

Amerindian Roots of Bob Dylan's Poetry

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(Trans. from French by Valerie Burling)

Bob Dylan is a recognized author whose sources of inspiration have already given rise to several studies, the most monumental surely being *Dylan's Visions of Sin* by Christopher Ricks (2003). According to Ricks, Dylan's sources can be found in the Bible and in the Anglo-American literary corpus, in writers ranging from Shakespeare to T. S. Eliot and including Milton and Yeats. Such cultural self-centeredness could seem surprising to a French reader to whom other names immediately spring to mind, such as Baudelaire (Dylan is a skillful inventor of oxymorons, a prominent element in *Les Fleurs du Mal*), Verlaine, and Lautréamont, especially in his early period. Moreover, Bob Dylan's inspiration is by no means restricted to the tradition referred to by Ricks, even if it is enlarged to take in the broad spectrum of Western literatures in their entirety. Robert Zimmerman, a Northerner, is indeed fascinated by the Old South. And this very fact quite naturally explains the important place assigned in his work—and one that he readily acknowledges—to the Afro-American heritage. It is our intention here to bring to light another source of inspiration, the cultural tradition of Amerindians.

Such an approach may seem far-fetched in that, at first sight, Indians are strikingly absent from Dylan's corpus. Only on rare occasions are they mentioned explicitly: in the title of the instrumental "Wigwam,"¹ for example, or in the expression "broken treaties"² that is so hackneyed in the United States that it has become almost inoffensive. Another reference can be found in a line from the traditional "Shenandoah"³ (itself an Indian word) that Dylan arranged and recorded early on. This song speaks of the Mississippi River and contains the line "Indians camp along her border." But intuition

¹ From the album *Self Portrait*.

² From the song "Everything Is Broken" (*O Mercy*).

³ From the album *Down in the Groove*.

leads one to think that the first inhabitants of the New World are not really absent from Dylan's work, which here and there resounds with echoes of a latent Indian-ness.

Geography will help us to track down these buried references. Dylan frequently expresses his attachment to the northern regions of his origins. In a song entitled "California,"⁴ he admits that he misses the climate of the North where, if nothing else, four seasons prevail. Indeed, the theme of distinctly separate seasons is omnipresent in his work. These lines make seasonal changes explicitly meaningful:

If not for you / Winter would have no Spring //
("If Not For You," *New Morning*)

Similarly, Dylan writes of winter landscapes, of frozen lakes and blizzards⁵ and, of course, we find summer in at least two of his songs, "Summer Days"⁶ and "In the Summertime."⁷

These examples of Dylan's attachment to his native region may well be connected with Indian-ness as expressed through an ideal feminine figure of Indian origin. The long hair of the girl in the song "Girl of the North Country,"⁸ a penultimate tribute to Dylan's homeland, endows this mythical beauty with an undoubtedly Indian character. This is brought to bear all the more so as the description of her powerful beauty is limited to just this one detail. Such an attribution of Indian-ness to long hair, common in American folklore most generally, is made explicit by the singer-songwriter in "Summer Days,"⁹ a song written four decades later and in which Dylan sings "Got a long-haired woman, she got royal Indian blood." In this song, the poet's personal voice comes to the fore in his play on ambiguity, "royal" and "Indian" being incompatible. In addition to the widespread vision of long-haired Native American women as regal, the figure of the Indian mistress, if

⁴ From *Bringing It All Back Home*.

⁵ From "Never Say Goodbye," *Planet Waves*.

⁶ From the album *Love and Theft*.

⁷ From the album *Shot of Love*.

⁸ From the album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*.

⁹ From *Love and Theft*.

not wife, to the white man belongs to the folklore of Dylan's native region after having long been a reality (White 1991).

