

# Dylan's Autobiography of a Vocation

A Reading of the Lyrics  
1965-1967

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*For Crista,  
Robert Colucci, John W. Price, Robert Drennan*

*In all my lectures, I have taught one doctrine, namely,  
the infinitude of the private man.*  
– R. W. Emerson



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# Preface

The best way to read this book is to listen to Bob Dylan's rendition(s) of the songs in question, or else to have reacquainted oneself with their lyrics at [bobdylan.com](http://bobdylan.com). Even so:

## **Caveat One:**

One will likely register a sharp disjunction between my seriatim explications of Dylan's songs and how one hears them as vocal-musical performances. Many very able critics/commentators, some of whom I reference to frame my deviant perspective, have discussed the songs in that context. I recommend their many published books, articles, and online discussions to the reader looking for what the songs might mean as performed lyrics or as "songs," the topics and themes with which anyone can approximately identify.

## **Caveat Two:**

The present book is as much a critical detour from the "probable" as it is an attempted "possible" explication of Dylan's songs between 1965 and 1967. Poe perhaps best states an important criterion of the critical poetics to which I try to adhere. In *Eureka*, his theory of the Universe, he states this principle as "the straightest and most available of all mere roads" to what he deems "the Truth," namely that of "a perfect consistency."

I would only amend "consistency" here to mean a singular line of subjectively qualified thought. Focused primarily on his songs, I consider this book an extended surmise about Dylan's existential unconscious as a songwriting *self*. One can summarize the book's thesis using any number of lines from his songs. I prefer: "Someone else is speakin' with my mouth, but I'm listening only to my heart" ("I and I"); or "Feeling like a stranger nobody sees" ("Mississippi").

– Louis A. Renza

# Acknowledgments

Without Jeff Rosen and his office's consent, I could not have referred to Bob Dylan's considerable body of lyrical work the way I have. Jeff Rosen deserves profound praise from all Dylan scholars for the way he oversees Dylan's multifaceted artistic canon. I also wish to thank David Beal at Special Rider Music for gaining my permission to quote and refer to Dylan's songs and other written materials.

Much more than the usual, obligatory thanks go to my editors at Bloomsbury Press, Leah Babb-Rosenfeld and Susan Krogulski. Both kept me on the straight and narrow, encouraged me about my project from day one, and were always cooperative in addressing my stream of practical queries. As anyone can appreciate by just browsing sections of this book, my style, like some Ouija movement, lurches toward the trying-to-say-too-much-in-a-sentence-or-two. I therefore wish to thank Grishma Fredric and the copy editor Sundararajan Vidya at Bloomsbury Press for whatever clarity manages to wend its way successfully to the book's readers. All remaining rhetorical or ideational confusions are mine.

I must hold up Robert and Ralph Colucci as the tutelary spirits of this book. Listening to their stunning conversations about Dylan in the very early 1960s (all of us approximately the same age as Dylan) seeded my wonder at his poetic genius and spiritual trajectory. My subsequent, relatively recent discussions with Bobby C. provided the booster I needed to write the book in deed. And how can I fail to mention the many Dartmouth College students who took my course on Dylan's works, which I taught from the early 1970s through 2010? Their numbers obviously preclude my referring to them by name, but they know who they are and should happily, I hope, recognize how many of the ideas they shared in classroom discussions and private exchanges significantly contributed to what I have here written about Dylan's songs.

Special mention goes to my niece Alexandra Rahmann, Tom Atwood, George Ramos, Tyler McIntyre, Halley Moore, Tom Sorci, Paul Sherwin, Jack Morgan, David Harris, Bob Coyle, Robert C. S. Downs, and Jessica Guernsey for their long-term support and help with my various Dylan projects over the years. Many others also encouraged me along the way, among them Da-Shih Hu for showing me how mind and act are indecisively yet provocatively twinned; and Michelle Angers for having invited me to Colby-Sawyer College, April 1998, where I gave a version of the "Desolation Row" discussion included in the present book.

Dartmouth College deserves my appreciation as well for affording me with the opportunity to teach Dylan's lyrics as long as I did. In addition, the Dartmouth College Humanities Forum sponsored my talk "Bob Dylan's 116<sup>th</sup> Dream," April 2008, and before then, the College facilitated my directing a 2006 Conference on Dylan's

works. All the attending speakers and respondents at that Conference helped vitalize my thoughts about Dylan's works. Not least among these scholars, I wish to cite (alphabetically) Bryan Cheyette (who did not give a paper but whose prompting was instrumental in my making the Conference more than a whim) and the esteemed Dylan scholars Aidan Day, John Hinchey, and Christopher Ricks. And my deepest scholarly appreciation must go to Michael Denning for his prior and subsequent thoughts on Dylan and recommendations regarding this book's very occurrence.

Most important acknowledgments are due to the most personal influences on my work: Crista, my wife, literally *Without Whom Not*, and who read my manuscript and listened to my theories with the greatest love and patience; my longtime friend and constant Dylan aficionado John W. Price; frequent conversations with another former student and now excellent scholar in his own right, Jed Dobson; and my continuing salutary friendship with Bob and Sylvia Drennan. Bob understands Dylan's works as well as anyone I know, and provided me with insightful comments galore before and after reading my manuscript.

Like most Dylan critics, I above all give thanks to Bob Dylan for his songs. Wherever and whoever he is, may he and his stay forever.

– Louis A. Renza

## Dylan 1965



### Dylan Goes Electric At Newport

NEWPORT, RI—JULY 25: Bob Dylan plays a Fender Stratocaster electric guitar for the first time on stage as he performs at the Newport Folk Festival on July 25, 1965 in Newport, Rhode Island. (Photo by Alice Ochs/Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images)

# Introduction

... art is a form of religion without dogma.

– D. H. Lawrence

The voyage into the interior is all that matters,  
Whatever your ride.

– Charles Wright

“I am my words.”

– Bob Dylan, 1963

The following book on Bob Dylan’s songs does not directly concern Bob Dylan a.k.a Robert Zimmerman, either the actual person or the musical-cultural celebrity. Nor does it claim to make claims about what Bob Dylan intended in or when composing any one of his songs. Instead, I mostly refer to Bob Dylan’s work and certain biographically relevant events in terms of a figure named “Dylan” (minus quotation marks) who I maintain subtends the songs otherwise authored by the other Bob Dylan. Extending the referential range of Jack Kerouac’s continuous autobiographical writings, *that* Dylan figure allegorically pens an ongoing, palimpsest autobiography, less linear than revolving in both his songs and albums. I discuss all of each album-period’s songs; and I rearrange their sequence not by their appearance on Dylan albums or by strict discographical chronology, but rather the better to show variations on a theme or, specifically, different aspects of Dylan’s subterranean concerns as a musical-lyrical artist. His continuous autobiography, that is, pointedly deals with issues affecting his vocation: he wants his songs—and he inscribes this desire *in* them—to help him and, as a corollary, potentially others to face an environment that consists of the ineluctable catastrophe and opportunity that we otherwise call existence.

In the following chapters, I variously refer to this bottom line as the “existential real,” or simply “the real,” or the “existential.” This “existential” is not reducible to any fixed apprehension of the irrational; it is not “*existentialism*,” not a portable or even quasi-systematic concept that one might plug into this or that experience to account for it. Rather, it more resembles Wallace Stevens’ epiphany of the poetic moment:

They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.  
We shall return at twilight from the lecture  
Pleased that the irrational is rational

Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street,  
I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.  
You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.<sup>1</sup>

But where Stevens' "fluent" muse would supposedly deliver him up to the clear fullness of what he elsewhere calls a vital "plain sense of things," Dylan's "Visions of Johanna," to take just one of his analogous muse figures, would bring him in subjective proximity to a contentless and therefore indifferently "revolving" real.

"Blowin' in the wind" from the beginning, the existential for Dylan exists only in a state of becoming within a field of subjective apprehension. For those reasons, it manifests itself in his songs as a virtually endless procession of images and insights at different times throughout his songwriting career. In a 1966 lyric, for example, he can articulate disappointment at how others (alias his audience) fail to discern his work's concerted quest to come upon the real. But in another song, "Dark Eyes" in 1985, he can register how others, whether they know it or not, equally despair from being haunted by the real: "A million faces at my feet but all I see are dark eyes." I use "spiritual" to designate both this view of others and Dylan's lyrical efforts to front the real on subjective terms. All aspects of this vision fund his ongoing spiritual autobiography. His songs show him multitudinously calibrating his experiences of external and internal events against the horizon of his oncoming awareness of the Absurd. The way I see it, the vocational project primarily to situate his work in that context begins full force in the creatively explosive period beginning with his 1965 songs in and around *Bringing It All Back Home*, and reaches a momentary resting point as recorded in the lyrics comprising *John Wesley Harding* (1967).

One can no doubt question this "allegorical" thesis on a number of grounds. In the first place, many Bob Dylan critics, fans and perhaps Bob Dylan himself surely would object to my emphasis on "reading" his lyrics. Songs have all to do with listening to their vocalized musical performance, as opposed to reading "words on the page," to which one usually relegates poems proper. Bob Dylan early on seems to have thought of himself as a poet ("I'm a poet, and I know it./Hope I don't blow it"), but eventually came to prefer assigning his work to that of "a song and dance man." As I have noted elsewhere, however, his lyrics have always excerpted his work for special critical attention.<sup>3</sup> If the Dylan "text" patently consists of a hybrid complex of lyric + music + *his* vocal performance, that complex nonetheless fails to account for how his work self-evidently hangs around for an excessive amount of critical attention well beyond the issue of that work's generic status. Hence the nation-wide media notice (2016) given to the Dylan winning of the Nobel Prize for literature as well as his archives to be housed at the University of Tulsa pretty much underwrites an academic field that critics already designated as "Dylan Studies." Hence the continual treatment of his works by social-political critics, exponents of "cultural studies," historians, and musicologists focused on relating his songs to US American musical traditions (e.g., *The Great American Songbook*) and the social wrongs they protested. Hence the many exegeses of Dylan songs by eminent literary critics, biographers, and scholars from various disciplinary fields.

In the end, I suppose referring to his songs as song-poems (Sean Wilentz's term) seems the safest depiction. Bob Dylan has always paid minute attention to his verbal lyrics.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, when discussing a Dylan song, for the most part we fix on a recollected, relatively immediate echo of its vocalized lyric by him, whether its having occurred on a recording or in a live concert. This recollected "text" produces a space for reflection

on the absent-present lyric. How can one listen to “Where Are You Tonight? (Journey Through Dark Heat)” (1978) and not *almost* simultaneously ponder the meaning of its elusive images and references? The same goes, of course, for “Tangled Up in Blue” (1975). What one does with this post- or a-performative reflection depends on the listener-cum-reader. But surely treating the lyric the way I do in this book, namely as a poem-infused song with spiritual legs and singularly performed by Dylan, counts for one important possibility.

In fact, he himself treats his lyrical work this way. All of his songs, so I would argue, inscribe a similar reflective space within themselves. For example, the two riders approaching society alias the watchtower in his well-known song “All Along the Watchtower” perhaps are doing just that: forever approaching and never arriving with a message for us, in whatever form such a message might take. Don’t we here collide with a question that itself becomes the message? The song’s opening vocational scene raises the stakes of this question beyond those that riddle Keats’ pastoral urn. Whatever the conclusion of their initial dialogue, the two riders’ imminent arrival ambiguously exemplifies Dylan’s resistance to communicative closure. This interpretation becomes reinforced if one maintains with some critics that the song’s end loops back to its beginning: the two riders, really two sides of Dylan when composing the song, are debating his vocational role as they approach the “watchtower.” Should and/or can he at all warn others about the necessity to face the real? “All Along the Watchtower” figuratively represents its own moment of approaching its *listener* in the song’s “now.”

This self-reflexive, allegorized lesion in communication occurs elsewhere in Dylan’s work. Consider the effect of his all but worn-out aphorism from “Love Minus Zero/No Limit” (1965), “there’s no success like failure/And failure’s no success at all.” Doesn’t that saying leave open the option for listeners to internalize an anxious freedom, signified and enacted by the saying’s inconclusive message? The same goes for the “everything is broken” refrain in the *Oh Mercy* song “Everything Is Broken” (1989). If *everything* is broken—this song, too?—what alternative exists? Even Dylan’s performance-practice of endlessly altering his songs’ renditions-cum-semiotic effects effectively recasts those songs so that they too appear in a state of never-ending, unresolved becoming.

Of course, we tend to replace this open-endedness with one or another “objective” meaning. As I discuss in Chapter 5, most listeners, to take one example, accept “All Along the Watchtower” as intimating a prophetic, outward-directed apocalyptic warning to the social establishment, which the Jimi Hendrix cover of the song helped reinforce. I maintain, however, that Dylan’s songs keep gagging this impulse to fill in the blanks. The very title of his now well-known and unfinished song “I’m Not There,” collected among his *Basement Tapes* songs, arguably personifies what his songs in fact *do*. This allegorized self-reflection of the song by a Dylan in the process of composing it at some point stops interpretation in its tracks. A good example of this hermeneutic veto occurs in the second line of the song “Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum” from the 2001 album “*Love and Theft*”: “They’re throwing knives into a tree.” Simply enough, the line suggests that this activity shows the two ho-hum characters as just passing the time. Upon reflection, however, they also figure obvious send-ups of average middle-class Joes who live life with zero spiritual reflection—like, by implication, most of mankind.



At best they make, as the allegorical pun has it, “stabs at the truth”: that is, at “a tree” alluding to the biblical Tree of Knowledge. The issue turns out a vocational one: the two do not know how to live their lives, or what for, but proceed to live blithely as if they did. But can the listener know any more than they? Stalling us from instantly grasping its allegorized sense, the song solicits our desire for and triggers our failure to receive—as it were, our own fall from—knowledge: not only about others like these spiritually obtuse characters, but also about the Dylan song’s conveying this very suggestion.

For me, Dylan’s genius lies in his uncanny ability to double-track his lyrics while composing them: to “think twice” or on two semiotic registers at once, with the second steadfastly focused on the vocational whys and wherefores that strike him during particular acts of writing. From one angle, the fact that his songs linger within a sphere of incompatible double-meanings testifies to their poetic value. Geoffrey H. Hartman calls this kind of textual event a “delay” of the “communication” or meaning-making “compulsion.” An undecided middle space defines what makes a poem, or let us say a Dylan song, poetic as such. That space requests “a labor that aims not to overcome the negative or indeterminate but to stay within it as long as necessary.” Discussing W. B. Yeats’ poem “Leda and the Swan,” Hartman observes that it leaves us with a question—I would here include the question Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower” leaves us with—that “obliges the reader to become active, even to risk something,” namely to “*stand . . .* in that question.” Not rushing to answer such a question can lead us to “take our time and think of the relation of the human mind to what overthrows it.”<sup>5</sup>

From another angle, I argue that Dylan seeks precisely “*what overthrows*” his mind or, more accurately, his sense of a bottomed-out self-identity, and does so by allegorizing his scene of autobiographical composition in and through his songs. As I adopt the term in this book, “allegory” refers to the stubborn otherness (*allos* itself meaning “other”) attached to a Dylan song’s conventionally understandable or objectively determinable meanings. Contrary to a system of signifiers that transparently refer to a fixed set of moral or spiritual signifieds, Dylan’s self-referential allegories never rise to the level of objectively definitive representation. They disappear from view, as it were, at the very point that his poetic-lyrical act goes off as if without a word (“She never said nothing, there was nothing she wrote”) toward the real, for example “with the man/In the long black coat” (“Man in the Long Black Coat”). As I regard them, then, Dylan’s songs orbit around his traceable efforts precisely to justify composing them in the midst of engaging a nothingness that possesses phenomenological force for him then and there.

I focus on *this* type of autobiographical rumination in the following chapters. I also argue that Dylan passes through different phases of aligning his vocation with that vision of spiritual point. His allegorized songs especially of the 1965–67 period disclose him seeking: (1) to engage a freedom of self determined against agenda-ridden thinking and/or socially secure notions of “self”-reference (in Chapter 1 on *Bringing It All Back Home*); (2) to endure an anxious freedom evoked when he accepts the end-game of self as “nothing” or as “a *complete* unknown,” which unleashes a freedom equally determined in relation to how other people reject that vision of it (Chapter 2 on *Highway 61 Revisited*); (3) to expel from consciousness those others “whom” he internalizes as interfering with his realization of that “real” freedom (in

Chapter 3 on *Blonde on Blonde*); (4) to imagine a private artistic space in which to decompress the foregoing agon with audience-others, while retaining the spiritual aim of his vocational labor (Chapter 4 on *The Basement Tapes*); and (5), to accept an ethics of the singular self, yet one compatible with other persons' pursuits of different but no less spiritually oriented goals (Chapter 5 on *John Wesley Harding*).

Throughout my discussions, I maintain that Dylan's autobiography of his vocation masks an inescapably subjective relation to his songs that requests the same from us. In that sense, I more or less adopt the position of the French phenomenologist Georges Poulet. As depicted by Hazard Adams, Poulet provocatively asserts that the critic writes "a criticism that is itself literature in an attempt to convey his consciousness of his author's consciousness. His [the critic's] work, in turn, will be more than its own objectivity when it also finds a reader and joins itself to that reader's consciousness."<sup>6</sup> In this book, however, I complicate Poulet's position in two ways. First, I accept the Freudian qualification that written and putatively objective versions of our experiences necessarily come down to the writer's motivated wish.<sup>7</sup> Second, I accept Jacques Derrida's widely understood argument to the effect that any endeavor to occupy an author's textually evoked subjectivity necessarily falls victim to the myth of self-presence. Even the self I think I am in relation to others is out of sync with the "unknown" something about myself that at any moment can flood that socially recognizable "self"-reflection. More in retrospect, I can equally acknowledge a "something there is about [me]," to paraphrase a line from a Dylan song,<sup>8</sup> that provides the raw, anonymous material for my variously definable selves. "I am an other," Rimbaud famously uttered, a phrase that Dylan alludes to in his album notes to *Bringing It All Back Home*. But one can add that most often, I am also not such an other to another. The Martin Buber "Thou," say, constantly entails a problematic goal, since it most often assumes the proportions of a miraculous occurrence.<sup>9</sup>

Yet when all is said and done, the Dylan *in* his songs resists turning into a Buberian "It." He means to be sure that "there was no man around/Who could track or chain him down" ("John Wesley Harding"). All of Bob Dylan's associable group-orientations, for example his religionist affiliations, sooner or later become up for grabs in his *Dylan* songs.<sup>10</sup> To be sure, as performer of them, he allows for the illusion of our taking his subjectivity objectively. Listeners of Bob Dylan's songs surely experience the temptation, encouraged by their musical-vocal presentation, to apprehend the singer as if he were all but totally present to and in them. Even then, however, the lyrics keep inviting post-immediate reflection. There, as it were at that crossroads of interpreting his songs, one can certainly opt for one or another plausibly "objective" reading, for instance concerning their sociological relevance especially in the 1960s' Western rock 'n' roll milieu or US culture at large.<sup>11</sup>

Instead, in this book I take the other road and try to discuss the Dylan disappearing into his songs at the point of the question they leave behind after scripting a vocational scene. One then and there encounters a blank "Dylan," the other *become* other by his now unexpected but lyrically enacted residual absence. We are left with an image of subjectivity the equivalent of the "nothing" that I argue Dylan finds it crucial to engage to justify composing his work. In effect, he ideally would become "masked

and anonymous,” or a mystery not just to us but also himself. The “existential” project I assign to Dylan thus has him working to come upon not the pleasures of self-indulgence, but rather of a contentless or emptied *self*: “When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose/You’re invisible now, you got no secrets to conceal” (“Like a Rolling Stone”). One finally has no secrets because they all come down to one’s own “nothing,” but only as one registers that subjectively.

