

“Isis” and Dylan’s Romanticism

--John Hinchey

I want to talk mainly about “Isis,” a song Dylan co-wrote with Off Broadway director Jacques Levy.¹ “Isis” was the *first* of several songs that Dylan wrote with Levy during the summer of 1975, and this fruitful collaboration yielded seven of the nine songs released at the end of that year on *Desire*. I’ve chosen “Isis” mainly because it’s an interesting and entertaining song in its own right, but also because it offers a useful vantage point for considering Dylan’s Romanticism, an abiding element in his artistic temperament that doesn’t get nearly as much attention as you’d think it would.

Adventure, mystery, discovery, renewal, the vista of inexhaustible possibility--these are the hallmarks of Romance. Its essence is an aspiration for a world without bounds, a vision of a life of unlimited possibility. “Forever Young” is a quintessentially Romantic idea, as is the popular conception of Heaven. Romanticism, you could say, is the impulse to find Heaven on Earth. It can sound ridiculous when you state it flat out this way, but al-

¹ This is a slightly revised version of a paper presented at “A Series of Interpretations of Bob Dylan’s Lyrical Works,” a conference hosted by the Dartmouth College English Department, August 11-13, 2006. Quotations of Dylan’s lyrics are from the original official recordings, unless otherwise noted. When quoting lines extensively, I revert to the principle I used in *Like a Complete Unknown* (Ann Arbor: Stealing Home Press, 2002): “I’ve had to determine the ‘spaces between words’ for myself. In transcribing Dylan’s poetry to the page, I have generally stuck with the prosody, as I hear it, of the original recorded version” (p. 7).

though an inveterate Romantic, Dylan almost never sounds ridiculous. He's adept at conveying his Romantic intimations indirectly, through symbol or metaphor, in questions, by negation, spiked with humor, or with any number of other tricks and tropes. He is less likely to assert a sense of the infinite than simply to find a way to undermine our confidence that any definition is really definitive, that any boundary is finally binding.

For instance, "Something There Is About You," a song from the 1973 album *Planet Waves*, celebrates the singer's wife as a mystical, even divine being, but it doesn't come out and say that. Instead, it concludes, "Something there is about you I can't quite put my finger on." All the wit--and the sexiness--of this line is in its punch line, in the way that "quite" skews the cliché, but the Romance is all in the way this ending picks up the larger possibilities of the title phrase--in the way the indefiniteness of "something" and the suggestion of an aura or nimbus in "about you" insinuates a sense of the divine. The line names with an elegant precision something it acknowledges to be irreducibly unnameable.

Or consider this couplet from another *Planet Waves* song, "Tough Mama":

*Sweet Goddess
born of a blinding
light and a changing wind
Don't be modest*

*you know who you are and
where you been*

Here Dylan pushes his luck. He does come right out and call her a goddess, but he gets away with it because we accept “Sweet Goddess” as hyperbole, one that, like the other epithets with which he invokes her attention in this song, resonates with the quality or aspect of his wife the singer is seeking out. In this verse, he is addressing the core of her being, something at once elemental--of “light” and “wind”--and also elusive, hidden--“born of a *blinding* light and a *changing* wind.” Moreover the inspired Romantic vagueness of “you know who you are and where you been” both seeks the attention of her elemental core and discreetly allows it to remain hidden. Lines that commence with an imperious impudence resolve themselves on a note of mystery and wonder.

This is the characteristic flavor of Dylan’s Romanticism: playful and serious, mystical and sexy, at once extravagant and cannily measured. He is an incurable Romantic who never makes a foolish move. That is why *this* comes as such a shock: “I married Isis on the Fifth Day of May/But I could not hold on to her very long.” This is foolishness of the highest order. The song’s anonymous protagonist is a fool for thinking he could marry a goddess--and not just *a* goddess but Isis, *the* goddess--or, more precisely, the

kind of fool who doesn't grasp the difference between being married to a woman who has a good deal of the goddess about her and being married to the goddess herself. His behavior in the opening two verses--cutting off his hair, taking off for the wilderness, and washing his clothes down the first chance he gets--is clearly some sort of ritual self-purification. But it's not clear whether he's trying to purge Isis from his system or purge his system of whatever it was that caused him to lose her. It turns out in this case to be both--he lost her because he's obsessed with her--but the singer himself doesn't know this. He's bent not on doing something about his plight but simply getting away from it.