Such indications encourage us to explore the Dylan corpus further in search of themes and images used by the writer and which, in the light of my extensive studies of Indian myths, cultural systems, and structural relations, may very well have their roots in Amerindian folklore. Even though these contributions may be hybrid, in other words a synthesis of Native and European elements (Gruzinski 1999), I also consider it possible, in strict accordance with my own application of Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, that these elemental occurrences are the result of a logical transformation, above all a matter of reversal, whether total or partial (Désveaux 2001:66). That being the case, I would like to propose an initial inventory of thematic and elemental migrations between Indian tradition and Dylan's poetic imagination. So we begin:

Example 1

Soon as a man is born, you know the sparks begin to fly.
He gets wise in his own eyes and he's made to believe a lie.
("What Can I Do for You?" *Saved*)

At Big Trout Lake, in the far northwest of Ontario, the Ojibwa people I have lived with¹⁰ have spoken to me of a spark flying in the fire as revealing the presence—invisible of course—of a person being talked about; the spark is thus able to expose a liar or a slanderer. Moreover, according to my Ojibwa informants, a spark can also signal a death; the above lines thus provide a structural reversal of the Amerindian motif by the theme of birth.

Example 2

I bought my girl
A herd of moose.
("Lo and Behold," *Basement Tapes*)

The hunter providing for the woman seems to prove a universal theme. It should be noted that in the northern Algonquian area, the subject of hunting takes on a highly erotic charge (Tanner 1979; Désveaux 1988), which could very well have poured over into the folklore of the Northern regions of Dylan's home. Insight into structural transformations in folkloric transmission points to a distortion in the Dylan text, as well as a precision.

¹⁰ Our fieldwork at Big Trout Lake took place in the early 1980s (Désveaux 1988). Mentions of Ojibwa mythology will henceforth refer to the same work, unless otherwise indicated.

First the distortion: unlike caribou, moose do not live in herds; they are solitary animals. Nonetheless, for our informants, the word “moose” takes on an emotional and sexual connotation clearly captured in Dylan’s lines. *Nimosom*, “my little moose,” is a pleasant way of referring to a person with whom one is intimate, possibly outside of marriage.

Example 3

My woman got a face like a teddy bear.
 (“Honest With Me,” *Love and Theft*)

According to our Ojibwa informants, when one comes across a female bear in a forest and she reacts aggressively, the best way to get out of trouble is to find her genital organs and stroke them until she reaches orgasm. In this way, the female bear is equated with woman as sexual partner. Such behavioral relations correspond well with the Western attachment to the “teddy bear”—in other words, the prototype soft toy designed for children to use as a mother-substitute, indeed the idealized lover of one’s fantasies according to Freudian teaching.

Looking to other Amerindian traditions, however, more specifically those of the Pacific Northwest, one finds further mythical references to bears as portraying aggressive traits in women. Dell Hymes has written extensively on the omnipresent female character of Grizzly Woman, especially with reference to Victoria Howard’s Clackamas Chinook portrayal of her. He draws our attention, for example, to Howard’s Grizzly Woman figure in “Thunder Boy and his Mother” as the only figure in Clackamas mythology to have two faces, a phenomenon that he interprets as describing her sexual ambiguity. Hymes (1983) writes: “Animals in myth were a way of thinking about traits of character, motives of personality. The female bear was a way of thinking about the integration of feminine personality.” Hymes stresses the fundamental ambiguities of the Grizzly Woman figure as a strong metaphor of the unpredictable and deceitful behavior of woman in her relationship with man. Such an interpretation indeed sheds light on Dylan’s use of “teddy bear” with respect to the female lover in “Honest with Me.” Sexual ambiguity and female aggression are made explicit in the line “She’s tossin’ a baseball bat in the air” while *teddiness* is clearly a mask disguising more masculine traits.