Of course, this subjectivist critical take smacks of critical fiction, since who can or could ever verify it? But first, the subjectivity to which I refer is dialectically qualified. Regarding the interpretation of creative texts, it concedes first dibs to the impulse to explain things objectively, for purposes of sharing that reading with others. Only then would criticism redirect the so-called objective, textual evidence back to the author and/or reader’s subjective field of apprehension. Second, one can claim, I think, that so-called “objective” critiques of Bob Dylan’s works anyway amount to tropes for subjective responses. I regard the act of criticism as the plausible explication of a desired possible thought in relation to a text. Our privileging scientific criteria notwithstanding, we each want that text to say what we want it to say (positively or negatively), based on the evidence it supplies that we think will seem plausible to peers. But if plausibility depends on, as I think it does, relative “interpretive communities,” to use Stanley Fish’s helpful critical term (itself dependent on an interpretive community to seem plausible), what happens to “objective” critique?

So yes, in this work I discuss an entirely surmised “Dylan.” But first, *is it that?*<sup>12</sup> And in any case who’s hurt by it, especially if the reader finds it interesting, and possibly more than that? I suppose I could rely on old chestnuts to justify my interpretive flings into the Dylan dark. Nathaniel Hawthorne conveniently provided one: “Nobody, I think, ought to read poetry, or look at pictures or statues, who cannot find a great deal more in them than the poet or artist has actually expressed. Their highest merit is suggestiveness.”<sup>13</sup> And Adam Phillips reminds us that Freud, regarding both literary works and the “self,” called for the interpretive practice of “overinterpretation,” since “all genuine creative writings are the product of more than a single impulse in the poet’s mind.”<sup>14</sup> Overinterpreting Bob Dylan’s songs or not, I do believe that the Dylan I recreate in the following book at least exists tangled up among them.



## Return to Me: *Bringing It All Back Home*

In a certain sense, he was revolutionary, yet not so much by doing something as by not doing something; but a partisan or leader of a conspiracy he was not. His irony saved him from that, for just as it deprived him of due civic sympathy for the state, due civic pathos, it also freed him from the morbidity and the imbalance required for being a partisan. On the whole, his position was far too personally isolated and every relationship he contracted was too loosely joined to result in anything more than a meaningful contact. He stood ironically above every relationship.

– Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*

“You’re going to die. You’re going to be dead. It could be 20 years, it could be tomorrow, anytime. So am I. I mean, we’re just going to be gone. The world’s going to go on without us. All right now. You do your job in the face of that, and how seriously you take yourself you decide for yourself.”

– Bob Dylan, to an interviewer in *Don’t Look Back*, 1965

The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.

– T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”

### 1 Social critique/Existential spiritual

The sentiment expressed in Kierkegaard’s imaginary vision of Socrates<sup>1</sup> could just as easily apply to the changing tenor of Bob Dylan’s lyrical compositions beginning with the album period of *Another Side of Bob Dylan* and coming to fruition in *Bringing It All Back Home*. Critical discussions surrounding the songs on *Another Side of Bob Dylan* usually focus on how they mark Dylan’s vocational turning point or another side in a career surely notable for more than one. The vocational change here supposedly consists in his exchanging the folk-song’s social-political ethos for a more self-centered focus in his lyric compositions. At the time, this change got simultaneously entwined with his move from solo “folk” guitar accompaniment to an electrified, rock ‘n’ roll orchestration of the songs in *Bringing It All Back Home*.<sup>2</sup>

Still, Dylan’s change by no means invalidates the political relevance of his new set of songs. Indeed, one might draw the opposite conclusion. According to Mike Marqusee, for example, Dylan’s “shift from the public to the personal” in *Another*

*Side of Bob Dylan* “was to prove a defining moment in the American sixties”: “Dylan’s premature political disillusionment reflected not only the stresses of revolt and reaction, but also the relentless packaging of experience and identity in a consumer society.”<sup>3</sup> For Marqusee, if Dylan’s new lyrics forgo working toward specific social reforms, they nonetheless attempt to expose a hydra-headed American authoritarianism, a larger *bête noire* than those Dylan had fingered in the preceding *The Times They Are A-Changin’* period.

What can throw a spanner into this *apologia* for a Dylan with “another” political “side” to his songs is the “electric” set of *Bringing It All Back Home* songs. Does it show him too easily complicit with “pop” art and *its* complicit allegiance to the American culture industry?<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, one only has to listen loosely to the album’s songs to sense Dylan himself resisting any such judgment, although even *that* judgment becomes subject to doubt. For example, the “folk”-performed songs like “Gates of Eden” and “Mr. Tambourine Man” arguably express anti-political sentiments whereas rock-orchestrated songs like “Subterranean Homesick Blues” and “Maggie’s Farm” protest various aspects of the American capitalist establishment. This complication to the songs’ expected or plausible readings points to the slippery semantic practice governing Dylan’s lyrical compositions.<sup>5</sup> His lyrics not only tend to express one viewpoint while also possibly undermining it, but they also simultaneously cast doubt on that second meaning as well by making it difficult to deny the first.

The Dylan song thus generates at least two possible meanings, both of which work in tandem yet resist a simple semantic synthesis. One can discern such complication in an ostensibly “social” song such as the one Marqusee takes for a prime example of a still politicized Dylan. Although not explicitly intent “on condemning or transforming the [American-capitalist social] system,” “Chimes of Freedom” steadfastly focuses on “the system’s victims, those it persecutes and those it ignores or discards.”<sup>6</sup> Relying on a transparent metaphorical code, the song’s *mise en scène* undoubtedly alludes to the social unrest occurring in US society at the time. The Dylan speaker and some companion, in this reading most likely a folk-political cohort, seek shelter from *this* storm, although not to escape it but ostensibly to ponder and criticize its various manifestations.

Yet “Chimes of Freedom” also complicates even this social-political reading, and not least by its baroque rhetoric, a chief example of which appears in the mixed metaphor of the song’s very refrain, “chimes . . . flashing.” The language slows instead of facilitates whatever social protest the song otherwise invites us to take as its intention. The words mimic a storm of *sound* at the expense of verbal meaning: “Through the mad mystic hammering of the wild ripping hail/The sky cracked its poems.” Pathetic fallacies abound, while literary echoes and self-references rain down [*sic*] on the song’s listeners: “Through the wild cathedral evening” (a Kenneth Patchen allusion<sup>7</sup>) “the rain unraveled tales.” Nor can one easily decide whether a particular phrase amounts to a poetic condensation of a thought or a periphrastic concealment of one. Do “the disrobed faceless forms of no position” refer to anyone anywhere whose existential *cri de douleur* goes unnoticed; or does the image reduce to an unnecessarily oblique way of referring to people who lack important social status?

More important, “Chimes of Freedom” arguably hints at disaffection from social malaise in theme and rhetoric right from the start. In resonating with a no-man-is-an-island theme, the bells in “Chimes of Freedom” toll not for specific, socially oppressed groups but for people who lack even such minimal social identity. The early Dylan often criticized the US social system, for example as typified by New York City in the song “Talkin’ New York.” There the City, the picaresque Dylan speaker representatively implies, promulgates an indifferent social *Gesellschaft* for all of its inhabitants. But in “Chimes of Freedom,” the “we” (“We ducked inside the doorway”) acts like a delimited social pronoun. The song stages only the speaker and his companion—perhaps a surrogate for the song’s listener—finding a temporary haven from the “thunder crashing” period’s social upheaval, most notably street protests over civil rights and the Vietnam War. The two occupy an indeterminate position “Far between sundown’s finish an’ midnight’s broken toll.” For the Dylan speaker, the question that comes foremost to mind is what should he and “we” do in the face of this social chaos? On the other hand, given the song’s elegiac ending (“we listened one last time an’ we watched with one last look”), it would appear that he has already chosen to part company with his folk-political cohort, and not stay to protest the plight of social castoffs.

Yet even as one in a series of faux “farewell” songs in Dylan’s long career, “Chimes of Freedom” self-evidently protests the oppressed situation of any *single* person as equally deserving his artistic attention. As one critic notes, the songs “inclusive rhetoric . . . refuses to draw lines of separation between any group or individual. The ‘chimes’ toll for everybody; everybody’s worldview has merit.”<sup>8</sup> But Dylan’s position also skirts any liberally based view of freedom-for-all. For that matter, the song explicitly celebrates anyone including the artist ironically committed to social marginality: for “each an’ ev’ry underdog soldier in the night.” Freedom here chimes not for protesting peacemakers but “for the warriors whose strength is not to fight,” in other words for those who could but don’t engage in social-political warfare. To be sure, the modern social machine (“the city’s melted furnace”) serves to ensure that everyone becomes reducible to the same. But Dylan and his companion, who from this viewpoint figures less a liberal fellow traveler than a figure of his own imagination, notice this repression of self-potentiality going on: “we watched/With faces hidden while the walls were tightening.”

On one level, then, his image of “chimes of freedom *flashing*” at best points to the flickering or pro tem aspect of “freedom” possible to gain through social-political movements that his “finger-pointing songs” supported. But Dylan now mainly sets out to free the singular misfit within any social group. The chimes especially ring for “the mateless mother” who exists on a par with “the rebel . . . the rake . . . the outcast, burnin’ constantly at stake.” Exercising the impulse to know and control the other, one or another social *langue* leads one to mis-identify oneself as a “rake” or an “outcast.” Such social pressures are ubiquitous. Anyone can turn into “the misdemeanor outlaw” who deviates from social norms, no matter how small or in what social group. But the same goes for persons who perversely conform to small or large social norms, for example the “mistitled prostitute” in a society where most people sell their labor for social gain. Dylan’s new politics no doubt incline toward the anarchistic, but more as

an existential anti-politics supportive of “the gentle, striking for the kind” or those who disengage from the combative stances demanded by this or that socially grounded goal. Nature abets this anti-politics in that it consists of an ever-fluxing backdrop that mitigates the major importance of social agendas. The “mad mystic hammering of the wild ripping hail” or the “The sky” with its “poems” moves the mystery of existence, its “naked wonder,” to the forefront, which only “the guardians and protectors of the mind” promote. Such moments can occur anywhere anytime, as here in a song personified by “a cloud’s white curtain [that] in a far-off corner flashed.”

The “chimes of freedom” simply toll for those “misplaced in jail,” including those who don’t fit into social scripts that foster illusions of public access to self, or for “the searching ones, on their speechless, seeking trail.” If not in terms of conventional or anti-conventional social values, Dylan’s songs represent any listener’s move toward a singular experience of “freedom.” Up to a point, of course, this notion dovetails with certain social-liberationist goals, so that as if “suspended” Dylan can still idealize (“Starry-eyed”) a union (“laughing as I recall”) between his personal vocational project and others’ social-political ones. Both he and they find themselves at odds with established social values (“when we were caught/Trapped”). Yet this “both-and” vocational union remains tenuous at best. Should he compose songs eschewing single-minded social “causes” the better to celebrate “every hung-up person in the whole wide universe”? Or might he take even such projects as figurative pretexts to feed the single-minded goal of self-liberation?

Dylan gives voice to this last option in the song “Spanish Harlem Incident” on *Another Side of Bob Dylan*. There his creative moment coincides with his ethical optimism insofar as both ideally require ditching social determinations of self-identity. Concentrated by the medium of songwriting, *that* “incident,” otherwise referring to a brief, sexual encounter with a black Latino woman, occurs in his passing connection with the “Gypsy gal” inspiring this song. Here the woman doubles as his gypsy or “mystery” muse whom he asks to foretell and forward his vocational destiny as an artist with a “restless” state of mind, playing his song (“my fortune/Down along my restless palms”) and determined to disclose his and her “naked wonder.” For her to help him do creative work, he must allow her “heat,” both sexual and existential, to dilute his fixed notion of self-identity. She herself exists as a marginal figure: a minority “Harlem” woman in mainstream white society; yet an indeterminate gypsy figure even in Spanish Harlem. She embodies for Dylan someone “too hot for taming” by prevailing major or minority social standards. “Spanish Harlem Incident” reveals his wish to give himself over fully to her “gypsy” spell (to “have fallen beneath/Your pearly eyes”) and thereby jettison (with her “eyes, so fast an’ slashing”) *his* fixed views of life and art. She inspires him with the quality of an untamed “self,” as if identityless or lacking any secure point of social reference. He would become, as it were, “pitch black,” a self paradoxically featureless and unable to perceive anything in “the night . . . come and make my/Pale face fit into place, ah, please!” Dylan’s existential goal here appears to him with erotic-aesthetic force. His intercourse with “her,” literal or figurative, suffices for him to declare the direction his work will take hereafter: as “If it’s you my lifelines trace.” As his imagined double, she can help change how he envisions his life and composes/performs his songs, his voice in synchrony with her “flashing diamond teeth.”



The song's scene turns out no "incident" after all, but rather a trope for what could ignite his musical-lyrical vocation. "Spanish Harlem Incident" records one among other possible moments in which he imagines a would-be conversion to a decisive vocational change: "You have slayed me," namely his past way of envisioning life. "She" takes him up (to "cliffs") and woos him with magical "charms" in terms of which he finds himself "riding"—a homonym for "writing"—and losing his identity: "I know I'm 'round you but I don't know where." Dylan suffers a loss of his "pale" self by encountering his "pitch black" double, the residuum of which nevertheless entails an individuated if identityless perspective. This imagined moment becomes the standard by which he will define the "real" scenes of composing songs and performing them. The "wondrin' all about me" is what the "Gypsy gal" or muse-mysteriarch alerts him to, and that he regards as the source of his poetic charge "Ever since I seen you there." Social pressures, of course, particularly the patronization of minorities, endlessly return to haunt this usage.<sup>10</sup> But Dylan's alleged abuse first of a minority person as a sexual object and second as a woman turned into muse figure takes second place to his move toward an anarchical, inward state of mind, the existential ethos of which of course applies to "her" or to any listener. "It Ain't Me, Babe" on *Another Side of Bob Dylan* makes much the same point: a principled detour in his work from the standards defined by any audience that holds either to the value of consumerist entertainment or of a specific political agenda. The Dylan song can still criticize oppressive social forces, but only insofar as they thwart his or anyone's effort to achieve *self*-liberation, meaning whatever transcends social definitions of self in his environment.

## 2 Leaving home

After *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, the charge that Dylan instinctively assigns to composing/performing lyrics more and more centers on his vocation at the expense of other people's ethical mandates. The issue no longer becomes a "both-and" affair but rather an "either-or" one: either he pursues his vocational goal first, or accepts one or another socially defined ethical obligation. In practice, the first option means to uncover any obstacles that might block a free relation to *self*-examination. But is such openness at all realizable? Deriving from his immediate environment, how can anyone evade even by violating socially endorsed or tabooed modes for living one's life? At the very least, Dylan's vocational task assumes the status of an endless enterprise. In its own way, this project itself can turn into yet another illusion, for this task consists not only in trying to focus on his relation to "self" precisely in the face of resistant social pressures, but also not to do that with self-certain conviction. Dylan therefore plays out such illusions in his lyrics the better that he might pursue a formless relation to "self." He associates this project first and foremost with a poetics of lyrical art that inclines him to privilege sheer verbal flow and ad hoc referential insights into his social world. This practice results in songs and albums on the model of "variations on a theme" as opposed to some coherent, teleologically constrained narrative. But during his act of composing it, each song still circles around whatever Dylan deems would block the question of self as a question.

The very title *Bringing It All Back Home* alludes to his artistic effort to relate all things to a paradoxically homeless notion of self.<sup>11</sup> In part, Dylan's anti-formulation constitutes a reaction to the assaults on self perpetrated by his social environment, which helps account for the alliance of his non-positioning with countercultural social protests of the mid-1960s. For example, one can easily construe the album's opening "Subterranean Homesick Blues" either way. On one hand, the song ostensibly extends the significance of Jack Kerouac's novel *The Subterraneans*, which concerns in-group hipsters living "beat" lives of sex and drugs, all below the radar screens used to enforce inauthentic, middle-class American mores. On the other hand, confronted with an entrenched American establishment—call it "Amerika"—permeating all aspects of his daily life, Dylan contrariwise adopts the persona of a *former* countercultural protester now having become unable to believe in *any* kind of social "cause." Leaving him inwardly homeless, his alienation has become total, occurring in relation to both mainstream American society *and* its countercultural alternatives.

Other songs on *Bringing It All Back Home* likewise propose that neither he nor his peers can genuinely act with moral-political certitude. Unlike the old-style hipster self-certain in his "anti-" stance, Dylan's figures seem "homesick" in an absolutely bleak, "subterranean" world. One might even say that his subterraneans are existentially alienated even from social alienation. The "home" to which he's "bringing" his songs thus ironically consists of anything but a place where he might feel rest assured with his life. Quite the reverse, he and others find themselves constantly on the run. Johnny's trying to elude Amerika via a drug-culture, and doing so notably "in the basement," sub rosa, behind the scenes, anywhere *but* up-front, politically speaking. Even when the persona takes to the streets, he ends up only "thinking about the government" and finds himself in despair that he can't do anything to counter its egregious acts against individuals. Government officials themselves have got "laid off" and are looking for hand-outs or "to get paid off." If only unconsciously, they can't find existential compensation for the ethical compromises they have had to make to play the Amerikan game.

