A Semantic and Syntactic Journey
Through the Dylan Corpus*

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The original title of this paper, as presented at the Caen colloquium, was "Dylanesque Syntax," which was meant as a joke of sorts, the idea being to scare the audience into submission before the first line was even spoken. Of course, there is no such thing as "Dylanesque syntax," in the sense that we are by no means dealing with a language that is separate from (American) English and has a distinct, separate syntax (even though it may be argued to have a distinct, all but separate phonology). What I intend to do is simply apply some of the tools of linguistics, especially corpus linguistics, to the songs recorded by Dylan over the past 44 years, and, in line with the general theme of the colloquium, see if the findings can teach us something about his artistry. I will then leave it to true Dylan scholars to interpret some of the data I am presenting, in the context of their own approaches to Dylan's writing and poetry. I would like to add, in the way of an introduction, that it is indeed the lyrics I will be concerned with, not the music, even though I am aware that the question of *music as syntax* is of paramount importance to some theorists.

The corpus compiled simply brings together as many of the Dylan lyrics as I managed to compile. As always with the "Bard of Hibbing," it is impossible even to approach exhaustiveness: there are 401 songs in total, which doesn't quite cover the whole body of the officially recorded songs. Still, for my purposes in this study, this selection will be taken as representative enough, if not close enough to completeness. I simply copied all the songs back to back into one single file (which proved to be something of a headache), saved it in ".txt" format, and ran it through a concordance program[1] to see what would happen.

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[1] The program I used is the SCP (version 4.0.8.), developed by Alan Reed (freeware). A concordance program (or concordancer) is a piece of software to facilitate

The concordance program displayed the basic figures about the file: 111,555 words, and a 8,170-word vocabulary. There are of course a number of ways of viewing these raw figures; the only significant figure is the vocabulary count, and on that criterion alone—compared to Shakespeare's alleged 25,000 to 30,000-word vocabulary—Dylan might indeed appear as a poor writer. On the other hand, random comparisons with other classic writers yield results that make him compare very favorably (James Joyce's *Dubliners*: 67,000 words, with a 7,600 word-vocabulary, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*: 121,000 words and 6,500 word-vocabulary provide comparable examples). Another significant figure in textual analysis is the type-token ratio (111,555 / 8,170 = 13.65 in the case of the Dylan corpus), which measures lexical density and richness. It should be pointed out, however, that such a ratio will prove different for specific literary genres. Indeed, we are dealing with song, which makes extensive use of repetition in verses and choruses. Very little comparative use can then be made of that ratio, until we further investigate other bodies of song.

I found it a lot more interesting, as it were, to take a quick look at word frequencies and ranks; but here again, the raw data had to be pre-evaluated since, and not surprisingly, the program reported back to me that the most frequent word in the corpus was "the"! However, once the words were sorted out by categories, and certain grammatical items (i.e., determiners, conjunctions, pronouns, and the auxiliaries *have*, *be*, and *do*) set aside, a much more interesting picture emerged. Here is a list of the top 10 lexical nouns in the corpus: *man, time, love, baby, night, day, mind, eye, lord,* and *heart*. The list itself, however, would hardly be worth commenting on if we didn't have a reference corpus for assessing it. To this end, I have chosen the British National Corpus (B.N.C.) for reasons of simplicity (it is easy to use online, and there are interfaces available where frequencies within word classes are readily obtainable).[2] Of course, it might be objected that the American National Corpus (A.N.C.) would have proven a more appropriate yardstick, but this system was not easily accessible at the time of the study; moreover, as we will only be considering the top of the lists, regional variations are negligible and may not have made any visible difference.

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corpus exploration and statistical data.

[2] The British National Corpus can be accessed at http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk /ucrel/bncfreq/.