Example 4

Of the two sisters, I loved the young.
 (“Ballad in Plain D,” *Another Side of Bob Dylan*)

In Amerindian mythologies, the theme of the two sisters is very frequently encountered in close association with that of the right choice. Here, at first glance, and in the framework of a Western conception, Dylan takes the easy way out, in both sexual and narrative terms, by showing his preference for the younger sister. But the line takes on quite another meaning if we read it in the light of Amerindian marriage customs. It is well known that for Indians, sororal polygyny¹¹ was, if not the norm, at least a structural possibility, always open and legitimate, a fact that can be seen quite clearly in kinship charts (Désveaux 2002) and in myths, notably those of the Ojibwa (De Josselin de Jong 1913:20-23). Love for the younger sister can thus be interpreted either as an ultimate attempt to choose despite forceful societal constraints—

For her parasite sister, I had no respect,
Bound by her boredom, her pride to protect.
Countless visions of the other she'd reflect,
As a crutch for her scenes and her society.

—or as a kind of right of access to feminine sexuality including its deliberate limitations, in the name of sentiment:

Through young summer's breeze, I stole her away
From her mother and sister, though close did they stay.
Each one of them suffering from the failures of their day,
With strings of guilt they tried hard to guide us.

Whatever the outcome, Dylan clearly attempts in this song to describe the lover's motives with respect to the difficulties imposed by social norms.

Example 5

Got ice water in my veins.
("Standing in the Doorway," *Time out of Mind*)

This ice-cold water flowing in the poet's veins recalls *Wiitiko* (*Windigo*, *Winnigo*), the monstrous creature that haunts the imaginative world of the Algonquins in the subarctic forests (Marano, 1982). This character was originally a human being, obliged by famine to eat human flesh. As a result, the monster could never give up his taste for flesh. This appallingly dangerous creature, banned from society ("I got nothing to go back to now"), wanders alone through the forest, ready to attack humans again. At Big Trout

¹¹ In the jargon of anthropology the expression means polygamy that involves sisters being married to a single man.

Lake, the Wiitiko has a heart of ice. We note that the Wiitigo figure made its way into American popular culture as *Wendigo*, one of the Marvel Comics villains fought by Hulk.¹² What is unique and striking in Dylan's lyric is that the image does not convey an expression of self-control or coolness, as in common usage of the term "a heart of ice." The singing persona is expressing his feelings of desperate alienation as an outcast. There is no detached coolness in these lines:

Don't know if I saw you, if I would kiss you or kill you
It probably wouldn't matter to you anyhow.

"Standing in the Doorway" is clearly an elaboration of an experience of ostracism, the impossibility of going back, as that endured by the mythical creature of Wiitigo. The line "Got ice water in my veins" expresses a reaction to a life of lonely erring ("I've been riding the midnight train"), namely the transformation of warm blood to ice.

Example 6

There is a bird's nest in your hair.
("Dead Man, Dead Man," *Shot of Love*)

It must be acknowledged that this image, which belongs to Dylan's Newborn Christian period, is especially appropriate in its given context of Christ's head crowned with thorns. However, a curious innovation is found in the fact that the crown of thorns is replaced by a bird's nest, thereby superimposing Christian and pagan registers. Dylan may also be playing on the common expression of "bird's nest hair," adding a popular dimension to this complex motif.

The complexity I wish to point to is discovered in the bird-nester as a central theme in Amerindian mythologies.¹³ This myth, which may be read in a multiplicity of transformations as transcribed from British Columbia to

¹² See http://www.geocities.com/marvel_monsters/wendigo/wendigo.html. It is entirely possible that Amerindian elements identified in Dylan's texts have been handed down through other uses made of them in such works of popular American culture.

¹³ In his four volumes of *Mythologiques*, Lévi-Strauss provides an intricate description of the profound unity of all Amerindian mythologies, from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego. Comparing narrative texts of individual tellings, he identifies reversals of whole plots, or in some cases segments of them, as they are passed on from one local mythology to the next. For him, structural units provide the common frame upon which all these plots are all built. The bird-nester myth serves as a guideline in his exploration of the mythology of the entire hemisphere (Lévi-Strauss 1971).

