan's song (although he had earlier plundered its title in 'Make You Feel My Love'). The title 'Ain't Talkin'' is intertextual from the outset: it paradoxically affirms silence (*not talking*) while in fact the narrator *is* talking volubly, in a slowed-down vocal not so distant from the ... *talking* blues of Dylan's earliest years, as reflected in a title like 'Talkin' New York'.

The unearthing of the quotations from Ovid is recounted by Harvard professor of classics Richard Thomas, in his book of 2017 *Why Dylan Matters*: 'On October 10, 2006, Cliff Fell, a New Zealand poet and teacher of creative writing, wrote in his local paper, the *Nelson Mail*, of a startling discovery'. Fell 'happened to be reading Peter Green's Penguin translations of Ovid's exile poetry' - and in a shock of recognition, suddenly heard lines from Ovid rise up in Dylan's familiar voice²². Useful summaries of the borrowings appear in two on-line posts by Scott Warmuth from 2008, and in a 2009 essay by Robert Polito²³. The two lists are not quite identical, but perusal of both plus reference back to the Ovid/Green texts yield for 'Ain't Talkin'' a tally of ten quotations/allusions from *Poems of Exile* (examples being: 'I'll make the most of one last extra hour' in stanza 5, and 'Who says I can't get heavenly aid?' in stanza 7) - plus an eleventh from Ovid's earlier work the *Amores*. The *Amores* quote ('If I catch my opponents ever sleeping / I'll just slaughter them where they lie', in stanza 3 of the final version), unlike all the others, already appears in the *Tell Tale Signs* version, suggesting that Dylan most likely read the *Amores* before the *Poems of Exile*, and the latter at some point between his two recordings of the song.

The first, (almost) pre-Ovidian version already adumbrates the song's characteristics. The first stanza begins: 'As I walked out tonight in the mystic garden', recalling the Earthly Paradise of Dante's *Purgatorio*, situated at the world's end²⁴ - but without Dante's pre-paradise revelations, for instead of female beauty framed by flowers in bloom, we have 'wounded flowers ... dangling from the vine'. Later, the 'Queen of Love' makes an appearance (deleted in the final version), 'coming across the grass', but her solace is not for the narrator. As Dante's commentator Dorothy L. Sayers remarks, for the Italian poet the Earthly Paradise is 'a starting-place and not a stopping-place'²⁵. The destiny of Dylan's narrator, however, is to wander endlessly and pointlessly (both versions obsessively repeat the verb 'walkin'') - self-exiled from human contact, locked in his own private hell ('In the human heart an evil spirit

²² Thomas (2017), 239.

²³ For the lists, see Warmuth (2008a and 2008b) and Polito (2009), 145 and 152n.

²⁴ The Earthly Paradise, situated atop Mount Purgatory, is the location for the closing cantos (28 to 33) of Dante's *Purgatorio*. There Dante's narrator encounters two beautiful women, Matilda (gathering flowers) and Beatrice, who will be his guide in Paradise.

²⁵ Dante ed. Sayers (1955), 294n.

can dwell') and a prey to the obsessional thoughts of his 'miserable brain'. The first version goes on its way accumulating the intertextual – musical: 'yon cool [and] crystal fountain'²⁶, from the Celtic folk standard 'Wild Mountain Thyme'²⁷; 'world of woe', from the folk–gospel 'I am a Poor Wayfaring Stranger', biblical ('love my neighbour', harking back to Jesus' words in Matthew²⁸) and literary, as in the image of the 'primrose path' [to hell], taken from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* but deleted in the final version²⁹. This first version offers a circular end, with the narrator back in the mystic garden and almost nothing changed - but perhaps rather a feeble concluding plaint: 'You're riding high and down you go'.

The second version, apart from incorporating the Ovid quotations – and by that token strengthening the song's theme of exile – further develops the intertextual dimension. Added song references range from the venerable, Pete Seeger-performed folk standard 'Old Dan Tucker', with its 'toothache in my heel'³⁰, to Joni Mitchell ('summer lawn', evoking her album *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*). The line 'My mule is sick, my horse is blind' (in the stanza dropped from *Lyrics*), suggests a return to Cervantes in what feels like a ghastly parody of Sancho Panza³¹ and Don Quixote, reduced to a farcical mule-and-horse double act. As Polito shows, the Ovid quotes, too, are in many cases wrenched out of context by 'elisions and reversals'³², as in, for example, 'They will turn your mind away from contemplation', a line therapeutic in Ovid but despairing in Dylan.

The song's circular ending is retained, but with modifications through which it acquires deeper connotations: the narrator returns to the garden, this time by day, to find himself stranded in a godless universe where 'the gardener is gone'. The 'last outback at the world's end' of the closing line is a straight quotation from Ovid, but simultaneously points back to Dante and his imaginary geography. In this now more intense finale, the 'heart burning' comes to feel like not only the Stanley Brothers', but also that of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner ('this heart within me burns')³³, or, terrifyingly, that of the subterranean hell of William Beckford's late eighteenth-century Gothic-Oriental tale of terror *Vathek* - where a multitude 'in search of repose and consolation ... sought them in vain, for every one carried within him a heart tormented in flames'.³⁴ The second 'Ain't Talkin'', radically improved from the first,³⁵ inhabits a discursive universe where a multi-sourced intertextuality constantly enriches Dylan's words and images.

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²⁶ The 'and' appears in the first but not the second version.

²⁷ For data on 'Wild Mountain Thyme', see Barker (2008), 393. It is often considered a Scottish song, but was actually composed and first recorded in 1957 by a musician from Northern Ireland, Francis McPeake. There are, as of 2019, five different official recordings of this song by Dylan, one each on *The Minnesota Party Tape*, *Another Self Portrait* and *The Bootleg Series vol. 12 - The Cutting Edge*, and two on *The Rolling Thunder Revue: The Live Recordings*. However, on none of these do the words 'yon cool crystal fountain' appear. They are, however, sung on a version by Scottish folk group the Corries from 1969, with the alternate title 'Will Ye Go Lassie, Go'.

²⁸ Matthew 22:39: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'.

²⁹ In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare puts the words into the mouth of Ophelia (I-III, 51); Dylan thus creates a connection with his own 'Desolation Row' and its fourth stanza featuring Ophelia.

³⁰ Also recorded by Bruce Springsteen in 2006 on his tribute album *We Shall Overcome: the Seeger Sessions*.

³¹ Dylan mentions Sancho Panza in *Tarantula* (Dylan (1966), 8).

³² Polito (2009), 145.

³³ Coleridge (1970), line 586.

³⁴ Beckford (1900), 167.

I hope in this paper to have demonstrated the creative density of Dylan's writing in these two songs, and that while qualitatively the final version of each outshines the outtake(s), valuable material has also been dropped. Intertextuality rules in both, yet the final product is startlingly original. Both exemplify a type of Dylan song which, already long, could be even longer, following a compositional principle of accumulating multiple images and incidents, on similar lines to other Dylan masterpieces such as 'Desolation Row', 'Shelter from the Storm' or 'Jokerman'. Both 'Dignity' and 'Ain't Talkin'', songs of unending motion whether hopeful or desperate, powerfully and rewardingly exemplify the open-ended, endlessly stimulating yet never completed nature of Bob Dylan's lifelong creative project.

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