Comparative Frequencies within Word Classes

We started out our investigation with lexical nouns; the following is a comparative table, a linguistic hit parade, as it were, of the top 10 nouns in our Dylan corpus and in the B.N.C.:

Bob Dylan Corpus[3]	British National Corpus
1. man *(425)*	1. time
2. time *(392)*	2. year
3. love *(254)*	3. people
4. baby *(364)*	4. way
5. night *(232)*	5. man
6. day *(210)*	6. day
7. mind *(149)*	7. thing
8. eye *(172)*[4]	8. child
9. lord *(143)*	9. Mr
10. heart *(182)*	10. government

Table 1: Nouns

I will not try and comment on all the items, each of which no doubt might elicit numerous literary or textual interpretations from scholars and specialists in various fields. In Dylan's corpus, numbers 3, 4, and 10 are clearly reflections of the predominance of the love theme in the songs, while number 9 is a reflection of a religious theme. Some of the items are nevertheless very striking, as is, for example, number 1, *man*, also in the top 10 nouns in the B.N.C. In the case of Dylan's use of this noun, a strictly linguistic approach proves very telling. Indeed, a simple study of its distribution in context brings out, significantly, its overwhelmingly *generic* use. Quite simply, whether we have *a man*, *one man*, or *men*, what Dylan is actually referring to is *mankind*. Some examples of this:

[1]   / How many roads must **a man** walk down / Before you call him **a man**?/ How many times must **a man** look up / Before he can see the sky? ("Blowin' in the Wind")

[2]   Now, too much of nothing / Can make **a man** feel ill at ease / ("Too much of Nothing")

[3]   / **No man** alive will come to you / With another tale to tell ("This Wheel's on Fire")

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[3] Absolute values are given in brackets for the Dylan Corpus, to be compared to word count; I didn't find it useful to give such values for the B.N.C.

[4] As well as sad-eyed 16 / blue-eyed 8 / one-eyed 2 / cross-eyed, black-eyed, and so forth.

[4]   But he was never known / To hurt **a honest man**. ("John Wesley
       Harding")

[5]   /Silvio / I gotta go / Find out something only **dead men know**// ("Silvio")

The second item on the list that strikes me as interesting is number 8, *eye(s)*, which also occurs in a significant number of compound adjectives (i.e. *blue-eyed, sad-eyed, cross-eyed*, and so forth). However, it does not feature in the top 10 nouns in the B.N.C.; indeed one has to go way down the list to find it, in the 43rd position. At first sight, it would be tempting to treat it as a simple manifestation of the love theme, as in the case of numbers 3, 4, and 10 above. But a look at the collocations shows that there is a lot more to it: the associations are almost always negative and/or threatening, whether they be adjectival (*sad-eyed*, *evil eye*) or verbal (*my eyes they burn*, *his serpent eyes*, and so forth). Very seldom do we find conventionally positive happy collocations like *blue-eyed,*[5] *into your eyes where the moonlight swims*, and so on. Some other examples follow:

[6]   *But with **the cold eyes of Judas** on him, / His head began to spin/*
       ("The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest")

[7]   *See **the cross-eyed pirates** sitting / Perched in the sun /* ("Farewell,
       Angelina")

[8]   *Call girls in the doorway / All **giving me the eye** /* ("Call Letter
       Blues")

[9]   *But **there's violence in the eyes**, girl, so let us not be enticed /*
       ("Precious Angel")

[10]   ***Your eyes are filled with dead men's dirt**, your mind is filled with
       dust /* ("The Death of Emmett Till")

The third item I would like to address in some detail is number 7, *mind*. As a linguist, all I have to say is that it stands out because it is comparatively rare in large corpora (you have to go way down the B.N.C. list to about number 150). On a more interpretive note, however, this lexical item cannot be explained by love or religious themes, but may point either to the intellectual and cerebral side of Dylan's writing, or at the swirl of impressions and feelings the poet or the characters experience in turn. A good clue to Dylan's experience of such processes is found in the following quotation:

What happens is, I'll take a song I know and simply start playing it in my
head. That's the way I **meditate**. A lot of people will look at a crack on the

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[5] And even so, most occurrences of "*blue-eyed*" are to be found in "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" (1963), where (according to my own personal communication with expert Charles Holdefer) they refer more to a state of vulnerability or innocence under assault.

wall and **meditate**, or count sheep or angels or money or something, and it's a proven fact that it'll help them relax. I don't **meditate** on any of that stuff. I **meditate** on a song.[6]

Let us now turn our attention to verbs. Again, if we take the B.N.C. as our reference corpus, this is what the picture looks like:

Bob Dylan Corpus	British National Corpus
1. go *(749)*	1. say
2. know *(616)*	2. get
3. see *(476)*	3. make
4. come *(445)*	4. go
5. say *(385)*	5. see
6. tell *(298)*	6. know
7. make *(259)*	7. take
8. think *(252)*	8. think
9. want *(243)*	9. come
10. look *(233)*	10. give

Table 2: Lexical verbs

Nothing really remarkable here: perception, cognition and utterance verbs (PCU) feature prominently, as do motion verbs; of course, one can always ponder the presence of *want* here, but in fact, this item is not very far down the B.N.C. list (number 23). On the other hand, it might surprise some that *give* isn't here, but it is not very far down the Dylan list either (number 12). Since this analysis is obviously not taking us anywhere, let us turn to modal verbs, which yield very different results:

Bob Dylan Corpus	British National Corpus
1. can *(763)*	1. will
2. will *(357)*	2. would
3. could *(233)*	3. can
4. would *(162)*	4. could
5. must *(126)*	5. may
6. might *(103)*	6. should
7. may *(97)*	7. must
8. should *(57)*	8. might
9. shall *(44)*	9. shall

Table 3: Modals

Here it is striking to see that *can* is indeed even more frequent than the three modal verbs which follow it (*will*, *could*, *would*) combined, which is

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[6] *L. A. Times*, "Rock's Enigmatic Poet Opens a Long-private Door." April 4, 2004.

quantitatively enormous, and enormously significant, especially if we combine *can + could.*[7] It can partly be explained by the co-occurrence of this item with perception verbs like *see* and *hear*, which indeed appear very frequently in the corpus.[8] But I might venture a more general interpretation, starting with an inversion of the analysis as we look more closely at Dylan's limited use of *will* in his texts. Linguists often say that *will* is all about **predicting**, either on the basis of some observed property of the grammatical subject (*he **will** sit for hours doing nothing; And he asks for a rope and a pen that **will** write* [Black Diamond Bay (1976)]), or on the basis of the subject's volition (***will** you marry me? Yes I **will**, I **will** not go down under the ground* ["Let Me Die in my Footsteps" (1991)]). The crucial value involved here is obviously *prediction*, and I would like to elaborate on this use in pointing out that there is only a fine line between prediction and prophecy, for, in social terms, what prophets do is provide people with the delusion of having some grasp of the future. And indeed, as we all know, the younger Dylan was almost immediately hailed as a prophet, a fact that, we also know, made him increasingly uncomfortable. As he confirmed in a CBS interview in Dec. 2004,

> It was an explosive mixture that turned Dylan, by 25, into a cultural and political icon—playing to sold out concert halls around the world, and followed by people wherever he went. Dylan was called the voice of his generation—and was actually referred to as a prophet, a messiah. Yet Dylan says he saw himself simply as a musician: "You feel like an impostor when someone thinks you're something and you're not." What was the image that people had of him? And what was the reality? "The image of me was certainly not a songwriter or a singer," says Dylan. "It was more like some kind of a threat to society in some kind of way." What was the toughest part for him personally? "It was like bein' in an Edgar Allan Poe story. And you're just not that person everybody thinks you are, though they call you that all the time," says Dylan. "You're the prophet. You're the savior. I never wanted to be a prophet or savior. Elvis maybe. I could easily see myself becoming him. But prophet? No." He may not have seen himself as the voice of the '60s generation, but his songs were viewed as anthems that sparked a moment. "My stuff were songs, you know? They weren't sermons," says Dylan. "If you examine the songs, I don't believe you're gonna find anything in there that says that I'm a

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[7] In which case they become more numerous than all of the others combined!

[8] *Hear* is in fact number 12 on the list (205 tokens).

spokesman for anybody or anything really." "But they saw it," says Bradley. "They must not have heard the songs," says Dylan.[9]

What we also know was that, as early as 1964, Dylan seemed to be taking great pains to avoid being considered a prophet or being trapped in a prophet's attire. A well-known quotation to illustrate this point:

> In a soldier's stance, I aimed my hand / At the mongrel dogs who teach /
> Fearing not that I'd become my enemy / In the instant that I preach /[10]

My claim is that there is probably a deliberate avoidance of *will* on Dylan's part. The last (maybe the first and last) prophetic song in the Dylan corpus is quite obviously "When the Ship Comes In," written around 1963, and which has 27 *wills* in 48 lines! The picture that emerges is also that of a deliberate preference for *can*, which of course, in linguistic analysis, has at least one feature in common with *will*: the notion of the *property* of *capacity* of the grammatical subject. Indeed, there are contexts in which the two modals are interchangeable (He will / can sit for hours doing nothing). But it is easy to see how *will* goes one step further than *can* to predict the actualization of the property or capacity. What Dylan strives to do is maintain his visions one step short of actualization. The typical song in that respect, in my view, remains "Blowin' in the Wind," which unsurprisingly does contain a lot of *can*'s.