Brazil, portrays a hero, who must climb to the top of a tree or a mountain to collect eagles' feathers or eggs, as the victim of his father, his father-in-law, or his elder brother. The parallel of images, consciously or unconsciously created by Dylan, may be drawn out with the image of Christ who must also climb upwards onto the cross to fulfil his oath. Completing such a structural hybridization, we find the Amerindian hero reversing the situation to his advantage, just as Christ does, through death, thereby strengthening his position towards God and humanity.

Example 7a

Man gave names to all the animals,
In the beginning, long time ago.

(“Man Gave Names to All the Animals,” *Slow Train Coming*)

In the foregoing lyrics, we find ourselves again in the realm of religious connotation. These two lines clearly refer to a passage from the Old Testament: “And Adam gave name to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air and to every beast of the field” (Genesis 2:20). Dylan's rephrasing of the Biblical text by replacing the Hebrew character with the more general “man,” brings to bear, again consciously or unconsciously, Lévi-Strauss's teaching regarding the capacity of the human mind to classify, hence name, each natural entity. Such generalization, combined with other elements, brings the naming phenomenon as described in the Dylan text closer to an Amerindian ontogenesis. In effect, we discover the transformation of a classical theme in Amerindian mythologies—that of the procession of the animals—whose function, as demonstrated by Lévi-Strauss, was to set out, by naming them, the different animal species. The fact that humans give names to animals is an indication of their sole superiority over them. In the same spirit, and again keeping in mind the aetiological description of animal traits commonly found in Amerindian mythologies, the following lines, in which the different kinds of animals are defined by their attributes, whether in terms of habitat, locomotion, or means of defence may be quoted:

Example 7b

I can drink like a fish,
I can crawl like a snake,
I can bite like a turkey,
I can slam like a drake.

(“Please, Mrs Henry,” *Basement Tapes*)

Dylan once again provides a cross-over of two traditional views of natural phenomenon, the Western one as represented by Biblical scripture and the

Amerindian one, each serving as a subtext for the other, each strengthening the other. Indeed, both worldviews are mutually perpetuated through Dylan's perception of the animal kingdom.

It is probably on *Under the Red Sky* that this cultural interplay reveals itself most creatively, the entire process being strengthened by Dylan's inclination to exploit cosmological designs for deeper ontological as well as metaphysical meaning. Two songs deserve special attention here for their reference to man's relation to the sun. The first one is "2 by 2." A take-off on the popular children's song "One Little, Two Little, Three Little Indians," providing a formal reference to Indian-ness, one also finds, at the beginning of the lyric, a striking use of a motif that recurs frequently in Amerindian mythology:

Example 8

One by one, they followed the sun.
("2 x 2," *Under the Red Sky*)

In Northern Algonquian versions of the myth (Savard 1985; Désveaux 1988:63-65), one tells of how a trickster comes across a wide path in the bush. Unable to identify the prints, he follows them for a while but to no avail. He thus decides to set a snare on the path. He discovers that the path is that of the Sun when, the next morning, daylight does not come: the sun has been trapped in the snare. In an effort to remedy the situation, the trickster sends animals, one after another in a sort of procession, along the path toward where he put the snare. One by one, all but the last of them fail to free the sun from the snare due to the fact that, at a certain point along the trail, their fur is burnt by the blaze of the sun. The last animal to be called upon is the mouse, who is able to dig a hole and thus approach the sun without being burnt. He is able to undo the snare very quickly and therefore release the light-giving celestial body. This narrative context finds much resonance in another of Dylan's songs:¹⁴

Example 9

Gon' walk on down that dirt road 'til I'm right beside the sun
Gon' walk on down until I'm right beside the sun
I'm gonna have to put up a barrier to keep myself away from everyone.
("Dirt Road Blues," *Time out of Mind*)

It is interesting that whereas the mouse strives to get close to the sun for the benefit of all, Dylan's adventure is carried out for individual salvation.

¹⁴ I thank Catharine Mason for having drawn my attention to these two passages.

