

Songwriting Tradition and the Interpretive Talent¹

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In a 1965 interview with Jenny De Jong and Peter Roch, Bob Dylan spoke of his songwriting technique up to that point: “the big difference is that the songs I was writing [...] they were what I call one-dimensional songs, but my new songs I’m trying to make more three-dimensional, you know, there’s more symbolism, they’re written on more than one level².” Then, in typically Dylanesque style, he promptly contradicted himself adding that “A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall”, from his second album, was his first three-dimensional song. This apparent contradiction reveals two different truths. The first is that even from the early days, Dylan sought to achieve a three-dimensional, polyphonic quality in his songs by bringing together different perspectives and time dimensions. The other is that such features could not emerge from what he called “finger-pointing songs³”, i.e., songs composed on the basis of a predetermined (political) idea.

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2. *Sheffield University Paper*, «Bob Dylan».

3. *The New Yorker*, “What Bob Dylan Wanted at Twenty-three. A portrait of the artist trying to move past ‘finger-pointing’ songs, and finding a new voice in the process”.

In his formative years Dylan was looking for a *modus scribendi* that could offer more creative freedom and authenticity, while neatly placing his work on the boundary between oral and written traditions. For Dylan, a convincing synthesis of oral and written seems to require two qualities, namely a time-free quality and, as mentioned above, three-dimensionality. However, as a young artist he was never specific about the implications of these aspects, which critics have still not managed to interpret in full⁴. Years later, in the mid and late seventies, he reconsidered these concepts in various interviews⁵, discussing them in greater detail. On many of these occasions, as in the interview with Matt Damsker quoted below, he credited his art teacher Norman Raeben⁶ for having taught him the “trick” of how to capture these qualities in his songs:

Now, in the old days, I used to do it automatically, but it’s like I had amnesia, all of a sudden in 1966. I couldn’t remember how to do it. I tried to force-learn it, and I couldn’t learn what I had been able to do naturally like *Highway 61 Revisited*. I mean, you can’t sit down and write that consciously, I mean, because it has to do with the break-up of time... (...) I learned in ‘75 that I was going to have to do it from now on... consciously; and those are the kinds of songs I wanted to write. The ones that do have the break-up of time, where there is no time, trying to make the focus as strong as a magnifying glass under the sun, you know. To do it consciously is a trick. (...) I did it on *Blood on the Tracks* for the first time, and I didn’t know... I knew how to do it because it was a technique I learned; I actually had a teacher for it⁷.

4. In particular, the issue of timelessness has not yet been analyzed sufficiently. As Alessandro Portelli points out, on the basis of several statements made by Dylan, many scholars have spoken about the ‘timelessness’ of his songs in fascinating but essentially vague terms. Portelli defines this general observation as a “commonplace dear to Dylan’s critics and partly to himself”. As he rightly notes, this concept is untenable since a song “is not ‘timeless’ but precisely the opposite: it exists only in time” and, thus, it should be analyzed, on a case-by-case basis, as a particular form of temporality. See PORTELLI, 2018, 52 p. (my translation).

5. See the interviews with Matt Damsker (in DYLAN, 1996b, p. 459-467), Jonathan Cott (in DYLAN, 2006, p. 171-197 and 251-270), Ron Rosenbaum (DYLAN, 2006, p. 199-236) and Karen Hughes (DYLAN, 2006, p. 237-250).

6. “A lot of ideas I have were influences by an old man who had definite ideas on life and universe and nature – all that matters (...) his first name was Norman” (in DYLAN, 2006, p. 222).

7. DYLAN 1996b, p. 465.

On another occasion, this time talking to Jonathan Cott, he further chronicled this very Dylanesque story, giving his 1966 motorcycle accident as the origin of the “amnesia” that caused him to lose the ability to compose songs as he previously did. He went so far as to say: “I was convinced I wasn’t going to do anything else, and I had the good fortune to meet a man in New York City who taught me how to see”⁸.

Critics have wondered for decades what the real nature and extent of Raeben’s influence on Dylan was. This forty-year-old debate has recently been enlivened by the studies of various critics⁹, who have demonstrated that Raeben’s theories had a substantial impact on Dylan’s output on many levels. According to Dylan himself, during the years of the Woodstock family retreat he was seeking to tap into a new creative vein by deepening his knowledge of Jewish culture and studying painting, albeit with little success¹⁰. Decades later, he would state in his autobiography, “Picasso had fractured the art world and cracked it wide open. He was revolutionary. I wanted to be like that”¹¹. Raeben, who had a profound knowledge of the post-impressionists and modernists, was the right person to help Dylan satisfy his needs. Culturally, the two men had much in common, which, as we will see, partly explains their affinity: Raeben emigrated to New York, fleeing from the region of Russia, now Ukraine, from where Dylan’s paternal ancestors had come¹². By fusing his vast knowledge of Western philosophy with Jewish cultural and exegetical paradigms, Raeben had formulated a method for artistic creation that gave particular importance to the mechanics of the palimpsest and

8. COTT, 2006, p. 260.

9. On Norman Raeben’s influence on Dylan, see CARTWRIGHT, 1991, p. 85-90; CARRERA, 2011, p. 296-310; WILENTZ, 2011, p. 137-139; FANTUZZI, 2014, p. 76-94; FANTUZZI, 2017, p. 31-51, and the last section of CARRERA, FANTUZZI, & STEFANELLI (dir.), 2020, p. 163-231. For a comprehensive analysis of Raeben’s work, teaching, and influence, see FANTUZZI, 2020.

