



Sam Shepard's *Rolling Thunder Logbook* – A Book That Is Alive

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Abstract. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a logbook is “a full record of a flight by and aircraft,” “a full nautical record of a ship’s voyage,” respectively “a record of performance, events, or day-to-day activities.” Undermining readers’ expectations, Sam Shepard’s *The Rolling Thunder Logbook* is anything but “an official record of events,” and neither is it a “full” account of Bob Dylan’s 1975 Rolling Thunder Revue tour. It subverts the conventions of journal writing as well. As Shepard phrases it in the “Introduction,” “This book has taken on such a fractured form not for the sake of ‘art’ or experimentation but rather because the form is a direct outcome of a fractured memory” (2004, 1). In this paper, I argue that, though it might have been unintentional on Shepard’s part, the *Logbook* – through its very form – becomes capable of truly transmitting the atmosphere of the Rolling Thunder Revue and that this proves to be the adequate style and mode to draw Dylan’s portrait.

Keywords: Shepard, Bob Dylan, Rolling Thunder Revue, identity.

Bob Dylan’s Rolling Thunder Revue tour of New England was envisioned by Dylan as a kind of travelling circus with a set of “constant attractions” and their entourage, plus a film crew, but still open and flexible to allow performers leaving or joining in the course of the voyage linking twenty-two towns of Northeast America. It featured such artists as Joni Mitchell, T-Bone Burnett, Joan Baez, Arlo Guthrie, Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, but also Allen Ginsberg and Sam Shepard. In the late fall and then frozen December landscape of 1975, the troupe journeyed from small town to small town with occasional deviations to, for example, Kerouac’s grave or “the last” Shaker village.

Sam Shepard, an upcoming experimental playwright and film script author at that time, was hired to join the tour as an “on-the-set” scriptwriter. Dylan had planned for a film to be shot in the course of the tour, a surrealistic movie with

artists, musicians, cowboys, clowns and Poe-impersonators, “something like” (Shepard 2004, 15) *Children of Paradise* or *Shoot the Piano Player*. Shepard joined the cast and crew, and set off on the journey. But nothing ever came of the movie. There were some scenes shot, possible locations visited, script ideas outlined, and costume lists drawn up, but they remained what they were: fragments of a work-in-progress never reaching completion.¹

In 1977, however, Shepard published a volume about the tour and his experiences of those six weeks constantly on the move: *The Rolling Thunder Logbook*, with photographs by Ken Regan, the official photographer of the tour, republished in 2004 by Da Capo Press, with a new Preface in verse by Shepard and a new Foreword by T-Bone Burnett. Already at first sight and at the first reading, the volume manifests – both at the level of form and of content – the non-conformist, burlesque, masquerading character of Dylan’s tour. Its fragmentariness and its refusal to be fixed (within a genre, a style, a mode of discourse, etc.) recreate the very essence of the Rolling Thunder Revue and of the Dylan phenomenon.

According to the *Collins Dictionary*, a logbook is “a book containing the official record of trips made by a ship or aircraft;” the *Oxford Dictionary* defines it as “an official record of events during a particular period of time, especially a journey on a ship or plane;” while the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* states that a logbook is “a full record of a flight by an aircraft,” “a full nautical record of a ship’s voyage,” respectively “a record of performance, events, or day-to-day activities.” It lists as synonyms words such as record, memoir, documentation, chronicle, history, report, account, narrative, story, testament, narration, testimony, tale, diary, and journal.

Undermining readers’ expectations, Shepard’s *Logbook* is anything but “an official record of events,” and neither is it a “full” account of the voyage. It subverts the conventions of journal writing as well. As Shepard phrases it in the “Introduction:” “This book has taken on such a fractured form not for the sake of ‘art’ or experimentation but rather because the form is a direct outcome of a fractured memory” (2004, 1). In this paper, I argue that, though it might have been unintentional on Shepard’s part, the *Logbook* – through its very form – becomes capable of truly transmitting the atmosphere of the Rolling Thunder Revue and that this proves to be the adequate style and mode to draw Dylan’s portrait.

