

## **“The Low Hum in Syllables and Meters”: Blues Poetics in Bob Dylan’s Verbal Art**

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It may seem to be stating the obvious when pointing to the fact that Bob Dylan’s songs carry the voices of master blues singers. Vocal texture and color, singing behind the beat, and the use of twelve-bar rhythms might very well prove sufficient indicators for qualifying Dylan as a blues musician. Unfortunately, however, the elaborate and fascinating details of blues verbal artistry continue to remain a mystery to many scholars, as well as many musicians themselves. In this paper, we will take a closer look at the poetics of traditional blues lyrics within the particular context of their strong influence on Dylan’s songwriting. In doing so, we will focus on language use. Our goal is a deeper understanding of tradition, transmission, and personal creativity.

By poetics, I mean that function of language that serves to enhance, embellish, and in any way focus the attention of listeners (or readers) on what could be called the “message for the sake of the message.” This definition is a direct borrowing from Roman Jakobson’s description (1987:62-94) of the interworkings of poetics in all speech genres, from everyday forms to the most complex and calculated of written poetics. Ethnopoetics,<sup>1</sup> which has been used most widely to treat Native American oral traditions, have contributed to the knowledge that poetic structures, motifs, and devices are culture-specific. Versification, narrative technique, sound patterns, metaphors, symbolic matrices, imagery, characterization, grammar use and all other such techniques derive from cultural uses of the

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<sup>1</sup> The leading figures of ethnopoetic approaches to verse structures and stylistic form are Dell Hymes (1981, 2003) and Dennis Tedlock (1983). Hymes’s work applies philological methods in his studies of rhetorical and poetic structures, while Tedlock takes his lead from sound matrices (rhythm, pauses, intonation, volume) and discursive strategies in identifying poetic ways of creating meaning.

specific language that serves as medium for the art form. This principle of interpretation was first espoused by Edward Sapir (1921:225), who demonstrated that “every language is itself a collective art of expression.”

Dell Hymes<sup>2</sup> furthered the work of Jakobson and Sapir in his pioneering description of speech styles as having both collective and individual import. By focusing on style as a descriptive basis for language (as opposed to grammar in the long-standing tradition of linguistics), Hymes leads us to more applicable insights into the interdependence of content and form (and their corresponding referential and poetic functions) in verbal expression. He provides concepts and methods for identifying stylistic features as primary integers in the social construction of meaning. Hymes’s work allows for a wide-reaching application of Jakobson’s insights into poetics. In the following example, Jakobson (1987:70) leads us to consider how poetics operates in everyday life:

A girl used to talk about “the horrible Harry.” “Why horrible?” “Because I hate him.” “But why not *dreadful, terrible, frightful, disgusting?*” “I don’t know why, but *horrible* fits him better.” Without realizing it, she clung to the poetic device of paronomasia.

Hymes’s<sup>3</sup> intricate demonstrations of stylistic operations (including verse structure) in a number of spoken languages<sup>4</sup> also provide a basis for dealing with personal choices in individual speech.

Style is not only a matter of features other than referential, or of the selective use of features of both kinds; it also has to do with the selective creation of new materials and letting go of the old. As languages change, they do not change wholly randomly, or lose structure in accordance with the second law of thermodynamics. They remain one relatively consistent set of realizations of the possibilities of language, rather than another. And they have the character they do in this regard partly because of choices by users. It is possible to consider some kinds of change, including sound change, coming about in part because of social meaning associated with features, more prestigious variants replacing less prestigious ones. It is possible to consider some changes as coming about in response to internal

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<sup>2</sup> Taken from Hymes 1981. See also Hymes 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Hymes’s assertions, within the context of their use in this essay, appear in Bauman and Sherzer 1974:449.

<sup>4</sup> English, Greek, Portuguese, Hopi, several varieties of Chinook, and several varieties of Salish are just a few of the languages in which Hymes has identified verse form in oral narratives. For a complete list, see Appendix 3 in Hymes 2003.

imbalances and pressures, and to cumulative drifts which make some avenues of change far more tractable than others. But some changes cannot be understood except as changes over time in what users of the language find it most desirable or essential to say.

Music lyrics provide a privileged use of verbal style as their primary purpose is to fit the music. We find an abundant number of lyrical styles in the English language alone. Blues music represents a highly selective use of verbal expression, as noted in the above quote, forming a “relatively consistent set of realizations of the possibilities of [the English] language.” In the following discussion, we will study some of the stylistic features of blues lyrics as they have been adopted by Dylan in some of his most traditional work (focusing specifically on his compositions in the AAB song form), and as they have helped to shape some of his most original work. I will argue that, for Dylan and many users of American English, blues artistry has been not only a choice of a more “prestigious variant,” but an art form allowing for a real sense of what is “most desirable and essential to say.”