Any one tactic by which one tries to alleviate social injustice turns out powerless and even targeted for blame: "Look out kid/It's somethin' you did."<sup>12</sup> One can only try to keep moving away ("duck down the alley way") or retreat into further social recesses to find someone equally alienated like oneself ("Lookin' for a new friend"). Of course even that becomes a futile enterprise, for like "The man in the coon-skin cap," people fake being "real" or authentic pioneer-like American selves. In effect, they are already imprisoned "In the big pen," figuratively beholden to one cock-brained American ideal or another. Just as Dylan surmised in "Some Other Kinds of Songs" on *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, every political act turns into a con-game to get power over others, so that what one has is never enough: "[He] Wants eleven dollar bills/You only got ten."<sup>13</sup> Conversely, if a friend like "Maggie" comes running fresh from planting bombs or making drugs ("Face full of black soot"), she too pays a price for her effort by ending up riddled with paranoia about the bureaucracy supposedly invading her privacy and knowing what she has done: "Plants in the bed but/The phone's tapped anyway." She suspects the establishment always about to be "busting" everyone sooner (by "early May") or later.

This social situation clearly makes one wary of taking any kind of political action. Quite the opposite, one feels forced to worry constantly about getting caught doing anything at all (“Walk on your tip toes”) no matter what it is (“Don’t matter what you did”). Anxiety prevails about one’s doing anything that would violate social norms of behavior, even taking common, over-the-counter drugs like “No Doz.” But Maggie’s world doesn’t allow for any dozing. No matter who they pretend to be, others eventually reveal themselves as dangerous, and that includes people whose work seems intended to help other people. For example, firemen who “carry around a fire hose” to save houses and occupants can interchangeably turn into figures one sees on television who bust blacks protesting abuse of their civil rights. Similarly, one might find a nondescript, average Joe in “plain clothes” a plainclothes policeman. For Maggie, paranoia about paternalistic masquerades acts like an antidote to a totally irrational world that advertises itself as eminently rational, yet keeps her and her peers permanently in a “subterranean” world. Simultaneously a state of mind, this place serves as a mere substitute home that also promises imminent despair: “You don’t need a weather man/To know which way the wind blows.”

Nothing can alleviate this pervasive, Amerikan-bred despair, least of all the most commonly invoked panaceas. Getting healthy doesn’t matter (“Get sick, get well”) nor does schooling (“Hang around the ink well”); neither does trying to make money, which always remains subject to the anxiety about whether “anything is goin’ to sell.” Conforming to (“Try hard, get barred”) or dropping out of mainstream social values (“Get back, write braille,” meaning: try working blindly or without resolute effort) does not work either. Whether one goes straight (“Join the army”) or turns crooked (“Get jailed, jump bail”), in other words conforms *or* rebels, “You’re gonna get hit.” Activist art like the earlier Dylan’s likewise fails to solve or salve such problems. Would-be artists end up just wanting to “Hang around” the artistic scene (“the theaters”). They act like artists instead of doing art, which in turn results in their falling into bad habits (*à la* drug “users”) or doing art vis-à-vis commercial standards (“cheaters”). Most just plain fail to achieve artistic success (“Six-time losers”). An analogous futility marks those who seek romance to escape the continual subterranean press of alienation, for example like the “Girl” who hangs around laundromats “by the whirlpool” washer, a figure for a ceaseless circularity that expresses how she keeps hoping to meet the love of her life but only ends up finding “a new fool.”

The chaos of modern, social life defines the real whirlpool. Trying to find answers, one ends up anxious about large-scale political *bête noires* (“Don’t follow leaders”) and the smallest of public obstacles: “Watch the parkin’ meters.” In short, the routine of life turns into a relentless cycle of trying and failing to avoid crises. As soon as one gets “born,” one is driven to seek shelter (to “keep warm”) both in a physical and psychological sense. This also means trying to become comfortable in one’s social setting by conforming to its perceived values and impossibly pleasing everyone. One superficially follows fashions in clothes (“Short pants”), looks for commonplace “romance,” wants to belong to a religion (“get blessed”) or make money (“Try to be a success”). In the end, not even education can protect one from the fate of social abjection: “Twenty years of schoolin’/And they put you on the day shift.” The only way

to cope with this situation is to go “subterranean” for real (“jump down a manhole”) and don’t call attention to oneself: “Don’t wear sandals” (a bohemian signifier), avoid public “scandals” of any kind. Rebellion has become an entirely underground affair, which contradicts its being a rebellion at all. Dylan’s vision of an American underground or alternative to Amerika essentially comes down to a state of perpetual homelessness.

The comic version of “Subterranean Homesick Blues” occurs in “On the Road Again,” the title of which of course again alludes to a work by Jack Kerouac. Dylan’s comic exaggeration focuses on what Elizabeth Bishop termed the surrealism of daily life, with his song especially targeting the US social world. Every day from when he wakes up, he feels “jumpy” or anxiously alienated: “There’s frogs inside my socks.” US Amerika seems beholden to a “frigid” or anti-homey mode of life (e.g., the “mother” who’s “a-hidin’/Inside the icebox”) and to an aggressive, patriarchal ethos: “Your daddy walks in wearin’/A Napoleon Bonaparte mask.” Physical love doesn’t solve the Dylan speaker’s dilemma either, for when he tries to have sex with his would-be lover (“pet your monkey”), she resists him violently; indeed, she insists on his adhering to fixed values that would deny pleasure altogether: “I get a face full of claws.” The figure closest to her heart (“who’s in the fireplace” a.k.a. hearth) is a fantastic ideal, a make-believe nice guy (“Santa Claus”) who would give her gifts gratis, perhaps without asking for sexual favors. For even “The milkman comes in/He’s wearing a derby hat” or appears as if he were cuckolding the speaker. To say the least, the Dylan figure feels out of place (“why I don’t live here”) in Amerika. If he asks for “something to eat,” especially for something that might satisfy his *spiritual* appetite, he receives only commonplace responses (“brown rice, seaweed,/And a dirty hotdog”). Similarly, both an old militaristic nationalism (“Your grandpa’s cane/It turns into a sword”) and religiosity (Your grandma prays to pictures/. . . pasted on a board”) give him nothing to believe in. Neither does a capitalist ethos that mitigates or would reduce his talents: “Everything inside my pockets/Your uncle [Sam] steals.” No hope exists for him to rectify this situation: “you ask why I don’t live here/Honey, how come you don’t move?”

Everyone needs to move away, a position that captures the relentlessly delivered theme of “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding),” which in a way constitutes a redaction of his earlier “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall.” There Dylan had exposed social wrongs defining the American present with the vocational intention of having his songs do something about them: “And I’ll tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it,/And reflect it from the mountain so all souls can see it.” Now the social world’s malaise seems completely resistant to any kind of reformist change. The new song begins with an allusion to Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* and its exposé of Communist totalitarianism. “Darkness at the break of noon,” however, here specifically plays on the totalitarian aspect of capitalist American culture. Its “darkness” is no less pervasive than its Communist twin. The self-alienation that capitalism spawns applies “even” to the rich person whose “silver spoon” obversely doubles “The handmade blade,” the poor ghetto person’s desperate means to rob others to acquire so-called goods and feel powerful. From the very beginning of one’s life, social despair accounts for the object-fetishism (e.g., “the child’s balloon”) behind acquiring things. Capturing official religionist thinking with their “flesh-colored

Christs that glow in the dark,” this acquisitive habit works to distract us from our basic, existential environment, here imaged by “the sun and moon.”

To experience this takeover of our perception finally leaves one feeling helpless to do anything about it: “There is no sense in trying.” People simply can’t change things in any real sense. For example, direct “threats” against the establishment do little more than impotently “bluff [it] with scorn.” To follow leaders with oratorical flare (“the fool’s gold mouthpiece”) who either promote *or* protest the establishment only leads to “Suicide remarks” and self-destructive actions. The same goes for inspirational songs and marches that Bob Dylan had a hand in during his former “protest” phase. In the face of the ideological totalitarianism sketched out in the song, such criticisms lack substance. Contrary to biblical-prophetic precedents, they mimic blowing a “hollow horn” and uttering “wasted words” like “bullets” that “bark.” Their ineffectuality “proves to warn” us that we need to see life in completely different terms and in that sense be “busy being born.” That would require one *not* to engage the regnant social powers, since doing so would only leave one in the process of “dying” spiritually. The aphorism “He not busy being born is busy dying” additionally refers to how life consists of a flow of experiences so that closures of any kind, most of all proffered by political promises, amount to the death of personal efforts to confront the real.

Everything in this social scene works to reduce the sacredness of life to its most profane or lowest common denominator, and no one way of thinking can help us imagine a way out of this dilemma. Faced with social chaos, religious thinkers (“Preachers”) only rant about looming apocalyptic endings (“evil fates”). In the realm of education, “Teachers” postpone any kind of certain knowledge, even of the existentialist brand (“knowledge waits”). In fact, they make so-called “knowledge” solely a matter that “can lead to hundred-dollar plates.” The instinct to do good also “hides behind its gates” despite how everyone has access to the basic truth about being human. After all,

even the president of the United States  
Sometimes must have  
To stand naked.

But the social realm appears intractable to change *in* social terms: “the rules of the road have been lodged.” Our only choice (and chance), then, is to sidestep the games that others beset us with: “It’s only people’s games that you got to dodge.” This is one tenet that Dylan thinks can help him and us “make it.” Practicing this principle, for example, we can remain alert to how the world of advertising cons us “into thinking” we’re special (“you’re the one”) or into fantasizing that we can effect the impossible (“what’s never been done”) or “win what’s never been won,” even as the essential fact of existence, the fact of “life” per se, “goes on/All around you.”

Herein begins Dylan’s paradoxical response to this quasi-totalitarian scene of US culture: to escape it one must effect a no less total mode of disaffection from the social world. To try changing that world condemns one to a vicious cycle in which one constantly forgets the existential business of relating self to the self that would have us live in terms of the real. But that ideal has become difficult to believe as well. Just as Emerson in his essay “Experience” noted that “our moods don’t believe in each other,” so

Dylan notes how we sometimes become subject to arbitrary moods in which we futilely think we can control our existence in the face of social chaos: "You lose yourself, you reappear/You suddenly find you got nothing to fear." This illusion temporarily allows us a sense of self-autonomy, which of course never lasts since sooner or later someone comes along who thinks "they really know you." The intimation of that alone is enough to burst the bubble of any such autonomy: "A question in your nerves is lit." Even so, no one can really know the other: "there is no answer fit to satisfy" the question the self can pose to itself. One must hold the line and "not fergit" that one finally does not "belong" to any other thing or self.

Yet that fact is hard to swallow and so one is constantly tempted to seek ways to avoid it: by following "the rules of the road" and "obey[ing] authority"; joining "Social clubs" pretending to be what one is not ("in drag disguise"); joining the middle-class "rat race choir." As Dylan remarks in "Subterranean Homesick Blues," external values ready to grip "self" appear everywhere one turns. Those seeking pleasure, for example, find it coopted by sexually repressed ("Limited") moralists who condemn anyone who enjoys sex, the body, life. Conversely, patriots and moral idealists "defend what they cannot see/With a killer's pride" in the name of "security." Such idealisms come down to fantasized escapes from "death's honesty," the bottom-line truth for everyone. Anyone who thinks otherwise only in "Life sometimes/Must get lonely." Dylan makes this point emphatically in the last verse where he sees no out from how others one way or another practice a living death ("stuffed graveyards"). They adhere to ideals and values like money and security ("False gods") that distract them from living life in straight existential terms. But he also knows that he can't underestimate this falsity because "pettiness . . . plays so rough." Others would do anything to incarcerate him, literally or figuratively make him "Walk upside-down inside handcuffs," before accepting those same terms. Such coercion can bring him to his knees, so to speak ("okay, I have had enough"), but he remains determined not to change his judgments about what he sees: "What else can you show me?"

In and through this and his other songs, Dylan airs "thought-dreams" that could, if known, "put my head in a guillotine." Something about his songs remains secret, elusive, allowing him to endure and to keep apart from what others demand of him from ideological perspectives, themselves at odds with each other. Such disaffection allows him just to be himself: "But it's alright, Ma, it's life, and life only" that counts. The song's address to "Ma" has a completely different aim from the one that defines the dramatic situation in "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall." He still recognizes himself encountering egregious social situations and accordingly is tempted by "causes" to do something about them. But here "Temptation's page flies out the door." He can always criticize or "find [him]self at war" with the social system, such as by sympathizing with the socially downtrodden: "Watch waterfalls of pity roar." But sooner or later he realizes that he keeps repeating much the same criticism to no fruitful end: "That you'd just be/One more person crying." To the extent that "Ma" represents Dylan's own social conscience, he confesses that his sentiments are in fact a-social since they will likely signify "A foreign sound to your ear." What "she" or he hears from that other part of himself is just his "sigh": the expiration of his commitment to alter social conditions in any concerted manner.

But if his sense of a ubiquitous social alienation leads to his further alienation from such alienation itself, what's left for him to do in his songs except practice a fatalistic fencing with the social Other or dream of eluding It? In "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream," Dylan sketches this outcome with picaresque gusto, all in relation to his surreal depiction of a pervasive Amerikan unconscious. The number "115" in the title signifies a virtually endless series of similar "dreams" that self-evidently reflect his vision of US culture, past and present. His burlesque narrative begins by featuring his total disconnection from the official "Amerikan Dream" of progress. Alienated from the values exposed in "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)," Dylan again can't get a purchase on his life. As if he were in a dream, nothing in this culture makes sense because everything keeps turning back into something else. A runaway metamorphosis even characterizes the song's very narrative. The "Mayflower" at the start of course alludes to the nation's founding, but then turns into a Melvillean ship associated with an original quest for the real in the guise of Ahab's "whale"; and that too quickly changes into Dylan's seeking an ideal place that spawns illusions about having found it: "I thought I spied some land." Melville's Ahab turns into "Captain Arab" who, just like us with the ideal, proceeds to "forget" the original meaning of the quest. At bottom, even hard-nosed realists in American society traverse the same ground. Like "tough sailors" lost "at sea" or life, the narrator and his friends all "sang that melody" of a so-called American Dream: "I think I'll call it America," he says, as the captain aggressively ("Let's set up a fort") begins to cheat, exploit, and/or "buy[] the place with beads" as cheaply as possible.

Who escapes seeking an edge, a bonus of some sort, in living, the seed-bed of an inevitable capitalist ethos? With this aggressive beginning, the narrator and captain figure an older version of the American Dream, but quickly find themselves in the latest version in which the country has been settled by an even more aggressive and absurd set of laws and their enforcers, for example the "Crazy" cop who "throw[s] us all in jail/For carryin' harpoons." The Dylan protagonist somehow ("don't even ask me how") breaks out of this dream-turned-nightmare, but cannot find anywhere to "get some help" for his friends, who at this point represent others similarly alienated in American society. A "Guernsey cow" directs him to "the Bowery slums." As with (rural) folk music that has now become relocated in places like New York City, "cow" music here purports to uphold the values of the urban poor or downtrodden. Accordingly he sees the dream-like inversion of folk protests: "People carried signs around/Saying 'Ban the bums.'" Similarly, the *Guernsey* cow signifies a once-special or refined milk now up for sale.

At this point in the song, a self-referential, vocational moment appears that in effect revises his own alter ego's former experience, for the Dylan picaro recounts how he himself joins this protest movement out of hunger, here a trope for something to believe in, which he hasn't been able to satisfy for some time now: "I realized I hadn't eaten/For five days straight." He therefore goes in search of a "cook," the movement's figurehead, all the while fudging his protest credentials so that he might "pass" or fit in:<sup>14</sup> "I told them I was the editor/Of a famous etiquette book." But it turns out that the people in charge are culturally effete or too weak to effect serious change ("The waitress *he . . .* wore a powder blue cape"). This results in Dylan's also having to refine his song offerings (*à la* "crepe suzette") or lie about what kind of "food" he *really* wants

to find. Such contradictions become combustible, and the social movement, at least in his experience of it, thus breaks up (“the whole kitchen exploded/From boilin’ fat”), forcing him to leave without “my hat,” figuratively the head-cover he has used to disguise what he *really* thought while a former member of the movement.

Tracing an autobiographical review of Dylan’s vocation, the narrator then takes a popular route (“a bank” a.k.a. the pop-musical scene) to seek his fame and fortune, although by doing that he ostensibly intends to rescue his incarcerated friends “in the tank.” The “tank” doubles as a pun on jail and fish-tank: his friends have come to resemble fish trapped as impotent pets in the entirely money-oriented version of the Amerikan Dream. He wants to alleviate their entrapment and in the process perhaps recover a time when one could at least conflate the American Dream with something like a spiritual quest: “To get some bail for Arab/And all the boys back in the tank.” Yet the bank-ridden US public sphere will lend Dylan money only on condition that he provide “collateral,” meaning that he not tell the truth about Amerika in his songs. He of course cannot quite agree to this stipulation, which is why the US public at large ends up rejecting him: after he “pulled down my pants/They threw me in the alley.” Instead of money, he accepts the sex (“up comes this girl from France”) that comes with fame, but he regards this as slight consolation since all along he has held out for the American dream to afford him the space in which he might pursue the real. Here again, however, he gets taken in. The woman wants him only superficially; her pimp, who personifies the materialist values that *she* represents, “robbed my boots,” a metaphor for what might have truly helped Dylan move forward in the quest he has taken over from his Captain, who at this point has turned into a Guthrie-esque figure within Dylan’s surreal autobiographical rumination.

To salvage whatever he can of his belief in an American Dream, he appeals to American cultural tradition (“a house/With the U.S. flag upon display”) to help him and gain release for “my friends” in the same predicament. Yet now he gets rejected outright since he doesn’t fit into any legitimate, cultural rubric: “Get out of here/I’ll tear you limb from limb.” He pleads that what he is really doing in his work is questing for the real, which has a conspicuous precedent in the Western tradition (“You know they refused Jesus, too”). But the Dylan self again gets rejected, this time by the caretaker who personifies the American “house” or the conventional Christian (and perhaps even “folk”) notion of spirituality: “I ain’t your pop.” This rejection infuriates Dylan as seeker and, as he is doing in composing the present song, he takes aim at this version of Amerika: “I decided to have him arrested.” Paradoxically and not a little like Edgar Allan Poe’s literary reputation, he then goes on tour in Europe to prove an American success story. This tour, comically rendered via a “cab,” suggests a certain appreciation of his work in England’s rock scene: “The Englishman said, ‘Fab.’” There his songs possess a certain artistic heft. They transcend American stereotypes, here imaged by the metonymy of America’s adopted native food [*sic*]: “he saw me leap a hot dog stand.” The same stereotypical attitude of Amerikan culture includes its militaristic ethos. Why else does the Englishman also notice Dylan having leaped over “a chariot”? Enlightened by this tour, he no longer limits his being an original American to narrow-minded stereotypes but instead feels akin to anyone who like him exercises an ethos



metaphorically in line with that chariot opposite to and opposed by inhabitants of “a building/Advertising brotherhood.”