Let us now end this part-of-speech tour with a quick look at adjectives:

Bob Dylan Corpus	British National Corpus
1. good *(138)*	1. other
2. little *(136)*	2. good
3. old *(118)*	3. new
4. hard *(116)*	4. old
5. new *(99)*	5. great
6. true *(99)*	6. small
7. last *(97)*	7. different
8. dead *(84)*	8. large
9. high *(83)*	9. local
10. far *(79)*	10. social

Table 4: Adjectives

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[9] CBS News, 5 December 2004.

[10] "My Back Pages," 1964.

I must confess at this point that this table came as something of an anticlimax to me when I first compiled it, as my remembrance of Dylan texts as a teenager was and remained one of rich impressions and flamboyant imagery. I had lived under the linguistic delusion that all that flamboyance was conveyed by a profusion of adjectives. In actual fact, what we can see from table 4 is that the top 10 adjectives are desperately commonplace. However, the discrepancies between the two columns deserve a few comments. First, we may simply observe that in the B.N.C. there are only six out of 10 that are Germanic, the bottom four being Latinate; nothing comparable to the left-hand column, where all are Germanic. In the Dylan corpus, you'd have to go very far down the list to find a couple of Latinate adjectives (*different* and *strange*); this trend, incidentally, is by no means limited to adjectives, since the whole of Dylan's vocabulary is massively (95%) Germanic. But it is indeed in his use of adjectives that the difference is most blatant and significant; adjectives typically describe properties of individuals, and it is well-known that (see table 5) the Latinate member of each pair will always refer to a property that is one or several notches more *abstract* in meaning than its German counterpart. Compare:

GERMANIC	LATINATE
deep	profound
dark	sombre
clever	intelligent
hard	difficult
high	elevated

Table 5: Germanic vs. *Latinate adjectives*

What this points to is a marked tendency for Dylan's adjectives to describe very concrete properties of very concrete objects. We'll leave that aside, pending further research on adjective-noun collocations, and just end with one more remark on table 4: the only adjectives that stand out with respect to our reference corpus are numbers 7 and 8, *last* and *dead*, neither of which are to be found even in the top 50 in large corpora. From a thematic point of view, *last* is not interesting, as it is most often associated with *night* or *time*, only reflecting the deictic anchoring (the *here and now*) of the stories told. *Dead* is a lot more revealing of the underlying obsessions that pervade Dylan's lyrics, and is probably to be associated with the religious theme, all the more so as the majority of tokens are in fact nominalized adjectives, **the** *dead*, in Biblical and/or eschatological contexts.

Now, returning to the contradiction I pointed out earlier between the feeling of flamboyance of the texts and the very disappointing nature of the adjectives found in the corpus, what I would like to show is that the feeling

is more than just a feeling, the flamboyance is here indeed, but linguistically speaking it is not conveyed by the noun + adjective combination, but by the noun + noun combination, which is the next point I would like to develop.

Complex Noun Phrases

Let me first briefly return to what I pointed out earlier about the Latinate vs. Germanic opposition. Obviously, the very existence of an opposition is made possible by the simple fact that the two series co-exist in the lexical stock of English. The same obtains when we move from word to phrase and then on to clause and sentence, that is to say, the domain of syntax (*syn* = with, together; *tassein* = to arrange), the rules governing the grouping of words to build up meaning. And it is one of the defining features of English to include syntactic patterns that pertain both to Germanic and to Romance languages. For instance, there are in English three ways of combining nouns into complex noun phrases, two of which are typologically Germanic, and one typologically Romance:

PATTERN	N *OF* N	N'*S* N	N Ø N
TYPE	Romance	Germanic	
EXAMPLE	*the trunk of the tree*	*the tree's trunk*	*the tree trunk*

