The Last Ship Sails: Raising The Titanic From Black Diamond Bay

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Draft Version

As we step with Dylan out onto the white veranda with which he opens his 1976 song "Black Diamond Bay," we find ourselves in medias of a res so enigmatic and elusive that even Walter Cronkite, who closes the piece, will be unable to say for sure that "that's the way it is." Set in the fictional Black Diamond Bay of Joseph Conrad's *Victory: An Island Tale,* Dylan's song documents the final hours of a pacific island hotel as a volcanic eruption sinks the island and its inhabitants into the sea. As we advance through the verses, it is hard to ignore the apparent fact, characteristic of many of Dylan's songs, that the characters we meet seem strangely indifferent to the plot pooling around their ankles.

The woman with whom the song begins drifts through the hotel, laughing off the gambler's hails, calling out to the Soviet ambassador, and rejecting the soldier's ring. In each instance, her interlocutor tarries only for a line or two before sinking out of sight. With each gesture, she hints at a vaster drama that is never the one we are watching unfold. Such ephemeral characters are ubiquitous in Dylan. Their recent pasts and predestined futures are scattered in the wild winds of Dylan's narrative universe. They inhabit many of Dylan's pieces like travelers in an ocean-side auberge, present only for a stanza as they pass through on their way to some other song. In "Desolation Row," "Einstein disguised as Robin Hood" stumbles past on his way to who knows where. In "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues," we learn that the "peasants" call "sweet Melinda.. the goddess of gloom," but her sacred rites we, uninitiated, are barred from knowing. Dylan's strange scenery and idiosyncratic figures have long made it difficult to take Dylan at his word when he dons the mantle of the folk musician, just passing

on the ancient traditions. However, as I intend to argue, Dylan's characteristic style does have a precedent in a tradition just as old, and just as intimately bound up with the folk forms on which he relies, as the folk music with which he so closely identifies--that of riddling.

Patrick Murphy could as easily have been thinking of "Black Diamond Bay" when he characterized the 10th century Old English riddles of the Exeter book as "artful and allusive responses to traditional forms."[1] The authors of these riddles drew heavily on traditional folk figures and phrases, and embellished them with literary allusion and enigmatic language to produce works in which the details often seem cryptic and their meanings elusive... until one knows the answer. In fact, it is the very incongruities and paradoxes of the Exeter riddles that draw the listener's attention to the elements of the original folk forms still visible on the surface of the poems, and guide the listener to the solution submerged in its depths. Likewise, Dylan's often unexpected juxtapositions of character and scenery serve to guide us back into the traditional forms through, as he puts it, "a different door in a different kind of way."[2] "Black Diamond Bay" is not a song at all, so much as it is a riddle--a riddle the answer to which is "the Titanic."

Although the song is set in Conrad's Black Diamond Bay, the details through which Dylan constructs this setting are not drawn from Conrad. Schomberg's hotel in *Victory* is a place of mosquito nets and candle light. Maurice Tourneur's 1919 film adaptation imagines the Soerabaja hotel as a building of wooden walkways and open air windows--a simple structure befitting a lonely desert outpost in the Dutch East Indies. Yet, the woman in the song walks "marble floors" and ascends "spiral staircases." Schomberg hangs "Japanese paper lanterns." The Greek hangs "from the chandelier." The scenery of Black Diamond Bay projects a consistent aesthetic, but it is not the one we are promised by the nominal setting. The incongruously elegant accoutrements of the island present, therefore, a paradox, until we recognize in the sinking island and its volcano the familiar outline of the great ocean liner and its iceberg.

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1   Murphy, 18
2   Rolling Stone

With the title track of his 2012 album *Tempest*, Dylan relates the story of the Titanic through language and images that offer us a skeleton key to his earlier work. Immediately familiar from "Black Diamond Bay" are many elements of the setting, out of place in a Sourabayan backwater, but at home on a luxury ocean liner. "The chandeliers were swaying," unburdened by dangling Greeks, "from the balustrades above." Below, crew and passengers, sans Soviet ambassadors, "drowned upon the staircase / of brass and polished gold." Drawing his old backdrops out of mothballs, Dylan sets the stage for his Titanic epic with the scenery of his earlier song, fashioned, as it was, with precisely this story in mind. For the final performance, Dylan commissions three major set pieces drawn from the from long tradition of Titanic balladry: the band, the boiler, and the broadcast news.