Yet “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream” is nothing if not a continuing nightmare as another obstacle to his quest for a creative American scene soon arises. In one sense, this new “brotherhood” represents Dylan’s contemporary rock ‘n’ roll community, but as soon as he attempts to embrace it (“I ran right through the front door”) he finds that it too stifles his creativity: “it was just a funeral parlor.” Because he has spiritually heightened creative ambitions, however, no one recognizes him there; hence “the [funeral] man asked me who I was.” As he is trying to do all along in his “115th Dream,” Dylan now tries to explain that he is working to rescue or recover what he deems the original spiritual potential of the American Dream defined by a community of “my friends.” But in the end, the rock-cultural scene has no interest in this enterprise; it can only view his project cynically, and rejects him and his cohorts outright: “Call me if they die.” Equally opposed to his project, he becomes the notable target of unseen establishment opposition, including American populist values represented by a then popular sport activity: “a bowling ball came down the road/And knocked me off my feet.” The mass media tempts him (the image of the phone’s incessant ringing), but then faceless people in the media only criticize what he’s trying to do and end up reducing it to nothing: “When I picked it up and said hello/This foot came through the line.” This is a one-way communication circuit with no spiritual contact in the offing.

Understandably “fed up,” the Dylan picaro gives up his quest for accommodation between him along with “my friends and Captain Arab” and Amerikan society. He flips a “coin” to determine whether he should suffer their fate and resign himself to imprisonment or “jail,” in other words to a permanent sense of alienation in US society, or go off alone. This time his decision seems clear: he “hocked” his uniform, that of an identifiable American quester (with his “sailor suit”), flips a coin and, because it rhymes with “sails,” wordplay synonymous with his lyric vocation, “made it back to the ship” now representative of the self potentially en route to the real. Since he still ostensibly lives off US society, it assumes he has to pay a fine, as in “being taxed by.” He rejects that assumption, of course, but even as he “took/the parkin’ ticket off the mast” and rips it up the authorities come by and want to know his true identity. He tells them he’s “Captain Kidd,” referring to someone who takes from social establishments without committing himself to them. Neither can the authorities determine what he’s doing or what social value his songs have. He answers that he has no definable or socially manifest purpose at all: he works “for the Pope of Eruke,” with the latter an anagram for “you are key.” Even as the papal allusion intimates that his work indeed possesses a covert “religious” valence, his response seems gibberish to these authority figures who dictate social values of one kind or another. But since they feel threatened by what they do not know about him (they’re “very paranoid”) and fear his a-social values, “They let me go right away.”

Unlike Dylan, his friends eventually get coopted by the social scene. Arab gets “stuck” on a “whale,” this one no longer having anything to do with a metaphysical quest for the real but rather suggesting a ponderous system of values that in modern terms reduces to (outmoded) food and/or fuel. Perhaps, too, “Ahab” has become a fixed classic (*Moby-Dick*) that no longer possesses existential umph. In fact, Arab has

gotten “married” to a substitute figure of authority or “deputy/Sheriff of the jail.” In contrast, Dylan thinks to have left the American myth or Dream altogether. When “leavin,” he sees the “three ships” that historically inaugurated the myth of an actual, external place promising to deliver people the spiritual goods, but Dylan can no longer understand why anyone coming to or living in America now would ever believe that. In accord with American economic values, they might as well be driving “a truck” as opposed to sailing a ship in a quest for the real. No other option to a now established American consumerist order exists except, it seems, to drop out of the *social* scene altogether. So at the end of his narrative, Dylan just says “good luck” (good-bye) to “Columbus” and the irredeemable Amerikan Dream, and indeed to the possibilities of its social resurrection.

But again, where can Dylan move *to* through his songwriting? As subliminally sketched in “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream,” Dylan’s disaffection from the Amerikan Dream includes criticism of musical art used to criticize the failure of that Dream. “Farewell Angelina” more concisely lays out his wish to disown the success he has acquired as a “protest” songwriter/performer. Composed during the period of *Bringing It All Back Home* but left off the album, the song addresses a former lover, a “little angel,” who once inspired the politically activist type of songs for which he has since achieved a certain fame (“the bells of the crown”). “Farewell Angelina” reads like a *chanson à clef*, what with its more than likely reference to Joan Baez, but “she” soon acts as a trope for a “little” muse personifying a qualified inspiration for songs that now have many imitators (“bandits”) who have “stolen” the style. The “guards” of the former social movement can’t prevent any number of persons (“Fifty-two gypsies” figuring a whole card-*pack* of people) from occupying “the space” or position of leadership formerly reserved for those with creative or wildcard imaginations: “where the deuce/ And the ace once ran wild.” He and others like him are giving up this game (“The sky is folding”), and he expects that “Angelina” along with the art she once inspired will soon have to do the same: “I’ll see you in a while.” At the same time, he realizes that she still intends to “return[] to the South” to use her art in support of a social cause.

For him, however, the real issue goes deeper than the outwardly political. The new revolutionary leaders of the social movement mimic would-be outlaws of the social establishment but offer political solutions to what in essence amount to philosophical problems. Such leaders thus resemble “cross-eyed pirates”: they forward confused visions cribbed from other thinkers, while basking in the public limelight: “sitting/Perched in the sun.” They target essentially petty issues (“Shooting tin cans”) and use quasi-serious concepts (like Marxism, say) as weapons (“With a sawed-off shotgun”). Factions within factions keep multiplying (“The sky’s changing color”), turning into a flux of uncontrollable changes that leads Dylan to seek escape (“And I must leave fast”) from all of them. All the while, middle-class Amerika offers him zero alternatives, but instead constantly justifies the game that radicals opposed to it play. Middle-of-the-road Americans merely succumb to sensationalist (“King Kong”) or fairy-tale (“little elves”) or movie-romantic (“Valentino”-type tangos) distractions from life. These fantasies “Shut the eyes of the dead”: they prevent people from realizing their state of living death in a shameful (“The sky is embarrassed”) display of escapism.

To Dylan, the entire social world consists of pointless if multiple versions of escapist collective strife from militaristic (“machine guns”) means for maintaining peace to countercultural followers who have become “puppets” impotently “heav[ing] rocks” to resist the establishment. In preferring to withdraw (“I must go where it’s quiet”) from this external chaos, Dylan realizes that those same people will term him an escapist. But he remains determined to take his vocational stand: “Call me any name you like/I will never deny it.”

### 3 On the outside looking inward

The “quiet” existential caliber of Dylan’s vision of life tellingly comes through in the song “Gates of Eden” where he takes the bottom-line homelessness inscribed in “Subterranean Homesick Blues” and turns it into a decisive vocational stance. In part a baroque allusion to William Blake’s mostly pictorial *The Gates of Paradise*,<sup>15</sup> the Dylan song’s barrel of mixed metaphors makes uncanny sense: people are permanently homeless, cast out of whatever “Eden” once meant or could ever mean again. In the human world, for example, war and peace become interchangeable, never-ending truths: “Of war and peace the truth just twists/Its curfew gull”—whatever could stop this furious relativism—“just glides.” Socially endorsed truths go back and forth as if in perpetual motion. Given this stalemate, what can Dylan have his songs do? This question *in itself* becomes their essential component. As a poet-self (“the cowboy angel”), he follows (“rides”) these “truth” movements using a visionary perspective (“upon four-legged forest clouds”) that acknowledges its own limits (“With his candle lit into the sun”). From one side, he tries to deliver the truth of the world’s non-truth to others. From another, he realizes that he can’t express even *this* truth to them since poetic insights into the real can occur only indirectly. Because like viewing the “sun,” coming upon the real would obliterate our socially derived notions of self-identity, the Dylan poet can only point in its direction. Whatever the efficacy of his artistic work, he recognizes that partial glimpses into the real at best will assume a negative cast to others: like a “glow” as if “waxed in black.”

People shy away from this minor analogue to an “Eden” that entails one’s accepting the mysterious nonentity of one’s existence as such. Preferring unequivocal answers to its mystery, they instead pursue social distractions that only serve to perpetuate their expulsion from “Eden.” Dylan’s compressed image of “The lamppost . . . with folded arms” refers to how social law, supposedly based on *enlightened* reason, acts wholly certain about its truth yet anxiously (“Its iron claws attached/To curbs”) tries to grasp and control what appears to it as the chaotic real. If not consciously, people intuit the real as the “hole” or abyss “where babies wail,” or where the loss of innocence (“Eden”) happens due to resisting the abyssal fact of life. What appears reasonable to others mostly works to reinforce this resistance: “it ‘shadows metal badge’” or enacts hard social rule in the face of primal disorder. But sooner or later, all putatively rational visions of order “can only fall/With a crashing but meaningless blow.” This endlessly scandalous disjunction between order and disorder results in a chaotic “sound” that includes people’s vociferous insistence on their (falling) truths.

Dylan further suggests that partial ideas of reality stoke ideals of a social "Eden" over which people end up fighting each other. Like "The savage soldier [who] sticks his head in sand/And then complains," one way or another people fight for fixed opinions that by definition dodge the real. Moreover, something or someone *other* always interferes with their idealized scenario for "reality." If the conservative "complains" about liberal-thinking people upsetting traditional values, liberals in their turn resemble the "shoeless hunter who's gone deaf/But still remains." That is, they purport to face injustices of social life in order to help others but end up fixating on a reformable reality and remain clueless when it fails to transpire. In order to hold off their helpless position, they inwardly deny the absurd real that haunts any reformation of social reality. Both kinds of social activists are at odds with Dylan's vision of poetic visionaries as "hound dogs" baying on "the beach" of existence, ever-mindful and through their work reminding others that the ineradicable mark of being human, here figured as "ships with tattooed sails," consists of sailing on an abyssal sea.

To try to get back to "the Gates of Eden" constitutes a futile enterprise unless one can realize "real" experience. Dylan's baying dogs additionally suggests the illusory and frustrated status (the hound-dog sound) of this same vision. People, after all, tend to accept an easier or more accessible kind of truth. Their preferred poets therefore likely mislead them with distorted versions of a paradisaical state of mind or society. Some would-be saviors vainly try to arrive at Eden by magical, Aladdin-like, means, for example via drugs, which people have used time and again like "a time-rusted compass blade." Others follow another type of guru or "Utopian hermit" who ends up wanting power and/or the money that fuels it, hence "Side saddle on the Golden Calf." Asserting self-certain truths, they all strike solemn poses and lack irony: in "their promises of paradise/You will not hear a laugh." For Dylan, humor signals that one does not take one's one truth too seriously since the real wouldn't have it otherwise;<sup>16</sup> humor thus helps identify those persons at least able to register the absence of the escapist Edenic ideal. Even Dylan recognizes the lure of power since song-artists too can do creative work for acquiring public acclaim and for its value as property: "Relationships of ownership/whisper in the wings." Self-aggrandizing, such artists play for and to one or another audience, and in effect beg for expected attention ("those condemned to act accordingly") from those who "wait for succeeding kings" or other artist-heroes to anoint. Dylan wants his musical-lyrical art to keep him from playing the same kind of game: instead "I try to harmonize with songs/The lonesome sparrow sings." An average, non-spectacular bird paradoxically stands as the metaphorical figure for an ideal artist who expresses a vision of life without trying to own and sell it out for fame and fortune. In that respect, Dylan would remain humbly aligned with an entirely spiritual notion of an Edenic code: "There are no kings inside the Gates of Eden."

Dylan's song dictates that he uncover any possibly ambitious motive he might have, even that tied to his own "Beat" poetic stance in songs like "Subterranean Homesick Blues." Like "The motorcycle black madonna" and her stud boyfriend who "cause/The gray flannel dwarf to scream," Beat values goof on middle-class people in part to gain an inversely inflated cachet from an in-group, critical public. For their part, this too-easy target finds value in the other's criticism of its values: "As [the middle-class person]

weeps to wicked birds of prey," he (also inversely) distracts himself from his empty life by desiring to do what he thinks his rebellious debunkers do, for example taking drugs or practicing promiscuous sex. This is all yet another case of one group, rich or poor, hip or straight, "wishing for what the other has got." The symbiotic, sado-masochistic relation of bohemian versus middle-class life never ends, for the social rebels will soon "pick up on" the middle-class person's "bread crumb sins." But neither group has anything to do with Edenic thought: "There are no sins inside the Gates of Eden." No one group possesses the truth. For Dylan, whatever truth exists occurs in passing while positioning one in contact with the real; otherwise truth for that person turns out false for others and eventually for both. "The foreign sun" constantly tempts one with "light"—*truth* about the real that comes from outside sources, but for that very reason always rings false to him: "it squints upon/A bed that is never mine." Truth for Dylan remains subjective as opposed to "foreign" or objective truths such as one can accept without ceaseless existential qualification. In the end, even this truth about truth has *its* limitation, for when one tries to "resign" from such inherited "fates," that, too, can turn into an alibi to avoid the real. One then latches on to what makes sense in one's parochial field of life: "Leaving men wholly, totally free/To do anything they wish to do but die."

But of course, the fact that one never wants to die motivates one's worrying about the truth in the first place. However, not to worry about it but *only after knowing one is about to* is "to die" from such "trials" and begin a journey toward reentering "the Gates of Eden." At first, the Dylan's speaker's "lover" in the song's last verse stands for his poetic desideratum. Her telling him "of her dreams" without analyzing them at first smacks of some Beat, neo-romantic anti-intellectualism. But second reflection allows that "she" represents the position he wants *to* arrive at when composing his songs. This state of mind would mimic pre-reflective cognition of the world: to have himself think, write, and perform his work "With no attempt to shovel the glimpse/Into the ditch of what each [dream-or song] means." When he judges himself at his best, he comes close to realizing that criterion, all as if he were tracing "what's true" from inside the Gates of Eden. Any other state of mind leads him to the falsity of "truth," for "there are no truths outside the Gates of Eden."

Without the possibility of arriving at truth, what purpose to existence or what vocational project makes any sense? To face this bereft state yet still to take its disclosure as a "truth" of sorts, albeit one always turning into a fiction, at least serves Dylan as a substitute project in composing songs. Their thrust is to disrupt all self-certain visions of life, whatever their venue. He underscores this form a self-erasure in the song "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" where the "you" pointedly allows for an eventual revelation of uncertainty that extends to the act of interpreting the song itself. This second-person addressee conventionally figures a now bereft lover, but Dylan's double-minded rhetoric also allows us to take the "you" for an audience-other whom we can also understand two different ways. In the first, "Baby Blue" refers to a defined audience "blue" over Dylan's rejection of acting as figurehead for a social movement such as he was with a "folk" crowd.<sup>17</sup> But the reference comprehends a more "hip" social audience as well. A few critics at the time, for example, noted how the song both plays

off the “blues” genre and puns on “baby blues,” subterranean slang for depressants. In either case, however, the song as if invites specific fillers for “you” as some listener wishing to decode Dylan’s lyrics in objective terms in order to corroborate a specific, in-group identity.<sup>18</sup>

But “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue” equally references *anyone* adhering to a fixed vision of life and so who has become invulnerable to even a hint of the real. We all have no choice: either we experience and take to heart the “blues” of existence; or we try to suppress it and suffer depression stemming from that effort. Since most of us take the second route, the song’s phrase “it’s all over now, baby blue” applies to Dylan’s listening double and to himself. For he too must avoid any firm belief in the real whenever it takes the form of a short-cut concept on which he can rely. In that sense, “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue” resists how it and Dylan’s other songs can edify any “you” by means of straight or direct communication. What seems certain is that any one of the song’s possible addressees “must leave” the relationship. All that remains is what “you” can salvage from the experience that has just passed before it disappears altogether: “whatever you wish to keep, you better grab it fast.”

If “Baby Blue” represents anyone who expects Dylan to act and compose lyrics in a certain way or to live her/his life according to a certain (e.g., folk or hip) ethos, that person instead encounters an “orphan” Dylan no longer affiliated with those values: “Yonder stands your orphan with his gun.”<sup>19</sup> The song intimates that others ought to judge his songs as expressing an ineluctable uncertainty; for example, the phrase “Crying like a fire in the sun” acknowledges that *what* he sings will become instantly eclipsed by “the sun,” here again synonymous with that figure in “Gates of Eden.” This passing formulation pertains to himself as well. One might say, then, that his songs deconstruct themselves by anticipating their fugitive validity in relation to the real. For that reason alone, Dylan can equate them with gospel blues, which he suggests in the line echoing the famous blues song “When the Saints Go Marching In”: “Look out the saints are coming through.” His songs, that is, possess a spiritual valence but without religionist ties, for no traditionally understood apocalyptic solution can alleviate the final uncertainty that defines one’s relation to oneself.

Dylan’s song would have one avoid self-pity in the face of a fundamental, existential experience that will forever bring one to one’s knees as if one *were* indeed a “baby.” Faced with perpetual uncertainty in living life (“The highway”), one must gamble and at best “use your [existential] sense” as a moral compass. One must eschew efforts to control it by reason and make do with the chaotic flow of experience: “Take what you have gathered from coincidence.” His art thus sets out to disabuse others from using *it* as a guide. An artist like himself (the “painter”), on whom, because of his common background (“from your streets”), “you” may have once relied to represent your personal or social interests, now appears “empty-handed” or without answers. Like this one, his songs say nothing but that they can say nothing to edify us one way or other. And yet this *is* to say something as both we and he stand deprived of what once may have seemed beautiful and orderly. In “drawing crazy patterns on your sheets” or on our minds, the Dylan artist breaks down peaceful dreams of the reality

we *call* reality. He imagines his art turning upside down baby blue's high-flown ideals concerning life: "This *sky*, too, is folding under you."

The song notably "traffics" in an imaginary time or moment when Dylan leaves the other to recognize the futility of rationalizing the irrational. He stages "baby blue" just when her many back-and-forth, self-contradictory fantasies ("seasick sailors") about life's purpose suffer so many setbacks that she can only believe that these fantasies are all "rowing home" or revealing their illusory status as such. Having broken down, other fairy-tale notions of reality are also "going home" or ending. No hero, no heroic idea or ideal can now make life feel all *right*. No Santa Claus figure with his "reindeer armies" can bring back the gift of a believable order to her. Even believing in love finally fails to offer her consolation for her lost ideals, and so her "lover" has "just walked out your door" leaving "baby" helpless *as* a baby. All devices and methods to secure security no longer work, for the Dylan song will have "taken" the baby-like security "blankets from the floor" a.k.a. the supposed ground of self. "Magic carpet" notions of reality only block one from coming upon this intimation of the real. Their proposals for answering the riddle of existence are "moving under you"; they lack any home-like stability, so that one's only choice is to "leave behind" any careful ("stepping stones") plan for living life.

Simultaneously applying this final *mise en scène* to himself, Dylan fastens on a new if still indefinite vocational goal ("*something* calls for you") bearing down on him and by extension us. This calling has more to do with an inward movement than an externally figured one such as marks the valedictory song "Restless Farewell" ending *The Times They Are A-Changin'* album. In "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue," Dylan imagines that his own and our past illusions about changing life are "dead" and one need never believe in them ever again: "they will not follow you." Portraying himself as a "vagabond rapping at your door," a decisive sense of existential homelessness has now overtaken him: "Strike another match, go start anew." Unable to believe in definitions of self as inherited or adopted from his social environment, he (and we) will necessarily succumb to a "vagabond" sensibility "standing in the clothes that you once wore."