### **Dylan, Blues Arranger and Innovator**

In the early 1990s, thirty years into a successful songwriting and performance career, Dylan released two CDs of his own arrangements and recordings of traditional music. These recordings are, to my mind, another version of Dylan's *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965), rendering valuable sources of inspiration in musical technique, poetic frameworks and human life narratives. In the liner notes to the album *World Gone Wrong*, the collection of particular interest to us here, Dylan shares with us the ways in which the lives and themes of his musical masters have touched him. In performing the songs composed and/or handed down by the musicians he honors, the artist passes down stories of human struggle and deep emotion as narrated by the song lyric.<sup>5</sup> It is clear to ethnopoeticians and other folklorists that oral transmission of traditional narratives is far from being a detached, impersonal investment. Performance of traditional lyrics indeed requires a

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<sup>5</sup> I have been using the term “lyric” to mean the words to a song in unfixed form. For the purposes of this paper, this definition will contrast with “text,” which will refer to the transcribable performed version of a lyric. Inasmuch as variations exist from performance to performance, once transcribed, they can be studied as personal interpretations of the lyric.

personal interpretation of the subject matter disclosed. Dylan (1990: liner notes) informs his listeners:

“Broke Down Engine” is a Blind Willie McTell masterpiece. It’s about trains, mystery on the rails—the train of love, the train that carried my girl from town—the Southern Pacific, Baltimore & Ohio, whatever—it’s about variations of human longing—the low hum in meters and syllables. It’s about dupes of commerce & politics colliding on tracks, not being pushed around by ordinary standards. It’s about revivals, getting a new lease on life, not just posing there—paint chipped and flaked, mattress bare, single bulb swinging above the bed. It’s about Ambiguity, the fortunes of the privileged elite, flood control—watching the red dawn not bothering to dress.

Conscious of the cultural, social, political, and symbolic references anchoring this song in social life—references that cut across temporal barriers by pulling from deep-set human motives—Dylan reshapes the contours and inner impulses of the piece, though very subtly, to allow for the emergence of his personal voice. It is indeed his loyalty to the original “score” and “text,” as recorded by Willie McTell in the ‘30s, that makes this work an interesting springboard for a study of Dylan’s mastery of—and innovations in—blues poetics.

### **Songfulness**

On the surface, one may describe McTell’s lyrics<sup>6</sup> as a collection of loosely connected sentiments, events, and discourses. However, a number of elements serve to establish balance and coherence throughout. We note first the use of repetition that creates a sound effect of symmetry and completion. A liberal use of anaphora along with the regular syllabification of musically measured rhythms provides a familiarity of sound that satisfies the ear as well as satisfying that part of the human mind that would ordinarily look to language for meaning. The listener will not necessarily contemplate the words and lines for metaphoric secrets and referential content, as Dylan has provided in his liner notes. However, she will take pleasure in what musicologist Lawrence Kramer (1999:303-319) has called the “songfulness” of the lyric, the satisfaction of hearing language sung without seeking to decode the message. The significant role that songfulness plays in the social

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<sup>6</sup> This study is based on McTell’s 1933 recording of “Broke Down Engine.” See references.

construction of meaning can be better understood when one considers the fact that the ear will quickly pick up on a lyric that is not well-constructed and instinctively revolt against unbalanced, a-rhythmic, and otherwise unpoetic texts. In other words, language—in itself, without reference—is meaningful to the listener.

The specificity of blues songfulness can be easily grasped by observing audience response in the performance arena. In many instances, nothing more than a few syncopated drum beats or bass guitar notes will interpellate<sup>7</sup> listeners into the realm of blues experience in which the mind and body yield entirely to the effect of the music. A number of songwriters have reflected upon both the existential and universal impact of “bluesfulness” in metatextual commentary reflecting on the song form itself. Such metalepsis is, of course, an evolution of the common use of the term “blues” in traditional songs. Adding to a vast corpus of skillful arrangements of blues masterpieces, Dylan provides provocative insights into contemporary applications of traditional blues messages. In “Sitting on a Barbed Wire Fence” (1991), he contemplates condescending views of blues music put forth by commentators unfamiliar with a blues experience:

Of course, you're gonna think this song is a riff /  
I know you're gonna think this song is just a riff /  
Unless you've been inside a tunnel /  
And fell down 69-70 feet over a barbed-wire fence . . .

