

Dylan, Nobel, Paris, Freedom Flashing

By William Eaton

Le monde s'étire s'allonge et se retire comme un accordéon qu'une
main sadique tourmente

*The earth stretches elongated and snaps back like an accordion tortured
by a sadic hand*

Dans les déchirures du ciel, les locomotives en furie

In the rips in the sky insane locomotives

S'enfuient

Take flight

Et dans les trous,

In the gaps

Les roues vertigineuses les bouches les voix

Whirling wheels mouths voices

Et les chiens du malheur qui aboient à nos trousses

And the dogs of disaster howling at our heels

— Blaise Cendrars, « La prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite
Jehanne de France », 1913. English from John Dos Passos's essay
on Cendrars, "Homer of the Trans-Siberian"¹

After a number of terrifying killings in France, many tourists went elsewhere, and thus, for example, walking through Paris's Luxembourg Gardens in July 2016, one could be stunned by, and also appreciative of, the lack of crowds. And yet at night the lights of the Eiffel Tower continued to sparkle, as if in memory of all the missing or as if to say that it, the Eiffel Tower, was not so easily frightened or dismayed.

¹ John Dos Passos's essay on Cendrars was reprinted in *Orient Express* (Harper & Brothers, 1927).

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Many French-speaking friends and colleagues and French teachers (over many decades) deserve great thanks and no blame, but here Tiziana Monacelli deserves a particular "shout out" for dialoguing vigorously about Dylan's song and the French language. And it was Isabelle Leroy-Jay who, one morning in her kitchen, helped get the translation process/struggle started—most enjoyably!

The spectacle brought to my mind a Bob Dylan song from the mid Sixties, “The Chimes of Freedom,” with its refrain, “Seeming to be the chimes of freedom flashing.”

Flashing for the warriors whose strength is not to fight
Éclater pour les guerriers assez forts pour fuir la guerre
Flashing for the refugees on the unarmed road of flight
Éclater pour les réfugiés, démunis et sans repère

I began to work on translating the lyrics into French. A quixotic undertaking, given that my mother tongue is English and because of the song’s Cendrars-like poetry and its reliance not only on rhyme but also on two metrical schemes, which cannot be the same in French because French does not involve tonic accents.

On Saturday, October 8, I completed my first draft, and, within five days, Dylan had been awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, for “having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition.” Among other things, for those of us who believe that rhyme and repeating metrical schemes (e.g. the iambic pentameter of a Shakespearean sonnet) continue to offer a great deal to poets and poetry, it was hard not to see the award as a kind of vindication.² The permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, Sara Danius, told the press that choosing Dylan had “not been a difficult decision . . . [H]e’s a very interesting traditionalist, in a highly original way. Not just the written tradition, but also the oral one; not just high literature, but also low literature.”³

The award not only tipped a very large cap to popular forms (going back to Homer), but also to the ongoing influence of the Baby Boom generation on global culture. Among the reactions I got a kick out of was this from one of my other childhood heroes, the singer-songwriter Country Joe MacDonald: “I was shocked [that Dylan received a Nobel Prize] . . . He is a good songwriter, but hardly today. We all can agree he is yesterday.”⁴

² See in this regard, Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter & Poetic Form* (Random House, 1979). Among many other things, he offers this useful definition:

Meter is what results when the natural rhythmical movements of colloquial speech are heightened, organized, and regulated so that pattern—which means repetition—emerges from the relative phonetic haphazard of ordinary utterance.

A previous *Zeteo* essay of mine began with that definition. See [The Meter of Contemporary Poetry](#).

³ As quoted in [Bob Dylan wins 2016 Nobel Prize in literature](#), by Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Alison Flood, *The Guardian*, October 13, 2016.

