

• Some remarks on the lyrics Bob Dylan's song "Dignity" by Kees de Graaf

- The word 'Dignity' is described as:

1. The quality of state of being worthy of esteem or respect.
2. Nobility of character, manner or language.

Before we go to the specific words of the song I would like to point to two aspects which might have been the inspirational framework of the song:

a. It was Ecclesiastes who said: 'Vanity of all vanities, all is vanity, what profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun'. The outcome of the song will be: it is vanity to search for 'dignity' under the sun. Man by himself or the entire creation on itself is unable to create dignity. What is not expressed in this song is the idea that this dignity must come from somewhere else. Man cannot create it. We are caught in a two dimensional world.

All we produce is 'blood on the tracks' of time, in a political world, where 'hunger pays a heavy price to the falling gods of speed and steel'

b. Yet the poet starts his search for dignity. He wants to put the impossible to the test. Where is dignity hidden? Is it possible that we have overlooked dignity because it is so easy to find? Maybe the land of permanent bliss of dignity is 'only one step from here'? The way in which he handles this search is somewhat reminiscent of Socrates.

Also Socrates was in search of dignity. Socrates questioned all sorts of experts in the form of a living dialogue. He intended to touch his opponents in such a way that would start thinking and by doing so would find the real truth and meaning of life. Dylan more or less does this in the same way. And very fascinating!! Let's go

'deeper' into the lyrics and -who knows- far beyond where 'the vultures

feed'..

In his search for dignity a number of men pass by:

- a fat man
- a thin man
- a hollow man
- a wise man
- a young man
- a poor man
- a blind man
- a drinking man
- a sick man
- an Englishman.

So quite a variety of men in all different sorts of conditions with only one goal: to find dignity somehow, somewhere.

'A fat man looking in a blade of steel'. He may be one of the 'masters of war' who builds the big guns . It's the world 'of steel-eyed death'

Did the big usurpers and conquerors find dignity in the great battles of history? By no means. The gods of speed and steel have fallen, no matter how fat they may have grown, no matter how much they ostensibly benefited in their role as masters of war.

'A thin man looking at his last meal'. It was hunger who paid the heavy price to the falling gods of steel. 'A man 's gonna do what he has to do, when he's got a hungry mouth to feed'. Will he find dignity in suffering, in starving to death, when you have come to your last meal? Even if I give all I own to feed the poor (I Cor.13:3), will I find dignity? No way.

'Hollow man looking in a cotton field'. See the hard labour of slaves in the cotton plantations. Hear the 'cracking of the whip'. Oh yes the big cotton plantations will be burning, yet the slavery labour 'bringing home thirty cents a day to a family of twelve' will not result in finding dignity. Unfortunately.

First of all thanks to:

- 1) The Rev. Peter Hyatt for bringing to my attention that 'fat man looking at a blade of steel' might also refer to Prov. 23:2: 'When thou sittest to eat with a ruler, consider diligently what is before thee. And put a knife to thy throat, if thou be a man given to appetite. Be not desirous of his dainties: for they are deceitful meat'.
- 2) The Actor N. Plot for telling me that the word 'speed' in 'Hunger pays a heavy price to the falling gods of speed and steel' refers to 'speed' as a drug. I have my doubts here Mr Plot. Speed and steel may refer to the age of velocity and steel industry which have become gods or idols. Large amounts of money are spent on speed, for instance on space programmes, and on steel to make weapons for waging war, this at the expense of all natural resources and of all people in what we call the third world causing massive starvation: it is hunger that pays the price to the gods of speed and steel. Thinking about this 'fat man looking at a blade of steel' I saw a documentary on Discovery Channel called 'Hitler's Henchmen', a special on the Nazi Herman Goering, the Nazi war monger. I saw this big fat man walking amongst his soldiers

and weaponry - looking at his blades of steel- and immediately had to think of 'dignity'.

'Wise man looking at a blade of grass, young man looking in the shadows that pass'. The wise and the young man do exactly the opposite as the fat man who relies on steel and brutal power. The wise and young man are deeply convinced of the fragility of life. They read in Psalm 103:15 'As for man, his days are as grass, a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more'. The young man looks to the shadows that pass: 'My days are like a shadow that declineth; and I am withered like grass' (Ps 102:11). Quite a wise man this young man to meditate so deeply. There is great reward in this: this young man will stay forever young. And yet in itself there is no dignity in such a contemplation. It's all vanity.

The poor man tries to find consolation looking through the painted glass of the Rose Window of the Notre Dame Cathedral. These old cathedrals look so pompous and dignified -infinity seems to go on trial here- as if they say: 'I've seen it all, here you can find dignity'. But then there is the 'memory of decay'. It's no use trying, there is no everlasting dignity to be found in these windows of painted glass.

But now back to the hard facts of every day. Somebody got murdered. Every hour somebody is murdered in New York so they say...But now somebody got murdered on New-Year's Eve. This is no suitable occasion to murder somebody. New-Years Eve is an evening of contemplation and meditation over the past year. Quite an evening for Mr. Dignity to bring out the best in people. But then the door of the house where the crime is committed opens and the person you would expect least steps out as the culprit: Mr. Dignity. This is 'the enemy I see wearing a cloak of decency' and he is called dignity.