I would be remiss not to mention here Dylan's reference to blues tradition and authenticity in his beautiful tribute to his master (1991): “No one sings

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<sup>7</sup> By “interpellation,” I refer specifically to Jean-Jacques Lecercle's development (1999) of the Althusserian term that describes the process of hailing individuals into subjects. This social process is “an extraordinary example,” Lecercle tells us, “of the performative power of language.” Reflecting upon Althusser's classic example of a police officer hailing someone in the street with his whistle, Lecercle (1999:156) describes the (social) effect: “the sense of guilt which is the psychological correlate of subjectification is so diffuse that *everyone* turns round (which suggests that there is overkill in interpellation: the paradox is that interpellation is both individual—it concerns *this* subject—and collective; the utterance potentially addresses everyone, but that is precisely what language allows the speaker, through metalepsis, to do.” Like the police whistle, songs enact public interpellation, calling individuals—both fictional, often archetypal characters and through them, listeners—into subjects. This process as Althusser described it derives from ideological forces and power struggles. Dylan seems conscious of this process as we will see in the explication of “10,000 Men” below. The term is useful to us in a more general way in that it allows us to better focus on the social dynamics of song performance.

the blues like Blind Willie McTell.” In the final part of this paper, we will see how Dylan manipulates poetic form in and of itself to induce (blues) meaning.

### Grammar Deviations

A number of deviations from Standard English grammar have become accepted and recognized by speakers as stylistic forms of speech due to their degree of expressivity. Indeed, what is often perceived of as “bad” or ungrammatical English can be formulaic and poetic. No one could deny, for example, the emphatic expression vehicled by double negation (present in other English varieties as well). The triple negation found in American Southern dialects allows, not so uncommonly, for even greater exclamatory effect: Ain’t nobody here got no idea what I’m talking about?!

The “ain’t . . . no” formula is of particular interest in the overall structure of Dylan’s arrangement of “Broke Down Engine.” In effect, of the three uses, the first and third frame the text, occurring in the first and last verses. The singer-songwriter plays metatextual tribute to the blues master by repeating the title of his song in the line “Feel like a broke down engine” followed by the “ain’t . . . no” formula in these two verses. The final verse replaces the initial “ain’t got no drivin’ wheel” with “ain’t got no whistle or bell.” This framing device creates structural balance and strengthens the effect of the double negation as it expresses the ultimate state of absolute loss of one’s self. Such ultimateness is further reinforced by use of the formula in the penultimate verse, creating a culminating effect of a symbolist nature rather than a narrative one. Repetition adds to this effect: in both verses the complete phrase is “ain’t got no” and both interpellate the female lover.

The dropping of auxiliaries in the use of the perfective aspect (for example, “You seen my cat?” as opposed to “Have you seen my cat?”) provides another stylistic grammar deviation common in Southern dialects. In Standard English, the perfective form, as it relates the accomplishment of an act, employs the auxiliary “have” as if to indicate that one presently *has* (holds/carries/owns) a particular experience. The dropping of the auxiliary may have derived from phonological (rhythmic) structuration of verbal speech or from mere syntactic simplification. The result, at any rate, seems to be one of a heightened effect of the achieved action without locating it in time and space. McTell’s song line, “You been down and lonesome,” which reduces the standard form “have been” to its past participle “been,” places the action—or in this case, the state of “being”—in the forefront. The

dropping of the auxiliary places the experience in a more direct relation to the acting subject. It is clearly not the same as if one were to say “you are down and lonesome,” which provides a general description of the subject’s condition. “You been,” I would argue, combines or even merges the doer, the doing, and the having done into a definitive operation by which the action or the experience illustrates its doer.

If we compare the retention of the auxiliary “have” in the blues song “You’ve Been in Love Too Long,” recorded by Bonnie Raitt (1979), we can see/hear the difference of effects. The Paul/Stevenson/Hunter-authored lyrics, as performed by Raitt, focuses our attention on the time-measured experience of the acting subject, clearly highlighting the result of that experience: “You’re a fool for your baby.” It is as if the singer were saying “look at yourself, it’s time to move on.” In fact, “You been in love too long,” to my Southern ear, sounds stylistically awkward and I would suggest that this is due to the lack of a temporal marker needed to complete the sense of “too long.” “You been” seems, in this way, to express fatality, outside of time—let’s say a blues destiny—while “you have been,” which marks grammatical tense in the auxiliary, expresses a present state of being, linking it to the past and opening it up to the future.<sup>8</sup>

### **Informal Register**

Incomplete sentences, the dropping of the first person pronoun, an abundant use of the second person “you,” and an abundant use of the “-ing” verbal form in blues lyrics are markers of a heightened interpersonal exchange and serve to create an atmosphere of intimacy both in the narrative and in the performance arena. These grammatical devices derive from spoken English and clearly denote an informal register in which barriers between speaker and listener(s) dissolve. In formal speech as well as in writing, syntactic structures adhering to the rigorous rules of subject/predicate conjugation allow for clarity of subject matters that are transmitted across mediatized bridges. Rigorous syntax is indeed necessary for clear

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<sup>8</sup> This Ø (a common indicator in linguistics signifying the absence of a first person pronoun) perfective form, common to Southern American English, whether of spontaneous origin or an adoption from white colonialists, has not attracted the attention it deserves from linguists (probably due to grammatical purism). Further investigation should also include a description of the use of double participles in which “do” seems to function as an auxiliary. In the McTell text at hand, we find “I done got broke” and “I done pawned my pistol.” The participled “do” clearly highlights the *doing* as a completed act. The expression “it’s a done deal” is surely a derivative of this grammatical evolution.

communication in situations in which the speaker's references are not so readily available to the listener(s). Diction, definition, and illustration are rhetorical devices practiced by orators and diplomats in an effort to communicate across barriers, whether they be political, cultural, or epistemological.

