Dylan Ramona Other Poets Soul

By William Eaton

This appreciation of one of Bob Dylan's love songs, "Ramona," leverages its lyrics to make three basic observations about poetry and to call attention, to include in the footnotes, to several poems by other writers. While not all of these comments are positive, in general this short essay is watered with a love of poetry.

1

> *your magnetic movements*
>
> *still capture the minutes I'm in*

Many, many poems can be valued for the fact that—in the midst of them, and be they on the whole good or bad (whatever that may mean)—a reader may find one or more wonderful lines. Wonderful to "me" now or wonderful more generally, more broadly.

Like many another, I keep a collection of favorite lines which have been snatched from poems that I (*mea culpa*) but otherwise dimly recall. "It is erotic when parts / exceed their scale" from Lyn Hejinian's "The Cell." And from the second verse of Edward Arlington Robinson's "New England" (where I am rooted):

> Passion is here a soilure of the wits,
> We're told, and Love a cross for them to bear;
> Joy shivers in the corner where she knits
> And Conscience always has the rocking-chair, . . .

Which calls to mind E.E. Cummings' "the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls". And let's go from there to Rita Dove's "Fifth Grade Autobiography"—

> . . . sun through the trees
> printing her dress with soft
> luminous paws.

There are of course times when the wonderful lines redeem or attach us to a poem that on the whole doesn't work so well or that includes some clunkers. An example is "Winter Seascape" by John Betjeman (who became an English TV personality as well as Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom from 1972 until his death in 1984). The short "Seascape" concludes with a regrettable penultimate verse, as well as an unearned concluding verse which leaves us doubting the whole *mise en scène*. Yet the poem lives on, deservedly

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anthologized thanksbut the poem lives on, anthologized, presumably thanks to its sounds and repetitions which, with an ease that belies their artistry, give us a very clear sense of a stormy sea breaking against a rocky English shore.[1]

In the case of "Ramona" (the full text of which appears at the end of this piece), a few of the lines and images could have used more attention, but there are also the lines already quoted about magnetic movements catching my minutes.[2] Here, resources of poetry—concision, synecdoche, and meter—are used beautifully to describe a certain kind of love. I was going to write "young love," but the phrase describes just as well how I felt when

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[1] Herewith the pleasing first and fourth verses and the not-so-pleasing fifth one (of a six-verse poem):

> The sea runs back against itself
> With scarcely time for breaking wave
> To cannonade a slately shelf
> And thunder under in a cave . . .
>
> Far down the beach the ripples drag
> Blown backward, rearing from the shore,
> And wailing gull and shrieking shag
> Alone can pierce the ocean roar.
>
> Unheard, a mongrel hound gives tongue,
> Unheard are shouts of little boys:
> What chance has any inland lung
> Against this multi-water noise?

[2] Of course Dylan's whole style and genius depends on his making quick associations, free associating at times, guided by rhythm and rhyme, and without letting any internal censor demand logic. Nonetheless, another songwriter might have tried to revise his desire to "be under the strength" of his beloved's skin, along with the second and fourth lines from the first verse:

> The pangs of your sadness
> Shall pass as your senses will rise
> The flowers of the city
> Though breath-like

I understand the wonderful liberties of poetic diction, and I get what is being suggested with "your senses will rise," but the diction is inelegant at best. And in what sense are the flowers of a city "breath-like"? Just in the sense that this sets up a nice rhyme with the next line and thus leads to the verse's nice closing:

> Get deathlike at times
> And there's no use in tryin'
> T' deal with the dyin'
> Though I cannot explain that in lines

Nor does the middle of the third verse seem at the level of the rest of the song. The rhythm of "Nothing to win and nothing to lose" perhaps honors in the breach the idea that it is *variations* from established meter that make a poem come to life, but read out loud, it's clumsy.

> I've heard you say many times
> That you're better 'n no one
> And no one is better 'n you
> If you really believe that
> You know you got
> Nothing to win and nothing to lose

As regards the theory here, I can never stop recommending Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter & Poetic Form* (Random House, 1979).

my son was an infant. (And perhaps he felt on some level that his mother and my magnetic movements captured the minutes he was in.)