For, according to Gilles Deleuze, “nomads have no history; they only have a geography” (1987, 393). During the six weeks of the tour, the cast of artists turned into nomads, all of them detached from their usual spaces and from the “normal” flow of time of their lives. Furthermore, the *Logbook* suggests a certain deterritorialization experienced by them, a rediscovery of America, a rewriting of their own Americanness. Away from their domestic environments, they travel

1 Dylan did finally make a film in conjunction with the Rolling Thunder Revue, released in 1978, entitled *Renaldo and Clara*. The Rolling Thunder Revue also constitutes the theme of Martin Scorsese’s 2019 pseudo-documentary: *The Rolling Thunder Revue: A Bob Dylan Story*.

through the frozen New England landscape, the small towns of the Northeast, which appear as blurred flashes rather than in realistic-naturalistic detailed descriptions. Spaces are captured through one or the other small detail: the name of the town used as title, a café, a wax museum, a conversation with a taxi driver, a hotel lobby, the “Dreamaway Lounge” of an eighty-year-old gypsy lady called Mama, and the list could go on. The *Logbook* refuses to fix them on a “conventional” map. Though the majority of the “scenes” bear the names of the given towns as titles, the geography that is drawn differs largely from that created by official topography. Despite the fact that they suggest the progression of the tour, the view of the “migrant,” of the outsider materializes in sometimes a rapid, other times a slowed-down sequence of images of a different America. To use Deleuzian terms, here “actual geography” is transformed into a “virtual geography” infused with both deconstructive and creative energies: “[t]he world we slide through like it’s never there” (Shepard 2004, 104).² For, as Catherine Weiss argues in her essay “Blowin’ in the Wind: Bob Dylan, Sam Shepard and the Question of American Identity” (2019) analysing the two artists’ collaboration on the song “Brownsville Girl,” through their works both Dylan and Shepard constantly destabilize existing American myths, but at the same time they also insist on the necessity of such myths. The disrooted, “vagabond” Shepard inscribes the New England area with stories of indeterminacy, fluidity, doubling, and a reinterpretation of history from the early settlers to 1970s Madison Square Garden.

Discussing Conrad’s and Stevenson’s *Logbooks*, Nathalie Jaëck states, “What the reader gets is not a final result but a transitory text in progress” (2009, 337). The same can be claimed with reference to Shepard’s text. The unreliable memory leads to a selection of accidental recollections, moments, scenes, characters, and stories that – just like the intended film – remain suspended. Relying again on Deleuze, I argue that Shepard’s writing does not arrange experiences into a traditional chronological order (a convention of journal writing) and does not impose upon them a set form. Meetings, occurrences, conversations and discussions, meditations and monologues, lists and descriptions pop up on the pages of the *Logbook*, allowing space for memory to deviate into associations, random digressions as if criss-crossing on the side roads of the mental map of Shepard’s memory. It never attempts to claim wholeness or try to become a medium of historicizing; it rather fictionalizes history (cf. Steinberg 2003), openly admitting its own instability and fluidity and, fundamentally, that of any

2 Dale Clisby and Sean Bowden (2017) outline the different critical views on Deleuze’s concepts of the “actual” and the “virtual,” stating that there exists a lack of consensus in what concerns the interpretation of these core concepts in Deleuze’s philosophy: while some analysts understand the virtual as being prior to the actual being endowed with “a one-way power of creation” (for ex. Badiou, Hallward, Ansell Pearson), others talk about the two domains as mutually influential (see, for ex., Smith or Williams). In my reading of Shepard’s *Logbook*, I apply the terms “actual geography” and “virtual geography” with the prior interpretation of the domain of virtuality.

text that would try and record history. It problematizes the very possibility of documenting experiences.