If "Baby Blue" sketches an imaginary scene in which one becomes truly helpless, as if a child or "baby" confronting the real for the first time, the song "Outlaw Blues" recites that situation as an unavoidable fate. It insists that one experiences breakdowns in believable orders *whether or not* one tries (not) to. The first two lines outline both options: "[It's] hard to stumble/And land in some funny lagoon." That is, at times one can't avoid the sensation of getting thrown out of a "normal" sense of reality. If this experience is tough ("hard") to take, it is also not "hard" for most people to arrive at. The "muddy" and "funny lagoon" refers to one's crazy and murky encounter with the freedom of self-formlessness, precisely that which Dylan in fact means to pursue. To that end, he states his determination not to seek let alone rely on a fixed sense of self or reality: "Ain't gonna hang no picture/no picture frame." Quite the contrary, he considers himself a spiritual "outlaw" ("I feel just like Jesse James") even if superficially he looks to others like he's obeying the law, such as by showing himself to be ethically concerned "like [a] Robert Ford." Dylan's so-called song-protests now concern his engaging a "muddy" reality that essentially puts him out of reach to what others care about. It stands for "some kind of change," with the emphasis on "some." To others, he might as well be "on

some/Australian mountain range," which is to say, high above and far away from them. But he wants to be "out of it" for "no [other] reason" than to be *truly* "out of it," that is, not stuck with a social identity that he tends to accept or internalize passively. Dylan's vision is admittedly "dark": he doesn't see reality the way others do ("I got my dark sunglasses") and his songs articulate (as per his "tooth" image) *that* vision of life: "I got for good luck my black tooth." What signifies bad luck or a dark vision to others signifies good luck and a positive move forward for him. His songs express the passing truth of reality *as* "nothin'" but the real, but only if listeners voluntarily ask his songs to show it: "Don't ask me nothin' about nothin',/I just might tell you the truth."

Dylan's songs can also express how they signify a positive vision for him personally. In "California," a version of "Outlaw Blues," his vocational desire takes the form of wanting to go "down south/'Neath the borderline" where "some fat momma/Kissed my mouth one time." The south represents both sexual freedom and the source of blues music to which he would abandon his musical-lyrical art. The "woman in Jackson" of "Outlaw Blues" personifies much the same point of the "fat momma" in "California": she figures how his song refuses to tell its identity, personal *or* social. Since "I ain't gonna say her name," his song thus has no definable allegiance and fits into no definitive genre. Being of "brown-skin," in this context meaning neither black nor white, she personifies how his songs deviate from what passes for any "acceptable" norm. In effect, they figuratively practice miscegenation: of poem with song; of words breeching articulate understanding; of "blues" prosody and a half-breed mode of conventionally understood "literature." If it appears to fall into any identifiable genre, his song works to sabotage that identity and opt for generic multiplicity. For that reason, in the "California" version of "Outlaw Blues," Dylan asserts that although San Francisco's attractive ("fine"), he's "used to four seasons" unlike California's "one."

"It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" and "Outlaw Blues" push Dylan's relation to songwriting toward explicit, self-referential vocational musings that account for what it finally means for him to "bring it all back home." The despairing visions of US America or modern society at large that he articulates in songs like "Subterranean Homesick Blues" and "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream" doubtless instigate representative interpretations. But while one can take them as social critiques of the incumbent social scene, these exposés problematically evince a stubbornly self-directed, autobiographical undercurrent that becomes more apparent with Dylan's allegorical staging of the severely limited audience for the true tenor of his work in "Maggie's Farm." Playing off the precedent of a 1929 song "Penny's Farm," "essentially a rural tale venting against a dishonest landlord," Dylan's lyrical redaction of it "has often been seen as one of [his] kissoff songs to the folk scene, though . . . also filled with political overtones and personal reflection."<sup>20</sup> But here the political and personal don't exactly coincide. Among other things, the "farm" image evokes a number of highly compacted possible references: a place, as with any farm, where one has to do hard work, which chimes with Maggie's informal name suggesting someone from a rural area; but also a "state farm" or prison with its meaning of "hard labor"; then again a "funny farm," colloquial slang referring to institutions for the insane.



The latter alone might again bespeak Dylan's social-political frustration with US American values and ironically reinforce the continuing "protest" aspect of Dylan's works.<sup>21</sup> Yet this multiplicity of interpretive options itself points to various types of audience figures whom his songs mark for criticism. Each type of figure would inhibit him from expressing his "head full of ideas/That are drivin' me insane," which of course relegates him to a funny farm imprisoning existential outliers. Maggie herself represents not only anyone who demands that Dylan produce songs with a social-reformist upside, but also any kind of pressure ("It's a shame the way she makes me scrub the floor") to regard his work *as* work in the social sphere. "Maggie's Farm" protests his doing both "protest" songs and accepting various other "pop" mandates that Dylan unavoidably engages when composing songs. Maggie's kin constitute a representative variorum of anti-creative public pressures. For example, her brother accepts his lyrics only up to the point where they cease to entertain him. In the end, he refuses to expend any more effort to interpret them than "a nickel" or "dime's" worth of serious attention. He would also "nickel and dime" these songs, that is, listen to them only if they don't threaten his style of life or judge it devoid of any value. More, "he fines you every time you slam the door" or for not allowing him to escape, say, from the Dylan song's existentially dark intimations.

Related to this type of audience and complete with "cigar," Maggie's "pa" figures a caricatured capitalist whose purely materialistic outlook leads him to find no use-value whatsoever in Dylan's songs. Even as a cultural-industrialist, he essentially dismisses their artistic value out of hand: "he puts his cigar/Out in your face just for kicks." For him, songs have value only as commercial objects, but this only serves to repress the promiscuous or play-for-play's-sake aspect of songs in general and Dylan's in particular. The "pa" figure's "bedroom window/It is made out of bricks" because he also blocks himself off from awareness of the real, and in that way acts in accord with the repressive project synonymous with the Amerikan establishment: "The National Guard stands around his door." Conversely, Maggie's "ma" personifies the puritan strain of religion that undergirds pa's Protestant-capitalist ethos. She resorts to a Christian style of rhetoric that would keep the lower-class people ("all the servants") content with their lot: "she talks" to them "About man and God and law." Her cultural conservatism clearly eschews anything artistically risqué like the Dylan song. As a representative of old-style religion persisting in the present, she denies that she is really old, that is, outmoded in these modern, secular times: "She's sixty-eight but she says she's twenty-four." "Her" fundamentalist appeal to an American public influences people to reject ahead of time any appeal that Dylan's musical-lyrical art might otherwise possess for them. At best, she represents the pressure on Dylan at least to compose songs that would propagate moral or else quasi-religiously sanctioned notions of right and wrong.

All these family-cum-familiar pressures add up to the primary demand that Dylan conform to one or another prescribed vision of life and write/perform his songs accordingly. He tries to resist these pressures ("I try my best/To be just like I am"), but they relentlessly persist: "everybody wants you/To be just like them." But if they press Dylan to "sing while you slave and I just get bored," that boredom indicates that in the end they have no hold over the kind of lyrical art he wants and intends to do but

which he here leaves undefined. Nevertheless, one can infer from “Maggie’s Farm” that he construes creative activity as a wholly nonrestrictive and a-moral venture, the chief characteristic of which goes beyond a “freedom from” to a “freedom to.” If he idealizes an audience equipped with the same indeterminate qualities, he also envisions doing work that analogously defies categorical definitions and produces what amounts to a homeless art.

#### 4 Homeless art

One of Dylan’s more explicit self-referential songs testifies to this anonymizing [*sic*] poetics. In “She Belongs to Me,” “She” personifies the poetic principle that he would have guide his lyrical art, since for one thing “she” helps him escape definitive strictures such as he sketches in “Maggie’s Farm.”<sup>22</sup> Alternatively “she” represents the formlessness of Dylan’s sense of his own imagination during creative moments when “she” allows him avenues of escape from his particular self-interest or intentions. “She” works to suspend fixed meanings, his and not only that of others, and even literal references, such as regarding any person in terms of whom he may have contingently composed a song like “She Belongs to Me.” In and through this self-evident muse figure, all things turn figurative, so that Dylan can wholly transform whatever personal or musical influences intrude on his compositional act: “She’s an artist, she don’t look back.” “She” also provides everything for him to produce his art (“She’s got everything she needs”) and thus lets him make do with his present circumstances and experiences. But this is no art for art’s sake license, for “she” also juxtaposes these imagined experiences toward a non-answerable question that exposes their finitude and the limit to our understanding of *her*. Dylan’s imagination-cum-art can remind him and listeners of the despair existence entails (“[She] can paint the daytime black”) but also can lighten that despair for people (“take the dark out of the nighttime”) by pointing to how an existence that doesn’t have to be just *is*. The range of Dylan’s art’s existential implications turns out virtually limitless, accounting for why he and we can make multiple connections when “standing” before or encountering any one of his lyrics. We can then become “Proud to steal her anything she sees” precisely by making those connections *really* count. For that reason alone, he and we can’t understand the Dylan song in a conceptual sense but only acknowledge its post-rational mystery, as it were brought to our knees without any “key” by which to know it: “But you’ll wind up peeking through her keyhole/Down upon your knees.”

“She Belongs to Me” amounts to Dylan’s imagination of an ideal Dylan song that has “got no place to fall.” No one person can use “her” as a mouthpiece (“She’s nobody’s child”) or judge the song’s value according to some social-ethical criterion: “The Law can’t touch her at all.” But again, this doesn’t move the Dylan song over into art-for-art-sake territory. Partly because it remains encased in musical sound or the way “[she] sparkles before she speaks,” his song as such constitutes a trope intimating infinite mystery, hence acts like a “hypnotist collector” that mesmerizes him and others by her sound. Even before we can interpret the song’s lyrics, we thus become

“her walking antique.”<sup>23</sup> Dylan would have us celebrate “her” for such attributes, especially given the modern world’s determination to explain everything and to repress the fact that in existing we never really know where or who we are. “She” is no mere aesthetic phenomenon, then, but rather akin to a spiritual event to celebrate: “Bow down to her on Sunday/Salute her when her birthday comes.” At the same time, “she” also need not assume a formal religious status, for “she” can equally occur in a profane (e.g., a popular) context à la “Christmas” or even a mock-religious one like “Halloween.” In both cases, Dylan would have us lend her trumpets or drums, which is to say, take in and emphasize the musical or non-meaningful thrust of “her” appearance before us.

As Aidan Day surmises, the song’s title therefore ironically holds that no one can own “her,” but also with the same applying to existence as perceived through the lens of Dylan’s musical art. Yet insofar as such art pertains essentially to him in his act of imagining “her” before, as it were, others encounter “her,” “she” at least *does* belong to him. Of course, one has to qualify Dylan’s artistic idealization here since for him the act of imagination as the subject of imagination by definition occurs only in a kind of Wordsworthian “spot of time.” “Love Minus Zero/No Limit” paradoxically portrays this double idealization in terms of an imagined figure “without ideals” and so with no tendency to defend them. “My love” personifies his notion of a unique artistic moment that would avoid any aggressive, social ramification. Even if one takes the obvious interpretive route and hears Dylan addressing an actual lover, one has to consider the contradiction of his doing what he claims *she* doesn’t do: *his* act of idealizing her in “Love Minus Zero/No Limit.” No doubt by the term “ideals” he likely means abstract principles as they apply in social circumstances. Yet reading the song for its putative objective meaning, one has to acknowledge that the contradiction sets up Dylan as an ironic figure unable to live up to his own song’s idealless standard.

On the other hand, my argument so far would have Dylan entertaining “ideals” only on condition of their fugitive or soon-become formless nature. Irony therefore doesn’t apply to his position in this song except in a very special sense. His “love” mirrors his act of imagination in the process of composing lyrics, which in turn serves to *de-idealize* fixed, ego-coherent notions of self. Dylan’s “ideal” song would become as if entirely *stripped* of content. One can of course understand the “no limit” part of the song’s title to mean nothing but full-throttled love. Nonetheless, the “zero” also points to a “love” lacking final definition and in *that* way without limit. A love that knows itself *as* an ideal makes it incompatible with any aggressive, public expression of this or that truth, political or personal; hence, “she speaks like silence/Without ideals or violence.” When properly configured, his acts of imagination ideally [*sic*] just occur without restrictions placed on them by his mundane desires or by internalized cultural values. Only then can he believe “her” “faithful” to his goal to transcend cloying definitions of self, and so “true, like ice, like fire.”

In contrast, other composers tend to use their art to seduce the public (“carry roses”); whether to gain approbation or effect some desired change, they “Make promises by the hour,” whereas Dylan’s preferred songs refuse such seductive teases: “Valentines can’t buy her.” In the same vein, most musical efforts by singers/songwriters

are infected by commercial (“dime store[.]”) self-interest that lacks staying power and promotes moving on as if one were waiting in “bus stations.” Still others obsessively rehearse contingent occurrences (“talk of situations”), political or personal; or traffic in knowledge or information that they merely regurgitate (“Read books, repeat quotations”); and then try to deliver what they consider serious, permanent truths (“Draw conclusions on the wall”) by which they think themselves able to predict “the future.” Dylan’s songs would avoid making such attention-grabbing postulations: “My love she speaks softly.” Judged from a radically subjective perspective, the other type of song never succeeds. If his song “knows that there’s no success like failure/And that failure’s no success at all,” that means that *nothing* succeeds in the end. Put another way, Dylan’s aphorism bespeaks an existential truism: one’s failure at social projects can lead one back to oneself, but only if one does not use such failures to judge existence as such, for then they turn into yet another wave of failure.

The world we live in everywhere presents us with crises that breed suspicion about who’s to blame for one woe or another. A “cloak and dagger” world constantly “dangles” over our heads, which in turn tempts us to adopt melodramatic or black-and-white solutions as to what or whom to love and/or hate. We are offered roles and easy solutions by which to define ourselves so as to mitigate the impact of existence’s sheer contingency, and in the process prostitute what and who we are: “Madams light the candles.” In this roiling world of change, no one is content, neither those seemingly in power who keep worrying about keeping it, nor those lacking power who begrudge the former: “In ceremonies of the horseman/Even the pawn must hold a grudge.” Like “Statues made of match sticks,” that is, like ideals at first enticing but ultimately found wanting, we tend to fall into one of many stereotyped ways to deflect the real. Worse, these notions of necessity collide with the stereotyped ideals of other people, so that they all “Crumble into one another.” His “love” would avoid all such solutions without itself become yet another within this existential riddle: “She knows too much to argue or to judge.”

Dylan’s effort to strive for a non-positional self-identity threatens anyone who seeks a securely defined and/or definitive version of it. The line “The bridge at midnight trembles” expresses our constant sense of insecurity *re* existence and of our vigilance as to what threatens self-security. “The country doctor rambles” presumably because he knows his patients in their homes, both their physical abodes and psychic vulnerabilities. But here he moves as if without direction. No cure for the wound of existence exists, certainly not the “perfection” that “Bankers’ nieces seek,” for life is at bottom “cold and rainy,” relentlessly diluting (“The wind howls like a hammer”) all or any illusions of a coherent self. Dylan’s idealless ideal, a desired target of his art but that would cancel its teleological motivation, would have him try to uphold a vision that would let him accept this unhappy fact. Poesque in its association of “My love” with “some raven,” Dylan’s inherently mournful vision acknowledges his final inability to express any self-certain truth through his musical-artistic medium, even at its best.<sup>24</sup> Instead he can only position himself at its “window,” that is, as if on the inside of the *song* looking out, with *its* “broken wing” preventing full flight or luxuriation in the self-presence otherwise promised by poetic vision.

Any other kind of vocational devotion or source of inspiration can trap him into the illusion that he can instantly and directly communicate his visions to others. In “Love Is Just a Four-Letter Word,” a song contemporaneous with *Bringing It All Back Home*, Dylan casts love as an ideal that he has had to learn to accept. He employs an anecdote to illustrate this point. He once encountered a woman totally unrelated to him (“a friend of a friend”) who left him (“I left my mind behind”) with an indelible truth about love that she foretold in “the Gypsy Café” (my emphasis). For him, she represented someone tested by experience. Having “a baby heavy on her knee” had not deterred her from accepting the reality of her situation, for she “showed no trace of misery.” He himself had no words or similar experience to share with her that morning: “I kept my mouth shut, too/My experience was limited and underfed.” So he remained “hid,” only overhearing her conversation with someone else saying those words about love to “the father of your kid.”

“Love” here serves as a trope for Dylan’s poetic visions; in allegorical terms, he at first naïvely paid no heed to the Gypsy woman’s view about the limitations of trying to become an “ideal” self. The speaker subsequently “Pushed towards things in my own games,” but his experiences led him nowhere except “drifting in and out of lifetimes.” He “tried and failed at finding any door” or conduit to a fully genuine “love.” He had missed taking (or mistaken) the other meaning of the woman’s words about “love” as just a word: that love a.k.a. the poetic word’s limitation itself can provide the incentive to appreciate its passing occurrence. This limit to “love” applies to his vocational goal whenever for him it assumes the form of a fixed ideal rather than a momentary occurrence. Limitation does not make it “absurd” to pursue. One can find such love, that is, love for self in the process of erasure, appearing even in songs composed by “strangers” because it willy-nilly “travels free” beyond any one person’s control. Dylan comes to realize that the notion of a set vocational “destiny” constitutes one of those “traps set by me” to keep him from accepting “that love is just a four-letter word.”

Dylan’s *Bringing It All Back Home* songs thus arguably move in one notable direction: not just *from* their potential social or moral value, but also *toward* an inwardness of self that yet moves away from his ability to signify it and from others’ care to apprehend it. Through the language of his lyrics, the constitutive social medium of “self,” Dylan stages that same language encountering its own finitude. Each song *acts* to place in question his very artistic identity, already in question because of his art’s hybrid status.<sup>25</sup> Two works on the album especially allegorize this movement toward his art’s lack of ground or “home.” The first, the jacket notes on the original album, reveal a Dylan alienated from social scenes of writing. Instead of being in his own parade, he features himself “watching the [American] parade,” more an observer than a participant.<sup>26</sup> We too witness him witnessing others perceiving him in this social parade. Imagining their view of him, he identifies himself as at once a traditional blues singer/songwriter (*à la* “sleepy john estes”); a caricatured, celebrity sensation (“jayne mansfield”); an exaggerated tough-guy realist or *noir* detective of social ills like a “bogart” in *The Maltese Falcon*; and at most an unwitting spokesman a.k.a. puppet-figure (“mortimer snerd”) for social causes. But above all, he sees himself as an artistic

seeker of and for the real, aiming to become a thief, by analogy with “murph the surf,” of the jewel of existence itself.