10. In those years, Dylan took his first painting lessons with the artist Bruce Dorfman, who lived near his house in Woodstock (see CARRERA, 2011, 336-337 p.). Concerning his Jewish readings, between 1968 and 1972 he and his wife Sara were especially interested in the study of Cabala and went to Jerusalem three times for this very reason. On one of these trips when talking to rabbi Yoso Rosenzweig, he famously stated: “I’m a Jew. It touches my poetry, my life... Why should I declare something that should be so obvious?” (BOUCHER, 2021, p. 69).

11. DYLAN, 2005, p. 55.

12. Dylan learned about Raeben’s classes through Bill and Robin Fertik, two of his wife’s friends. These two artists studied with Raeben in the late sixties and early seventies. They spoke to Dylan about their mentor’s philosophical and artistic ideas and his ability to bridge different artistic and cultural approaches.

to interrelationships between the arts, while recognizing the Talmudic model, from a lay perspective, as a valuable source of artistic inspiration.

Based on the study of unpublished materials from Norman Raeben's lessons, this article aims to delve deeper into these issues by exploring the interconnections between creative practice, intertextuality, and the visual arts. In this context, I will focus on three main aspects of Raeben's influence, namely his conception of time as a blending of different temporal dimensions, his ideas on intertextuality, and on the role of the subject in art. Through a comparison between the topography of the Talmud and a reading of "Tangled Up in Blue", the present essay examines the ways in which Dylan's early songs anticipate the theory and practice of Raeben, illustrates how his songs from the seventies reflect Raeben's teachings, and provides some pointers towards a deeper understanding of Dylan's ideas on the songwriting tradition and canon.

In his search for authenticity and artistic freedom, Dylan experimented with visual forms of writing from the beginning of his career. The manuscripts of his early works, now mostly held at the Bob Dylan Center and the Morgan Library, show that his interest in drawing dates back to his youth¹³. The figures, sketches, and embellishments that accompany his lyrics create a fascinating interplay between the visual arts and the songs, the evocative power of the latter being enhanced by a rich repertoire of images. As he said himself, he began composing lyrics as "chains of flashing images,"¹⁴ marked, in turn, by a constant search for the concretion of different temporal dimensions and an extensive recourse to intertextuality. Accordingly, his lyrics contain innumerable citations and floating verses that make his songs out-and-out literary palimpsests¹⁵. Among the sources of inspiration, the Bible and the Talmud play a distinctive role, having influenced Dylan's ideas on time from the mid-sixties¹⁶.

13. In this regard, some of the materials that once belonged to the McKenzie family, including Dylan's copy of Woody Guthrie's book *Bound for Glory*, are particularly illuminating. Some of these artifacts can be seen in MCKENZIE, 2021.

14. GLEASON, 1966, p. 28.

15. On this topic, see footnotes 38 and 39.

16. This connection also emerges in Dylan's early interviews, including those he gave to Nat Hentoff. In the second of these, originally published in *Playboy*, Dylan stated that "Traditional music is based on hexagrams. It comes about from legends, Bibles, plagues, and it revolves around vegetables and death" (...) "Unspecific things have no sense of time. All of us people have no sense of time; it's a dimensional hangup" (DYLAN, 2017, p. 104 & 108). He also expressed the same concepts in his first unpublished interview with the same journalist: "There are some really strange, weird folk songs, that have come down through the ages, based on nothing. Based on a legend or the Bible or, you