By contrast, incomplete sentence structures are used by interlocutors of certain languages who share similar references, ways of thinking, and codes of communication. It is common, for example, in both American and French conversation for a listener to complete the sentence of an initial speaker thereby confirming reception and understanding of (and in many cases agreement with) the idea transmitted. We find in such cases a type of syntactic and cognitive interplay that is obviously not practiced in formal settings. These observations allow us to perceive the "broken" sentence structure of blues and other American folk music genres as a stylistic design of the informal registers of spoken language. It should also be pointed out that the informal register of blues poetics is in keeping with the rules of prosody that have likewise emerged through speaking.

The absence of the first person pronoun "I" in American southern English is, to my knowledge, a largely stylistic effect often found only in song. I have known no instance in spoken English of a speaker deleting this pronoun other than in a veritable "breakthrough into performance."<sup>9</sup> It is nonetheless common in American genres of folk music, especially the blues, and allows for a sense of closeness to the speaker that coincides well with the immediacy of the singing voice. Interestingly, Dylan's version of "Broke Down Engine" has 17 instances of Ø I (absence of) while McTell's version has only six. Elaborate rhetorical use of this device for the contemporary artist can be studied in "Meet Me in the Morning," "Gonna Change My Way of Thinkin'" and "Dirt Road Blues," all composed in AAB form.

As for the abundant use of second person "you," Dylan's text is more in keeping with that of McTell's. In both cases, the singer interpellates three players in the following order: listeners – beloved – Lord – beloved. Dylan's lyric deviates from that of his blues master only in the addition of a third interpellation of the beloved. Attentive listeners to Dylan's work are familiar with the many innovations the artist has made in his use of player

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<sup>9</sup> The notion "breakthrough into performance" reflects a discourse phenomenon identified by Dell Hymes (1981) in which speakers step unexpectedly out of a usual, everyday use of language into skilled verbal expression for the sake of its effect. Hymes (1981:81) writes: "The concern is with performance, not as something mechanical or inferior, as in some linguistic discussion, but with performance as creative, realized, achieved, even transcendent of the ordinary course of events."

interpellation. In short, these two pronominal devices—deletion of the first person pronoun and interpellation—clearly establish a subjective mode of expression and enhance the emphatic function of language by colorful player interaction. Such subjectivity and intersubjectivity become an integral part of the informal register of the song discourse.

The close-up point of view that is expressed in the verbal ending “–ing” also adds to the rich design of intimate association between singer and listener in “Broke Down Engine.” Grammarians have always pointed to the continuous aspect of the “–ing” form. The description of an event as it is carried out derives from a subjective view of the event and gives interlocutors a feeling of lived experience. It is common for English speakers to expose actions that have an effect on their sentimental landscape by using *be + –ing*. “His failure to respond to my love is torturing me” discloses an ongoing pain in a way that invites the listener to observe closely. “His failure to respond to my love tortures me” states a fact and provides a global view of the tortures of unrequited love in a way that allows for more objective distance. “Ah, you’ll get over it,” one may spontaneously reply to the second example, using the simple present, whereas the example employing the continuous present incites a more sympathetic, far less detached view of the event.<sup>10</sup>

McTell exploits this grammatical device three times in “Broke Down Engine.” The first two involve the description of first person actions creating an intimate feel for the singer’s desperate situation: “Been shooting craps and gamblin’” (verse 3) and “I ain’t crying for no religion” (verse 4). The song climaxes with an elaborate use of the “–ing” form in the final verse (6). In effect, the continuous aspect is used elaborately in the unfolding of an entire love narrative “right before our eyes”:

Don’t you hear me, baby, knockin’ on your door?  
 Don’t you hear your daddy, mama, knockin’ on your door?  
 Can’t I get out singing, living, tapping ‘n flatting, slip right across your floor

Dylan adopts and modifies the pattern of the three instances of the “–ing” form found in McTell’s 1933 text. His arrangement maintains the sequence of the two lines employing the verb form followed by a love narrative. His narrative contains, however, several modifications:

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<sup>10</sup> This subjective effect of the verbal form *be + –ing* is well illustrated by the film *The Truman Show* in which Truman’s life may be viewed in all its intimacy at any given moment: *Truman is sleeping. Truman is starting to wake up. Truman is opening his eyes.*

Can't you hear me, baby, rappin' at your door?  
 Can't you hear me, baby, rappin' at your door?  
 Now you hear me tappin', tappin' across your floor

Dylan's text further changes the culminating effect of the narrative verse by following it up with a repetition of the first two verses in the framing device discussed above. This structure focuses attention back on the individual landscape of the lone lover, shifting us away from the interplay of the lovers. I would suggest that such a maneuver is influenced by the romantic poetry of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Verlaine, who many scholars have argued to have been influential in Dylan's songwriting.