2

And there's no use in tryin'

T' deal with the dyin'.

"Ramona" is also a song full of advice. Indeed, the young poet's love for a young woman may seem but an excuse for giving out advice. And certainly some of us have tried (with mixed success) to express our love of another person by giving them advice.

For other reasons—because millions of Americans and many more millions around the world have a need for or are addicted to crutches?—advice poetry is enjoying a surge of popularity, with the advice being along the lines of "look on the bright side," or, "you're only as beautiful as you feel." The reigning queen of this domain is Rupi Kaur—

learning to not envy
someone else's blessings
is what grace looks like[3]

In thinking about older advice poems I have admired, Elizabeth Jennings's two-verse "Delay" has come to mind. Comparing love to starlight, she concludes:

Love that loves now may not reach me until
Its final desire is spent. The star's impulse
Must wait for eyes to claim it beautiful
And love arrived may find us somewhere else.

As for "Ramona," its advice is for young people under pressure, as young people always are, to conform. To conform to the aging ways of parents, teachers, and employers and to the tastes of peers. I am sure that this advice played a large role in attaching me to Dylan's song half a century ago (!) when, as a teenager, I first heard it.

It's all just a dream, babe
A vacuum, a scheme, babe
That sucks you into feelin' like this . . .

From fixtures and forces and friends
Your sorrow does stem
They hype you and type you
Making you feel
That you must be exactly like them

[3] From Kaur's most recent book, *from the sun and her flowers* (Andrew McMeel, 2017).

3

Ramona, come closer

Shut softly your watery eyes

But what makes "Ramona" a great song-poem is something else and much more wonderful. Though the song may suffer, in 2018, from the patronizing tone with which a young man (as if himself an old soul) addresses a woman of his generation, it triumphs precisely because of the pleasure and warmth we feel to be in the presence of a large-souled human being.

In thinking about poets I've been reading lately—from Gary Snyder through Robert Frost, Ted Hughes, Theodore Roethke, Alice Oswald, Tara Bergin, Phillippe Jaccottet, Paul Verlaine, Victor Hugo, Walt Whitman . . . —few exhibit the quality of soul that Dylan does in "Ramona." It's something beyond compassion or empathy, beyond an ability to put oneself in another person's shoes. It's a recognition that the suffering of others is ours not just because we might be part of one big human family, but because "there but for the grace of God go I."[4]

Recently I heard a young poet say that, to her, love poems are about the poet, about "me," the lover. Some of Alice Oswald's youthful poems can fit in this category, though perhaps the category is close to the Poetry Foundation's **Anti-Love Poems**. Two examples, the first from an early version of Oswald's "Since love is round," which begins:

since love is round and man misshapen
it may not always accord and if I
and I do furiously reprove myself
hackle up and without impulse cry
or if after if I hum for hours
all cold and odd and feign mad
and vanish with my jacket on my head[5]

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[4] In March 2018 Wiktionary was stating that this phrase is allegedly from a mid-sixteenth-century statement by John Bradford, "There but for the grace of God, goes John Bradford," a statement made in reference to a group of prisoners being led to execution. Bradford, an English Reformer, was imprisoned in the Tower of London for alleged crimes against Mary Tudor, and then burned at the stake on 1 July 1555.

[5] Originally published in *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (Faber and Faber, 1996). A **later version**, with a new opening—intriguing, but perhaps seeking, above all, to efface the youthfulness of the original?—was published, with the cautious title "Poem," in Oswald's *Spacecraft Voyager I: New and Selected Poems* (Graywolf Press, 2007). The rest of the first version of this poem follows below. Note that the ellipses are in the original text.

and your calm hands just lift and let it by . . .
I say a miracle a notion at risk
and grown of and aloof to faults and a
terrible demand is love but if you ask
something of refund on your gentleness
and in good time take secretly
another girl and say so guiltily . . .