From a semantic point of view, and to cut a very long story short, the difference between these three patterns has to do with the tightness of the relation between the two nouns. To grasp this phenomenon, the further to the right one moves in the table, the tighter the relation is. With the prepositional pattern, the relation is said to be constructed by the speaker in discourse, but it is pre-constructed in the N Ø N pattern, to the point in which we get items that are lexicalized as separate dictionary entries (*police station*), and, at the tail end of the process, are fused as a single graphic unit (*ashtray*, *bookstore*). The genitive pattern stands somewhere in between those two extremes, and in context will pattern sometimes with one, sometimes with the other.

What is most interesting in the Dylan corpus is the distribution of the three constructions. The overwhelming majority of compounds are of the N of N type; we find over 1,000 of these, which is enormous, as opposed to a little less than 400 (390) of the N Ø N type, and only about 200 N's N. It will prove enlightening to look at examples of each of these patterns in turn, beginning with the last one.

About 25 per cent of Dylan's uses of genitives are to be found in only two songs, "Maggie's Farm" (1965) and "Knockin' on Heaven's Door" (1973) and, interestingly, are associated with 47 proper names (including Maggie, of course), accounting for another 25 per cent. This suggests strong constraint with proper names and no real choice, as it were: *Maggie's farm*, *Big Jim's wife*, *Lily's arms*, but one would not say **the farm of Maggie*, **the wife of Big Jim*, **the arms of Lily*.

As for N Ø N compounds, most of Dylan's uses are highly conventionalized and lexicalized (*patron saint*, *jigsaw puzzle*, *milk cow*, *cannon ball*, *railroad track*, *light bulb*, and so forth, thus behaving like single Ns). Since the poet's creativity is in this domain close to nil, his non-conventionalized compounds are predictably few and far between; they are, nevertheless, truly remarkable, and the flamboyance is indeed here: *voice vacancies* ("Ballad in Plain D" [1964]), *white diamond gloom* ("Where Are You Tonight" [1978]) *cyanide hole*, *leather cup* ("Desolation Row" [1965]), *charcoal gipsy maidens* ("Blind Willie McTell" [1991]), *corpse evangelists*, *confusion boats* ("My Back Pages" [1964]), and not to forget *the jingle jangle morning* of "Mr Tambourine Man" (1965).

The bulk of Dylan's semantic creativity, and his most breathtaking and long-lasting imagery is conveyed by the N of N type. This is all the more remarkable as the nature of the relations between the two Ns in this pattern is normally quite restricted, while being virtually infinite in N Ø N combinations. In this analysis, we find Dylan inventing and piling up layers upon layers of signification, for a genuine idiosyncratic effect. Examples are just too numerous, and the following provides only a short selection:

> I've been ten thousand miles in the **mouth of a graveyard** ("A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall")
> **Father of wheat** / Father of cold and **Father of heat** / **Father of air** and **Father of trees**, the **pierce of an arrow** ("Eternal Circle")
> **Rivers of blindness** ("Where Teardrops Fall")
> Puts both his hands in the **pockets of chance** / **bordertowns of despair** ("Dignity")
> King of the streets, **child of clay** ("Joey")
> The **disease of conceit** / The **tombstones of damage** ("Ballad in Plain D")
> In a **city of darkness** ("Ain't no Man Righteous")
> **Furrows of death** ("Two Soldiers")
> With a **firebox of hatred** ("Train a-Travelin'")
> In this **ocean of hours** ("Last Thoughts on Woody Guthrie")
> The **crossroads of my doorstep** ("One Too Many Mornings")

This linguistic manipulation must, of course, be related to Dylan's extensive use of the preposition *like* (more than 500 occurrences in the

corpus), which also constructs predictable (*shining like the moon above* ["Brownsville Girl," 1986]), or unexpected (*the wind howls like a hammer* ["Love Minus Zero/No Limit," 1965]) relations between nouns.

Moving on from word to phrase, and eventually to clause level, my last point will be a brief investigation of Dylan's distortions of conventionalized syntax.