### Blues Metaphor

A third feature of which is characteristic of blues songs is found in the use of ingredients from everyday materiality as metaphors of human life and well-being, sexuality, struggles, and passion. Trains and rain are common metaphors in blues songs as well as in blues-inspired country and folk musics. Windows, floors, and doors are also commonly used in the traditional blues. In Yank Rachell and Sleepy John Estes' "Ragged and Dirty" (also recorded by Dylan 1993), for example, we hear: "Went to my window baby, I couldn't see through my blind" in which the window represents the singer's eyes and the blind represents his inability to see the reality of his lover's infidelity. These metaphors are made clear in the line that follows: "Heard my best friend coming round, I thought I heard my baby cry." Cris Smither's "I Feel the Same" (recorded by Bonnie Raitt 1973) gives us "It seems so empty now, close the door," in which the door represents the passageway allowing for a relationship to develop . . . or not.

"Broke Down Engine," a severe and life-interrupting event, evokes an individual's lost spirit and momentum. It also clearly suggests an interruption of sexual happiness. "Booze" becomes the fuel that could serve to lubricate or corrode the "driving wheels," which are, in turn, the particular motives and activities that keep the mind and heart inspired and a relationship "running." The house thus becomes the frontier of an individual's psychic and physical space. Other house references in the McTell lyric are:

Can't you hear me baby, knockin' on your **door**?  
 Can I get out singing, living, tapping 'n flatting, slip right across your **floor**?  
 You ain't got to put her in my house, Lordy, you only lead her to my **door**.

In keeping with this tradition, Dylan songs are filled with elements of everyday material life as relating deeper insights into existential experience.<sup>11</sup> We find doors in more than 80 of his songs, commonly denoting the threshold of interpersonal relations. Windows are also abundant. Well over 20 references to floors evoke communal life, domestic drudgery, the lowest stages of a person's life or a form of subterranean disclosure/truthfulness.<sup>12</sup> These commonplace items, as well as trains, rain, barbed wire, shoes, and other articles of clothing are a clear carry-over from blues traditions. To these, Dylan adds alleys, clocks, pies, ashtrays, money, phones, televisions, and brand names as well as his own version of traditional references.

Dylan's creative use of blues metaphors is widely encompassing and expanding in both detail and general reference. His references to the larger categories of materiality commonly referred to in the blues—houses, clothing, body parts, and climate—make up a considerable part of his corpus. His innovations involve processes of 1) transformation and/or projection of traditional metaphor through metonymy, synecdoche, or extension; 2) parallels; 3) modernization of objects and their function; and 4) elaboration through detail. Examples of these processes include 1) the replacement of the traditional "door" with the synecdochal "keyhole" in "She Belongs to Me"; 2) the paralleled "railroad gate" for "door" in "Absolutely Sweet Marie"; 3) "stainless steel" in "Sweetheart Like You" as a modern allusion to domestic doldrums. The modernizing of traditional references is also found in the juxtaposition of rural lexical items in "Sitting on a Barbed Wire Fence"—barbed wire, hound dogs, and bodily tortures of love ("killing me alive")—to contemporary elements of American life—random sums of money, foreign (unintelligible) doctors, and the musical riffs that one may hear in passing.

Elaboration through detail is probably the most common method of innovating blues metaphors used by Dylan. Entire songs have been devoted to random details symbolic of general references such as the many

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<sup>11</sup> Dylan's metaphoric mastery has made way for fascinating, in-depth explications by a great number of competent scholars and other attentive listeners. Whether they be exotic, classic, or contemporary—borrowed, derived or invented—Dylan metaphors are never without substantial and coherent anchorage in the overall text meaning. Origins and influences are not always clear and direct and there is surely much to be done in this area of song studies. The objective here, however, must be confined to those metaphors that fit a stipulated definition of a blues metaphor.