While the logbook genre would require the “official” and “full” recording of “day-to-day activities and performance” in a factual, precise, and repetitive manner, Shepard’s text does not only deterritorialize, but – to borrow a term from G. G. Simpson (1996) – it also “dechronizes” the tour and those taking part in the voyage. As Shepard puts it, they were “[t]rying to make connections. To find some kind of landmarks along the way. It’s not just another concert tour but more like a pilgrimage. We’re looking for ourselves in everything. Everywhere we stop. Even when we’re moving. Trying to locate ourselves on the map. In time and space. [...] All these [...] are bringing up questions of who and what we are” (2004, 46).

It snatches out specific segments from the measured and quantifiable continuity of those six weeks, themselves a period cut out from the normal chronology of everyday life, of the ordinary, and it transforms them into narratives of Shepard’s highly subjective Bergsonian “durée”-s the way he perceived and then remembered them. And though this might suggest that the emerging Shepard narrator would stabilize the text through a sustained narrative identity – however limited and subjective he may be –, what we find instead is a constant refusal of the discourse to settle and/or to be monopolized. Constant oscillation can be seen in what concerns the speaker, too: from Shepard’s fragments figures emerge who take over the role of the speaker and in the form of monologues, poems, lyrics, announcements, news in newspapers, scripts for scenes in the film, etc. further destabilize the “host text,” just to dissolve back into the voids of the *Logbook*.

Identity thus becomes a process of construction and deconstruction, a work in a never-ending progress, while the emerging figures seem to be the results of these very texts rather than their “producers.” The gallery of portraits “painted” by Shepard turns into a montage of moving pictures that only rarely come into full focus and only for a moment, and then they blur and disappear behind the words. We see them as transient, fluid, suspended for a second, and then eluding any stabilizing effort – somewhat similar to how I imagine Kerouac’s characters in *On the Road*.

A central interest of Shepard’s *Logbook* lies in how stories are told and how they work. A memory of their conversations about poetry triggers in Shepard a meditation on how texts are capable of creating images in the human mind:

Any analysis of lyrics is destined to become as much of a drag as an in-depth discussion of Freudian psychology and belongs to the domain of the critics anyway. My interest is in the inside process, the system of cellular shiftings that goes on as words come sliding from the past into the present. One thing that gets me about Dylan’s songs is how they conjure up images,

whole scenes that are being played out in full color as you listen. He's an instant filmmaker. (2004, 53)

This contemplation of the cinematic effects of Dylan's lyrics, and implicitly of literary texts in general, also provides the opportunity to testify on his views with reference to how "images," essence, or meaning are not inherent parts of texts but are created in the interaction between text and audience/reader while also emphasizing that art is fundamentally meant to affect one's emotions and that if it truly functions it is also capable of conjuring up feelings:

Probably not the same scenes occur in the same way to everyone listening to the same song, but I'd like to know if anyone sees the same small, rainy, green park and the same bench and the same yellow light and the same pair of people as I do all coming from "A Simple Twist of Fate." [...] How do pictures become words? Or how do words become pictures? And how do they cause you to feel something? That's a miracle. (Shepard 2004, 53)

This metatextual preoccupation of the *Logbook* with the function and effects of stories is even more emphatic when it comes to myths. The entire text destabilizes the fundamental myths of America and Americanness, such as the melting pot theory, the frontier, the self-sufficient and stable individual with an identity firmly rooted in a land conquered and tamed by the white settlers. The segment entitled "Pilgrim Fear" attests to this rewriting of myths:

They didn't know what they'd find. So they run into this huge continent and beach the boat. But they're scared shitless. [...] They build forts and walls and haul in cannon. They rebuild Europe on a primitive land. Everything's full of possible danger. They don't trust a soul. Even their own kind are burned as witches. They lynch Indians at the drop of a hat. [...] They're going to spread themselves no matter what. But now they've forgotten why they came in the first place. (Shepard 2004, 101)

Dylan is featured as a modern-day mythmaker who re-inscribes his environment with new narratives. Though "this land here has been discovered. Every inch," the rediscovery is seen as indispensable where the cast of the Rolling Thunder Revue "is going up and down the face of New England like Lewis and Clark" (Shepard 2004, 118). The tour "is turning into an expedition," even for Ginsberg "after going through America backward and forward for over forty years," because "[n]ow the move is [towards the] inner space" (Shepard 2004, 110) made accessible by Dylan's storytelling. His new myths are not created with any claim for universal validity or eternal truth, but their momentariness

and their immediate connectedness to the here and now is what confers upon them authenticity and efficiency:

Myth is a powerful medium because it talks to the emotions and not the head. It moves us into an area of mystery. Some myths are poisonous to believe in, but others have the capacity for changing something inside us, even if it's only for a minute or two. Dylan creates a mythic atmosphere out of the land around us. The land we walk on every day and never see until someone shows it to us. (Shepard 2004, 63)

Texts, stories also prove to carry that core from which identities originate. From Ginsberg, the poet as “improviser” (Shepard 2004, 52), “like a latter-day Whitman” (Shepard 2004, 29), to Jack Elliot who as a “wandering, mythical, true American minstrel” “transforms the hotel room with American landscapes” through his stories (Shepard 2004, 17), from “the girl standing in the freezing cold outside the red brick town hall in Plymouth Massachusetts who says she has “never seen Dylan. Actually seen him in the same room. So I was curious about this person who I’ve never seen but who keeps appearing in my dream” (Shepard 2004, 43) and the old gypsy woman gifting Baez her dress to the “last Shakers” who have become themselves a museum, “[n]ot just a museum of objects but of entire way of life that these people are embalming in the flesh” (Shepard 2004, 155), or from the Poe impersonator to Joni Mitchell whose “word maneuverings tend to verge on uncanny” (Shepard 2004, 117), or Shepard the playwright; they all appear as products of the *Logbook*. It thus becomes a colourful tapestry, a patchwork carpet, whose Jamesian gaps – not filled or hidden, but much rather made even more apparent and striking by the multitude of photographs – constantly remind readers to reevaluate their concepts and beliefs with reference to how stories, myths, history inscribe places and time, and make them aware of the inherent instability of any such “record.”

It is not surprising, thus, that the *Logbook* never reaches a “proper” end. From the outset, it never seems to have had a firmly and clearly stated “destination” other than “the road.” It spreads horizontally, but it remains flexible and unsettled enough for the reader to jump back and forth, even take a digression. It is just like the Rolling Thunder Revue that also subverted its own ending: a tour planned for New England suddenly arrives to New York Maddison Square Garden to join in on the fundraiser – together with Muhammad Ali – in favour of Rubin Carter (former middleweight boxer convicted for murder) to be released on bail after nine years of imprisonment and granted new trial (to happen some three months later in 1976 – according to the *San Francisco Examiner’s* entry of 21 March 1976, embedded in the *Logbook* (Shepard 2004, 173)). The last segment of the volume features Shepard the playwright stressing throughout the New York premier of

his play *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*, with Dylan in attendance, while the last photograph features Ginsberg and Dylan – guitar on shoulder – walking away from the camera as if towards some new performance or maybe even towards future collaborations with Shepard, for instance, *True Dylan* (1987).

This fragmented and unstable text centres on the figure of Bob Dylan, “a magnet” (Shepard 2004, 115). The ever-eluding poet-composer-musician-performer arises as a Deleuzean “intensive middle space”³ that “does not yield to [any] attempt to contain it, like wind in your face” (DeLanda 2005, 80). In her study, Weiss (2019) also demonstrates how both Shepard and Dylan constantly change masks, a process that reflects the fluid nature of identity, their capability to adapt and transform in response to cultural shifts.⁴

“Dylan has invented himself. He’s made himself up from scratch. That is, from the things he had around him and inside him. Dylan is an invention of his own mind. The point isn’t to figure him out but to take him in. He gets into you anyway, so why not just take him in?” (2004, 98), Shepard asks. All throughout the *Logbook*, he shows a keen interest in the workings of the creative mind and the roles the creative artist assumes, the masks and costumes he/she puts on. Dylan becomes the structuring principle and the organic centre of the volume – a centre that is in constant formation and movement, thus undermining the very essence, even the possibility of a fixed centre. As his monologue in the *Logbook* proves, he constantly “recreates” himself embodying and demonstratively performing the fluid and elusive nature of identity:

I was lookin’ for myself. [...] I started listing things around me. Everything the eyes could see and the ears could hear. Making lists to myself. Chain saws, hammers, cheese barrels, cracker barrels, crackers, rednecks, preachers, panthers, nails, jigsaws, horses, hobbyhorses, sawhorses, outboard motors, rain clouds, lightning, lumber trucks, pig meat, breakfast, teacups, dancers, Nijinsky, divers, deep seas, oceans, rivers, railroad, rappers, radio, waves, mothers, sons in battle, danger, ideas, magic, warlords, ghost bombs, replicas, machine shops, galaxies, torture, treasure hunts, band leaders, Dixieland, wheat crops, tractors, trailers, engineers, bodyguards, cheetahs, Mexico, badlands, desert life, organs, drum rolls, executions, crucifixions, embalmings, ambulances, bloody hands, gimmicks, inventions of the mind, inventions of the body, sporting goods, taxis, rolling pins, ball bearings,

3 Russell West-Pavlov (2009), in discussing the Deleuzean concept of “intensities,” argues that, according to Deleuze, intensities are fundamental in shaping how we experience space. In a similar manner, Yountae An (2014) defines the “intensive middle” as a space of constant transformation and shifts, a “site of becoming” with endless creative potential rather than a fixed and stable site.

4 In her study “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Musician, Writer, Actor” (1998), Ruby Cohn makes a similar argument with reference to Shepard’s artist characters on stage.

working parts, blisters, broken backs, white-face cattle, robber barons, landlords, dressing rooms, diamonds, fast hands, goose bumps, Apaches, dingo dogs, and monkeys in space. (Shepard 2004, 156)

This Whitmanian catalogue – similarly to the *Logbook* itself – challenges narrative conventions, the fake belief in the possibility of objective, factual, authentic, and uncontested recording of human experience and identity. The tour, Dylan, life prove to be “beyond any attempt to capture the whole. There’s no way to even document [them]” (Shepard 2004, 148). Dylan is featured as mobile and variable – just like the text, he refuses to be stabilized. He becomes a void to be “dressed in different costumes.” A void, however, that is overcharged and loaded with endless possibilities, the container of everything. The vanishing artist protagonist of the Rolling Thunder Revue appears as a gypsy, a Native American, a filmmaker, an actor, a writer, a listener, a magician. He does not even shy away from the horror of the identity-expropriating potential of doubling: in several scenes, he plays with the motif of the doppelganger, doubling himself on stage either through masks or by an actual double.

Tonight Dylan appears in a rubber Dylan mask that he’s picked up on 42nd Street. The crowd is stupefied. A kind of panic-stricken hush falls over the place. “Has he had another accident? Plastic surgery?” Or is this some kind of mammoth hoax? An imposter! The voice sounds the same. ... [Then] he rips [the mask] off and throws it back into the floodlight. There he is in the flesh and blood! The real thing! (Shepard 2004, 108–109)

Baez ... pulls off a real show stopper by coming on dressed completely as Dylan. For a second you think you’re seeing double for sure until she tries to sing like him. Then the whole thing dissolves. It’s like an apparition up there. Both of them the same height, dark eyes peering out through white-moon make-up. The same straight-brimmed hat, black vests. There are so many mixtures of imagery coming out, like French clowns, like medicine show, like minstrels, like voodoo, that your eyes stay completely hooked” (Shepard 2004, 170)

Shepard’s Dylan emerges as the sum total of all the texts, photos, gaps of the *Logbook*, which – exactly through its indeterminacy, fragmentariness, and denial of ever posing as authoritative in any sense – proves, paradoxically, both: the limitations of any text to capture experience to the full, and the very potential in highlighting and exploiting these very limitations to provide and transmit to the readers the opportunity to experience the atmosphere of the Rolling Thunder Revue and Bob Dylan’s creative and self-creative art. It perfectly fulfils the goal

Shepard set for himself: “to give the reader a taste of the whole experience. If that happens, the book is alive” (2004, 1).

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