As many scholars have highlighted¹⁷, while this influence is common to the work of many Jewish American writers, it seems particularly conspicuous in Dylan's oeuvre and it affects his songwriting on various levels. It does this to such an extent that Alessandro Carrera recently stated that "so many introductions are possible to Dylan: musical, poetic, sociological, political. But the Bible is the preferred access"¹⁸. I do not know if the speculum of his biblical references should be regarded as the most important approach to his lyrics, but it certainly is one of the most fruitful, and it is thus particularly suited to be adopted here as a specific means of examining Dylan's use of intertextuality. This is not only owing to the frequency of such quotations in the songs, but also because, as some recent publications have disclosed, it offers exceptional access to understanding the mechanics of Dylan's writing technique. The already ample literature on this topic, in fact, has been greatly enriched by the publication of Renato Giovannoli's monumental three-volume work *La Bibbia di Bob Dylan*¹⁹. In his book, Giovannoli meticulously demonstrates the magnitude of Dylan's references to the Scriptures, showing that he quotes at least one passage in nearly every stanza of his songs. In some instances, Giovannoli uncovers several citations in a single line. The mosaic of biblical images that Giovannoli presents is notable, but what makes his book even more valuable is his description of how Dylan puts the pieces of the puzzle together. Drawing on a notion put forward by Gérard Genette in *Palimpsestes : la littérature au second degré*²⁰, such an assemblage can be described as based on underlying matrixes, i.e., essential elements that interact to form the subtext of the work of art. Through this palimpsest, the song acquires an initial degree of three-dimensionality, not only creating new meanings, but also conveying the evocative power of the references in a virtually endless play of intertextuality.

Another point of interest derives from the fact that these analytical patterns can also be applied to secular references since the dynamics of the palimpsest, as Genette explains, are common to all forms of textuality. Such considerations are

know, plague... or religion, and just based on mysticism. (...) We can call anything a folk song, you know (...) provided that it is in a rhythm of its own and in a time of his own" (DYLAN, 1996, p. 356-357).

17. Of the many publications examining the influence of the Bible on Dylan's work, see in particular CARTWRIGHT, 1985; GILMOUR, 2004, and GIOVANNOLI, 2017. On Dylan's Jewish studies and influences, see in particular BOUCHER, 2021, p. 61-69; ROGOVOY, 2009; YUDELSON, 1991, p. 170-176, and WOLFSON, 2021, p. 214-225.

18. CARRERA 2017, p. 8, my translation.

19. GIOVANNOLI, 2017.

20. GENETTE, 1982.

especially true regarding Dylan's allusions to folk and blues, repertoires in which the link to tradition is crucial and the use of subtexts, metrical calques, floating verses, and mascon images are pervasive.

These considerations can be further enhanced if the impact of the Scriptures is also addressed from the perspective of the Jewish tradition.



FIGURE 1. TALMUD BAVLI, BEROCHOS 2A

Another fascinating (and heretofore relatively overlooked) biblical source of inspiration is, in fact, the topography of the Talmudic page²¹. As we shall see later when discussing the works that followed Raeben's lectures – although on closer inspection, perhaps at an unconscious level even earlier – the Talmud was a valuable artistic model for Dylan. Although Dylan was not fully aware of it initially, the topography of the Talmudic page is a highly apposite visual representation of certain distinctive traits of his poetics. Its unique form places

21. Though many critics have identified and commented extensively on Dylan's Talmudic references, there is still no study that specifically addresses this aspect of his output.

the biblical passage, that is, the story, at the center of the page, surrounded by the commentaries of the masters. The page is thus enlivened by added dialogue containing the words of commentators distant in time and space, while the intertextual links create endlessly varied perspectives in an ever-open hermeneutic process, giving new life to the voices on the page. Oral and written traditions, therefore, are inextricably linked and perpetually intercommunicating in the 'now' of a page that can challenge temporal and spatial barriers. It creates an enigmatic environment in which the many voices of the masters can unite in dialogue, despite being of different eras and despite coming from the countless places to which they had been dispersed in a centuries-long diaspora. Or, if you will, places where an exiled people, fated to await the Messiah to regain their land, could find a virtual surrogate for their home in the creative world of hermeneutics.

There are several similarities between these dynamics and those of the songs of a singer-songwriter who famously stated: "I was born very far from where I'm supposed to be, and so I'm on my way home"²². There are not only many points of contact with the Talmudic tradition in the ways in which Dylan captures the voices of his characters and crafts the spaces in which they dwell. The parallels are even more marked when addressing another distinctive trait of Dylan's works, that is, his experiments with the representation of time. Reflecting on the biblical text and its commentary, historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi writes: "Unlike the biblical writers the rabbis seem to play with Time as though with an accordion, expanding it and collapsing it at will"²³. To understand how this effect is achieved, we can again quote Yerushalmi:

In the world of Aggadah Adam can instruct his son Seth in the Torah, Shem and Eber establish a house of study, the patriarchs institute the three daily prayer-services of the normative Jewish liturgy, Og King of Bashan is present at Isaac's circumcision, and Noah prophesies the translation of the Bible into Greek. Of course, there is something rather compelling about that large portion of the rabbinic universe in which ordinary barriers of time can be ignored and all ages placed in an ever-fluid dialogue with one another²⁴.

22. WILENTZ, 2011, p. 320.

23. YERUSHALMI, 1982, p. 17.

24. *Idem*.