Setting off for parts unknown, the singer converts his song from one kind of Romance--the quest for a soul mate--into another--a quest for freedom. Dylan has always shown a fondness for both modes of Romance; indeed, love songs and road songs, in various guises, are two of his most characteristic forms. Moreover, Dylan has always presented these two forms of Romance as modes of experience that are at once complementary and antagonistic. These two modes of Romance are both ends in themselves, with quite distinct motives and themes, and means to each other, the one always affording relief from or stimulus for of the other. In "Don't Think Twice," the demise of a love affair propels the singer back out onto "that long lone-

some road.” And in a later song, the singer throws his ticket out the window and his suitcase out the door to signal that “Tonight I’ll be Staying Here with You.” In many Dylan songs, especially the early ones, the two modes of romance shadow each other, like positive and negative images of the same photograph. In “Tomorrow Is a Long Time,” for instance, the road-weary singer, unable to lie in his bed until he is reunited with his “own true love,” complains that without her, he “cannot hear the echo of my own footsteps or remember the sound of my own name.” Or is he really complaining? There is something distinctly Romantic in the extremity of his desolation. Don’t we even catch nascent in these lines about disappearing from oneself the ecstatic thrill of “You’re invisible now, you’ve got no secrets to conceal?”

The implicit reciprocity between these two modes of Romance--the way one is always emerging from and then leading back into the other--is made explicit in the narrative structure of “Isis.” But unlike similarly complex ballad Romances on *Blood on the Tracks*, “Isis” is both Romantic *and* a burlesque of the Romantic. In “Isis” the quest for a soul mate has become a form of madness, a self-parodying obsession that barely, if at all, allows the sojourn on the road out from under its anxious shadow. In “Isis” Dylan’s Romantic imagination is at cross purposes with itself. But before taking a

closer look at how he handles this premise, I want to make a brief survey of the history of the Romantic strain in Dylan's songs to show how he got here.

Until *Blonde on Blonde*, the Romance of freedom, the lure of the road, almost always held the upper hand in Dylan's art. Dylan's most famous early love songs--"Don't Think Twice," "It Ain't Me, Babe," "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue,"--are anti-love songs that challenge the singer, or his sometime lover, or both of them to convert erotic frustration into fuel for spiritual renewal. In his most famous song, his most radical Romantic persona invites "Miss Lonely" to join him in the ecstasy of living "on your own, with no direction home, like a complete unknown." It's an apocalyptic vision that, by inviting us to make ourselves at home on the road itself, dissolves the polarity between home and the road from which Dylan's Romances draw their imaginative energies.

You could say that with "Like a Rolling Stone." Dylan had gone too far; certainly, it's hard to imagine going any further in that direction. Not surprisingly, then, Dylan immediately reversed course. On *Blonde on Blonde* the mystery tramp himself, at once bewildering and bewildered, appears in the guise of Romantic lover. But *John Wesley Harding*, the album that followed, serves up withering critiques of the excesses of the free spirit Dylan had always celebrated, and on *Nashville Skyline* Dylan's muse, as Dylan

himself described it in *Chronicles*, had been safely "bridled and house-broken." *New Morning* exhibited a renewal of Dylan's poetic energy, but by now he was a thoroughly domesticated poet.

By 1973, Dylan was beginning to feel the old itch for adventure, and preparing for the 1974 tour with the Band, he did something quite remarkable, if not simply crazy: He wrote *Planet Waves*, an album of songs whose vision of marriage turns "Like a Rolling Stone" on its head. Instead of making his home on the streets, Dylan imagines bringing the ethos of road into his home. The album's signature line, which concludes the "Sweet Goddess" verse of "Tough Mama" I discussed earlier, converts "You're invisible now, you got no secrets to conceal" into "Sweet Goddess, you're perfect stranger's coming in at last."