While the mouse saves humanity from darkness, the singing persona of "Dirt Road Blues" stands beside the sun, seeking a barrier to protect himself from society. The reversal of the Amerindian context found in Dylan's walk towards the sun makes it no less pertinent to Amerindian mythology scholars. First, Dylan's relation to the sun as a shield from society is not to be perceived as a desirable one. These lines from "Standing in the Doorway" suggest that the reversal may be a dialectical inversion of cosmic and human values:

You left me standing in the doorway crying
In the dark land of the sun.

Such individual isolation, even when experienced in the light of the sun, yields darkness. It becomes clear, in any case, that in both Dylan's and the Algonquian version of movement towards the sun, the path leading to this powerful celestial body relates an individual's relationship to society. Moreover, both versions provide a parallel description of cosmological forces in the well-being of humanity.

Dylan's fascination with cosmological schemes is evident in his numerous mentions of both the sun (50 to be counted) and the moon (36). The moon, generally associated with the color red, appears in connection with complex female figures. A close reading of the song "Under the Red Sky" (from the album of the same name) should provide support for this argument. At first glance this song clearly issues from European folklore. Its structural framing seems to be taken from the tale of Hansel and Gretel in its numerous, widespread versions. The words of the bridge come straight from an old English children's song.¹⁵ I am nonetheless convinced that gleaning the text for Amerindian elements will prove worthwhile. It is first important to point out that the motif itself of a boy and girl, being explicitly or not brother and sister, is quasi-universal. The working hypothesis to be demonstrated here is that the fusion of two traditions, the European and the Amerindian one, of parallel motifs, results in cultural manifestations that are structurally grounded and not merely blended. Such an analysis may be found in the last part of *Histoire du Lynx* (1991), in which Lévi-Strauss demonstrates the same type of process in converging traditions of French folktales imported by the *coureurs des bois* and the mythologies of Plateau Indians. Structural analysis of "Under the Red Sky" in light of such demonstrations is all the more

¹⁵ "There was a man lived in the moon, / lived in the moon, lived in the moon, / There was a man lived in the moon." I would like to thank Richard Thomas for having drawn my attention to this song.

interesting as its dynamic images mark the crossroads of two great Amerindian mythemes.

Example 10

There was a little boy and there was a little girl
And they lived in an alley under the red sky.

In a widespread Ojibwa tale (Désveaux 1988:69-70), a man suspects his wife of adultery with a snake from the underworld. He decides to go out into the underworld to reveal her disloyalty. Conscious of the danger attached to his venture, indeed knowing that his fate is sealed, he warns his two children: “When the sky in the west is red, I shall be dead.” A tale of orphans living under a red sky seems more than a coincidental occurrence in the Dylan corpus when one discovers that the themes of the red sky and clouds of blood are indeed recurrent in Dylan’s poetry. Here is just one example:

Example 11

Well, the road is rocky and the hillside’s mud,
Up over my head nothing but clouds of blood.
(“Cold Irons Bound,” *Time Out of Time*)

The Ojibwa storyteller goes on to tell how the children will have to run away from their mother, who is transformed into a rolling head during a fight in which the father dies.¹⁶ We have here a thematic element—the rolling head—that is omnipresent in indigenous America.¹⁷ What’s more, the fact that the little boy and the little girl (Is she his sister? She most probably is.) live in an alley suggests that their fate is sealed, and specialists agree that destiny is the distinctive feature of mythical heroes. The fate of the little boy in Dylan’s “Under the Red Sky” draws us even closer to Amerindian myth origins as seen in what follows:

Example 12

There was an old man and he lived in the moon.

¹⁶ The occurrence of the red sky motif is common not only in myth tellings. Frances Densmore collected the lyrics of an old Ojibwa song entitled “The-Woman-of-the-Red-Sky” that was sung in praise of a woman for going to war with her husband (Cronyn 1934:21).

¹⁷ Such a chase is likewise widely manifest in popular American culture today. It can be seen, for instance, in Spielberg’s first *Indiana Jones*. Setting aside all other considerations, every movie house car chase—and the last part of practically every Hollywood crime film is punctuated with such an event—is an avatar of this mytheme.