Thanks to the speculum of Raeben's lessons, we can better understand how Dylan's mid-seventies songs reflect these features. On closer inspection, however, many of Dylan's most famous early songs, such as "Highway 61 Revisited", "Desolation Row" and "Stuck Inside the Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again" (to name but a few), also evidence similar dynamics and how these features combine. In these songs, in fact, Dylan often revives a whole series of shape-shifting characters from places that are distant in time and space, as if they were captured in the on-going present of utterly ineffable literary topoi. "Desolation Row" is emblematic in this respect: at the end of this nine-minute song with its long bizarre parade of figures, the listener is left without the means of knowing what the little town looks like. To this extent, one may feel compelled, like Greil Marcus, to ask "Where is Desolation Row?", this being the title of Marcus' seminal article in which he finds that such a question cannot be fully answered²⁵. Here, in fact, as in the aforementioned songs, the persistent use of intertextuality and the concretion of the dimensions of time complement Dylan's tendency to play with different masks, characters, and first-person narrative personae, which, in turn, further highlight the polyphonic quality of his work. In an almost post-impressionistic manner, characters are presented in a few rapid strokes as if they were continually-evolving voices commenting on the main subject, which, while hard to define and never addressed directly, is the core of the song: tradition, captured in all its complexity, connecting memory and existence. We are thus presented with a comedy of voices, a sort of carnival parade in which the Phantom of the Opera interacts with Casanova, and Cinderella flirts with Romeo in the same village where sailors and dozens of historical figures and literary characters dwell, each intent on their own affairs. Their deeds are invariably described in the present tense, reinforced by the obsessive repetition of the word "now", annulling spatial distances and causing different temporal dimensions to collapse in the ongoing present of the song. Then the final stanza surprises the reader with a *fulmen in clausula*:

Yes, I received your letter yesterday
 (About the time the doorknob broke)
 When you asked how I was doing
 Was that some kind of joke?
 All these people that you mention
 Yes, I know them, they're quite lame
 I had to rearrange their faces
 And give them all another name
 Right now I can't read too good

25. MARCUS, 2010, p. 243-256.

Don't send me no more letters no
 Not unless you mail them
 From Desolation Row²⁶

The listener discovers from the interplay of perspectives that all the characters of the song thrive in an environment that comes to life through the pages of a letter received; it is a fascinating image that once again brings us back to the Talmudic page.

Although one may argue that the Talmud can offer a fascinating parallel to Dylan's artistic ideas on time and space from the early days, it was only thanks to the teachings of Norman Raeben that his pupil fully understood its creative power. In most of the interviews that I have collected over the years as part of my research into his theories and teachings²⁷, Raeben's students have stressed their teacher's ability to create temporal and spatial bridges, transporting the spectator to another time and place. One of the essentials of his lessons was that "Art telescopes time." As Dylan puts it, he "used to say that: you've got yesterday, today and tomorrow all in the same room, and there's very little that you can't imagine happening"²⁸. Such ideas partly stem from his extensive knowledge of Bergson's theories on time²⁹, but once again the influence of the Talmudic model is crucial. The following remark by artist Roz Jacobs³⁰ about her time in Raeben's studio makes this clear:

As his student I learned how to enter the page as if it were infinite
 in space and time. I didn't feel like I was drawing on top of a piece
 of paper. Instead, I had the sense that the paper was space and while

26. DYLAN, 2016, p. 183.

27. This information emerged from my doctoral research, which centered on Raeben's art and teachings and his influence on Bob Dylan. As a part of the project, I collected a large amount of material and interviewed various students and collectors in order to reassess Raeben as well as to safeguard the body of his work. Some of these painters attended Raeben's classes when Dylan was there and became friends with him. I owe a special thanks to artists Roz Jacobs, John Amato, Bernice Sokol Kramer, Debbie Moshief, and Claudia Carr Levy (who was also Jacques Levy's wife) for their invaluable help and advice. I must also express my gratitude to Dylanogist and collector Mitch Blank, guitarist and songwriter, Erik Frandsen, and music journalist Larry 'Ratso' Sloman, whom I had the pleasure to interview about Dylan's mid-seventies work. For further information, see FANTUZZI, 2020.

28. CARTWRIGHT, 1991, p. 88.

29. Bergson's *Matter and Memory* and *Creative Evolution* are among the books that were most frequently mentioned in his lessons.

30. Artist Roz Jacobs studied with Raeben for a long time around the same time that Dylan attended his classes.

I was drawing the subject would arrive out of that space. It was not paper. It was a universe that was alive – and full of darkness and light, wonder and possibilities. [...] while creating art you feel a timeless resonance – a time space continuum that goes beyond the third dimension³¹.

Not unlike the pages of the letter in “Desolation Row” in which an entire microcosm teeming with historical, Biblical and fictional voices relives, in Raeben’s work, and in that of his students, the paper is not merely a blank sheet but a universe waiting to come alive: the barriers of time and space can be overthrown, distances dissolved, and relationships redefined and recreated.