When "the sun went down and the music did play" on Black Diamond Bay, it could easily be mistaken for the evening concerts in Schomberg's music hall by Zangiacomo's all-girl orchestra, which provide the context for the central conflict of Conrad's plot. However, the music that plays within the frame of Dylan's lyrics takes on a different color by its appearance at the height of the action, after the lightning strikes, and moments before the volcano sets the whole island sinking into the sea. Music that unflaggingly accompanies the final moments of a slow and inexorably unfolding tragedy is, perhaps, the most iconic symbol of the Titanic; it reappears in its more recognizable form in "Tempest," as the "orchestra.. playing songs of faded love." The music crescendos as the water rises in both songs, until climaxing in the deafening roar of the boiler explosion that ultimately dooms the ship.

That "the boiler in the basement blew" seems an arbitrary detail to focus on as the island begins to sink, until we recall the centrality of the boiler explosion to the story of the Titanic; the iceberg ruptured the ship's hull, but it was only when the water rushed in and overloaded the ship's boilers that the Titanic's fate was sealed. This element of the story recurs in "Tempest," when "the engines then exploded... the boilers overloaded." A boiler explosion cannot sink an island, but it can, and did, sink the ship that becomes the island in Dylan's metaphorical play. The boiler's salience in the earlier song hinges on its significance to the later one. While the several hours it took the RMS Titanic to vanish

beneath the waves have spawned an armada of recognizable symbols and powerful anecdotes to which a modern songwriter might turn for inspiration, the predominance of the boiler in many extant traditions of Titanic oral poetry suggest--as the final traditional element confirms--Dylan's deep engagement with folk material.

When "old Cronkite" appears "on the seven o'clock news" at the end of "Black Diamond Bay" to relay the story of the sinking island, Dylan's narrator "turned it off and went to grab another beer." To those unfamiliar with the Titanic's vernacular tradition, this line may seem one of the shallowest connections to the sunken ship, despite its repetition at the end of "Tempest" as "the news came over the wires;" in fact, it is one of the deepest. Whereas the music and the boiler explosion signify the Titanic across a range of media, the concluding news report points to the particular provenance of Dylan's inspiration; "Black Diamond Bay" and "Tempest" share the three elements of this Titanic major chord with a long tradition of Titanic balladry with which Dylan is deeply conversant.

During a Rolling Stone interview after the release of *Tempest*, Dylan suggested that "if you're a folk singer, blues singer, rock & roll singer, whatever, in that realm, you oughta write a song about the Titanic, because that's the bar you have to pass."[3] After a century of historical exegesis has dredged up seemingly every passenger, possession, and utterance from the north Atlantic, the specificity of Dylan's selection of details from the vast body of Titanic literature points to his intimate familiarity with the history of Titanic balladry in the oral traditions of folk and blues music. "Tempest," and by extension "Black Diamond Bay," draws pointedly from traditional sources, as evidenced by the formal phenotype that marks its common ancestry with the Carter Family's "The Titanic" and with the collection of "Shine and the Titanic" narrative poems collated by Bruce Jackson.

Tempest draws its opening directly from the Carter family's "Titanic." The Carter family's "The pale moon rose in its glory... She told a sad, sad story" reappears in "Tempest" verbatim, while Dylan inverts the Carters' cardinal perspective from the moon "drifting from golden west," to the "western

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3   Rolling Stone

town" on which it shines. " The watchman too undergoes a similar reorientation, from one who "dreamed the Titanic was sinking / out on the deep blue sea" in the Carter family version, to his incarnation in Dylan, where he "dreamed the Titanic was sinking / into the underworld." Other figures drift more fleetingly between songs. The Carters' "rich man," who "tried to save his baby / also his darling wife," becomes in Dylan "the rich man, Mister Astor," who "kissed his darling wife." "Captain Smith," who "must have been drinking," in the Carter family version, had indeed "filled his cup with tears," in Dylan.