Here we find the theme, in reverse, of the Ojibwa version of another pan-American myth, which deals with a couple of orphans, in effect a boy and a girl. In the Ojibwa story, the boy acquires the status of a demiurge by establishing all the different periodicities that give rhythm to human life, including the a-periodicity known in death, and ends up transformed into moon-spots. The first two verses of the song seem like a variation on the theme, with which Dylan is constantly playing around. In effect, the poet introduces a concentration of time ("someday") absent from the Indian versions (well-known to specialists as well as to Amerindians familiar with their literary traditions). The old man in the moon inscribed in the Dylan text embodies the figure, remodeled, as it were, of the little boy from the Ojibwa story who is destined to become a demiurge before his sister's gaze, both protective and filled with wonder, leading us to yet another leakage of Amerindian influences into Dylan's work:

Example 13

Someday, little girl, everything for you gonna be new.

The next line, which mentions a diamond and a shoe, immediately recalls the European treatment of the Cinderella theme, which also emerges from an English nursery rhyme called "Little Girl and the Queen."¹⁸ European overtones are likewise found in the following lines as they may refer to Hansel and Gretel:

Let the wind blow low, let the wind blow high,
One day the little boy and the little girl were both baked in a pie.

Obviously well-grounded in European literary references, these lines nonetheless contain underlying Amerindian echoes. The American pie is very much like the North American bannock, a sort of round loaf of leavened bread cooked in the open air, compared to the sun by my informants at Big Trout Lake. In the same vein, but from a broader American perspective, we are reminded of the myth of a couple composed of brother and sister, which exists in countless versions from Alaska to Amazonia. These versions liken the couple to the Greek Dioscuri, in other words to the Sun and Moon, and relate their incestuous love and especially its physical consummation as producing the eclipse. Two things ensue from this event: menstruation, which corresponds to the lunar cycle, and the spots on the moon at night that reflect

¹⁸ Richard Thomas, personal communication.

the bleeding emblematic of the female condition. In “It’s Alright, Ma, (I’m Only Bleeding),”¹⁹ Dylan was already flirting with this theme:

Example 14

The handmade blade, the child’s balloon
Eclipses both the sun and moon.

Here the child’s balloon functions perfectly in its role: it prefigures the image of the moon and its spots. The metaphorical value of the verb “eclipses” becomes a literal acceptance. As for the expression “the handmade blade,” we are tempted to put forward an interpretation that may seem rather risqué. Beyond the imagery of a primitive tool, which would refer back to the Indian civilizations as precursors of Euro-American ones, it can also be seen, through a kind of overlapping process, as a suggestion of incest, connected with male masturbation.

Let us, again, return to “Under the Red Sky” to draw attention to the fact that its demiurgic dimension is suddenly interrupted in the last verse. The song enters a regressive phase confirmed by the mutation of “old man” into simply “man”:

One day the man in the moon went home and the river went dry

“The river went dry” reflects, of course, an opposing view to that found in the well-known expression “as long as the rivers flow,” a guarantee of the perpetuation of the world according to the traditional saying ascribed by Americans to Indians. In fact, what Dylan is talking about is a sort of heating-up, synonymous with drying-up, but also with the abolition of normal periodicity based on lunar, in other words monthly, cycles. The introduction in a minor key of another theme from Amerindian mythology, that of the freeing of birds in summer (“let the birds sing, let the birds fly”) suggests that the man leaves the moon to return home on a summer’s day.

Beneath the outward appearance of a simple effacing process, what we really find is the total and dramatic breakdown of all the efforts made by mythological heroes to set up the world and its temporalities. The fact that these heroes were children straightaway introduces into Dylan’s lines the prospect of their comparative powerlessness, which is paradoxical for them. Amerindian mythologies always refer to the setting up of the world and its temporalities. Here Dylan uses the force of conviction and the constituent power of all mythic discourse to turn it round on itself. The drying-up of the

¹⁹ From *Bringing It All Back Home*.

river takes on the dimension of a cataclysm. The ending of *Under the Red Sky* therefore describes a tragic fatality, which recalls the spirit breathing through the poetry of Racine.