Coincidentally or not, Dylan's marriage began to fall apart shortly after this, and his next album, *Blood on the Tracks*, was flooded with the resulting emotional upheaval. Ironically, this made for an even more persuasively Romantic album than *Planet Waves*, but its romanticism is sustained only by uniting it with its opposite, a severe, unsparing realism. But the album, especially in its major ballads, is also haunted by doubts that marriage and the Romantic spirit are even compatible. "Now I'm going on back again, I got to get to her somehow" begins the final verse of "Tangled

Up in Blue.” However, this singer’s quest is to reclaim not a wife and home but the company of a woman, or type of woman, or maybe just an aspect of women he has always encountered off the beaten track: in a topless place, in a room with a pipe and incendiary poetry, or finally and most tellingly, “on the road headin’ for another joint.” In addition, songs like “Idiot Wind” and “Up to Me”--a *Blood on the Tracks* outtake--convey the disconcerting sense that any settled identity will eventually turn sour, that familiarity, with one-self as much as with one’s beloved, breeds not contempt but carelessness and complacency, which in turn breeds all manner of evil. “He started into dealing with slaves,” Dylan sings in the only verse in “Tangled Up in Blue” about domestic life, and that “started into” perfectly captures the creepy flavor of unwitting moral and spiritual decay that shadows these songs. The locution “started into” fuses “started” with “fell into” in a way that suggests that his slave dealing was neither intentional nor accidental but accidentally intentional.

“Isis”--to return finally to my main subject--is a Romantic ballad in which the spirit of Romance both flowers *and* curdles. The singer’s reunion with “Isis” at the conclusion of the narrative carries both the elation of a fresh start and the deflating sense that he’s back where he started, his adventure of self-renewal having come to naught. The narrative reflects two con-

tradiictory senses of the shape of time because its protagonist is himself of two minds, or two states of mind. His mad dash into the “wild unknown country” brings him to a “high place of darkness and light,” a twilight world that is an image of his own mind. It’s doubtful that he recognizes it as such because at the beginning of the song he is completely, willfully, in the dark about himself. By the time he reaches the “high place of darkness and light,” hitches his pony--with absurdly purposeful bravado--“to a post on the right,” and heads into a laundry to “wash [his] clothes down,” he has dissipated whatever impulse of self-renewal prompted him to cut off his hair and set out for the “wild unknown country” in the first place. He may have been unable to hold on to Isis for very long, but he still hasn’t let go of her in his mind. At the conclusion of the first of the ballad’s six two-verse episodes, he is clearly out of gas and at the end of his rope, a hapless fool for love who would be a figure of extreme pathos if the imperturbable gusto with which he goes about avoiding himself were not so damn funny.

That gusto is his saving grace, an excess of spirit that not only holds our interest but attracts the attention of the man in the corner who approaches him for a match, a man the singer is rather easily persuaded to join in what turns out to be a wild goose chase into the mountains up north. This stranger is an occult figure. On the one hand, he can be seen as the singer’s

double, his bright side, free of the obsessions and anxieties that are plaguing his spirit. (The doubling and brightness are both indicated in the punning gesture with which the stranger enters the song: “A man in the corner approached me for a match.”) But he’s also a secret agent of his creator, a songwriter too fond of his creation to abandon him to stew in his own juices.

Indeed, it appears that, in one sense, this stranger is literally the songwriter--or at least one of them. Here is what Jacques Levy, Dylan’s co-writer, had to say about “Isis” in a 2001 interview:

“If you want to know what ‘Isis’ is all about you only have to think about it and it’s all there really. It is simply about two guys who go on an adventure together without knowing what they may find They dig and dig and they find something and they come back with it. On the other hand, maybe they find nothing. That is exactly what Bob and I were doing, searching. The song is a kind of allegory of what was going on at the time. What was happening in the song was exactly what was happening with us and it was really exciting.”²

“They find something and they come back with it. On the other hand maybe they find nothing.” What Levy remembered having brought to the writing of the song--and to have shared with Dylan--is a creative venture in which the shared adventure of digging for what they can find is its chief--and only certain--reward.

² Derek Barker, “Apathy for the Devil: Jacques Levy, Joseph Conrad, and ‘Black Diamond Bay,’” *Isis* 90, pagination unknown. Reprinted in Derek Barker, ed., *Isis: A Bob Dylan Anthology* (London: Helter Skelter, 2001), p. 138.