Significantly, two of the three core elements of the Titanic taxonomy from "Black Diamond Bay" appear in the Carter family's rendition, and again in Dylan's more refined retelling. In each case, Dylan promotes the simple folk lyrics into more elaborate descriptions for his more extravagant ocean liner. The Carters' "band," playing "Nearer My God to Thee," on the deck of the sinking ship thus becomes the "orchestra" in Dylan. Likewise, in the Carter family version, "the sad news reached the city," occasioning tears and sorrow for the widows and children left behind. In Dylan, when "the news came over the wires," it evokes the more poetic register among the bereaved of the imponderability of God's judgment. Notably absent from the Carter family's song is the boiler explosion so prominent both in "Black Diamond Bay" and in "Tempest." The absence of the boiler from the Carter family hints at the size of the tradition of Titanic balladry and the scope of Dylan's mastery of it. The Carters themselves were prolific collectors and retellers of folk songs, and while some of "Tempest's" lines hew more closely to the Carters' particular phraseology, others, such as the naming of John Astor and Captain Smith, or the boiler explosion are only dimly visible, if at all, from the deck of the Carters' Titanic; they resurface elsewhere in the folk tradition, scattered among the field recordings of Alan Lomax, among other places where Dylan might have encountered them. At least one other tradition with which Dylan seems to have been familiar, also documented by Lomax, but more comprehensively treated in Bruce Jackson's *Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me*, is the genre of African American narrative poems Jackson indexes as "Shine and the Titanic."

The Shine poems relate the story of a fictional black boiler room operator named Shine as he brings both presence of mind and strength of body to bear on the hero's journey of escaping the sinking ship, although challenged by the delusional white captain and tempted by the helpless white passengers. The boiler figures prominently in these pieces, as after "the *Titanic* hit the big iceberg," Shine recognizes the flooding boiler as the proximal cause of the Titanic's eventual sinking, and "Shine jumped up from the boiler-room floor, / he said, 'Captain, captain, don't you know, / we have forty feet of water below."[4] Ever prudent, Shine has kept his distance from ocean-liners and boiler rooms since his experiences that early April morning, and he reappears in "Black Diamond Bay" as the jaded narrator inured to the tragedy unfolding in some remote tropic. Much like the Carter family song and Dylan's own Titanic pieces, these Shine poems typically end with some variant on "the news finally got around / that the old *Titanic* had finally gone down."[5] At least one example in Jackson's collection takes the connection further, as by the time the news reaches shore, "Shine done swimmed on over in Los Angeles and started drinkin'," or as Shine himself will put it at the end of Dylan's song, "I was sittin' home alone one night / in L.A. Watchin' old Cronkite," before he "turned it off and went to grab another beer."[6]

Even among contemporary artists who draw on folk material, it is striking just how much of that material Dylan incorporates into his work, and how visible it remains even after his decidedly elaborate reworkings. I suggest that it is fundamental to Dylan's style, and to Dylan's sense of how his work engages with his source material, to ensure that the material he incorporates remains in a form pointedly recognizable to those familiar with the genre's conventions. When Dylan places his work in the tradition of folk music, it is because preserving that literal, textual connection to his sources is fundamental to how he envisions his own work. Dylan's style shares this characteristic with traditional riddling, in which, whatever the other literary effects with which the poet adorns their creation, the

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4   Jackson, 186
5   Jackson 189
6   Jackson, 185

solution must be visible in the text of the riddle to those who know how to find it. A riddle without a solution is no riddle, and a Dylan song without that thread connecting it back to traditional forms is not a Dylan song at all. It is precisely because of this shared, formal commitment to telling two stories--the literary and the traditional--with the same words that Dylan's writing embodies many of the qualities characteristic of traditional riddles.

Reading "Black Diamond Bay" as a riddle clarifies the way that Dylan reconciles the two sets of images present in the song--the Titanic and the Conradian--and gets us to the heart of Dylan's songwriting method. Patrick Murphy, in *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles*, offers a theory of riddling that, I submit, illuminates the logic of Dylan's style. Murphy singles out the genre of "metaphorical riddling" by the characteristic way that the clues of these riddles collectively form a coherent story of their own, not specifically tied to their function as clues pointing the way to the riddle's answer.[7]

Murphy illustrates his argument by reference to Exeter Riddle 33, in which an iceberg is described as a warrior on a ship. The iceberg announces itself with the clue "my mother.. is my daughter, grown up."[8] As Murphy notes, the riddle is built around the well known conceit in English riddling that "*ice* is the daughter of water and the mother of water as well."[9] To those familiar with Old English riddling, this clue is enough to divine the answer, much like the music, the boiler, and the news in the Titanic tradition. The remainder of the riddle, rather than heaping up clues, engages in the metaphorical fancy of reimagining the iceberg as a fierce warrior. Yet, there is always something uncanny--something that does not quite fit--if we take the story about the warrior at its word without recognizing it as a riddle.