⁴ Country Joe McDonald, as quoted in [Dylan Becomes First Songwriter to Win Nobel in Literature](#), by John McMurtrie, *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 13, 2016. Country Joe’s best-known song is the anti-Vietnam-War “I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die Rag” (also known as “The Fish Cheer”), with its once well-known conclusion and refrain:

Well, come on mothers throughout the land, pack your boys off to Vietnam
Come on fathers, don’t hesitate, send ‘em off before it’s too late
Be the first one on your block to have your boy come home in a box.
And it’s one, two, three, what are we fighting for?
Don’t ask me, I don’t give a damn, next stop is Vietnam
And it’s five, six, seven, open up the pearly gates

Here is a link to [the lyrics of “Chimes Of Freedom” with draft translation into French](#). *Caveat lector*—a good friend, a professional translator whose mother tongue is French, e-mailed me, “Quand je lis ta traduction, pardon, mais tout me heurte, sans m’inspirer. Sorry.” (When I read the translation, pardon, but everything rubs me the wrong way rather than inspiring. Sorry.) Nonetheless, the work encouraged me and might lead others to look closely at Dylan’s word choices and at other aspects of his craft. I have previously explicated at some length another of his great lyrics, “Love is Just a Four-Letter Word.”⁵ For this piece, I will confine myself to the following notes regarding the “message,” insofar as there is one, and the Nobel arts of “Chimes of Freedom.”

- Tolling, tolling, tolling, tolling, tolling, tolling, tolling, tolling, tolling, tolling—the word appears eleven times in the lyric. And it takes some work not to be led by the word “tolling” through Hemingway (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*) back to the famous paragraph in John Donne’s 1624 “Meditation XVII”:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; . . . [A]ny man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.⁶

Why do I dwell on this? Because “Chimes of Freedom,” and its listening “one last time” and watching “with one last look,” seems to have come to be embraced *not* as a song in the wake of and announcing disaster, but as a paean to freedom. (Does this speak to how we read, dwelling on words and ideas we like and ignoring the rest?)

Of course, along with the eleven tollings, there are the more optimistic “chimes” (ten of them), and there certainly seems to be something positive in the song’s title and in its repeated phrase: “the chimes of freedom flashing.” We might say simply that the song is of its times, the Sixties, with all its storms and thunder and flashes of brilliant and threatening light, the deaths and destruction, at home and abroad, the dreams. The song tries to achieve quickly and with bold phrases things that would in fact require more thought and hard work to actually achieve. And yet the lyric is a triumph, and this in no small part because it is so much of its times.

The oddly appropriate low point in the history of the song came decades later, on January 20, 1993, when, presumably at the Clintons’ request, Dylan performed some bits of “Chimes” at the first inaugural. It is hardly surprising that he rushed through, garbling

Well there ain’t no time to wonder why
Whoopie! we’re all gonna die.

⁵ William Eaton, [A phrase in connection first with she](#), *Zeteo*, August 24, 2014.

⁶ John Donne, [Meditation XVII](#), from *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*. Note the Latin epigraph: *nunc lento sonitu dicunt, morieris*, which has been translated as “Now this bell tolling softly for another, says to me, Thou must die.”

the words, as the President looked on, ever so pleased. (Or was this, and Bill Clinton's thumbs-up and gleeful clapping, just part of the act? Even in the midst of a desperate election season, it is worth asking—what do words mean to the Clintons or to others like them?)

A blogger has noted:

The last time Dylan sang from that location [on the Washington mall] he was in the company of Martin Luther King, Jr., and now here he was singing for a president who in three years would sign into law a welfare reform that King would have fought with all of his might.⁷

- *Sonnaient pour la mère, toute seule et maltraitée / Et pour tous les petits infâmes, moins compris que trompés:* Tolling for the mistreated, mateless mother, the mistitled prostitute / For the misdemeanor outlaw, chased an' cheated by pursuit

Given the tolling, the idea of a death knell, it is not surprising to learn that “Chimes of Freedom” was inspired by the assassination of John F. Kennedy (a nasty piece of work, let us say). The assassination took place on a Friday in 1963, and prior to writing the song, Dylan drafted the following six-line coda to a poem: “the colors of Friday were dull / as cathedral bells were gently burnin / strikin for the gentle / strikin for the kind / strikin for the crippled ones / an strikin for the blind.”⁸ I note that Dylan's attention here is not on the fallen leader, but on quite another group of people. And this idea that the death knell tolled in 1963 is a reminder that the ship of the Sixties was running aground before most of us Baby Boomers were old enough to get on board. Or, switching analogies, we thought we had hit the jackpot, but, in fact, the casino had gone bust.