<sup>12</sup> As when *Rambling, Gambling Willie's* cards fall to the floor (Dylan 1991) and the singer's words fall to the floor in "With God on Our Side" (Dylan 1964).

commonplace objects found in a house in “Everything is Broken.” “Shelter from the Storm” and “A Hard Rain’s A’ Gonna Fall” are but a couple of examples of songs built on climate references. “Clothes Line Saga” provides a narrative of the routines of doing the household laundry as it portrays the complexities of cohabitation. “4<sup>th</sup> Time Around” alludes to personal identity and the difficulties of interpersonal relationships through everyday activity involving language, clothing, and body parts. Elaboration of general categories may also be sporadic yet often provides powerful images such as a leopard-skin pill-box hat, red, white, and blue shoestrings, buttons on a coat, and high-heeled sneakers (clothing as identity, lifestyle, affiliation and discrimination); and drainpipes, buckets of rain, a mattress balancing on a bottle of wine, and a fireproof floor as representative of domestic life.

### **Binary Blues Clauses**

The formal structure of the AAB blues verse is composed of two word groups that I have termed “binary blues clauses.” These word groups are juxtaposed and repeated in a second line; they are then followed by a third line that, just as between the binary clauses, induces a particular relation to the A lines. The verse itself is thus a triplet while inside the verse we find three binary structures: the repetition of line 1 in line 2; the response effect of line 3 to the two repeated lines; and the combination of two clauses found in all three lines. The overlapping of binary and tertiary structures is certainly an integral part of the rhythmic richness of this song form. We will focus here on the linguistic features of these structures as they lend themselves to stylistic form.

Probably the most important feature of binary blues clauses arises from syntactic fragmentation so common in American speech. The clauses remain independent of one another, basic English syntax is often defied and the meaning of the line is found in the equation of two lines, as opposed to the full thought that defines a sentence. Indeed, the core of the construction of the verse is based on relations other than grammar and syntax, constituting parallels that are clearly poetic in nature. In sum, the full poetic effect of this formula is found in the implied relationship between the two clauses and that between the A and B lines.

In my inventory of the McTell and Dylan corpuses I have identified the following relationships: cause and effect; elaboration of a condition, state, or situation that often constitutes the stylistic device of amplification; confirmation of a figurative meaning; combinations of events, circumstances, habits, or characteristics that derive from a given scenario,

often unsuspected in the opening clause of the line; condition into an effect; and, of course, oppositions. These relationships are rarely straightforward but instead implied as part of the elliptical nature of much poetry and song. For example, from "Broke Down Engine," we find "I ain't crying for no religion, Lordy, give me back my good gal please." The binary operation is oppositional: the implied relation between the two clauses is completed in the singer's need for supernatural power—not as a religious pursuit but as a romantic one. A distinction between religious and romantic motives contrives to express the desperate nature of the latter.

Although the binary clauses may form a complete sentence as in "Don't you hear me, baby, knocking at your door," this is most often not the case. Even in the example here, deeper meaning is discovered by fragmenting the clauses and seeking an implied relation. Such is found in the equation of the two sides of communication. In effect, the two clauses evoke the two processes necessary for communication to take place, starting with the second, namely the receiving of a message, and ending with the initial act of sending a message. By inverting the two processes, the singer places emphasis on the receiving end of things, interpellating the beloved who may or may not be deaf to his cries. In the same way that this inversion of the communication act provides a good example of how binary blues clauses defy temporal order, one may also question the necessity of the syntactic completion of the two clauses to the line's meaning. It would be easy for a blues singer to completely separate them, replacing them with "Don't you hear me, baby? I'm knocking at your door." Other options are "I knocking at your door" and "I be knocking at your door," and it is quite plausible to interpret the deletion of the first person pronoun as a stylistic effect. It is clear that, whatever the possibilities, the complete sentence structure adds nothing to the essential meaning of the line.

In "I done pawned my 32-special, good gal, and my clothes been sold," the second clause elaborates a progressive stage in an achieved state of helplessness evoked in the first clause. The singer is weaponless and then without clothing, both as a result of gambling. The first loss leaves him without defense (or a means for aggression) and the second leaves him without public decency. A process of degradation is implied, not only in the comparison between the lesser need for a pistol than that for clothes, but also in the change from the active voice ("I done pawned") and the passive voice ("my clothes been sold"). In the first act, the singer acts and in the second, he endures the act. The message thus unfolds: gambling is dangerous and it only gets worse.

Dylan's own compositions include 17 songs with full AAB structure and seven others using an altered use of binary blues clauses. His innovations of this form are as remarkable as in his use of blues metaphors. A surprising example of innovation of binary blues clauses will be studied in what follows.

### **Obscurity of Form into Meaning**

I wonder if even the most attentive listeners of Dylan's recordings would be able to readily identify the one song on *Under the Red Sky* (1990) which is composed in AAB verse form. The lyric structure of "10,000 Men" is indeed disguised by several dominant features that in fact bear a contrast to the traditional blues form. The contrasting formal designs that make up "10,000 Men" clearly mark both cultural hybridization and originality in Dylan's songwriting.<sup>13</sup> The use of varying discourse genres provides the most striking and encompassing example of stylistic contrasts. The description of collective identities and activities of "10,000 men" (and alternately of women) clearly enters into a socio-historical view of the world: front-line soldiers, elite members of society, explorers, wealth seekers, brides, destitute criminals, housekeepers and servants may be viewed as archetypes as in many of Dylan's texts.

