Chapter Four

Bob Dylan Ain’t Talking: One Man’s Vast Comic Adventure in American Music, Dramaturgy, and Mysticism

Peter Murphy

Sam Shepard: Have you ever felt like a couple?
Bob Dylan: You mean two? Yeah. All the time. Sometimes I feel like ten couples.¹

Jokerman: the American Picaro and his Idiot Audience

Bob Dylan has spent a lifetime despising the nineteen-sixties—all the while being held up everywhere as its avatar.² This comic tale of mistaken identity is the story of his life. No matter what he says—let alone what he

sings—it seems to make no difference. When he wrote a percussive-pulsating one chord rant-chant against living in a ‘Political World’ in 1989, it was dismissed by critics—sub-standard Dylan, they said. What they were really saying was: no, we don’t believe you. You are a protest singer at heart. You don’t really loath politics, whatever you might say or do. So books continue to be written about him as if he was a nineteen sixties political radical playing loquacious-hipster king to Joan Baez’s platitudinous-remonstrating queen. No matter how much he might exorcise this notion in his marvelous biography, *Chronicles, Volume One*—one of the great pieces of American literature, on a par with Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or Saul Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March*—it changes nothing. Left-liberal writers still compulsively lionize him in their own image—and their feckless children, who populate the modern media machines, regurgitate the same risible clichés about him.

How ironic that an artist who, throughout his life, has variously invented, hidden, concocted, and reinvented his identity should fall foul of mistaken identity. But also how fitting this is. For Bob Dylan’s art is a comic art—and is it not proper that a comic artist should be misunderstood? Is that not the point of the comic worldview? Isn’t the double-meaning of things—the gap between the artist’s meaning and the understanding of their audience—the essence of comedy? In tragedy the artist and the audience knows that a terrible thing will befall the character on stage. Oedipus wanders in confusion, yet Sophocles’ audience grasps what is going on. The central character is condemned by fate. There is a knowing consensus about this between artist and audience. They share the foreknowledge of horrible things to come. In comedy, in contrast, the artist pulls the leg of the audience. The comic artist is a tease—and, like Aristophanes, openly debunks and hounds the audience. Bob Dylan is a masterful exponent of this reprobate art. He has spent a lifetime tormenting his audience—confounding them, annoying them, ignoring them, playing tricks on them—dissembling his own character on stage to fool them, clowning with that character, impersonating his own self, and making it appear and disappear.

Comic characters occur in pairs: for example, battling pairs like Charlie Citrine and Von Humboldt Fleisher in Saul Bellow’s *Humboldt’s Gift* or adventure-bound pairs like Huck Finn and Jim. Dylan is a bit of both. He is a picaro