As Anita Riedinger argues of the author of Riddle 33, "this poet, like others of the riddle tradition, misleads his audience by disguising his subject with the formulaic imagery of a warrior."[10]

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7   Murphy, 18
8   Murphy, 9
9   Murphy, 10
10   Riedinger, 38

The iceberg's "laughter was terrifying," and terrifying laughter often "precedes a battle."[11] Overt references to "battle deeds" lead us to take the "sharp edges" and "board-walls" as swords and shields.[12] Yet, this warrior imagery never quite manages to fully dissolve the iceberg riddle around which it is built; the whole story never quite manages to make sense without the solution that organizes it. As Riedinger notes, many scholars of Old English riddling have found it difficult to reconcile clues that make it sound more like the subject of the riddle is a warrior on a ship with those that make it sound more like the subject of the riddle is the ship itself. The ambiguity of the image created by the clues before the solution is known is, in fact, a hallmark of the metaphorical riddle.

Murphy, citing Senderovich, argues that "while the explicit target [of a riddle] is identified by a verbal, pronounceable answer, the implicit target remains under the veil of taboo not simply because its naming is proscribed, but because there is no name for this strange image. And it is not a withheld answer but a matter of intuitive, eidetic knowledge."[13] The language of Riddle 33 recalls for its imagined audience the language of warriors and ships, but it is impossible to fix in one's mind precisely what scene is being described. All we see are fragments that suggest now an image of a warrior, now the form of a ship. If the metaphorical play were too coherent, the riddle would lose the very cryptic contradictions that demand its listeners resolve the paradox with a solution. As Riedinger illustrates, the strategic ways in which the riddle violates the narrative conventions of the warrior genre whose guise it assumes are fundamental to its operation as a riddle. The iceberg is described as "hatefully fierce," yet "slow into battle."[14] As Riedinger explains, "slow into battle" plays on an Old English literary tradition in which to be "battle-slow" is a mark of cowardice; the hero of Old English literature is "strong and brave, not at all slow in battle."[15] A warrior that is "hatefully fierce," yet "slow into battle" strikes the informed listener as a paradox, like a sinking island. "The 'riddle-maker' of 'Iceberg,'" Riedinger

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11   Ibid.
12   Ibid.
13   Murphy, 183
14   Riedinger, 39
15   Ibid.

concludes, "uses contradiction/paradox as a clue."[16]

In "Black Diamond Bay," the language and images drawn so clearly from Conrad never seem to add up to anything resembling the novel's central structure. Axel Heyst and Lena remain characteristically fugitive from the hotel at the center of the story. Schomberg is nowhere to be found. The incongruous details in Dylan's songwriting work precisely by calling us to attend to the discrepancies we cannot otherwise make sense of. Dylan could have expunged the sinking island from his story. The sinking itself bears little weight in the architecture of the song, as the lava flow stands ready to play the role of central tragedy. Yet, the sinking figures prominently in the song in the final image of a now sunken island that "left nothin' but a Panama hat / And a pair of old Greek shoes." Much as "Riddle 33 counts on the reader's familiarity with Old English poetry, "Black Diamond Bay" explicitly plays on the listener's familiarity with the Titanic genre by clothing itself in the traditional costume of Titanic balladry. "These riddles are not posed out of thin air but are often allusive variations on standard themes."[17]