However, in the third line of every verse (the B lines), each group is linked to the worldly activities that they perform, bringing them down to earth, so to speak, and giving them a clearly human role. The symbolic images of the men on the hill, of those dressed in oxford blue, of the women dressed in white, and so on, evoke their social status and place them in a synchronic view of history. This momentary, still-life view of human purpose is overturned in each of the B lines by transforming them into real life events carried out by individuals ("some of 'm gonna get killed," "coming in from the cold," "each one of 'em just out of jail," "sweeping it up with a broom," and so forth). I would like to insist on the fact that this synchronic/diachronic contrast is built into the formal structure of the lyric in which the A lines paint a history-book picture and the B lines zoom in for

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<sup>13</sup> Such a formal contrast seems to mark a poetic instance of structural transformation as described by Claude Lévi-Strauss in Amerindian myths. Interplay of stylistic form in one and the same text may very well reveal something about the microscopic process of cultural transformations identified in more macroscopic social phenomena by structural anthropologists.

a closer observation of active human life. The binary oppositions of the collective/particular and the synchronic/diachronic are expressed with contrasting rhetorical structures identifiable as socio-historical discourse and blues discourse.

Another genre, however, is superimposed throughout the text and, it should be noted, throughout the album. In effect, the underlying theme of "10,000 Men" finds parallels in the following nursery rhyme:

What are little girls made of, made of?  
 What are little girls made of?  
 Sugar and spice and everything nice  
 That's what little girls are made of.

What are little boys made of, made of?  
 What are little boys made of?  
 Snakes and snails and puppy dog tails,  
 That's what little boys are made of.<sup>14</sup>

In terms of content alone, Dylan's text, like the nursery rhyme, is built on a distinction between the activities and qualifiers of men and those of women. The structure is also built on a constant shift in our perception of each. On the surface, male roles painted in the A lines interpellate soldiers, well-dressed men, explorers, fortune seekers, poor men, and guardians of woman's morals. Female images call forth brides, housekeepers, and servants. This list clearly provides a "neutral" view of social categories as in history and storybook characters.

To link the Dylan text with the nursery rhyme printed above, we note that the male roles involve danger, power, possession, success, and failure while the female roles involve subordination and efforts at pleasing others. There is a sort of innocence in the simplicity with which these roles are presented. This simplicity is especially captured in the airy rhythms echoing children's rhymes as well as in the fixed nature of the images that one simply wouldn't think to question ("That's what little boys are made of"). The number 10,000, an ungraspable sum for young children, and yet containing the pedagogical 10 (the number of fingers with which children learn to count) signals, however, the deceptive characteristic of nursery rhymes, as well as of authoritative discourse more generally.

The B lines of the lyric, which are to be interpreted as a response to the oversimplified categories of both historical discourse and nursery rhyme,

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<sup>14</sup> Transcribed from childhood memory.

bring to our attention that looks can, indeed, be deceiving. Such deceptions are drawn out in the following table:

<b>Gender role</b>	<b>Stereotype</b>	<b>Reality</b>
Soldiers	Powerful and brave <sup>15</sup>	Self-destructive
Well-dressed men	Respectful <sup>16</sup>	Self-satisfying
Explorers	Adventurous	Mischievous
Fortune seekers	Hard working	Pampered
Guardian	Protective	Jealous
Brides	Pure	Seducers
Poor men	Needy	Polygamous users
Housekeepers	Dutiful	Clumsy and futile
Servants	Sugar and spice	Nice <sup>17</sup>

In addition to the contrasting view of the collective players in the text, the male/female distinction finds a parallel in the speaking voice of the poet (male) who interpellates a female second person “you” four times in the song (verses two, three, five, and nine).

The lyric is constructed, then, of three narrating voices: the detached historical view of, let’s say, “the history lecturer”; the voice echoing from a child’s world of fairy tale; and the singing persona who plays out a personal drama of the male role sketched out in both the rhyme and history. The voice of the singing persona is, of course, the narrative voice holding the text together. We may thus identify the history lecture and the nursery rhyme as metanarratives,<sup>18</sup> held in suspension as part of the singer’s life references

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<sup>15</sup> This image and its story call to mind Dylan’s “John Brown,” in which the soldier’s mother boasts with personal satisfaction of her son’s bravery. In the end, John Brown has been injured and mutilated from battle. He shows that he does not feel self-satisfaction by placing his medals in his mother’s hand—a symbolic gesture.