⁷ From blogpost [Clinton Inauguration](#). Blog title: “Long and Wasted Year, Listening to Bob Dylan – One Week at a Time.” Video of [Dylan's inauguration performance](#) has been available via YouTube.

⁸ For more on this, see Clinton Heylin, *Revolution in the Air: The Songs of Bob Dylan 1957-1973* (Chicago Review Press, 2009), 176–81. As regards whether “Chimes” is about the Kennedy assassination, I agree with Dylan's no and disagree with suggestions to the contrary. (Dylan is reported as having told biographer Anthony Scaduto: “If I was more sensitive about [JFK's death] than anyone else, I would have written a song about it. . . . The whole thing about my reactions to the assassination is overplayed.”) I appreciate Heylin's notes about earlier versions of some of the lines, which notes he bases on a draft text written in pencil, with additions in pen, on stationery from the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in Toronto. (The ideal stationery on which to celebrate “the luckless, the abandoned an' forsaked?” This text was apparently reproduced in *The Bob Dylan Scrapbook*. Among the earlier versions Heylin records:

- “The twisted sidewalk's mist was lifting” preceded “As the splattered mist was slowly lifting.”
- An early draft apparently had bracketed the final phrase of “In the wild cathedral nite the rain beat out its tales.” Eventually it was replaced by “the rain unraveled tales.”

Scaduto's book is *Bob Dylan: An Intimate Biography* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1971). *The Bob Dylan Scrapbook, 1956-1966* (Simon & Schuster, 2005) was created as a companion piece to Martin Scorsese's PBS documentary *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan*.

- *Les éclairs de grandes cloches frappaient des ombres dans le bruit*: As majestic bells of bolts struck shadows in the sounds.

Clearly the poem involves the combining of sound and light, the chimes flashing, freedom erupting or torn asunder as in a violent thunder storm, the sky cracking “its poems in naked wonder.” If we trace such juxtaposing back to Cendrars and other French poets, we may be reminded of how often American writers have worked from models they—we—have found in French literature. (To paraphrase Cendrars on Henry Miller, in discovering France, in breathing France, we swallow in gulps, furiously, and eat, vomit, and piss forth its riches.⁹) At least in the case of the refrain, “An’ we gazed upon the chimes of freedom flashing,” the lexical clash—the sounds of chimes are rarely gazed upon nor do they flash—to me it makes both the scene and the freedom, our allegiances and hopes, seem more ephemeral, unrealistic.

- *Aux formes anonymes, défroqués et sans position*: For the disrobed faceless forms of no position.

One may also note that (even as Dylan, like Cendrars, at times stretches language to its breaking point) there are lexical links between and within stanzas, so that the “naked wonder” of the third stanza leads to the “disrobed faceless forms” of the fourth. Or, in the second stanza, the melted furnace of the first line leads to an echo of wedding bells dissolving into lightning bells in the third and fourth lines. (Does Dylan’s poetry owe a good deal to the stream of his consciousness, to the musical demands of meter and rhyme, and to a kind of catch-as-catch-can, trusting to the muses and inspiration, “time waits for no man” spirit of improvisation and dismissal of perfectionism? Yes.)