Levy's summary of the song's middle verses overlooks two central elements of the song--at least one of which, I strongly suspect, was also an element of his collaboration with Dylan that, whether consciously or not, the song allegorizes. That is, I suspect that Dylan himself entered upon this collaboration in a somewhat different mood than Levy, a mood more like that of his fictional singer at the beginning of the song: troubled, preoccupied, and anxious. Dylan had already started working on "Isis" when he hooked up with Levy-- he had a tune and apparently a bit of the lyric--but he hadn't been able to get anywhere with it. So if he undertook this collaboration with what sounds a case of like writer's block, one occasioned by a song that must have been inspired at some level by his own deeply troubled marriage, it's easy to imagine that his co-writer's cavalier approach to the project may have served as a tonic, enabling him to get a hold of himself and recover his freedom of spirit and capacity for play. And if Dylan was anything like his fictional alter-ego, it probably took him a while to get into the spirit of things. For it is not until the very end that the singer realizes that his adventure has been its own only reward. But by virtue of being that, it also proves to have been a regenerative ordeal, a quest whose object has been his own authentic self, which may be taken as the esoteric meaning of the illusory body--"embedded in ice" (or in Isis)--his partner is seeking.

Since our hero, perhaps not at all unlike Dylan, is an especially hard case, the moral of his ordeal has to be rubbed into his face: His partner has to up and die, toppling the whole enterprise into farcical slapstick, before the light finally goes off: “I saw that my partner he was just being friendly.” This phrase--“He was just being friendly”--rings a bell. Earlier, in the middle of the ride up north, the singer had found himself thinking about Isis and remembered her promise that they’d “meet up again” and remarry. “Things will be different the next time we wed,” he remembers her saying, but only if he can “hang on and just be her friend.” “I still can’t remember all the *best* things she said,” he concludes, but in the light of the way Isis greets him when they reunite at the end of the song, it seems that he doesn’t really grasp the import of what he does remember. We can feel confident, that is, that what she said was something closer to this: “You’re gonna have to be different before we can remarry, and the main thing you need to learn to do is to respect me as a friend.” But now, it seems, the singer finally gets it, or to use the song’s own trope, he finally does “catch” his partner’s “contagious” friendliness. His immediate response to his liberating discovery that he has been “had,” is to go find Isis “just to tell her I love her.” The most Romantic aspect of this denouement is the suggestion on a sudden, total metamorphosis, as if some spell has been broken. No longer in thrall to his desire for

Isis, the singer has mastered that desire with his simple, unselfish affection for her.

But this is an illusion. The singer's abrupt announcement, a propos of nothing, that he's ready to return to Isis is one of the most riotously comic gestures in all of Dylan's songs. "Love" is a slippery word, denoting either affection or desire, or as here, both. The "just" in "just to tell her I love her" echoes the "just" in "just be her friend" and "just being friendly"--these are the only three occurrences of the word in the song--and in each instance the force of the "just" is to underscore the element of restraint, discipline, self-control. In the first two instances, this emphasis is quiet yet firm, but here the palpable pressure exerted by the singer's desire against the restraints imposed upon it lend this little word a menacing comic charm. To speak here of "love" at all, rather than of friendship, is pushing his luck, and the singer strives to counter his recklessness by framing his intention as not "just to love her" but "just to *tell* her I love her." Such self-mastery as he does exhibit here suggests not the classical image of a rider on a horse but of a rodeo clown riding a bull: it's makes for a breathtaking sight, but you know it's just a matter of time before he goes splat.

The most interesting--and entertaining--aspect of "Isis" is its constant, subtle mockery of the Romantic myth of conversion, the notion that a frog

can turn into a prince, or vice versa. Its hero never ceases to be part frog, even as he was never entirely without his princely aspect. The lyric maintains throughout a truly inspired poker-faced ambiguity about whether its hero's mood and intentions at any moment are free and friendly or cravenly self-absorbed. "I gave him my blanket, he gave me his word," he reports as he and his partner set out for the cold in the north. You can almost hear the singer trying anxiously to calculate the fairness of this swap, but then you can just as easily imagine that he doesn't really care. In any case, he seems to set aside whatever anxieties he may harbor when he asks where they're going, but does he really? Is he subordinating his desires for a big payoff to the camaraderie of the chase, or does his greed just make him reckless?