<sup>16</sup> This category of supposedly respectful men taking advantage of naïve women finds a parallel in Dylan’s “Blind Willie McTell” (1991): “There’s a woman by the river / With some fine young handsome man / He’s dressed up like a squire / Bootlegged whiskey in his hand.”

<sup>17</sup> The final line of “10,000 Men”—“It’s really so sweet of you to be so nice to me”—yields the only purely linguistic evidence of a possible influence of the “What are little boys made of” nursery rhyme. All other echoes are either thematic or narratological.

<sup>18</sup> A metanarrative is the formal telling of a story within a story. The relationship between the metanarrative and the narrative varies but will have an inherent bearing on the ultimate meaning of the overall narrative.

and clearly having a bearing on his interaction with the female players in the lyric.<sup>19</sup> What is most interesting for us here is that the personal voice of the narrator is formally aligned with the blues discourse in both elemental and structural ways.

First, as we have seen, the blues discourse—as a more intimate and diachronic view of human life—is found in the B lines of the verses. The A lines, in all except verses five and nine, depict the collective group in a noun phrase. Verse one of the song sets the pace with the powerful and anticipatory, yet static, image of “10,000 men on a hill.” As opposed to the traditional blues form, these lines are not constructed of two clauses;<sup>20</sup> nor do we find any of the stylistic features identified above (grammatical deviations, informal register, commonplace metaphors). The B lines, on the other hand, are nearly all composed of two separate clauses and are rich in blues stylistics. Moreover, speech directed to a second person player (always female) is used in the B lines of verses two and three, and throughout verses five and nine. From the very first verse we see a considerable difference of grammatical “tone” between the A and B lines:

10,000 men on a hill  
 10,000 men on a hill  
 Some of ‘em going down, some of ‘em gonna get killed

In the B line of this verse, we find both phonetic deviations that imply casual discourse (we note that all of the A lines in the song employ standard diction) and grammatical deviation in the deletion of the auxiliary “are” in the second clause. We also note the uninhibited use of the “-ing” form.

One of the most interesting uses of grammatical deviations in the Dylan corpus is found in the B line of verse three of “10,000 Men”: “None of them doing nothing that your mama wouldn’t disapprove.” This line contains four markers of negation: none, no-, -n’t and dis-. The abundance of negations creates obscurity in the meaning of the line to the extent that one is practically obligated to do a mathematical calculation to figure out if the “10,000 men on the move” are “good guys” or “bad guys.” Taking into consideration the grammatical deviation of “None of them doing nothing,” the logical inference here is that mothers would not approve of anything these men do. No ambiguity whatsoever.

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<sup>19</sup> In all but one instance of a female presence in the text, the narrator is also present.

<sup>20</sup> Despite the use of single clauses, the A lines are sung as one full line with a long pause between, for example, “10,000 men” and “on a hill” in AAB blues fashion.

I will argue, however, that even for listeners born and bred in the rural South, this line causes confusion. I contend that this confusion is deliberate and results from the contrast between the double negation of the first clause as deviation and the double negation of the second clause as grammatically logical. The juxtaposition of these double negations seems to somehow negate the negation of the approval thereby creating a sense of ambiguity that does not grammatically exist. Could it be that a mother's approval stands as an ultimate play of power against the authorities of history? That the "snakes and snails" and "sugar and spice" is telling of some truth about the sexes, but not the whole story? Or might it be that the grammatical deviation itself is what our mama disapproves?

To conclude, blues renditions of the universal tale of unrequited love have often served as metaphoric representations of power struggles between slave and master and the later development of worker and boss. In some instances, descriptions of suffering in romantic love were composed to disguise descriptions of the hardships of economic and social injustices experienced by African-Americans in the rural South. The interplay of distinctly different voices and points of view in "10,000 Men" demonstrated above is clearly not a mystical configuration but a reflection of plurivocal realities of American cultural heritages and ideologies. The formal blues structure is maintained by the artist's enactment of a frustrated love affair. This is found most explicitly in the expression of jealousy in verse five. In verse nine, attempts to extract sweetness from a mere gesture of (tea) service reveal a lover's desperation. While such meaning conveyed in traditional blues lyrics is based to a large extent on content—characters, events, and sentiments—although not entirely (metonymy and other stylistic devices are clearly at play in "Broke Down Engine"), Dylan's textual meaning is disclosed most significantly through a reading of the dialogical structures which make up his poetic design. Indeed, formal discourse patterns and their historical references reveal a wide range of power relations (teacher/student, bearers of tradition/youth, commander-in-chief/soldiers) in parallel with explicit descriptions of male and female roles. "10,000 Men" is thus in keeping with the blues tradition as it depicts hardships that are both personal and political. The poetic innovation as described here stems from Dylan's meta-linguistic penetration of codes of authoritative discourses that guide social behavior and interpersonal relations by interpellating individuals into subjective identities.

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