To paraphrase Borges, the only word that cannot appear in a riddle about icebergs is "iceberg" itself. When the boiler, the music, and the other jetsam of the genre wash up in the lyrics of Black Diamond Bay, we do not need to wait for Walter Cronkite to tell us what has happened. The Titanic announces itself by its absence. The unnamed "last ship" that sails from the first verse of Black Diamond Bay almost audibly challenges us with that traditional Old English riddling formulation: "say what I am called." "The Titanic" provides the solution to this song, and around that solution, Dylan constructs an extended Conradian metaphor. It is the interweaving of these two strands, I suggest, that gives Dylan's lyrics their particular texture. If Dylan's characters seem out of place in their respective stories, then it is because they do not arise organically from their plots to serve the demands of their narratives, but rather drift in itinerantly from other genres, to tell us by their very weirdness that all is not as it seems. Dylan's characters *are* summoned from different songs, gathered together to perform

16 Ibid.
17 Murphy, 12

some strange, secret ritual that we, like ethnologists, can only look on with incomprehension as our native guide remains knowingly silent. They are *in* their songs, but they are not *of* them. With his literary elaborations of traditional folk forms, Dylan taps into a different "folk process" than that of the Carter family, but one just as intimately bound up with the same legacy of oral poetry.

Riedinger's aim in analyzing Riddle 33 is to argue for the influence of an Old-English "oral-traditional style" in the composition of the Exeter riddles.[18] This is not to say that the riddles themselves were oral forms, but rather that "a poet steeped in oral traditions could compose a new poem by drawing on the Old English poetic tradition for traditional formulas and, sometimes, traditional concepts – all of which provided the verbal and conceptual vehicles for constructing a poem."[19] Whether oral or literary, a riddle is fundamentally a linguistic game, and the recurrence and perversion of familiar forms and phrases are essential to its function. As Riedinger argues, "formulas, both verbal and conceptual, are an integral part of the riddle-style," not merely as "aids to the composition of a poem," but because "the semantic ambiguities of traditional formulas inevitably enhance the potential complexity of their solutions."[20] That "sharp edges" and "board-walls" can recall warriors while describing ice is what allows Riddle 33 to be a riddle at all. If the description fit warriors too perfectly, it would be unclear that the riddle was meant to be solved. Murphy refers to this necessary misalignment between a solution and its clues, which first calls us to search for the answer and then allows us to find it, as a "semantic slim chance."

Murphy illustrates the characteristic semantics of riddling through reference to a riddle that casts an egg, metaphorically, as a tomb: "A whitewashed tomb, / In it the soul breathes. Following Scott, we might say that there is only a 'slim chance' that an egg can be called a tomb, presumably because there is only a 'slim' overlap in the semantic rage of tombs and eggs.. the contents of an egg 'breathe' only by a 'slim chance' in the semantic range of that verb."[21] It does not quite make sense to

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18 Riedinger, 30
19 Riedinger, 30
20 Riedinger, 31
21 Murphy, 38

say "the egg breathes," but it is not totally devoid of sense either, as both eggs and breathing are linked by a thin thread through the semantic field of "life." To say "the egg breathes" is to allude to the egg's eventual becoming of something that does breathe, even if the egg itself does not respire. By invoking verb frames and semantics, Murphy, like Riedinger, emphasizes the pronounced role that oral and vernacular traditions implicitly play in the formation of even the most literary riddle. Riddles allow certain metaphors more readily than others, because the syntax and semantics of the language allow certain descriptions to be more felicitously applied to some pairs of clues and solutions than others. When Dylan chooses to retell the story of the Titanic through the language of Conrad, he is permitted to do so by the semantics of the English verb "sink."

Black Diamond Bay is able to "sink," and Dylan's audience is able to relate in some way to the line "as the island slowly sank," only because Dylan has managed to bend the meaning of "sinking" with respect to the concept of a "sinking island" away from any plausible geological notion and towards one that more readily corresponds to the narrative structure of the Titanic. If the island were to sink on the geologic timescale of plate tectonics, the central drama of the piece could never unfold. The island in "Black Diamond Bay" does not sink like an island, but by virtue of an island being, semantically, a "place" surrounded by water, Dylan's listeners are able to form a coherent picture, if not a complete one. Had Dylan attempted to retell the Titanic through the language of a "sinking" sun, or a "sinking" feeling, neither of which is a place where an orchestra might play or a boiler might burst, he would have had to solve a much more difficult rhetorical puzzle to communicate the essential elements of the Titanic narrative. The language of the sinking ship takes the place of sharp swords and wooden shields in the lexical armory of the modern riddler. There is, of course, nothing preventing a poet from drawing inspiration from the Titanic without drawing on its explicit rhetorical conventions, but Dylan's formal commitment to reusing the concepts *and the words* of his traditional sources is a sine qua non of his style.