The second example is "Caress" by the India-born, now multinational Sudeep Sen:

> Saryu,
> the Zen poet wrote:
> Without the brush,
> the willow paints the wind.
> And I replied:
> 'Without the brush,
> my breath paints
> her bare skin.'[6]

In "Since love is round," the misshapen beloved's role is to get to know better the misshapen lover, her ways, likes, and dislikes. In "Caress," the beloved need only be bare; the poem is about a gift or facility of the poet's. Similarly, Shakespeare's sonnets, though rooted in a beloved's youth, beauty, and inevitable decay, end up being more about the artist, his artistry, art (poetry), time, and mortality. The beloved is reduced or distilled to a cipher, unfaired even as he or she fairly doth excel.[7]

And yet . . . I would like to save a special, exalted place for love poems that are less about "me," the poet, and my love and ideas, and more about another person, very much distinct from myself—someone who "I" love for who he or she is. (My own love poems are about an "us"—that is, either about my relations with a woman to whom I am attracted or about my relations with my son.[8])

With such build-up, the lines in "Ramona," of which I am just beginning to make much, may fall flat. And yet I go on. I have wondered if, were we looking for poems with this "there but for the grace of God" quality, we might not look first not at love poems but at the great poems written by British soldiers who were in the trenches during the First World War. In writing of other soldiers' tragic experiences, at some level the poets knew well that such experiences could—and in some cases did—become their own. And yet—because the poets were officers trying to call attention to and memorialize the suffering of the rank and file?—in these poems, too, I find a distance between the suffering "they" and the observing, writing "I." An American writer—Walt Whitman most notably and influentially—may be drawn to conflate his own experiences and those of fellow citizens

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> then leave me I haven't such forgiveness . . .

[6] I encountered the poem in *Indian Love Poems*, Selected and Edited by Meena Alexander (Knopf, 2005).

[7] This closing phrase is extracted from the opening of Sonnet V, with me putting the poet himself, rather than Time, in the role of tyrant.

> Those hours, that with gentle work did frame
> The lovely gaze where every eye doth dwell,
> Will play the tyrants to the very same
> And that unfair which fairly doth excel;

[8] The curious might see, from Montaigbakhtinian.com, **Another Kind of Love Poem** and **This is my poem for Terminal B**, both about my son and me, or the stumbling sonnet duet **Not these outward copies**.

who happen to lack his book learning and freedom of comfortable movement. But the great English young poets of the First World War, presumably under the influence of the distances and barriers between the social classes in England—and the greater clarity about the fact and consequences of social class!—, are far from any such temptation.

As an example, I offer the conclusion of "Spring Offensive," a superb poem about yet one more near-suicidal charge over a ridge into machine-gun fire, a charge ordered by a high command which history has shown to be murderously incompetent. The poet, Wilfred Owen, was himself killed in action a few months later.

> The few who rushed in the body to enter hell,
> And there out-fiending all its fiends and flames
> With superhuman inhumanities,
> Long-famous glories, immemorial shames—
> And crawling slowly back, have by degrees
> Regained cool peaceful air in wonder—
> Why speak they not of comrades that went under?[9]

This ending asks about a "them" clearly distinct from the poet who is indeed, evocatively speaking about comrades, all be they underlings, who went under. When, fresh out of officers' training school, Owen began commanding troops in the field, he, in a letter to his mother, described them as "expressionless lumps."[10] It is said that his appreciation for

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[9] Project Gutenberg has put online **Owen's poems**. Online one may also find **some of the "greatest hits" of World War I poetry**, including Owen's famous "*Dulce et Decorum Est.*"

[10] Excerpts from Owen's letter of 4 January 1917 (from **Wilfred Owen Letters**, The First World War Poetry Digital Archive):

> My own dear Mother,
>
> I have joined the Regiment, who are just at the end of six weeks' rest.
>
> I will not describe the awful vicissitudes of the journey here. I arrived at Folkestone, and put up at the best hotel. It was a place of luxury—inconceivable now—carpets as deep as the mud here—golden flunkeys; pages who must have been melted into their clothes, and expanded since; even the porters had clean hands. Even the dogs that licked up the crumbs had clean teeth.
>
> Since I set foot on Calais quays I have not had dry feet. . . .
>
> After those two days, we were let down, gently, into the real thing, Mud. . . .
>
> I chose a servant for myself yesterday, not for his profile, nor yet his clean hands, but for his excellence in bayonet work. For the servant is always at the side of his officers in the charge and is therefore worth a dozen nurses. . . .
>
> The men are just as Bairnsfather has them—expressionless lumps. We feel the weight of them hanging on us. . . .
>
> Pass on as much of this happy news as may interest people.
>
> The favourite song of the men is
>
> > 'The Roses round the door
> > Makes me love Mother more.'
>
> They sing this everlastingly.
>
> I don't disagree.