Archaic and Non-Standard Forms

One of the most salient features to be noticed in Dylan's songs is quite obviously the repeated use of constructions such as:

> For the times **they are a-changin'** /
> Women screamin,' **fists a-flyin,'** babies cryin' / Cops **a-comin,'** me **a-runnin.'** / ("Talkin' Bear Mountain Picnic Massacre Blues")
> Yes, and if I could hear her heart **a-softly poundin'** / Only if she was lyin' by me, / ("Tomorrow is a Long Time")
> Then you heard my voice **a-singin'** and you know my name / I'm **a-wonderin'** if the leaders of the nations understand / ("Train A-Travelin'")
> There's seven breezes **a-blowin'** / All around the cabin door ("Ballad of Hollis Brown")

This pattern is the remnant of a thousand year-long evolution, and the "a-" has nothing to do with the indefinite article, but is the weakened form of the preposition *on* (*in*). The construction is still present in eighteenth- and even nineteenth-century prose, but dies out in standard English in the twentieth century. Still, it remains very much alive to this day in the most conservative dialects, both British and American. What is striking is that I have found 274 occurrences in the Dylan corpus, which is simply enormous. The only thing I can say at this stage, pending further research, is that he simply interiorized this archaic syntax, handed down from folksongs that regularly featured it, and that he is either using it as a signature or a message in a bottle; but again, I'll leave it to specialists of oral traditions to decide.

Another interesting feature I'd like to discuss is the use of *do*-auxiliary in affirmative sentences without any obvious emphasis. Seventy-five, or 11 per cent of all occurrences of *do* in the corpus, belong in this category. We should obviously distinguish between the first two of the series, and the last three:

> Her and her boyfriend went to California, / Her and her boyfriend **done changed** their tune ("Sign on the Window")

Been shooting craps and gambling, momma, and I **done got broke** / ("Broke Down Engine")

Next animal that he **did meet** / Had wool on his back and hooves on his feet ("Man Gave Names To All The Animals")

Outside in the distance a wildcat **did growl**, / Two riders were approaching, the wind began to howl. ("All Along the Watchtower")

Achilles is in your alleyway, / He don't want me here, / He **does brag** / He's pointing to the sky / And he's hungry, like a man in drag / ("Temporary like Achilles")

Of course, the *done* + V pattern belongs to the AAVE variety of English (quite characteristically, Dylan sang a lot of old blues and still relates a lot to the old bluesmen; see for instance his cover of "Broke Down Engine"). What is even more interesting is that the pattern is typically British in origin and can be traced with some certainty to the Southwest of Great Britain (Dorset, Somerset, Southern Wales, Cornwall). Dialectologists point out that those areas seem to preserve a tendency of Elizabethan English; again we can only assume that it travelled across the Atlantic with the folk ballads that Dylan studied, and that is partly why the constructions seem to crop up so regularly in the song corpus.

Interestingly, one of the salient features I noticed in Dylan's songs as a teenaged listener was his use of the regular past tense marker for the verb *know* to derive *knowed*, a phenomenon which can also be traced to the Southwest of England:

It ain't no use in turnin' on your light, babe
That light I never ***knowed*** **(**"Don't Think Twice, It's Alright")
If I'd ***knowed*** *how bad you'd treat me,*
Honey I never would have come. ("Man of Constant Sorrow")
I investigated all the people that I ***knowed***,
Ninety-eight percent of them gotta go. ("Talkin' John Birch Society Blues")

One may of course simply dismiss the phenomenon as a vulgarism (which is what many grammarians do), explain it away by a will to use folk language in folk songs, as a reference to Woody Guthrie (*I thought you* ***knowed***, **"**Hard Travelin'"); yet the truth remains once again, that it is a rural archaic British form Dylan is using.

Conclusion

This short-guided tour of Dylan's language sometimes leaves the linguist with the feeling that one may be dealing with a sort of Creole. The

overwhelming use of Germanic vocabulary alongside Romance syntactic patterns and the use of typically British archaic constructions to tell stories that are so American in nature, for example, reveal a Dylan seemingly striving for a language that bridges gaps and allows him to experiment with his broad range of influences brought together in a personal vision. Yet, looking back at the verbs in the corpus—the massive presence of verbs of physical or mental perception on the one hand, and of discourse on the other hand—points to an ambitious vision of universal focus as well, relating to both impression and expression. Might we say that such bold endeavours are to be connected to the very definition of art and artistry?

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