But then the poet moves on looking further in the cities and towns for dignity. He even goes far to the North - even farther North than were the 'Girl of the North country' once lived, where the rivers freeze and summer ends, to the North Pole, where there is the midnight sun, or to the far east, to the land of the rising sun, to Japan, searching high in the sky where the birds fly, searching low at the bottom of the ocean where the 'busted chains of the sea' are buried. No dignity to be found.

Well then, ask the cops!!, the law should know. Let the law take it's course.

They should tell you what's right or wrong, surely they must have stumbled on dignity somewhere on their patrols? But what a disappointment: 'horseplay and disease is killing me by degrees while the law looks the other way'. It's a big problem: nobody can see through dignity, no not even a chief of police because sometimes dignity comes as a man of peace.....

Met Prince Philip at the home of the blues, said he'd gave me information if his name wasn't used, he wanted money up front, said he was abused by dignity

'Prince Philip of Britain, pleading that the royal family is sorely pressed financially, said today on the "Meet the Press" TV show that he and Queen Elizabeth may have to move from Buckingham Palace to smaller quarters unless Parliament increases the queen's allowance. He said they have had to sell a yacht, and he might have to give up playing polo".

We have a nice pun of words on our hands here: His Royal Dignity said he'd been abused by dignity, But by asking money up front His Dignity abuses dignity because dignity is not for sale."

***Footprints running cross the silver sand,
steps going down into tattoo land,
I met the sons of darkness and the sons of light
in the border towns of despair.***

The poet goes back to ancient history, following ancient footprints cross the sand, going down into tattoo land, to the long forgotten cultures of the Indians and Inca's. Back to the roots of mankind and history, even to the very beginning when this world was created where he met the sons of light, those angels of whom Job 38:7 says: 'When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy'. Later on when man had fallen and come to despair he also met the sons of darkness, those wicked angles who had followed Satan in his mutiny and downfall. Corruption had entered creation, making it impossible to find dignity within this fallen world. It is in the border towns of despair where the decision is made which road to follow. Eternal despair is close by. He is hanging in the balance and standing on the crossroad. Also the land of permanent bless is only one step away. Desperation may lead you to either way. He has gone to the very limits if human existence to find dignity, but in vain.

***Got no place to fade, got no coat,
I'm on a rolling river in a jerking boat,
trying to read a note somebody wrote,
about dignity.***

There is just no escaping, nowhere to go, no place to hide, in a cold and turbulent world where one -like on a rolling river in a jerking boat- is swept from one side to the other where there is utter chaos, where 'people don't live or die but just float' on the whims of the tide, ostensibly without any purpose or goal. In such a circumstance it is very difficult to remain calm -just like Jesus who also was on a rolling lake in a jerking boat (St.Luc.8:22-26) but yet slept quietly- and almost impossible to hold one's course and to read what is really important in life: a letter about dignity.

***Sick man looking for the doctor's cure,
looking at his hands for the lines that were,
and into every masterpiece of literature,
for dignity.***

Sickness will strike many, and death will strike all human beings in the end. Man desperately fights against what is unavoidable. Disappointedly he looks at the lines in his hands which promised him a prosperous future but let him down. No dignity in this sort of prophecy. No dignity either in the great masterpieces of art which man has produced throughout the ages. All statues of literature- from Plato to Dante and Tolstoy- are made of matchsticks and are tumbling over one another. Man is unable to produce or capture dignity in words or lines.

***Englishman stranded in the blackheart wind,
combing his hair back, his future looks thin,
he bites the bullet and looks within,
for dignity.***

The British Empire, like so many empires, has fallen. All the great evening empires have returned into sand, no matter how great and dignified they may have looked. Nothing left to build on for this stranded Englishman. In dismay he combs his hair back and in desperation he bites the bullet- the bullet which created so many empires- and challenges the impossible: a bullet is designed to kill and is the last object one would expect to find dignity in.

***Someone showed me a picture and I just laughed
dignity never been photographed,
I went into the red, into the black,
into the valley of dry bone dreams.***

The idea that somebody could come up with a picture showing dignity as a person is really ridiculous. Man cannot produce dignity, let alone that he would be able to capture dignity in something tangible or visible. The poet searched high and low ,went into the red and black and even into the valley of dry bone dreams. These dry bones is a reference to Ezek. Chap. 37 where the prophet is carried out in the spirit of the LORD to a valley which was full of dry bones. On the word of the LORD these dry bones were covered with flesh and skin and rose to their feet, an exceeding great army. This vision shows God's ability to open graves and raise people from the dead. Man is however unable to do this, the power to break this chain of life and death must come from somewhere else. If it was for man these bones would have remained dry for ever. No dignity.

***So many roads, so much at stake,
so many dead ends, and I'm on the edge of the lake,
sometimes I wonder what's gonna take,
to find dignity?***

The poet is at his wit's end. It is such an important issue, so much is at stake. All has come to nothing. All vanity. The question is rhetorical: nobody will find the ultimate answer. Man cannot find a route to true dignity. He is lost. There is dignity in salvation but it must come from somewhere else....