As noted, others regard him differently. The hedonist living life from pleasure to pleasure (“erotic hitchhiker”) mistakes his being a performing artist for a person who’s played at some “hootenanny down in puerto vallarta, mexico.” Dylan views himself appearing to that person as a singer/songwriter whose work’s sexual or simply irreverent topics, at least as judged by US middle-class, stereotyped attitudes toward all goings-on south of the border, make him a *folk* singer in that one risqué sense. Someone with a different agenda insists on seeing him as a popular singer (“i happen to be one of the Supremes”) proselytizing drug use. Thus, he “suddenly becomes of middle-aged druggist,” or someone trying to legitimize drug-taking, as if he were “up for district attorney.” Other people blame Dylan and his songs for the counterculture’s (here comically displaced) “riots over in vietnam.” His reputation makes him vulnerable for seeming the agent of just about any social ill from the viewpoint of a general American public that reacts violently against his work: in their minds, they would “electrocute[]” him “publicly on the next fourth of July.” Indeed, he feels their responses threatening him with actual physical punishment: “I look around an’ all these people/[the d.a.’s] talking to are carrying blowtorches.” Understandably, he tries to retreat from this social scene, “go back t’ the nice quiet country” and, while “writing there,” simply ponder the “WHAAT?” of existence pure and simple. When he entertains such an escape, however, he discovers himself still pressed by the commercial demands incurred by the fact that many people still view him as special singer/songwriter. No surprise, then, that his music company’s “recording engineer” comes by asking him for his “latest works of art.”

There seems to be no escape from one demand or another. In reaction, he would view his artistic work in more modest yet entirely personal terms and resist writing songs to garnish critical attention, either by their words or electric accompaniment. On the contrary, he wants to insist that they were “written with the kettledrum in mind,” a percussive instrument, and at most with just “a touch of any anxious color.” Along the lines of “Love Minus Zero/No Limit” and “Love is a Just a Four-Letter Word,” Dylan denies seeking “perfection,” or more accurately recognition for creating the perfect work of verbal art. Rather, he chooses to associate his art with that of apparently marginal artistic figures in mainstream American society: for instance with the singers at “the apollo theater,” whom “white house . . . leaders” never encounter; or with the likes an “allen ginsberg” or “hank williams,” as opposed to more socially notorious artistic figures like “norman mailer.” Yet neither does Dylan care to protest these nonmainstream associates’ lack of public recognition (“i have no arguments”), never mind argue for their crucial and wholesome value: “i never drink milk.” He would work primarily to keep his focus on the nitty-gritty of music-making (here absurdly akin to “model[ling] harmonica holders”) without offering analytical reasons for his preference. The issue for him resembles anything *but* “discus[sing] azteck anthropology/english literature, or [world] history.”

Like the “formless” notion of self that marks his vocational focus, so Dylan’s poetics noticeably consists of a positional nonposition: a free-falling, ever-changing state of

composition and performance that “don’t look back.” This is why he can “accept chaos,” one main example for him being his private desire for “the sound” he imagines in “Farewell Angelina.” Leaving behind composing socially relevant songs, “I must go” to where “The triangle tingles/And the trumpets play slow.” That sentiment, of course, courses through “Mr. Tambourine Man,” ironically one of his most popular songs. As might be expected, it has invited an array of different, mostly referential interpretations, for instance that the song’s subject refers to a psychedelic drug experience.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps more ambitiously, the Dylan speaker’s wish to follow the Tambourine Man resonates with a specific Old Testament, prophetic source: “and there, as you come to the city, you will meet a band of prophets coming down from the high place with harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre before them, prophesying” (1 Sam. 10:5).

Is all this another tease, or, better, a test for listeners to get lost by the mirage of possible “objective” meaning? Nonetheless, the notion that Dylan here assumes the role of prophet underplays the clear separation between his speaker and the muse-like Tambourine Man whose “song” he wants to follow. Robert Shelton first cited the song’s Tambourine Man as a Dylan muse figure, and Aidan Day more thoroughly follows this reading in claiming that the figure concerns the creative process itself. It addresses the dualism of the “time-bound . . . determinism of the natural self” versus “a figure of the imaginative self or creative soul of the poet-speaker.” In a similar vein, John Hinchey formulates the song as kind of “prayer” in which the Tambourine Man references the very “power through whose grace [Dylan] makes his music.” The Man represents “the genius of song” itself, personifying “the liberated and liberating presence the singer feels within himself as he writes his poems, as he sings his songs.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the song’s mise en scène evokes Wordsworth’s female figure staged as singing a song out of hearing-range to him in the poem “The Solitary Reaper.” Like Wordsworth there, the Dylan speaker in his song seems less creatively liberated by the Tambourine Man than helplessly following his direction.<sup>29</sup> More subjunctive “plea” (*please* “play a song for me”), as Day notes, than imperative demand, “Mr. Tambourine Man” shows Dylan in the process of trying to resolve the elusive vagaries of the creative process.

But more in line with the album’s jacket notes, the song exposes the rift posed by Dylan’s artistic success in the public sphere and how that success interferes with his private conscience *as* an artist. Among other things, his performative turn to amplified musical sound on *Bringing It All Back Home* instantiates his songs’ “public” orientation and even desire for public approval. Rock music possesses a communal component, a “join in” sensibility that lends social immediacy to verbal-lyrical statements, and this affect surely pertains to him as much as his listeners. Less immediate, then, is the *non*-electric, vocal-musical rendition of song that characterizes the album recording of “Mr. Tambourine Man.” This conspicuous change has the effect of Dylan’s pulling back from the song’s instantaneous “public” connection, instead expressing a quietistic wish: to find a private or “subterranean” haven where artistic pursuits might occur unmotivated by possible public payoffs, let alone socially justifiable responses to urgent social issues. The song thus goes one step beyond “Subterranean Homesick Blues” in carving out a space in which to express a state of self-homelessness. From one angle, Dylan’s (verbal)

lyrics lend his otherwise private experiences a sharable dimension that the musical aspect of his songs would appear to reinforce. From another, "Mr. Tambourine Man" brings up the possibility that in comparison with their lyric composition, his songs' performance somehow has less significance *for him* than for others.

Musical performance here comes to mean a veritable subtraction from the primary means by which his alter ego of "Bob Dylan" had become publicly famous. The sound of song that he longs for in *this* song plays off the binary between the lyrics that effectively publicize his artistic self and words ground down into sheer sound that—here the connection with his existential impetus—turns those lyrics back into a figure for his sense of an inchoate, private self. In short, his songs' "musical" aspect comes to have a more immediate, private significance for him than the publicly mediated lyrics.<sup>30</sup> In particular, "Mr. Tambourine Man" tracks Dylan choosing to realize his desire for a private relation to his songs even as he recognizes its compromised but inevitable "public" status. This vocational pursuit by itself signifies a wish for a mode of selfhood that strays from conventional ethical positions. The song's refrain, addressed to the Tambourine Man figure ("Hey"), represents a secondary person in a musical band whose very marginality as a musical performer Dylan desires to appropriate for himself, but as qualified in the context of an autobiographical-vocational desire. He wants that "man" to "play a song *for me*," and in that way would undercut his public identity as a 1960s songwriter-cum-prophet.

How far does such self-minimalization go? Does he want to compose and perform his songs apart from *any* social, prophetic or other symbolic register by which others could understand them? That appears to be the case insofar as he imagines himself now devoid of any wish to dream ("I'm not sleepy") or idealize composing songs with ulterior goals: "there is no place I'm going to." If anything, he would have his songs return him to a state of being able to compose them as if before experiencing desires to have them either make a social-ethical impact or possess honorific "literary" import. In contrast, "Mr. Tambourine Man" expresses Dylan's desire for respite from *any* teleological pressure endemic to the creative act. He wants to leave behind "the haunted, frightened trees," that is, regarding things in terms of vexed social or personal issues from which his composition of lyrics at first surely spring. He would rather go to the "windy beach/Far from the twisted reach of crazy sorrow," or at least figuratively adopt an inhuman perspective on things that otherwise affect him. Likewise he would drive his memories "deep beneath the waves" and "forget about today until tomorrow" by immersing himself in the lyric-free rhythms of the tambourine.

If only in this case, Dylan imagines writing songs more marked by sound than sense: "In the *jingle jangle* morning I'll come followin' you." His lyrics here move toward their probable extinction, for isn't he composing this song precisely to abort composing songs with any verbally communicative "end" in mind? To *that* ephemeral end, he reminds himself that his former songs alias "dreams" have consistently turned into illusions. In retrospect, they double as convictions about the world around him, the so-called truths by which he once lived his life but that have since faded like "evenin's empire . . . returned into sand." Only during the moment of listening to the tambourine man's rhythmic sound can he think to live his life minus such illusions. This is to



experience life “blindly” or shed self-consciousness, yet simultaneously to remain alert to doing so: “still not sleeping.” Because of the havoc they have caused in his life, he has let go of willful or intentional designs on his creative work and by extension his existence: “My weariness amazes me.” The one position Dylan can now hold to (“branded on my feet”) concerns his ability like his Tambourine Man to experience life without needing to communicate it, hence “have no one to meet.” Given the failure of his past ethical investments in songs, he no longer believes that he can improve life for others through his songwriting: “the ancient empty street’s too dead for dreaming.”

“Mr. Tambourine Man” scripts Dylan’s wish to de-idealize socially formed ideals as they affect his art. Specifically he would banish any need to make his songs *mean* for others. Whereas formerly the desire to change the world around him or, for that matter, even the desire not to desire changing it, insinuated itself into his songs, now any effort to aim his songs in that direction has “Vanished from my hand.” Instead, he asks the musical medium personified by the Tambourine Man to “take me on a trip upon your magic swirlin’ ship.” *Like* a drug experience but also other equivalents to a “magic carpet ride,” his song at its musical base lets him float indeterminately or to no purpose even as it acknowledges purpose as a pressing, invasive possibility. He wants song per se to release him into a state where “my hands can’t feel to grip”: where he can’t any longer make lyrical, verbal sense of experiences that occur only in passing or continually flowing into each other always beyond one’s defining “grip.” Except after the fact, this situation would exempt Dylan from any *determined* vocational direction: “My toes too numb to step, wait only for my boot heels/To be wanderin’.” At most, his poetics, one might say, operates according to a revised Kantian aesthetic: not as purposive purposelessness, but as the suspension of the teleological impulse altogether. In that way, his poetics would allow him to be “ready to go anywhere” as if he were a perpetually homeless self.

But all this verges on a private vocational criterion by which he would eschew becoming the *self*-conscious hero of his work if only to himself. He wants to experience himself as if in some beautifully formless splendor: “I’m ready for to fade/Into my own parade.” If only to that one endless end, Dylan allows the Tambourine Man’s medium of song to “cast . . . a dancing spell” on him. Ethically considered, the most one can claim for Dylan’s idealized mode of song is that it might then inspire a spirit of freedom in him and listeners (“you *might* hear laughin’, spinnin’, swingin’ madly across the sun”), albeit not in any direct ideological sense: “it’s just escapin’ on the run.” The “Tambourine” version of song would leave it free from any need to proselytize this or that vision for or against others (“It’s not aimed at anyone”); and in lacking any content-ridden agenda, such freedom would appear limitless: “there are no fences facin’.”

Dylan’s present song at best hopes to mimic this spirit of compositional/performative freedom, also absent the pressure to be free *from* obstacles to it. His lyrics or “skippin’ reels of rhyme” comically because finitely follow that spirit like a “ragged clown behind”; as it were, they accept their secondary status in relation to songs composed to gain public attention. Dylan conversely positions would-be interpreters of his song (myself, of course, included) into accepting an ironic checkmate, for the song quietly exposes the vanity of interpreters’ attempts to externalize its essentially

elusive status: "it's just a shadow [the Tambourine Man's]/Seein' that [Dylan with his lyrics is] chasing." From this angle too, Dylan would pen songs to escape ("on the run") his memory of his past identity ("take me disappearin' through the smoke rings of my mind") as the artistic self that instigated his public fame.<sup>31</sup>

I have previously noted how this idealless ideal occurs entirely in the subjunctive mode. Dylan *would* have his art invoke a mythical time before he felt the compulsion to live up to any and all the formulated, artistic ideals that he perforce internalized and still internalizes through others. In retrospect and at least to him, this desire marks a "spot of time" that converts his preceding songs into "the frozen leaves" or artistic residue that, analogous to "the foggy ruins of time," failed to deliver him to the real, which is to say, to the anonymous self welded to its contingent perspective in a singularly experienced historical time and social space. That end would amount to a utopian state of homelessness for Dylan: bringing himself back to *that*, an essentially formless, inner space of creative freedom that yet always only leads to ongoing partial realizations, as "with [only] one hand waving free." On his album's jacket notes, he claims to have composed his *Bringing It All Back Home* lyrics "in a rhythm of unpoetic distortion." In that one way, Dylan can rightly say to himself: "i accept chaos. I am not sure whether it accepts me."

## Rebel without a Cause II: *Highway 61 Revisited*

Nothing exists; all is a dream. God—man—the world . . . ; they have no existence. Nothing exists save empty space—and you! . . . And you are not you—you have no body, no blood, no bones, you are but a thought.

– Mark Twain

Our vocation is to be nothing.

– Fernando Pessoa

A world without hope but no despair.

– Henry Miller

### 1 Spectacles of desolation

In the allegorical jacket notes to *Highway 61 Revisited*, Dylan states that he can no longer “say the word eye anymore.” For one thing, he cannot speak of any single *right* vision of life without conjuring up some other artist who already represents it and “that I faintly remember.” For another, no single vision of life exists: “there is no eye,” but “only a series of mouths,” in other words plural expressions of the existential. Dylan means to celebrate this diversity (“long live the mouths”), and the *Highway 61 Revisited* period songs do just that. For him, any “rooftop” or top limit placed on apprehending the *self* “has been demolished.”

In case we “don’t already know” it, the songs on the album will have begun at this point. They trace Dylan’s sense of his and ideally our proper vocational nonposition. We can all continue as if we don’t know it, instead going on as if the “eye is plasma”: as if seeing were reducible to mere biology and not synonymous with visionary insight. Such reductive views train us not to “have to think about such things as/eyes & rooftops & quazimodo,” figure for the poet whose life on the visionary heights appears monstrous to most people. Even if Dylan thinks that his following songs can nudge him and us to engage the absurd, it remains difficult to sustain that vision, especially given his alter ego’s distraction by rapidly increasing fame in the American public scene. A similar obstacle arises were he to deploy songwriting to cite human lunacy not to shame others to work for a more ethical, social world, but rather to reinforce his inner commitment to the real precisely as his single-most vocational goal. In “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream,” for example, he had satirically sketched the absurdity defining his social environment the

better to leave it at the end. But to where if not, as “Mr. Tambourine Man” intimates, a position that would minimize if not diminish altogether the import of his songwriting?

Yet Dylan is obviously not prepared to take a vocational vow of silence. Among other things, he still hopes to find a social double, someone somewhere who he can believe will support if not exactly duplicate his effort to encounter the real. What motivates his seeking a minimal social connection is acceptance of widespread “chaos,” which he claims he has done in the liner notes to *Bringing It All Back Home*, and that he sketches out in the next album’s eponymous song “Highway 61 Revisited.” The actual Highway 61 extends from Canada through Bob Dylan’s home state of Minnesota all the way down to New Orleans. The route traces a movement to and back from the geographical origin of the blues: from where African Americans migrated North with their musical-lyrical influences, and whites like Dylan figuratively moved back South to gain an authentic musical-artistic cachet.<sup>1</sup> But the song rehearses that first migration in the way it “sends up a dark humorous depiction of US racist history.” “Uncle Sam” has turned into “Georgia Sam” with “a bloody nose,” the US egalitarian ideal beaten up by the forces of Southern segregation.<sup>2</sup> But Dylan avows no “We shall overcome” response here. No “Welfare Department” lends “Sam” any “clothes,” that is, gives substance to an American egalitarian ideal that now serves only to cover up the scandal of a debased social situation. Isn’t there *some* place in US society where that ideal still survives, even if only in occulted form? Can the capitalist system lead to greater equality for all? “Sam” asks “Howard,” likely alluding to the *Über*-wealthy eccentric and patriotic American recluse Howard Hughes, whether or not he knows if US culture might somewhere support this ideal.<sup>3</sup> “Howard just pointed with his gun/And said that way down on Highway 61.” The pervasive and coercive influence of Capital makes for nowhere and no chance anymore for folk to escape from suffering extreme social blues.

In Dylan’s hands, however, the blues goes beyond familiar personal and/or social complaints. He has its temporal-spatial range extending back from the biblical site of Abraham, whom God asked to sacrifice his son, to intimations of “a next world war,” a contemporary allusion to the Cold War cloud threatening US America and with which Dylan had grown up in the 1950s. The “blues” topos no longer primarily concerns sorrow or loss understood only in a personal or in a racial-minoritarian sense, but also hints at an apocalyptic view of society at large. It affects everyone and encompasses (or revisits) past and present social relations alike. The song also strikes a self-referential chord. In effect, it revises the myth of personal freedom associated with the highway in the folk tradition of Woody Guthrie and others to which Dylan had referred in his inaugural composition “Song to Woody.” “Highway 61 Revisited” equally retraces and trumps the nostalgia for better times as recorded in Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi*, the River that Highway 61 more or less tracks.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to Twain and Guthrie’s world, Dylan’s no longer permits escape from a social scene that ubiquitously frustrates fundamental existential relations to the world. In a surreal collation of anachronistic topical references, the song conflates the biblical Abraham with figures from 1960s’ America, the segregated South with the US establishment at large, Brechtian Germany with France and the French Revolution, Shakespeare’s comic plays with contemporary racism, and not least spectacle and gambling with nuclear war.

The most striking trope of the song lies with Dylan's opening act where he yokes the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac to the sacrificing of sons in a US war marked by a patriotic ethos that he had once critically singled in early songs like "With God on Our Side" and "John Brown." Unlike its precursor, Dylan's redaction of the story doesn't allow for any final renegeing on God's part. Using hip street lingo, at first "Abe" doesn't understand why he must sacrifice his son ("Man, you must be puttin' me on") but he ends up forced to do it under threat of God's promised punishment: "The next time you see me comin' you better run." The issue no longer concerns exemplary testimony to faith in God's authority as it does in the Torah or, say, in Kierkegaard's Christian midrash of this biblical event in *Fear and Trembling*. Rather, Dylan settles for exposing authoritarian coercion, plain and simple. US culture's sacrifice of its sons alias Abraham's sacrifice of his son has no other justification than to illustrate the power of brute authority, hence also to intimidate others by example into following the law as laid down in the regnant social context. For that reason alone, Dylan states that the story ought to occur in the loud public setting: "We'll just put some bleachers out in the sun/And have it on Highway 61."