Isis, as he recalls in the next verse, thought he was reckless, but it's not clear whether she meant this as a criticism or a compliment, and whatever she meant, it's even less clear how he took it. Recklessness, after all, is simply an indifference to consequences. That can be a good thing. Gallantry, for instance, requires recklessness in regard to one's own interests on behalf of another, or of some greater cause. When he recalled Isis's remark about his recklessness, the singer had been thinking of turquoise, gold, diamonds, and "the world's biggest necklace"--these things sound like gifts he'd like to be able to bestow graciously upon Isis. But his thinking here--especially in

the cartoonish splendor of “the world’s biggest necklace”--all suggests a mind salivating with greed--a greed for material riches with which to buy back the only thing he really desires: the riches of Isis’s affections. So which is it? The answer, surely, is both. That is the peculiar nature of this Every-man: he is both a gallant knight and an incorrigible fool.

There is an irreducible ambiguity even in his moment of recognition, when he realizes that he’s been taken for a friendly ride:

*There was no jewels, no nothing,
I felt I’d been had.
When I saw that my partner,
he was just being friendly
When I took up his offer,
I musta been mad.”*

“I felt I’d been had” carries a sense of having been made fool of, with little, if any hint of recognition that, having set himself up to become the butt of a sort of transcendental practical joke, he’s made a fool of himself. Once it dawns on him that his partner was just being friendly, however, you’d think he’d realize that his mind had been fevered with greed. But then, you can never rule out the possibility that, when he confesses that “when I took up his offer, I musta been mad,” he is just wishing he hadn’t been so gullible.

Is he feeling guilty? or cheated? You can’t be sure; or perhaps I should say you can be sure only that it’s not just one or the other. His behav-

ior seems to reflect a real change, a regeneration of spirit, but appearances can be deceiving. It does appear, as I said earlier, that he returns to Isis with a love tempered by friendship, but one can't be sure that his Romantic obsessiveness hasn't just found a new mask. "You look different," Isis tells him. "Well, I guess," he responds. This exchange serves as the last word on the matter: the change in him is a tentative, uncertain thing. Indeed, the light in his eyes has already begun to dim when "blinded by sleep" and, ominously, "in need of a bed," he reaches Isis. He does rally himself, greeting her not with a kiss but with a "curse," but it's a curse that, perhaps in part because Isis herself is unfazed by it, seems (even as it sounds) very much like a kiss. Its negative energy seems to be directed less at her than at himself, and at the overpowering desire he is straining to curb. But it is also a tribute to the enduring--one might even say immemorial--enmity between them that is the necessary underside, rooted in their mutual otherness, of whatever real love, or friendship for that matter, there is between them.

Indeed, it is their mutual enmity as much as their love that energizes the bantering of the extraordinary final verse.

She said, "Where you been?"
I said, "No place special"
She said, "You look different"
I said, "Well, I guess"
She said, "You been gone"
I said, "That's only natural"

She said, "You gonna stay?"
I said, "If you want me to, yes!"

Their words to each other are equally conciliatory and inflammatory. "Where you been," for instance, puts him somewhat on the defensive, but it also lets him get his foot in the door. Remember, it was she who withdrew her affections, and not vice versa: she might have been expected to greet him with "What are you doing here?" or even "Who sent for *you*?" Similarly, his response, "no place special," deflects any implication of responsibility to account to her for his whereabouts even as he offers a wryly accurate account of them. They parry this way, on even terms, three times more, before concluding on a note that is at once deferential and deliciously assertive: "If you want me to, yes." Their performance maintains a perfect balance between intimacy and distance, and the singer's role in it does not resolve the ambiguities in his soul so much as it renders them moot. When two people attend to each other with such good faith, motives don't matter.