- *Sonnant pour les chercheurs, sans mots mais en chemin / Pour les amants esseulés aux souvenirs des petits matins*: Tolling for the searching ones, on their speechless, seeking trail / For the lonesome-hearted lovers with too personal a tale

Each stanza of “Chimes” has the same two sections. The second sections feature: shorter, simpler lines; an easier to pick up meter; and rhyming of the ends of the first three of these sections’ four lines. This feels very satisfying—indeed uplifting, the chimes of freedom!—and this particularly after the work our ears and minds have done with the first sections (where, it might indeed be said, *tout se heurte*, everything clashes). We can say

⁹ Paraphrase is from Cendrars’ article on Miller which was published in the review *Orbes* in 1934. This was perhaps the first significant notice of Miller’s work and of his first novel, *Tropic of Cancer*. I came across Cendrars’s remarks, translated into English, in the introduction to a selection from Michel Manoll’s 1950 radio interviews with Cendrars, which selection *The Paris Review* published in 1966 (five years after Cendrars’s death). In [the Review text](#) (The Art of Fiction No. 38), the wording is “in discovering Paris, in breathing Paris, in devouring Paris, he [Henry Miller] swallows in gulps, furiously, and eats, vomits, and pisses forth the city, adores and curses it”.

quickly, too, that the first sections are descriptive; they set the scenes in which the tolling of the second sections takes place.

- *Nous écoutions une dernière fois, nous jetions un dernier coup d'œil / Captivés, englouties jusque la sonnerie s'éteignait:* As we listened one last time an' we watched with one last look / Spellbound an' swallowed 'til the tolling ended

In English-language poetry, a long line is traditionally ten syllables. This must be because the ear, or the voice, becomes dissatisfied—or has become dissatisfied thanks to our poetry?—with a longer line. In Dylan's first sections, however, the first and third lines often run to fourteen syllables. They are extra demanding. The second and fourth lines tend to be two syllables shorter. They ease up on us. And there is also a falling off. The final tonic accent of the first and third lines is on the last syllable, but it is on the second to last syllable in the second and fourth lines.

What effect does this metrical scheme have on us? We might think of the water of waves piling up and crashing on a beach and then receding. Or I have thought of the chained dog in John Irving's *The World According to Garp*. Trying to catch a devilish stray cat, he keeps rushing to the very end of his chain, only to come up short and be choked by the metal, again and again. Alternatively, in places in "Chimes"—the "taken-for-granted situations," "leaving only bells of lightning and its thunder"—one may feel a kind of (metrical) weakness. A picture of a wooden-framed Southern town in the wake of a hurricane or tornado?

- *Les flèches lumière-électriques atteignaient toujours leur cibles / N'ignorant que les nomades et les enchainés:* Electric light still struck like arrows, fired but for the ones / Condemned to drift or else be kept from drifting

As regards the meaning of Dylan's song-poem, I would particularly call attention to this phrase in the first verse: "for each an' ev'ry underdog soldier in the night." In the second verse, this comes back as "the luckless, the abandoned an' forsaken . . . the outcast, burnin' constantly at stake." In the third verse there is "the unpawned painter behind beyond his rightful time," and in the final verse it's "the countless confused, accused, misused, . . . every hung-up person in the whole wide universe".

American culture, like other highly competitive cultures, is obsessed with the possibility and fact of winners and losers. (See, for example, Donald Trump, champion of those who have lost out to global capitalism, NAFTA included. What's interesting here is that Trump presents himself as a great winner, but his ability to connect with his "base" seems to be owing to the fact that in his heart he, too, feels like a loser. His businesses have been taken away from him by his creditors, after he proved repeatedly that, although he was an extraordinary promoter, he was a lousy business manager.)