This creative model also had a bearing on Raeben’s artistic theories. Building on the riff of Braque and Picasso’s reflections on the role of the subject in art³², Raeben believed that the painter must not eradicate the inevitable subject of a painting. However, a too literal rendition of figures disturbs the balance in the internal relationships in the image. Such a problem is even greater when the central images are human figures as they are the most difficult to integrate.



FIGURE 2. NORMAN RAEBEN. UNTITLED. PRIVATE COLLECTION³³.

31. JACOBS, 2020, p. 202.

32. See George Braque’s 1935 interview with Christian Zervos in BRAQUE, 2017, p. 31-32.

33. I thank Dolores and Josh Raeben for granting permission to use the image of this painting.

These conjectures possibly underpin Raeben's most distinctive stylistic trait. Raeben, in fact, found the answer to this conundrum in the world of the semi-abstract, portraying his subjects as lively, vibrant, evanescent sketches. In effect, people in his cityscape pastels are rapidly drawn as vague, ephemeral silhouettes swarming about in an ineffable, chaotic urban scene. In this way, the figures merge with the background more convincingly, and yet, they are never fully part of it: their transiency and varying degrees of unfinishedness feed into a dialogue that creates constant movement and interrelationships in the picture. What is even more astounding is that the minimalist execution of these pastel figures almost reduces them to vibrations of sound made visible. Paradoxically, this captures their true essence, their pure voice.

Dylan treasured this lesson and explicitly transposed it into his songwriting. The direct result was the pictorial trilogy that unfolds in *Blood on the Tracks*, *Desire*, and *Street Legal*. The first of these albums opens with "Tangled Up in Blue", which constitutes an out-and-out poetic manifesto. Years later, Dylan would say of the song:

I wanted to defy time, so that the story took place in the present and past at the same time. When you look at a painting, you can see any part of it or see all of it together. I wanted that song to be like a painting³⁴.

Dylan achieves this effect by fragmenting and conjoining several plots, painting a different situation over and over again from stanza to stanza by means of a markedly expressionist use of personal pronouns. Shifting from the first to the third person and vice versa, sometimes even in the same stanza, the lyrics make it impossible to establish clear relationships between the characters in the verses and their stories. As a result, the protagonists are reduced to indefinable sketches: they are details of a greater whole, obliged to contribute to the inexhaustible dialogue of an open work of art. Forever immortalized in the present of the song, but never fully part of it due to their transitory state, they live *in* time and at the same time *outside* of it; as Derrida would say, they are infinitely finite. Like Raeben's evanescent human figures, the protagonists, the narrator included, meld and harmonize with the context. The features and role of the narrator(s) in the song's diegetic mechanisms are truly singular. As critic Alessandro Carrera aptly writes:

34. FLANAGAN, 1987, p. 95.

The character that says “I” in the song is marginalized by the “conscious” arrangement of the text. Only the voice gives him identity. The syntax of passion is expressed solely through the rhythm of breathing and vocal utterances. In the words of the text, the narrator is absent, and the foreground in which the narrator should be acting cannot be distinguished from the background³⁵.

Through this rhetorical strategy, Dylan turns the characters into ineffable presences that emerge in the song as voices in a continuously evolving text, that is to say, as details in a semi-abstract painting.

In dissolving the characters’ identities, Dylan also fragments the storyline and multiplies the viewpoints, going so far as to render all the stanzas interchangeable except for the last one. As in his early masterpieces, as well as in many other songs that he was to write over the years (e.g., “Shelter from the Storm”, “Isis”, “Romance in Durango”, “Changing of the Guards”, “High Water”, “Key West”, and so on), the anchor point of the story is always in the last stanza³⁶. It is here that Dylan explicitly reveals the mechanics of the song, which turns upon the image in the title: the narrator, in fact, is “tangled up in blue,” an expression that Dylan heard in Raeben’s studio³⁷, and which also echoes the ballad’s metric burden. Time is what tangles up the character, as Dylan suggests as early as the first line of the stanza, “So now I’m goin’ back again | I got to get to her somehow.” The journey of the narrator(s) is a drifting backwards, which is all that he, whoever *he* may be, does throughout the track. Indeed, in his drifting, “The past was close behind.” Further complicating the picture are the last three verses in which Dylan masterfully reworks what he learned from his mentor, leading him to tell us that he and his beloved have always felt the same things, but have seen them from two different perspectives. This is clearly explicable in Raeben’s terms: everyone experiences the world in the same way (their *actuality*, i.e., concrete reality), but, due to the mediation of the senses, everyone interprets it differently. It is upon our perception of our past experience

35. CARRERA, p. 334 (my translation).

36. It is worth mentioning, however, that in *Murder Most Foul* (undoubtedly the most successful realization of this poetic ideal), the anchor point is in the first section, recalling the Talmudic model even more closely. Due to its complexity, however, the song needs to be analyzed apart. My lecture *Rough and Rowdy Ways: Memory and History in Bob Dylan’s Late Narrative Songs* was on this topic (delivered on June 3, 2023 at The World of Bob Dylan 2023 conference, organized by the Institute for Bob Dylan Studies and The University of Tulsa), and will be published shortly.

