

“I contain multitudes”, you say?

In the True Performing of It: Dylan and Shakespeare:

Bards encompass all of life in their work and give a voice to everyone in society. As Walt Whitman put it: “I contain multitudes”.

and

...One reason it is possible to convincingly stage Shakespeare in different ways in different historical periods is related to the uses of paradox and ambiguity, which we look at in *Wordplay*. Paradox writ large, as it were. The questioning nature of his art provides us with the ability to always see things from different points of view. Like Dylan, like all bards, he, in Whitman’s words ‘contains multitudes’ and all their attendant attitudes. Problems, concepts and controversies can be posed without dogmatic stances being ascertained or personal convictions revealed.

Whitman, you say? *Troubadour* pages 29-50

... . The triplet in this verse contains the following characters:

- Searchers
- Those denied a voice
- Trail seekers
- Lonely lovers
- Gentle souls unfairly jailed

It is almost as though these three lines are designed to contain a list of archetypal Dylan characters.

Listening to this you cannot help but be reminded of Walt Whitman's all-encompassing identification in 'A Song Of Myself' (which contains many similar characters such as wrongly blamed prostitutes, outcasts and criminals):

I am posses'd!

*Embody all presences outlaw'd or suffering,
See myself in prison shaped like another man,
And feel the dull unintermitted pain.*

*...For me the keepers of convicts shoulder their carbines and
keep watch, It is I let out in the morning and barr'd at night.*

*...Not a mutineer walks handcuff'd to jail but I am handcuff'd
to him and walk by his side,*

*...Not a cholera patient lies at the last gasp but I also lie at the last
gasp,*

The closing verse opens with beautiful imagery describing the ending of the storm as experienced by the friends whose comradeship has been strengthened by the experience. The opening words 'Starry-eyed and laughing' catch the wonder and hesitancy one feels after such an experience. This feeling of largesse leads to the awesome, all-embracing sympathy for everyone who needs the chimes of freedom to flash for them:

*Tolling for the aching whose wounds cannot be nursed
For the countless confused accused misused strung-out ones and worse
And for every hung-up person in the whole wide universe*

This is a bravura peak of emotion even amongst Dylan's mountain ranges of such, and it is all the more effective for the inexorable way the song's design has built to it. Unlike many lines I have previously quoted these do not necessarily come across on the page; in performance they are equal to anything else in the song and, given the delivery, a perfect culmination. Dylan listeners will probably 'read' the *nursed/worse/universe* lines in that familiar voice anyway!

The song is brought to a very definite conclusion by a six-second burst of harmonica. The listener, like the protagonists of the song, is released from an awe-inspiring experience, unsure of how much time has passed as he 'hung suspended'.

It's a magnificent achievement and again Whitman comes to mind with the long list of characters in 'A Song of Myself' which his self identifies with, envelopes and becomes. Men and women, regardless of colour, young, old, criminals or not are gathered into his cosmic, poetic embrace - 'every hung up

person in the whole wide universe' would cover it, if only Mr Whitman had thought of the phrase.

The somewhat similar 'The Sleepers' is, if anything, at times even closer to the Dylan of 'Chimes Of Freedom' as the following quotation shows:

*Onward we move, a gay gang of blackguards! with mirth shouting music
and wild-flapping pennants of joy!
I am the actor and the actress, the voter, the politician,
The emigrant and the exile, the criminal that stood in the box,
He who has been famous, and he who shall be famous after today,
The stammerer, the well-formed person, the wasted or feeble person.*

The 'mad mystic hammering' of Dylan's song takes us – like the storm takes him and his companions – out of day-to-day reality, out of time itself. Normal human perception is transformed into a state where we listeners can imaginatively embrace, just as Whitman did in the poems above, and the singer did while huddling from the storm, *'every hung up person in the whole wide universe'*.