In the 1960s—what with the nuclear arms race, the dawning of a new environmentalist consciousness, and the Vietnam War—the idea of winners and losers did not go away,

but ideas about what constituted winning were turned on their heads. As George W.S. Trow so well put it: “When the idea of winning is . . . full, but empty of integrity, then the only interest is in disappointment.”¹⁰ The “counter culture” of the Sixties came to the fore and made its producers lots of money by scorning business success and conventional social status and the various objects, the houses and cars and so forth, that were signs of such “accomplishment.” The artist, the alienated, the ever searching and protesting—these were, ever so briefly, our great heroes and role models.¹¹

Of course, so often, so relentlessly, the pendulum has swung back to conventional forms of business success and to conspicuous consumption. As an American child of the Sixties I am struck by how ignorantly and shamelessly the current products of our elite universities (people who might be considered among the most privileged?) are giving their lives over to the pursuit of money, which often involves the selling of gadgets and devices for manipulating gadgets. In a San Francisco sushi restaurant, I overhear three “millennials” talking ever so briefly about the careers they would have liked to pursue (e.g. teaching school) were their first priority not making money. Doing my reading and writing in Manhattan cafés, I overhear the occasional conversation about their children and their children’s schools, but mostly I hear talk of deals, money-making schemes, social-media marketing, monetizing education, replacing teachers with computers, etc. This is hardly the thunderstorm of freedom whose debris Dylan celebrated.

Afterword on Dylan’s getting the Nobel

I have great sympathy with those writers who feel, why did Bob Dylan or, say, Saul Bellow, get the award rather than me! But many of the objections I have read seem rather to be involved in class warfare (which is not shameful but ineluctable, never-ending). A class of writers are seeking to defend its approach to writing against the possibility that another approach might be equally good or better. And this because this possibility raises another, at least equally threatening one: the possibility of an expanding pool of competitors, not only for awards and other forms of social status, but perhaps also for teaching jobs. (It is worth noting that novels, too, have been attacked from a class perspective, as when Samuel Johnson dismissed them as an escape for servant girls and not real literature.)

As regards poetry in specific, what can it mean that the Nobel Prize for Literature has gone not to someone trained or earning a living in academia (e.g. in an MFA program),

¹⁰ George W.S. Trow, “Within the Context of No Context,” *Atlantic Monthly Press*; originally published in *The New Yorker*, November 17, 1980.

¹¹ Clinton Heylin’s comment in this regard: “‘Chimes of Freedom’ represents an entirely new kind of song [for Dylan], its litany of life’s losers resembling the work of the Beats. Perhaps it was no coincidence he had first met Allen Ginsberg five weeks earlier.” (From *Revolution in the Air, op; cit.*).

but to someone who didn't make it through college, a popular entertainer who has also ignored contemporary movements in academy-based poetry, the turning away from rhyme and repeated meters among other things? That Dylan is working in the oral tradition in which poetry so wonderfully began may simply add salt to the wound.

Among other things, it could be worth using the award to remind ourselves of the limitations, and perhaps the virtues, of "free verse."¹² Of course—this horse left the barn in the nineteenth century!—we can all think of wonderful free-verse poems. Langston Hughes's "Theme for English B" leaps to my mind, and Bob Perelman's "China" or Eileen Myles's "Dissolution" or Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "The world is a beautiful place" or Denise Levertov's "The Ache of Marriage," etc., etc.¹³ And yet I do feel that rhyme and repetitive meter schemes are great gifts to poets and poetry and thus to readers, and when poets turn their backs on these things, they should at least appreciate what they are giving up—great sources of inspiration and of music. We might say that Bob Dylan was able to reach great heights in some of his lyrics because he wasn't trying to make the climb without a good pair of boots.

In his speech at the a 2015 Grammy Award program, Dylan put this in his own way:

These songs didn't come out of thin air. I didn't just make them up out of whole cloth. . . . I learned lyrics and how to write them from listening to folk songs. . . . For three or four years all I listened to were folk standards. I went to sleep singing folk songs. . . . If you sang "John Henry" as many times as me—"John Henry was a steel-driving man / Died with a hammer in his hand / John Henry said a man ain't nothing' but a man / Before I let that steam drill drive me down / I'll die with that hammer in my hand." If you had sung that song as many times as I did, you'd have written "How many roads must a man walk down?" too.¹⁴

¹² I cannot write these words, "free verse," without recalling again Paul Fussell's *Poetic Meter & Poetic Form* and its excellent chapter on this subject. I quote from the opening:

The main nineteenth- and twentieth-century departure from traditional systems of metrical regularity deserves a chapter by itself. The first problem is the very term free verse. If we are persuaded with T.S. Eliot that "there is no freedom in art," the term free verse will strike us as a flagrant oxymoron. But if free verse seems an affront to logic, the term has the merit of familiarity and is thus handier than the pedantic cadenced verse or the awkward non-metrical verse or the pretentious *vers libre*. We will use free verse, but we will want to be aware that free has approximately the status it has in the expression Free World. That is, free, sort of.

¹³ My appreciation of Hughes's poem (and of my son) resulted in a pastiche: [This is my poem for Terminal B](#), Montaigbakhtinian, November 27, 2014. My appreciation of Perelman's poem helped inspire a postmodern travel piece: [Bologna Postmodernism Bob Perelman Amis, Literary Explorer](#), 2015. And for more on Myles's "Dissolution," see [What Might Poetry Give Us?](#), *Zeteo*, September 3, 2014.

¹⁴ "How many roads must a man walk down?" is the opening line of Dylan's 1962 "Blowin' in the Wind." The *Los Angeles Times* has published and put online [Grammys 2015: Transcript of Bob Dylan's MusiCares Person of Year speech](#), February 2015.

For those eager for more

My favorite recording of “Chimes of Freedom” continues to be one of the first I got to know, [The Byrds’ version](#), which has been available via YouTube. There are plenty of other versions available on YouTube, and most of them, to include recent Dylan versions, I, personally, do not care for, but I can recommend [a Dylan recording from 1964](#), and [a youthful Dylan-Joan Baez recording](#). There is also Dylan’s original, 1964 recording, on his fourth studio album, *Another Side of Bob Dylan*. I will hardly be the first to note that this album includes any number of other great lyrics. Quickly here, from “Ramona”—

There’s no use in tryin’ / To deal with the dyin’
Though I cannot explain that in lines

And from “Spanish Harlem Incident” (a song James Baldwin may well have appreciated because of how it reflects the centrality of people of color—in this case a young woman from Spanish Harlem—to white Americans’ understanding of themselves¹⁵):

I been wond’rin’ all about me / Ever since I seen you there . . .
You have slayed me, you have made me / I got to laugh halfways off my
heels
I got to know, babe, will you surround me? / So I can tell if I’m really real

And then there is the refrain from “My Back Pages” (written when Dylan was, roughly, 23!): “Ah, but I was so much older then, I’m younger than that now.” (This seems to have been a reference to a decision of Dylan’s not to write any more “finger-pointing songs . . . pointing to all the things that are wrong. Me, I don’t want to write for people anymore. You know—be a spokesman.”¹⁶ A role that proved not so easy for him to give up.)

¹⁵ James Baldwin, from “East River, Downtown: Postscript to a Letter from Harlem”: the Negro student movement,

does not have as its goal the consumption of overcooked hamburgers and tasteless coffee at various sleazy lunch counters. Neither do Negroes, who have, largely, been produced by miscegenation, share the white man’s helplessly hypocritical attitudes toward the time-honored and universal mingling. The goal of the student movement is nothing less than the liberation of the entire country from its most crippling attitudes and habits. The reason that it is important—of the utmost importance—for white people, here, to see the Negroes as people like themselves is that white people will not, otherwise, be able to see themselves as they are.

The essay first appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, March 12, 1961, with the title “A Negro Assays the Negro Mood.” The quotation above is from the text reprinted in the collection *Nobody Knows My Name*, first published by Dial Press, 1961.

¹⁶ Comment apparently made to music critic Nat Hentoff during the time Dylan was recording the *Another Side* album. As quoted in Heylin, *op. cit.*

And one last, personal note: Imagine the impression that all this—Dylan’s lyrics—made on a 10-, 12-year-old Midwestern American boy who was learning to want to be a writer.

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