37. This information is from an interview with the artist John Amato, who studied with Raeben in the late sixties and early seventies.

that we create our own *reality*, our “different point of view.” The song’s geniality is related to this image-creating mechanism, like light being shone on a diamond, fragmenting and multiplying the stories. In this way, Dylan constructs an endless play of perspectives that diverts the listener’s attention from the consequentiality of the plot and focuses it on the work of art in its entirety.

A closer examination of interviews given in the late seventies reveals that Dylan himself was well aware of the secrets of his poetics:

I was just trying to make it like a painting where you can see the different parts but then you also see the whole of it. [It has to do with] the way the characters change from the first person to the third person, and you’re never quite sure if the third person is talking or the first person is talking. But as you look at the whole thing, it really doesn’t matter.

I was trying to make the focus as strong as a magnifying glass under the sun³⁸.

This is not just a striking image. Dylan reproduces the structure of the Talmud page, where the focus is on a few verses of the sacred text placed in the center of the page surrounded by commentary. It is like a diamond set in a circle of precious stones: a model that has been defined as “graphological goldsmithery³⁹.” As in the Talmud, both Raeben’s pastels and Dylan’s major compositions eradicate the spatial and temporal hierarchy; set against an obscure literary *topos*, characters from different times and places, sometimes even from different worlds, interact with each other in an eternal ever-shifting present. In this way, the diverse parts of the composition are in continual dialogue and give rise to never-ending readings as works of art, which, rather than provide simple answers, always pose crucial questions.

In the light of these considerations, it is worth reflecting on Dylan’s ideas on literary sources and the canon. In the early 2000s, Dylan began to express his ideas about the songwriting tradition in numerous interviews. In 2004, when replying to accusations of plagiarism raised by some critics and journalists, he told Robert Hilburn:

Anyone who wants to be a songwriter should listen to as much folk music as they can, study the form and structure of stuff that has been around for 100 years. I go back to Stephen Foster. [...]

38. Quoted in CARTWRIGHT, p. 89-90.

39. HANDELMAN, 1982, p. 47.

That's the folk music tradition. You use what's been handed down.
 [...] There's nothing secret about it. You just do it subliminally and
 unconsciously, because that's all enough, and that's all you know.
 [...] All these songs are connected⁴⁰.

Songwriting is a world governed by its own rules, which postulate a strict relationship with tradition. In this light, the genesis of a song is to be found in the works and the voices that preceded it, while its expressive power further enhances the web of intertextual links. Dylan explored this subject in his acceptance speech for the 2015 Music Care Person of the Year, where he went so far as to reveal, one by one, the musical sources he had 'copied' from for some of his most famous songs⁴¹.

Many influential critics have examined the problem of canon from different perspectives and, especially over the last 20 years, the literature on this topic has been considerably enriched. Two discernible tendencies seem to characterize most studies: some primarily analyze Dylan's composition techniques in the light of the folk and blues oral traditions, while others focus on the literary tradition, often with particular regard to the modernist movement⁴². In this last respect, scholars have frequently paralleled Dylan's ideas with T.S. Eliot's concept of the literary canon⁴³, quoting the latter's famous statement: "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different⁴⁴." This assertion certainly applies to Dylan, as well as to Raeben, who used to teach that inspiration must

40. *Los Angeles Times*, "Rock's Enigmatic Poet Opens a Long-Private Door".

41. See Dylan's speech published in *Rolling Stone*: "Read Bob Dylan's Complete, Riveting MusiCares Speech. Dylan Thanks his Supporters, Denounces his Detractors in Epic Acceptance Speech".

42. The bibliography on these topics is extensive and is impossible to reproduce here. Among the many works, one should at least mention, in strict alphabetical order, CARRERA, 2011; GRAY, 2000; HAMPTON, 2019; MARCUS, 1997; MELLERS, 1984; NEGUS, 2008; PICHASKE, 2010; PORTELLI, 2018; RICKS, 2003, and WILENTZ, 2011, as well as the various valuable articles on these topics offered in the miscellany *The World of Bob Dylan* (LATHAM, 2021).

43. Among the many studies on Dylan and the modernist tradition, see in particular ARMSTRONG, 2011, p. 100-101; BELL, 2013, p. 427-429; CARRERA, 2007, p. 405-421; FALCO, 2022, p. 71-72; FANTUZZI, 2014, p. 91-92; HAMPTON, 2019, p. 26 & 56; THOMAS, 2017, p. 193, 204, 235 & 243-244, and WILENTZ, 2011, p. 312-313. On Dylan's quotations as a postmodernist practice, see DETTMAR, 2021, p. 205-213, and PANTALEI, 2020, p. 17-32.