Indeed, as in Racine's work, this potential cosmic disturbance reflects the difficult relations established between men and women by a superior willpower. As we have just seen, "Under the Red Sky" is an ultimate expression of Indian-ness in Dylan's use of the lunar paradigm by attaching it to that core combination of elements in Indian mythology, which brings together the phenomenon of menstruation and the couple composed of brother and sister,²⁰ both as the origin of differentiation between the sexes and as the impossibility of going beyond it, except in death. In Dylan's songs, the moon is almost always red or glowing red. We know that the cyclic character of female sexuality directly relates to fertility. Beyond the question of whether or not a partner is available, it plunges the man into an ontological bewilderment as regards his heritage. Moreover, for Indians, as I have shown elsewhere, the respective perspectives of procreation by the sexes by no means coincide (Désveaux 2001:159-61). Dylan seems to intuitively adhere to this lesson. The whole of the work (the biography aside) of the author of "All Along the Watchtower" and "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" testifies to a position out of step with the female values of reproduction as expressed by our societies, while paternity is held in suspension in his work.

Despite Richard Thomas' overestimation of Anglo-Saxon written literary influences in Dylan's work, there is no doubt that the special place occupied by Dylan in the pantheon of American popular music is due to the fact that he is one of the rare artists, perhaps even the only one, to have built a lasting bridge linking popular and scholarly cultures. Without embarking on a detailed discussion of the vast amount of literature on the subject, we shall keep in mind one thing that has generally been demonstrated: popular culture is based on orality, scholarly culture on the written word. With this as a starting point, we shall now examine the possible channels through which Dylan has been exposed to the Amerindian influences demonstrated above.

A first hypothesis leads us to envisage a certain Robert Zimmerman, alias Bob Dylan, pushing open the door of some public or private library, or some bookshop, coming across books containing transcriptions of Amerindian stories and reading them. He also consults monographs written by professional ethnographers. Here we are placing ourselves in the register of scholarly culture. The *Chronicles* provide evidence that justifies such a vision (Dylan 2004:35-39): Dylan describes his formative years in New York

²⁰ We recall, of course, the poignant "Oh, Sister."

as those of a voracious reader, highly eclectic in his tastes. Everything leads us to believe that he has never stopped reading all his life.

Without seeking to minimize the contribution made by the scholarly tradition to the singular cocktail of elements that comprise Dylan's poetry, we wonder, however, whether it may not be more fruitful to look more deeply into the reasons for this influence of Amerindian folklore. We must consider the powerful attraction exerted on Dylan by popular culture, or rather cultures.²¹ With such a perspective in mind, we must also return to Duluth and to Hibbing and examine a local culture impregnated with Indian influences of which, consciously or not, he became the inheritor and interpreter. Dylan was born and raised in a region where a strong Amerindian presence still prevails today. A great many reservations are scattered around Duluth, on both the American and the Canadian sides of the border. From the point of view of a possible native heritage, whose depths remain to be probed, we must keep in mind that the region also holds a strategic character, since it is a point of transition between the wooded areas and the Great Plains, and between the traditional Ojibwa territories and those of the Sioux.²² Moreover, it is a region where relations between Indians and Europeans lasted for more than two hundred years, from the seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, in other words during the whole of that period in history formerly described by Lévi-Strauss as Conradian, with reference to the author of *Heart of Darkness*. The French anthropologist was referring to a period during which interactivity between Natives and Whites took place from day to day, independently of the future historical situation unknown to them at the time, that is, when one side would definitively dominate the other, a situation of which we are aware only in hindsight (Lévi-Strauss 1986).²³ The fact that

²¹ A passage from *Chronicles, Volume One* throws light on Dylan's fascination with oral culture as a source of knowledge. It recounts his meeting with Sun Pie (for us an especially meaningful name), who apparently runs a small country gas station near Houma, in Louisiana. Their conversation touches particularly on Indians and their Asian origins (203-09). But here again the borderlines between categories of knowledge are somewhat hazy, since on certain points, notably the Indians' conception of the nature of war, Sun Pie shows a range of reference worthy of that of an experienced anthropologist.