Chaos rules the past and present social scene, and for that un-reason precludes anyone's possessing a *certain* sense of self despite artificial efforts to gain one. Gender-identity, for one thing, has become intractably mixed up. In contrast to its evoked literary precedent, the song's line about "the fifth daughter on the twelfth night/[Who] Told the first father" alludes to the Shakespearean play in which gender-confusion eventually gets resolved in a conventionally comedic ending. But in our modern world, the proliferation of first fathers, second mothers, and seventh sons makes clear only that no one gets to know his or her origin. Forced by chaotic, external circumstances, one's self-identity stays permanently vexed and trying to reform it by human means makes for an even worse problem. The daughter speaks about her "complexion" being "much too white" as if the choice of one's human features, here underscored by an inverted racist ideal, were absurdly a matter of artificial substitution, never mind an arbitrary Nature. The myth of family licenses the habit of making oneself palatable to others to the point where it provides the modern and especially American motivation for endless kinds of "self" makeovers, as with the father saying to the daughter, "Let me tell the second mother this [i.e., to make her complexion 'right'] has been done." Such incestuous passion ("the second mother was with the seventh son") structures people's incessant wish to duplicate themselves in each other's image and likeness.

And all this occurs within an American social medium encouraging conspicuous publicizations of self.. Out of boredom rather than committed principles, people want a show: the "[bored] rovin' gambler" who "was tryin' to create a next world war"; or newsmedia people and even protestors against the system using the media to attract others to their pro and contra enterprises. The "promoter" who consciously or unconsciously tries to profit off demonstrable social crises appears everywhere in US society. He would go so far as to stage a warlike event as a public spectacle for monetary gain and other kinds of social approbation: "We'll just put some bleachers out in the sun/And have it on Highway 61." "Highway 61 Revisited" exposes how everyone wants to make spectacles of virtually all events. Dylan's song's *bête noire* arguably comes

down to *that*, but then finds itself in a no less confused state of musical-lyrical affairs. Mimicking the movement up and down the metaphorical highway, not even blues music can express the subtle ways by which people now suffer ever-changing reasons for depression.

For example, through the capitalistic-technological proliferation of recordings, pop-musical art has become coopted by marketplace forces to the point where it leads people to avoid taking the blues to heart, in that way leading them to experience a different kind of blues anyway. Dylan has "Louie" a.k.a. Armstrong, for a long time the most well-known blues figure in the twentieth-century Western world, speak to "Mack the Finger," an allusion to Bertold Brecht's Marxist artistic alternative to the bourgeois "culture industry." Minus a finger besides, Brecht's "Mack the Knife" here is "knife"less or nonthreatening. According to the dialogue between "Louie" and "Mack," US consumerist culture continually reproduces self-approved commodities like the patriotic "forty red white and blue shoe strings." This shoe-string image further suggests the flimsy ("on a shoe-string") means by which such commodities become meaningful to people. This is a culture where one finds "a thousand telephones that don't ring; where communication has broken down between persons and now only consists of empty, meaningless discourse. The once Brechtian "Mack" wants to rid himself of "these" of commodity "things," but "Louie," Dylan's updated blues guru, says that the only place where "it can easily be done" is to dump them on Highway 61.

No escape seems possible from things becoming fodder for mass public spectacles of one kind or another. In the song "Tombstone Blues," Dylan flashes his critical-verbal guns on audiences who lack imagination of or desire for an alternative mode of existence. "Tombstone" itself references both death in general and the famous scenario of the American "Western" (my marks), the showdown gunfight at the OK Corral. The song thus goes beyond any straight critique of US America's social-cultural breakdown. In the first stanza, Dylan underscores the romanticized ideological myth ("The sweet pretty things") of the old Western frontier. Such myths, he notes, have now been put to rest ("are in bed now of course") since deep down no one really believes in their applicability in the modern world. Still, the official US government leaders ("city fathers") keep trying to resuscitate that myth. Contra the lumpen-revolutionary war-protests going on in US streets, for instance, they want people to revere old-style American Revolutionary ideals presented in the guise of "Paul Revere's horse," which Dylan mocks by alluding to that project as "the horse's ass" [*sic*]. This effort, however, bespeaks American anxiety, with everyone "nervous" over imminent social change. But Dylan again reverses himself by claiming that no one "need" worry, suggesting that events fostered by contemporary student revolutionaries and their agendas will change nothing. They themselves fold into an old American myth feeding the illusion of a new United States in the offing. "The ghost of Belle Starr," an ideal "star" or present-day, ersatz American hero, exhibits the passing of the innocuous "Western" fantasy, for the good American hero, the once-upon-a-time benign or Robin-Hood-like Western outlaw figure, has died and become a "ghost." Dylan similarly cites "Brother Bill," a connoted double for the cowboy showman Buffalo Bill. If Dylan acknowledges his (fraternal-like) relation to this type of American, in the end he denies full identification

with him and what he represents. In accord with an American culture constantly regenerating the wish to regard its activities as sacred in terms of Judeo-Christian values, this affiliation occurs only in a context analogous to a “Cecil B. DeMille” movie, the director known for biblical spectacles like *The Ten Commandments*. Moreover, like other events on “Highway 61,” this one ought to take place on a public stage typified by sensation: “I would set [Brother Bill] in chains at the top of the hill/Then send out for some pillars.”

Throughout “Tombstone Blues,” Dylan interchangeably refers to figures as if they possessed biblical signatures. “Jezebel,” who in the Bible led the Israelites into idolatry, inherits Starr’s reputed sharp-shooting ability. That is, whatever sharp American wherewithal (“wits”) that the genre of the “Western” once symbolized has itself become mere patriotic idolatry. American religion, here represented by “the nun,” performs the same hypocritical function: “she” constructs a transparent disguise (“bald wig”) that the American establishment (“the chamber of commerce”) uses to kill others (*à la* “Jack the Ripper”), such as by starting wars to defend capitalist interests. Dylan adopts the Samson myth to portray an Amerikan figure crushing the Philistine world: those who don’t subscribe to US social values. Everywhere one turns in this scene, one encounters the absurd abjection of the singular self via social tropes. This is Amerika, its representative social identity a messianic (read: imperialist) US ideology that uses third-world countries to support so-called American values. The former thus act out the role of “John the Baptist,” a would-be prophet eclipsed by Jesus, reduced to “torturing a thief” for “his hero the Commander-in-Chief.” Punning on the colloquial sense of losing one’s head, Dylan outrageously equates the biblical Baptist losing his head with US-dominated, third-world countries that would lose their identities if they dared choose a different way of life. But like that colonized country, the socialized self already suffers self-alienation and self-loathing (getting “sick”) from having to enforce a rigid, as if deified social order over existential conscience: “Tell me great hero [i.e., regnant US values], but please make it brief/Is there a hole for me to get sick in?” The bully (American) country pushes around small ones (metaphorically the size of a “fly”), while flexing its military might (“dropping a bar bell”) and using Cold War rhetoric (“Death to all those who would whimper and cry”) to inculcate its values as if they were absolute holy writ.<sup>5</sup>

The Dylan speaker exposes other well-publicized American ideological myths no less vulnerable to base motives and patently unable to sustain any idealistic alternative. Middle-class romance that pretends to self-other equality here gets framed as mere game-playing in the face of base sexual desire. Far from realizing any promised consummation in some (at least) faux-hallowed bower, “The hysterical bride” finds herself violated “in the penny arcade,” a public scene of cheap games where she has become nothing more than a sexual object for the male: “Screaming . . . ‘I’ve just been made.’” Like others in Dylan’s American scene, she lacks any singular identity, a condition that American ideology appears primed to reinforce. Everyone stands replaceable, even repeating former historical and biblical happenings. “Tombstone Blues” thus bespeaks the death of the “Western” myth in wider terms than the American “Western.” Even the song’s chorus points to how people passively accept this

reactionary regime of non-*self*-consciousness. "Mama" works in the factory and stays poor, enslaved to the system: "She ain't got no shoes," thus can't get up and leave. At most, potential authority figures impotently dream of rebelling against it: "Daddy's in the alley/He's lookin' for the fuse." Without hope or direction ("I'm in the streets"), the young "I" a.k.a. Dylan persona deems it impossible to change the modern American social configuration. Exactly in that sense he experiences "the tombstone blues": the death of all American idealistic dreams. His use of the generic names "Mama" and "Daddy" already indicates the externally enforced anonymity in the American scene: both those who serve and those who rebel are equally "poor." No song can express the sorrow this entails, all of which makes "*tombstone blues*" an apt self-reference for the Dylan song.

Dylan's critique of a spiritually deadening American culture not least extends to his own vocational medium. It too suffers the pervasive infiltration of "tombstone" Americanist values. Songs propagandizing them (marches "rehearse[d] around the flagpole") and doubling as "Tuba"-like or blowhard entertainment now supersede what once stood for quality music, whether in a populist ("Ma Raney") or high-cultured ("Beethoven") vein. The system similarly coopts songs intent on pursuing self-knowledge, just as does an educational system coopted by debased, so-called vocational training: "The National Bank at a profit sells road maps for the soul" to old and young people alike in "the old folks home and the college."<sup>6</sup>

In exposing the culture's contamination of his very *métier*, Dylan also circles back to the issue running throughout *Highway 61 Revisited*: the virtual impossibility of communicating a stance that *in spirit* elevates heterogeneous aspects of self over the homogeneity of selves promulgated by a publicity-contaminated American society. In the last stanza of "Tombstone Blues," he abdicates from his own effort to make *his* song akin to a sensationalist public spectacle for everyone and anyone to witness, which one could argue that this song's elliptical images themselves enact. Working to avoid cultural pressures to reproduce the "same" (my marks) requires that he mute any social-political temptations to preach a self-certain message. What else can he do except "*wish* [he] could write" (my emphasis) his listener "a melody so plain/That could hold" or sustain that person's attention. Dylan's view of the listener includes even the "dear lady" who agrees with him about the alienation induced by the American social scene, and yet wants him to foreground *that* message. Nothing he might write, in short, can "cool . . . and cease the pain" stemming from a listener's "useless . . . knowledge" about the objective world referenced in "Tombstone Blues."

## 2 To be *alone* with you

By "useless and pointless knowledge," one might surmise that Dylan also means socially grooved approaches to apprehending the real. Each person is to do that on his/her singular terms by shaving down substitute, social alternatives, among which Dylan includes others' relations to his own songs, never mind his social-cultural status. For him, this vocational task clearly entails risking self-isolation. It follows that he



also sets a premium on what one might term existential companionship, specifically with others who somehow manifest a similar singularity, whether in art work or personal relationships. This predilection obviously places a demand especially on these relationships. Given his vocational context, they can fail him at any time and in any situation, which precipitates his aggressive reaction toward, for example, “tombstone” society at large or else particular persons. We can see this first target in “Highway 61 Revisited” and “Tombstone Blues.” The second underwrites the addressees of four songs from the *Highway 61 Revisited* period.

On the surface, “Ballad of a Thin Man” expresses a critically self-righteous Bob Dylan, the celebrity person entertaining his cohorts by willfully shaming a “Mr. Jones.” It seems easy enough for listeners to take this position as well toward the song’s straight-laced figure. Most reviews of “Ballad of a Thin Man” ground “Mr. Jones” in biographical terms, especially a journalist-interviewer whom Dylan sets up as a shocked, middle-class “conformist. . . discovering the burgeoning counterculture.”<sup>7</sup> But as usual, one can doubly assign an allegorical underground to this Dylan song. First, the addressee’s too-common name constitutes an alias for *anyone* who thinks that he/she has a firm identity. Second, Dylan puts down “Jones” “With a pencil in your hand” as a typical person who wants to define *Dylan’s* identity or self. Third, not only does Jones possess only a “thin” self-identity himself, he manifests an equally “thin” or vulnerable attitude toward risqué kinds of human behavior. A “superficial Philistine”<sup>8</sup> thoughtlessly bourgeois in his values, Mr. Jones appears shocked at the suggested homosexual *mise en scène* he here encounters: a naked man and the kneeling sword-swallower who would use the thin man’s “throat.”<sup>9</sup>

Yet if Dylan’s put-down of Jones seems personally vindictive, the song’s entire occasion bespeaks an anarchistic scene bound to threaten *anyone* holding to relatively fixed social values. Even the title becomes significant in referencing both Dashiell Hammett’s well-known mystery novel and, in more showy ways, its whimsical movie translation. With a *mise en scène* that includes a “geek” and a “sword-swallower,” the song instantiates what would constitute utter social chaos for any average person. And the mystery deepens once one realizes that “Ballad of a Thin Man” expresses Dylan’s conviction that one’s existence transcends empirical explanations. Moreover, the Dylan speaker more or less assumes that that fact will necessarily elude listeners if they approach his lyrics looking for either entertainment or a commentary on social ills. The moniker “thin man” therefore represents any person who lacks a subjective, meaning *spiritual*, relation to life, which accounts for why “Mr. Jones” can at best only *vaguely* sense that “something is happening” in the lyrical “room” of the Dylan song.

The Jones figure thus puzzlingly encounters “somebody naked” in the songs: the “Dylan” artist/performer who strips away superficial themes, topics, and motives for conveying them, and instead seeks to get at the “naked” self. “Jones,” of course, doesn’t recognize *this* Dylan: “Who is that man?” Since the vision expressed in “Ballad of a Thin Man” lacks any conventional reference point, listeners will have nothing to “say/ When you get home,” that is, when they try to tell others what Dylan’s songs concern. Some, for example, turn to his work simply to get entertained by the offbeat or eccentric happening such as in “watch[ing] the geek,” a judgment that the Dylan song applies

to this listener. "Ballad of a Thin Man" executes this reversal by turning away from definitive meanings and leaving the listener helpless before it. What "Jones" hears is a song that "immediately walks up to you/When [it] hears you speak" and makes *him* feel like the eccentric fool: "How does it feel/To be such a freak?" Shaming Mr. Jones means to alert (other) listeners to adopt a subjective relation to the Dylan song, especially since one has no objective way to determine its meaning: "you ask, 'Is this where it is?'" Jones has looked for such meaning when in fact it really concerns "What's really mine." Any listener not willing to venture a similar relation to the song at most receives a minor aspect of its vision: it "hands you a bone," an elusive image or epigram to ponder but never the full existential point. His songs pivot around a non-objective "truth" that resists the usual modes of appropriation or of asking "Where what is?"

This frustrating series of zen-like responses to a listener's questions ironically lands Jones, if he could only see it, in the kind of truth coincident with the Dylan song's starting point: "Oh my God/Am I here all alone?"<sup>10</sup> But to Dylan, that person resembles a camel chewing its cud, which here means: not listening, refusing to "see" ("You put your eyes in your pocket"), unable to intuit (or sense, as in smelling) the effort to encounter the real proffered by the song ("[You put] your nose on the ground"). The Dylan song effectively outlaws such interlocutors ("There out to be a law/Against you coming around"); if it could, it would force listeners to hear its real subjective premise: "You should be made/To wear earphones." Dylan's primary *bête noire*, moreover, is the person who takes solace "Among the lumberjacks": any strong-armed group that would interdict the "sword-swallower," an authoritative figure promoting *les liaisons dangereuses*. The Dylan song ultimately acts like a flamenco dancer: in "click[ing] his high heels," it adopts the mock-comic pose of authority. At any point ("without further notice") his song can revoke the listener's penchant for assuming direct access to it by making that same thrill-seeking motivation the song's rejected subject: "Here is your throat back/Thanks for the loan."

Dylan's song means to perplex any listener to the point where he/she gives up the need to know it. One must instead finally bring to the song one's own subjective desire, toward which end "Ballad of a Thin Man" at last drags its imaginary male listener into a homoerotic relationship. The "one-eyed midget" in the next stanza stands for a metaphor not only of a small or be-littled male, but also the one-eyed penis. In homoerotic terms, the personified song as "midget" demands instant gratification ("NOW"), which Dylan's befuddled, supposedly conventional and in this case apparently heterosexual interlocutor doesn't at all understand: "For what reason?" The song gives the listener more than he bargained for. The straight "Mr. Jones" can't even formulate the situation, never mind its sexual logistics: "What does this mean?" Nor can he understand the ersatz midget's craving for Mr. Jones "milk," a trope that alludes not only to his semen but more important to his subjective, spiritual juices without which ("Or else") he won't comprehend the song, and so will have to "go home." But insofar as what he will take home is what he doesn't understand, he will encounter his permanently homeless self. Conversely, the self-belittling "midget" figure is Dylan's image for how his vocational project appears small or minor vis-à-vis the regnant social values of US culture represented by the likes of Jones and his ilk. In performing "Ballad of a Thin Man," therefore, Dylan himself turns into "a thin man."

This autobiographical turn in the song's shifting registers of meaning works further to neutralize the scene's referential significance. To its listeners, the Dylan song sounds like a nonsensical series of word-rhymes ("now," "how," "cow"), their meaning for some unexplained reason always on the brink of nonreference: "What does *this* mean?" Indeed like a "cow" giving "milk," only listeners who can nourish the song with their own spiritual requests can appreciate its significance. But the bottom line seems to be that for Dylan, "Mr. Jones" could serve to lock down his song's communicative range. Backed up by his carnivalesque cohorts in "the room," both Dylan's aggressive tone toward Jones and the tenor of the lyric can be read not as a spiritually provocative gesture but as Dylan's defensive reaction against his imminent artistic self-isolation. Since so many obstacles exist for people not to "hear" what his songs essentially concern, the issue finally becomes for *him* whether or not to continue on his vocational path.

That issue defines the context and tone notable in two other "put-down" songs in the *Highway 61 Revisited* period, "Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window?" and "Positively 4th Street." The first has Dylan imagining someone quite literally listening to his song, which *as a* "record" of course remains a spiritually neutral agent of communication. At the very least, the audience represents the entirely passive, non-interacting listener. More important, the song stages him or her listening to a Dylan song and missing how its point applies to them *right then*. For when listening to Dylan's songs, all that the "you" literally hears "in your room" is a singer ranting ("with a fist full of tacks") against people for not *really* listening to them: the spiritually "dead who can't answer him back." Yet he also imagines how *he* appears to them only as "Preoccupied with his vengeance," thus undercutting his would-be privileged negative judgment of them. His aggressive reaction to listeners' ignorance of what his songs concern absorbs him to the point where he realizes that he can lose track of his own vocational charge. Something about Dylan knows ("I'm sure") that this, what amounts to, his alter-self "has no intentions/Of looking your way" or of caring any more about his audience ("you") than "to test his inventions" or using others primarily to gauge their responses to his songs.