44. ELIOT, 1921, p. 114.

always come from the observation of something tangible or, to quote Eliot, from a sensuous thought. According to Eliot, citation has a twofold role: on the one hand, it allows the writer to acknowledge the beauty of previous works; on the other, by quoting from the greatest literary voices, it helps him produce something original that will allow him, in turn, to enter the canon. Quoting Timothy Hampton, Dylan certainly “is both a latecomer in history and the reinventor of form”⁴⁵. As recent studies by Raphael Falco and Richard Thomas highlight, there is, however, a substantial difference between the eminently exclusive concept of the canon theorized by Eliot and the one expressed by Dylan. Based on their vast knowledge of classical and early modern literature and its tradition, these critics remind us that the myth of the genius and the corresponding concept of originality are relatively recent inventions, essentially a product of romanticism. As Thomas puts it, “there is – more or less until the Romantics – no notion of “originality” in the sense critics of Dylan’s intertextual or transfigurative method of composing have in mind”⁴⁶. This consideration is even more crucial for the transmission of folk and blues music because the contemporary notion of originality did not entirely apply to these traditions even as late as the mid-20th century⁴⁷. In other words, even in the fifties, singer-songwriters like Woody Guthrie, Pete Seger, and the like would never feel ‘guilty’ about borrowing lines or melodies from other songs. On the contrary, not unlike the ancient, medieval or early modern poets, they felt compelled to tap into the traditions they were working in. As Falco states:

Imitatio is the means by which poets like Dylan manifest originality in the word’s literal sense, deriving from a source, or *origo*. But *imitatio* also allows poets to express originality— in the modern sense of creativity— through new combinations and revisions of past works. (...) Imitation evades influence, even if at times the line between them is blurred. Dylan’s lyrical postures might suggest a consummately post-Romantic, “avant-garde” consciousness, for which being “original,” in the eighteenth-century sense of the word, means being inspired from within. But, on the contrary, Dylan’s creative methodology more closely resembles that

45. HAMPTON, 2019, p. 56.

46. THOMAS, 2022-2023, p. 28.

47. For a more extensive study of these aspects, see PORTELLI, 2017, which provides much insight on the relationships between folk and blues transmission and Dylan’s creative practice.

of classical and Renaissance (early modern) authors who sought truth and beauty externally and historically, in the absorption and transfiguration of their sources⁴⁸.

Bearing in mind Raeben's influence and the impressive number of Talmudic references that Dylan makes in his lyrics, one might suggest that there is a further source of inspiration that should be considered in this context, i.e., the commentaries. Like the traditions studied by these authoritative critics, the Talmud too is an open and inclusive canon, in which any new comments dialogue with those that preceded them and acquire the same status. Moreover, in this tradition there are no chronological barriers of any sort, for, as the Jerusalem Talmud states, "There is no before or after in Scripture"⁴⁹: "all that a faithful disciple will expound in the future in front of his master was already given to Moses at Sinai"⁵⁰, that is, "it's either a matter of reason, or based on Scriptures"⁵¹. In a system in which the written and oral laws simultaneously convey all present and future truths and interpretations, the role of the hermeneutic is to become, in turn, an actor in the creative process and produce further writings: it is becoming part of the inexhaustible play of interpretation, alighting and extending a text that is in eternal becoming. This form of textuality thus presumes an open and ever-evolving canon, ever more inclusive, whose end is eternally deferred in the virtuality of messianic waiting. As Dario Calimani observes:

An individual comment can only offer a contribution to be added to the infinite possible interpretations, which, as a whole, reach out toward the utopian goal of unachievable complete meaning. It is like being in front of a modernist text, inclusive and antidogmatic; (...) One may suspect, in fact, that the texts of Judaism are not concerned with arriving at the truth. (...) One might read it as an act of defiance or simply of extreme respect, whereby the approach to the text favors an indirect path, by way of the Master and his commentary⁵².

48. FALCO, 2022, p. 8.

49. *Jerusalem Talmud, Shekalim* 6:1, 49d.

50. *Talmud Yerushalmi, Peah* 6:2.

51. Quoted in HANDELMAN, 1982, p. 41.

52. CALIMANI, 2000, p. 7-9. My translation.

In the wake of the folk and blues traditions and, through his cultural background⁵³ and Raeben's teachings – and probably also influenced by this literature – Dylan is fascinated by the potential that a vertical relationship of influence offers the author:

I don't think in lateral [*sic*] terms as a writer. That's a fault of a lot of the old Broadway writers... They are so lateral. There's no circular thing, nothing to be learned from the song, nothing to inspire you. I always try to turn a song on its head. Otherwise, I figure I'm wasting the listener's time⁵⁴.