²² In a filmed interview well known to specialists, Dylan claims to have a Sioux uncle. Spitz asserts that it's a built-up story (1989:17). True or untrue, in any case it's a symptom.

²³ "We too often neglect a period in history the length of which, according to the regions of the world, varies by a few decades or a few centuries, during which native cultures and those of their invaders or colonizers have cohabited, forming relations

both sides interacted daily implies that they shared, in part at least, their respective cultures. Later, admittedly, it was highly probable that those designated by history as the conquerors would be led to reject this period from their own history and to expurgate their cultural heritage. Nonetheless, traces of it would always remain.

If this were the case, the Dylan corpus would simply be a pointer, an indication of a vast field of research into the content and contours of these local cultures, a field that clearly remains to be explored. For, contrary to generally accepted ideas—especially here in Europe, it must be added—American popular culture is not homogeneous in its geographical distribution or practice. The present study seems to reach back through Dylan's work to the strata of culture from his childhood years, that part of his regional culture that is based on Amerindian influences. In this sense the approach I have taken resembles that of Elaine Jahner, who describes a phenomenon that she calls "cognitive style" and identifies in the neighboring region of the Great Plains. The objective thus becomes one of identifying those factors of an oral tradition, produced over a long, composite period, that shape the cultural elements of that tradition. For it is just such factors that acquire a structuring function that can allow us to understand the way in which a fairly widespread community portrays the world (Jahner 2004:1).

For Dylan specialists, however, the mystery remains as to why there is so little claim to this Amerindian heritage and why it is still an obscure facet of his work. This study puts forward a possible lead that calls for further investigation (or, if convincing arguments to the contrary are found, abandonment): the Amerindian substratum identified in select texts from the Dylan corpus may well be the vector of expression for the most intimate part of the poet's creativity, that is, his problematic view of biological fertility. After all, Dylan's personal ideas on the subject might be nearer to those of Amerindians than to those of Western cultures—namely that paternity is not a question of genetic transmission, but of the taming and adoption of a being biologically produced by a woman, with whom, in return, the status of the child is in a perpetual process of negotiation (Désveaux 2001:158-60).

Keeping all of this in mind, let us now pay another visit to my Indian friends. In the summer of 2005, I went back to Big Trout Lake to visit my

which were sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile, and when the fate of the former group was not yet definitively sealed. Such was the case for the relations between Algonquins and Whites from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. It is that period, which we could call 'Conradian,' as it so greatly resembled the one that Conrad knew and described later beneath other skies, that the participants in the Algonquian Conferences bring to life again with an erudition put to use in the service of a tireless curiosity." (Trans. by Valerie Burling).

Ojibwa friends. Standing in front of the worn plywood building at the tiny airport, Laurence Childforever recognized me at first glance. He beckoned to me and offered to take me into “town” in his brother-in-law’s pick-up truck. I eagerly accepted and climbed into the vehicle just as the local radio was quietly playing the chorus of Dylan’s “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door.” I took the liberty of turning up the volume and discovered that it was not the original version but one by a native singer, a woman who quite possibly belongs to one of the great many Pentecostal churches on the Indian reservations in the North. Over the years the song has become a standard there. The Indians have appropriated it, unless of course one should argue that it represents a re-appropriation. Indeed, in Amerindian myths, knocks on a tree (one, for example, which the bird-nester climbs) always prefigure death. In the America of today, eschatologies are still meeting and mingling; therein, perhaps, lies the beauty of this continent.

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