During his acceptance speech at the 2015 MusiCares Person of the Year awards, Dylan

discusses, in an unusually candid manner, the process by which he composed many of his most recognizable numbers. Foremost, Dylan emphasizes immersing himself in traditional folk genres. Dylan "learned lyrics and how to write them from listening to folk songs."[22] He claims that, "I didn't think I was doing anything different. I thought I was just extending the line.. just elaborating on situations."[23] While Dylan's longtime positioning of his work within the tradition of folk music has often been hard to reconcile with works such as Highway 61 or Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues, I have argued that Dylan's relationship to folk forms makes sense in light of the tradition the Exeter riddles. As Riedinger reminds us, the Exeter riddles "are not riddles in the modern sense of the word, but enigmas, descriptions of an object which are intended to be at once accurate and misleading."[24] As even Dylan recognizes, his take on the folk tradition within which he viewed himself was "maybe a little bit unruly... Maybe hard to pin down," maybe, we might add, at once accurate and misleading. [25]Dylan's work belongs not to the folk tradition from which he draws, but to the parallel and deeply related tradition of enigmatic literary responses to traditional folk forms--to the genre of riddling.

Within the genre of riddling, Dylan's observations about his method make sense. Dylan tells us, regarding his music, that "it all came out of traditional music," and so it did.[26] He describes a period of several years at the beginning of his career when "all I listened to were folk standards. I went to sleep singing folk songs. I sang them everywhere" which, he continues, fed directly into his later compositions.[27] "If you sang "John Henry" as many times as me," Dylan suggests, "you'd have written 'How many roads must a man walk down?' too."[28] "If you sang [Big Bill Broonzy's 'Key to the Highway'] a lot, you just might write... Howard just pointed with his gun / And said that way down on Highway 61."[29] Dylan continues, through a number of his songs, illustrating how a deep familiarity

22 Rolling Stone
23 Ibid.
24 Riedinger, 30
25 Rolling Stone
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.

with one song invariably led to its elaboration in another. "Sail Away, Ladies" became "Boots of Spanish Leather," "Roll the Cotton Down" became "Maggie's Farm," Robert Johnson's "Better Come In My Kitchen" became "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall," and the "Deep Ellum Blues" became "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues." In each case, Dylan describes the writing as something that happens "subliminally and unconsciously, because that's all enough, and that's all you know."[30]

I would like to suggest that Dylan's engagement with oral tradition is of exactly the same quality as that of the Exeter poets. When Dylan places his own work in the tradition of folk music, it is because he is, ultimately, retelling old stories. That which makes a Dylan song a retelling is exactly that which makes a riddle a riddle. Both rely on what Riedinger calls "traditional formulaic concepts," which, with as little as a well chosen word, can recall, for the poet or the listener, an iceberg sailing across the waves, or a ship sinking beneath them. Dylan does not have to leave traces of his original sources in his songs, but he does. In every case, the riddle has an answer, from the island that sinks like a ship, to the inhabitants of Deep Ellum who reappear in "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues" with new names and new faces to tell the same old story about a city of sin and vice. We might imagine Dylan immersing himself so deeply in the language of folk and blues--reciting Carter family, Leadbelly, and Lomax versions of the Titanic so often--that a stray line in Conrad might resonate with just the right language to spark a connection in Dylan's unconscious.

Dylan's songs are meant to be read as riddles, and like the Exeter riddles, these songs come without answers. The slim chances of Dylan's writings invite us to explore their depths. Dylan's songwriting opens for us an unusual kind of door into the timeless traditions of folk balladry, but it is we who must walk through it. Dylan has sunk decades of traditional forms beneath the waves of Black Diamond Bay, but if we should wish to look upon the great ship again, it is we who must raise it from the ocean floor. Dylan's music is not written for the listener content to turn off the television when the song is over and grab another beer. If we want to walk the marble floors and spiral staircases of the oral

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30 Ibid.

tradition with Dylan as our guide, then we will just have to "plan to go anyway / to Black Diamond Bay."