his men and their attitudes toward the fighting grew in large part as a result of he himself being wounded in action. His poetry is all about this revelation: there are reasons for the lumpiness of the working-class—of working-class machine-gun fodder![11]

And so, after all that, too much build-up, the lines from "Ramona" that bring out its soul. The already quoted opening, with its "come closer / Shut softly your watery eyes," give us a young woman who has been crying and a narrator who wants to help, perhaps to comfort. And then, from the last of the song's five verses:

> I'd forever talk to you
> But soon my words
> They would turn into a meaningless ring
> For deep in my heart
> I know there is no help I can bring . . .
>
> And someday maybe
> Who knows, baby
> I'll come and be cryin' to you

For some reason, in my memory that last line is somewhat different: "I'll be lost and come crying to you." In any case, here we have elements of great loving comfort, with the comforter:

- Unselfishly paying close attention to the other's suffering (i.e. over four stanzas).
- Not getting lost in sugar-coating or wishful thinking, but affirming for the sufferer that life is hard ("the flowers of the city . . . Get deathlike at times" and "deep in my heart / I know there is no help I can bring").
- Not pretending that he, himself, is above suffering.

As a certain unnamable tweeter seeks daily to deny, we are all, each and every one of us, vulnerable and in need of one another. (To include for exploiting, I'm afraid.) And perhaps the greater message of "Ramona" is that some of us, perhaps just a few, can truly love other human beings while seeing them clearly. A courageous poet like a courageous parent or lover—Shakespeare hardly excepted—accepts the inevitability of the suffering of other, beloved, mortal, socially dependent beings, and also that his or her own fate is much the same.[12]

Your very own W.E.O.

[11] It might be said that the next step in this progression is *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell, who was from a downwardly mobile, but once wealthy, gentile family who could not afford to send him to university. In his great novel, a member of the professional classes, the protagonist Winston Smith, seeks desperately to recover his own humanity by going to where the proles live and by rediscovering his own animality, in sex.

[12] *Cf.* from James Baldwin's brief observations on "The Creative Process": "It is for this reason that all societies have battled with the incorrigible disturber of the peace—the artist." Baldwin's text may be found, inter alia, in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985* (St. Martin's Press, 1985).

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To Ramona, by Bob Dylan

Ramona, come closer
Shut softly your watery eyes
The pangs of your sadness
Shall pass as your senses will rise
The flowers of the city
Though breath-like
Get deathlike at times
And there's no use in tryin'
T' deal with the dyin'
Though I cannot explain that in lines

Your cracked country lips
I still wish to kiss
As to be under the strength of your skin
Your magnetic movements
Still capture the minutes I'm in
But it grieves my heart, love
To see you tryin' to be a part of
A world that just don't exist
It's all just a dream, babe
A vacuum, a scheme, babe
That sucks you into feelin' like this

I can see that your head
Has been twisted and fed
By worthless foam from the mouth
I can tell you are torn
Between stayin' and returnin'
On back to the South
You've been fooled into thinking
That the finishin' end is at hand
Yet there's no one to beat you
No one t' defeat you
'Cept the thoughts of yourself feeling bad

I've heard you say many times
That you're better 'n no one
And no one is better 'n you
If you really believe that
You know you got
Nothing to win and nothing to lose
From fixtures and forces and friends
Your sorrow does stem
That hype you and type you
Making you feel
That you must be exactly like them

I'd forever talk to you
But soon my words
They would turn into a meaningless ring
For deep in my heart
I know there is no help I can bring
Everything passes
Everything changes
Just do what you think you should do
And someday maybe
Who knows, baby
I'll come and be cryin' to you