Like Raeben before him, Dylan is less interested in the finished work than in the creative process itself⁵⁵. The value of a piece of art in the tradition, therefore, is measured not in terms of perfection, but in its degree of verticality: it is not so much a matter of improving on tradition to craft something perfect in order to enter the elite world of the canon, as Eliot writes in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, as of drawing on that tradition to create new art that can then inspire others to do likewise. Dylan draws on an open canon that is inclusive and in perpetual evolution. As in the worlds of folk and blues, in the classical, pre-modern and Talmudic canons or in Raeben's chain of artistic praxis, the artist must contribute to the intertextual dialogue of tradition, giving new impetus to the songwriting universe. There is thus no need for there to be any conflict between authors and those who preceded them. On the contrary, from this perspective new work must aim to produce something fresh that, insofar as it is

53. Besides the well-documented studies that Dylan made in the sixties and early seventies (see SHELTON, 1986, p. 144, 196 & 306-307), as Boucher chronicles in his recent book, Dylan's Talmudic knowledge was previously influenced by his maternal grandfather. Dylan "observed the rituals and practices of his devout grandfather who studied the Talmud daily and encouraged his grandson to do the same" (BOUCHER, 2021, p. 66). On these aspects of his childhood, see also ROGOVOY, 2009, p. 18-22, and SHELTON, 1986, p. 21-28 & 38.

54. HILBURN, "Rock's Enigmatic Poet Opens a Long-Private Door".

55. It is interesting to note that chronicling the creative process is a common theme in the works of all of Raeben's students. Though referring to very different media, Roz Jacob's *Painting & Process* (JACOBS, 2010), Carolyn Schlam's *The Creative Path: A View from the Studio on the Making of Art* (SCHLAM, 2018), and Dylan's *The Bootleg Series*, to name but a few, all share the same urge to describe the process of creating art. One might argue that Dylan's radio program, though on a larger scale, also chronicles the creative process with each episode structured as if the songs were a series of different comments on a given topic.

closely related to previous compositions, can revitalize the tradition of popular music as a whole. On closer inspection, the differences between Eliot's exclusive, even confrontational, idea of the canon and what is expressed by Dylan may be found in the contrast between the two traditions to which they refer: while the former is inextricably linked to the realm of writing, the latter lies somewhere between the written word and experience that is gleaned from essentially oral popular traditions.

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Abstract: Bob Dylan's lyrics evidence innumerable citations and floating verses. These make his songs true literary palimpsests, complementing his desire to adopt different masks and first-person narrative personae. From the early days, Dylan has sought to achieve a three-dimensional polyphonic quality in his songs through the juxtaposition of different perspectives and time frames. However, he has never been explicit about the connotations involved in such a choice, and critics have not yet documented them in full. This article aims to investigate these issues by exploring the interconnections between creative practice and intertextuality and the visual arts. Taking into consideration the discovery of Norman Raeben's teaching materials, this article aims to provide a new key for analyzing these features. Through a reading of *Tangled Up in Blue*, informed by Raeben's ideas on time, the role of the subject in art, and the topography of the Talmud, the present study offers an insight into Dylan's creative process. It will also provide some pointers towards a greater understanding of his recent comments on songwriting by considering his ideas on voices, subjects, models, and the canon, which place his work on the boundary between oral and written traditions.

Keywords: Bob Dylan, poetry, painting, palimpsest, songwriting, biblical studies, Norman Raeben, Bob Dylan, Yiddish, diaspora, Talmud, Desolation Row, *Tangled Up in Blue*, genders, subject representation, literary canon, popular music, folk music, time, memory, oral and written traditions

La tradition de l'écriture de chansons et le talent interprétatif

*Résumé : Les textes de Bob Dylan comportent d'innombrables citations et vers flottants. Ces éléments font de ses chansons de véritables palimpsestes littéraires, qui adhèrent à son désir d'adopter différents masques et personnages narratifs à la première personne. Dès le début, Dylan a cherché à obtenir une qualité polyphonique tridimensionnelle dans ses chansons par la juxtaposition de perspectives et de cadres temporels différents. Cependant, il n'a jamais été explicite sur les connotations d'un tel choix, et les critiques ne les ont pas encore entièrement documentées. Cet article vise à examiner ces questions en explorant les interconnexions entre la pratique créative, l'intertextualité et les arts visuels. En analysant le matériel pédagogique de Norman Raeben, cet article vise à fournir une nouvelle approche analytique de ces caractéristiques. Cette étude offre un aperçu du processus créatif de Dylan, tout en lisant *Tangled Up in Blue* à la lumière des idées de Raeben sur le temps, le rôle des sujets dans l'art et la topographie du Talmud. Elle fournira également des pistes pour*

mieux comprendre ses récents commentaires sur l'écriture de chansons, en examinant ses idées sur les voix, les sujets, les modèles et le canon, qui placent son travail à la frontière entre les traditions orales et écrites.

Mots-clés : Bob Dylan, Norman Raeben, art, canon, arts visuels, poésie et musique, poésie et art, histoire de l'art contemporain, littérature contemporaine, littérature américaine, écriture de chansons, études juives, études bibliques, études talmudiques, Talmud et littérature

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