It's a splendidly happy ending, one that's at once wholly plausible and completely unexpected: we knew he had it in him, but we had probably begun to wonder if we were ever going to see it. The only problem with it is that as an ending to this tale, it is utterly false. In fact, in one sense, it is not offered as an ending to the tale at all; the tale does not end with this verse

but simply mutates in it from story to drama, a maneuver by which it fines-
ses the matter at the heart of the song: “I could not hold on to her very long.”
The thrill of his climactic exchange with Isis is in the way he does manage to
get hold of himself sufficiently to hold her attention, but he’s done this
before--just not for “very long.” He’s shown that he still has what it takes to
meet a goddess on her terms, but she’s still an immortal, a “mystical child,”
and he’s still not.

In the 1975 Rolling Thunder Revue performance of “Isis” used in
Dylan’s 1978 film *Renaldo and Clara*--it’s also featured on the bonus DVD
included with *The Bootleg Series, Vol. 6: Live 1975*--Dylan doesn’t wait for
the song’s epilogue to reveal that “what drives me to you is what drives me
insane.” In this performance, he delivers the bantering between the singer
and Isis as an edgy, almost anxious sparring that explodes at the end into a
truly maniacal “yes!”--an exclamation that is at once pitiable and terrifying,
as the clown is hurled to the ground in a puddle of insatiable desire and the
bull--or perhaps I should call him the Big Bad Wolf--bares his teeth.

This is one of my favorite of Dylan’s recorded live performances, but
the truth is that the version on *Desire* does greater justice to the lyric. In the
Renaldo and Clara version, the epilogue is redundant, a baffled aftershock.
In the earlier performance on *Desire*, the epilogue strikes a different note al-

together. Dylan's measured, meditative, almost prayer-like performance of the song gives what I have been calling the song's false ending its full due, so that its dazzling satisfactions are not undercut before they have had the chance to work their magic. The epilogue then comes in under its own power:

*Isis O Isis,
 you're a mystical child
What drives me to you is what
 drives me insane
I still can remember
 The way that you smiled
On the Fifth Day of May
 In the drizzling rain*

This epilogue is offered not as a recapitulation or a moral; rather, it is a recantation. The singer begins by recognizing Isis for the first time for what she is, a "mystical child," the substance of his desire not only for the woman who welcomed him home at the end of the song but for life itself. He also dismisses the story he has just told--and the fool he played in it--as "insane," even as he leaves pointedly undefined whatever it is that "drives" his insane pursuit of her. This solves nothing, of course, but it does buy him a reprieve from his own apparently incurable madness. And with an entirely predictable irony, now that he has given up all hope of possessing her, she returns to him. She returns as a vision, which is all that the "mystical child"

he calls Isis ever was. “I can still remember the way that you smiled” reverses “I still can’t remember all the best things she said,” suggesting that “all the best things she said” are in the radiant promise of her smile. (Think of it as “My love she speaks like silence” with the smirk wiped off its face.)

The tone here is not triumphant, or even satisfied, but contemplative, an essentially religious mixture of awe, wonder, and gratitude. The singer’s equanimity before her is troubled, however, by his knowledge that although she smiles upon him, she doesn’t belong to him. His continuing emotional turmoil, held in abeyance but unresolved, makes itself felt in the “drizzling rain” that frames but does not dim the light of her smile. It does, however, have the last word. Belatedly confronting the gap between the promise of Romance and its reality, he remains undaunted but unappeased. The mood here at the conclusion of the song is, in every sense of the word, *hopelessly* Romantic.

At the end, the singer remains a fool for love. The only difference his adventure has made is that now he knows it. With “Isis” Dylan balances a stubbornly reckless Romanticism with an exacting reckoning of its cost. It’s a precarious compound. “One More Cup of Coffee,” the first *Desire* song Dylan wrote and one of only two he wrote without help from Levy, strongly suggests that Dylan was no longer willing to pay the emotional and spiritual

cost of his Romanticism, and most of the other Dylan-Levy collaborations hang fire uneasily between an indulgent romanticism and a corrosive cynicism, a waffling that marks *Desire* as a transitional album. With the exception of the marvelous “Romance in Durango,” nothing else on *Desire* achieves anything comparable to the outrageous equanimity that makes “Isis” such a distinctively seductive creation. Its reckless aplomb finds a companionable setting only in the Rolling Thunder Revue, a Romantic supernova that turned out not to be the never-ending caravan Dylan initially imagined but a final fling with a Romantic muse he had never before--and would never again--court with such foolishly unguarded abandon.