This essentially external relation to his songs ironically places Dylan in the same predicament as the audience against whom he otherwise directs his frustrated sentiments. After all, how can anyone ever really determine the spiritual dimension of another person's response to his songs? How can one decide whether Dylan himself pretends to or else shows genuine artistic ambition in "Tryin' to peel the moon and expose it," that is, trying to disclose the real in his lyrical works? And how *can* he try to prove his artistic worth in a climate where his public success leads others to revere *whatever* he does? Critics of his songs, to take one example, resemble "bloodhounds that kneel": they hang on his every word or strive to parse the images in his songs to find his objectively sharable views on life that they might adopt for themselves. To other listeners, he even plays the role of a mystic seer who seemingly at will dabbles in arcane subjects: "If he needs a third eye he just grows it." It is as if his audiences exist solely to "hand him his chalk/Or pick it up after he throws it." But the public acclaim for "Bob Dylan" interferes with the subjectively conditioned spiritual drive behind *Dylan's* composing songs. So at best, he wants to believe that fans are "frightened" or

anxious over “the box [they] keep him in,” while at worst, he disdains “his genocide fools,” those uncritical and non-anxious listeners who would adopt his hip vision of life and exclude anyone else who follows a different one. In this last case, those who consider themselves in-group “friends,” sycophantic hangers-on, and peer imitators capitalize on his success. In essence, they exchange (“rearrange”) their positions with the ubiquitous rock ‘n’ roll groupies and also generally adhere to the faux “religion of the little ten women,” a trope for any number of superficial or small-minded admirers.

The refrain of “Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window?” calls others to transcend this obstacle: to crawl out “your window,” which is to say, get beyond “your” usual ways of perceiving his work and/or existence. But in the process of this plea, Dylan himself remains locked inside *his* “room”: obsessed with wrong reception of that very same work instead of openly pursuing it as an essential aspect of his vocation. “Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window?” again turns out a song about the condition for composing songs the way he would, but that self-reflexivity serves as an albeit passive means to avoid being a cultural object for others. Another way defines one aspect of the present song: trying to demystify himself to himself, for example by noting how he only “*looks so truthful*” (my emphasis). But either way, what appears a song in which Dylan boastfully rants against others’ ignorance of what his other songs concern tilts toward his effort to clear the ground to do such work regardless of its reception or his and its external status as a public spectacle.

Dylan would have everyone “crawl out” the “window” of blocked vision and face existence as squarely as possible. In his songs, “the dark” real “is just beginning” to show. Under what he must know invites a biographical reading, he tries to make that point as directly as he can in “Positively 4th Street,” from which he used two lines in an outtake version of the former song.<sup>11</sup> Needless to say, “Positively 4th Street” most emphatically comes across as rife with Bob Dylan’s animus directed at someone he knows and who we can infer now resents his recently acquired fame. The Dylan speaker publicly puts down whoever “you” is in reality, and does so on the grounds that he (or she) has betrayed their former friendship, despite the person’s present protestations to the contrary. For Dylan, the “you” “positively” or without qualification typifies the “4th Street” “crowd,” which plausibly refers to Bob Dylan’s past scene as a folk singer. As such, the “you” who disingenuously insists that he or she remains Dylan’s friend metonymically represents an entire group of people who denigrate the celebrity status that Bob Dylan has gained from indulging in the pop-electronic medium. This biographical reading of “Positively 4th Street” effectively frames the song as akin to a lyrical roman à clef.

Yet the lyric arguably possesses a false bottom under which rumbles certain allegorical goings-on in line with Dylan’s vocational musings during this period. From that angle, his primary disappointment with the erstwhile “friend” stems from his or her inability to get beyond public values the better to engage Dylan’s work subjectively. “You” looks at that work through the faulty lens of its public success and failure, which in this case bears out his former maxim: that his popular success equates with his failure in songwriting whether defined by “folk” criteria or, since he deviates from them, even typical rock ‘n’ roll practices. When Dylan was a virtual nobody, “You just stood there grinning”; given his success, “you” now deigns to lend

him a “helping hand,” and would become one more public advocate of his successful reputation. Such support seems false to Dylan since it has nothing to do with the spiritual let alone artistic aspect of his work. He or she “just wants to be on/The side that’s winning,” in other words to get on the bandwagon of Bob Dylan’s success as opposed to engaging Dylan’s inner-directed work. Listeners holding to any external criterion vis-à-vis Dylan’s work do the same, not least those who primarily focus on its social relevance. They too occupy the same position as the faux friend in “Positively 4th Street” and feel “let . . . down” by how the Dylan song predicates itself precisely on the negation of any such criteria.

A larger issue further accounts for Dylan’s animus in “Positively 4th Street.” In one sense, he recognizes himself in the “you” whom he encounters in the song’s moment: “I used to be among the crowd/You’re in with.” Both his past and present “you” seem entirely dependent on others’ values, especially as conveyed through the medium of petty (“talk behind my back”) social gossip. Dylan’s song, on the contrary, demands the listener’s full, singular response to it; it rejects “contact” with any listener who holds to myths of “Dylan,” which depend on a “crowd” consensus that only hides from this listener “What he don’t know to begin with.” That “what” in fact constitutes Dylan’s precondition for engaging his work: the effort, however limited given a person’s situation at any given time, to regard oneself minus social support as much as possible. Listeners who don’t make that effort can’t distinguish between the Dylan “self” of and in the song and “Bob Dylan,” the empirical, media-hyped person. This disjunction helps explain why when “You see me on the street/You always act surprised.” Dylan’s spiritual invisibility to such a listener otherwise leaves him totally defined by a (superficial) fame due to the contingent exterior a.k.a. public effect of his works. What would happen if that effect were to disappear? At best, people like the “you” in “Positively 4th Street” envy him either by wishing him “good luck,” all as if his career were first and foremost based on external circumstances alone, or by not meaning “good luck,” at all: “You’d rather see me paralyzed.”

While Dylan feels sorry for others trapped in such circumstantial concerns, he realizes that he can’t “rob” their “heartbreaks” if he is to keep to his own inner-defined vocational goal and eradicate the demands of external precipitates of “self.” People become “dissatisfied” with their “position . . . and place” when they compare his social position with theirs. Dylan’s aggressive stance toward the “you” here has one primary justification. His work means to have others “stand inside my shoes” and apprehend their own states of unfreedom so that “positively” speaking, they might begin to break free from their internalized, social self-imprisonments. Songs like “Positively 4th Street” try to make each single listener register the extent to which dependence on external values of all kinds becomes a “drag” on her potential relation to a spiritually defined self. Masked by Dylan’s aggressive tone, he nevertheless desires a compatibility with others by having them “be on your own/With no direction home/Like a complete unknown.” But he recognizes how much his desire for a comrade in spiritual arms, the flip side of his put-down of “you” or “Miss Lonely” in “Like a Rolling Stone” remains more wish than belief on his part. How likely is it that others will break free from anti-existential dependencies?

Dylan plays out full force his wish to overcome that suspicion in the album's most famous song, the one that *Rolling Stone* magazine dubbed the best rock 'n' roll song of the twentieth century. Numerous critics have subjected it to various interpretations ranging from the biographical (e.g., who "Miss Lonely" might be) to its musical-cum-sociological impact at the time both on rock music specifically and the 1960s generation at large.<sup>12</sup> One can equally impute to the song a self-referential edge. John Hinchey, for example, considers that "Like a Rolling Stone" reflects "a specific, historically documented crisis in Dylan's relationship with his audience." Tim Riley holds that the song's "singer sees his former self in his subject's shoes."<sup>13</sup> This interpretive view frames the song as the reverse of "Positively 4th Street" where the speaker would have the other perceive him-/herself from Dylan's position. If he at all empathizes with "Miss Lonely" in "Like a Rolling Stone," he surely remains uncertain about whether or not she sees herself in the same terms as he regards her. By means of imaginary projection, Dylan here stages someone *forced* to accept his notion of ground-zero selfhood. Indeed, given his insistent and aggressively performed refrain on the album's studio recording ("How does it **f-e-e-l**/To be without a **h-o-m-e**?"), he seems to imagine her unable to avoid accepting that vision.

The song begins like a faux fairy-tale ("Once upon a time"), this one not concerning a poor Cinderella become rich but rather a rich girl who once "threw the bums a dime" become poor. However, this and the other actions he attributes to her in the song show her acting according to social type. For instance, "she" could just as easily represent any naïve liberal who thinks she can personally avoid living in terms of the real by offering help ("a dime" = a spiritual pittance) to down-and-out people. Her liberalist equivalent of "bums" also connotes anyone who can't find a purpose in life as endorsed within the existing, mainstream social sphere. Dylan imagines her having failed until now to see that she along with everyone else unwittingly exists in this state of bum-like homelessness. But he also imagines her forced to realize the breakdown of such illusions "alone." Her "having to be scrounging for your next meal" metaphorically emphasizes how she has lost her social cushions and/or how circumstance have coerced her into feeling *spiritually* impoverished. Social-security blankets like money and education in the "finest school" can no longer soften her collision with existential fate. For a time, of course, collegial-cum-intellectual relationships could keep that lonely condition at bay: "you only used to get juiced in [schools or intellectual groups]," essentially just having a good time there. But acquiring socially approved knowledge has little to do with leading one "to live on the street" and "get used to" braving existence without depending on one's conventional notions of self.

Dylan makes a cameo appearance in the song when he has her encounter "the mystery tramp" who personifies just this state of spiritual homelessness that most people spend time trying to avoid. To accept this scene of living means to forgo depending on "alibis" or trying to "make a deal" to evade living life in relation to the "vacuum of" the Dylan tramp's "eyes," which can refer to the Dylan song itself. As Hinchey puts it, sooner or later and if only unconsciously, everyone intuits the "nothingness . . . within" self, the better to "become 'a complete unknown,' even (or especially) to" oneself.<sup>14</sup>

“Like a Rolling Stone” addresses other kinds of similarly motivated evasions of that realization. The song’s addressee can typify anyone who regards others for purposes of entertainment such as having wanted “the jugglers and the clowns” to do “tricks for you.” The lure of public spectacles also applies to temptations endemic to political life. Dylan then metaphorically sketches the self’s existentially doomed investment in the transient glamour of social-political power. In a scene eerily evoking J.F.K.’s assassination, “Miss Lonely” accompanies an exotic “diplomat” while riding in a limousine as if in a parade. The partner’s “Siamese cat” refers to a presumption of regal-like status in the public domain, his public attraction replete with the exotic and pseudo-wise “Siamese cat.” Craving such attention for its own sake ends in a *sic transit gloria* affair. The tease of investing one’s very identity in public forms of power turns out chimerical at best (“He really wasn’t where it’s at”) and eventually exhausts all of one’s vocational options: “After he took from you everything he could steal.”

Other social options fail the existential test as well. For example, in dwelling with “all the pretty people” like some “Princess on the steeple,” one finds oneself with “nothing” in the end.<sup>15</sup> Wedding oneself to high society groups, an image also applicable to any elitist group that reinforces people into “thinkin’ that they got it made,” only lands one miles away from the real. To get back on the vocational track, one has to “pawn” the pseudo-security seemingly provided by one’s preferred group and instead heed (“Go to him now, he calls you”) the vision of a “Napoleon in rags”: the visionary whose ambition for getting to the bottom of life knows no restraint. The hobo-like figure represents an ironic conqueror (“in rags”) since he can never claim to own any one of his along-the-way insights into the real. *This* “Napoleon,” another version of Dylan’s own would-be self, hardly befits anyone seeking to march in public parades and/or otherwise gain applause.

What other vocational option can one take “When you got nothing” or find yourself unable to depend on a secure or a self-certain vision of life? Once that security strikes one as inadequate, one then becomes “invisible” to others who think they have it or persist in seeking it as their major purpose in life. “Like a Rolling Stone” tracks the final inconsequence of social success, although not as an incentive to reform a non-egalitarian society. Rather, it leaves behind the private self without privilege, which accounts for the anonymous identity, the “mystery tramp,” that Dylan here adopts as a doppelgänger who fully embraces having “no direction home.” The song’s title of course derives from the saying “A rolling stone gathers no moss.” In Dylan’s vocational bailiwick, this saying comes to mean that no supposedly secure truth can halt any person’s movement toward the insecurity of what existence finally entails. The song’s central image of “a rolling stone” itself paradoxically represents a non-signifying *thing*, a “nothing,” therefore, that the song can only point to as “*like* a rolling stone.” This image also stands for a would-be self stripped of *all* social predications or in the process of becoming the same meaningless thing if and when judged from the vantage of the social sphere that regards “nothing” as a state of mind devoutly to be shunned. But Dylan regards it as a positive end, all in line with Emily Dickinson’s vision: “Nothing is the force/That renovates the World.”<sup>16</sup>

### 3 “Nothing” else

Despite its declamatory tone, Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone” revolves around his ironically utopian wish that others might be willing to encounter “the nothing that is.”<sup>17</sup> This wish, however, can just as easily turn into his infinite resignation to the fact that they won’t, a position that comes through in “It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry.” Dylan opens the song by framing his vocational medium as a vehicle of communication (“I ride on a mailtrain, baby”) that brings him no real satisfaction: “Can’t buy a thrill.” His work has become commonplace labor to him, as if he were in fact repetitively riding a daily train. It could therefore lead him to experience a vocational stalemate were it not that he’s “up all night” worried about recovering his original vision. He remains “Leanin’ on the window sill” so as to *see* that “WHAAT?” about existence.

As a counter to the suspicion that no matter how hard he tries, no one really seems to receive the spiritual tenor of his songs, Dylan’s “baby” in “It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry” stands for an ideal, intimate audience figure capable of grasping the visionary position behind his compositions. He thereby declares that if he fails (“if I die”) in his quest to maintain his work’s higher goal (“on top of the hill”), his “baby will.” Even as “baby” represents this intimate listener, she also personifies the song he finds himself in the process of composing, so that if he tends to fall short of his vocational standard, his songs will at least record his effort to enact it. Dylan’s notion of the “good” life means what his imagination (in the traditional trope of the “moon”) can realize at its best, “the moon look[ing] good” and “Shining through the trees.” His imaginative high overcomes (shines through) all intervening obstacles (“the trees”) and self-doubts, which otherwise might cancel his visionary reach altogether. Similarly, “the brakeman” “Flagging down the ‘Double E’” (a large locomotive<sup>18</sup>) would halt the Dylan speaker’s frustration at the barriers to communicating his vision, which he continually encounters and must strive to overcome. Whenever his imagination feels free (“the moon look[ing] good”), he believes he can heighten daily reality (“the sun look[ing] good/Goin’ down over the sea” of life) and communicate with an other (“my gal”) as if in a one-to-one, intimate relation. Moreover, her “comin’ after *me*” (my emphasis) indicates that this inspiring person and personification simultaneously brings him back to the issue of *self*.

Yet this semiotic union belongs *just* to his imagination; it consists of an idealization as such, for apart from “her,” he feels certain that most people will miss what his songs try to express. All he can do is write songs warning them (“the wintertime is coming”) about what will happen if they don’t move toward an inward relation to existence: they will become blocked (“The windows are filled with frost”) and accept an accepted view of it. That situation self-evidently stays out of reach to what he wants to communicate: “I went to tell everybody/But I could not get across.” Even “baby” might succumb to this state and thus forget the entirely subjective condition of that “what,” which is why he cannot tell her directly what to do: “I wanna be your lover, baby/I don’t wanna be your boss.”



This sense of resignation and even futility comes to a head in another song in the *Highway 61 Revisited* period, "Sitting on a Barbed-Wire Fence." On the surface, the song appears comically nonsensical. Who pays \$1,227.55 to "See my hound dog bite a rabbit"? But one can read the song allegorically where the "barbed-wire fence" signifies the Dylan song's elliptical rhetoric that blocks readers' efforts to reduce his song to, say, empirically viable proportions. That rhetoric also puts off readers who want clear political messages or who otherwise could care less about its spiritual import. But for him, no price is too large or exacting (e.g., the sum of money that he specifies) to hunt for spiritual prey. With that criterion in mind, he uses metaphorical tropes for quicksilver disclosures of the real: "See my hound dog bite a rabbit," that is, momentarily capture a fast disappearing insight. His vocational hunt also occurs within the limited space of a song lyric. Just like "my football's sittin' on a barbed-wire fence," so the subjectively determined, spiritual point of his lyrics can't be communicated with any certainty. This limitation leads to his spiritual malaise: his "temperature rises" and his "feet don't walk so fast."<sup>19</sup> Dylan's feeling of abject alienation remains intractably resistant to external panaceas such as drugs supplied by some "Arabian doctor." No one finally could "tell me . . . if what I had would last."

At the same time, he acknowledges the extent to which a muse-like force holds him to a high artistic standard: "This woman I've got, she's filling me with her drive" (which he amends to "killing me" in the outtake). Yet here "she" personifies not so much the spirit of imagination as his aesthetic ambition to speak and sing honeyed words given that he likes the way "she's thrillin' me with her hive." But aesthetic ambition, too, prevents him from enjoying his musical vocation free from pressures to excel. In the song's outtake version, he states, "She's making me into an old man," meaning that he has already lost his innocent relation to composing songs: "And I'm not even twenty five." In the website version, he muses that such pressures make him feel but one among many other musical and/or poetic artists. With him stripped of any vocational uniqueness, "she" might as well call him by any name like "Stan" or "Mister Clive," and listeners of his song will "think" it little more than "a riff" or a short lyric dealing with nothing special. He anticipates their failing to embrace the song's stance of "nothing to lose," meaning that no one can understand it "Unless you've been in a tunnel/And fell down 69, 70 feet over a barbed-wire fence." If the listener overcomes the song's "barbed" rhetoric, he/she will approach the abyss of the real, this time without recourse to aesthetic mediation.

Dylan yet wants to believe that sooner or later his songs *can* strike a spiritual match in other persons and ignite a parallel vocational desire. That hope determines the tenor of "I'll Keep It with Mine," which he first copyrighted in 1965 around the time of *Another Side of Bob Dylan*.<sup>20</sup> Eventually he left it off the final version of *Highway 61 Revisited*,<sup>21</sup> but the song arguably slots into the present context since its topic consists of his recognizing an intimate other's "search" for meaning in her existence. Others ("Everybody" else) may profess to have found that meaning, but since for Dylan life lacks meaning or purpose in any external sense ("how long . . . can you search for what's not lost?"), such promises to "help you" will only waste your time. One

can even say that they actually use “you” to help *them* support their own assertions of meaning. Since Dylan’s songs resist self-certainty, he will “keep” her quest “with mine” if, with his encouragement (“Come on, give it to me”), she listens to those songs in the existential register he composed them.

Of course, he recognizes that people might think him “odd” for “loving you [not] for what you are/But what you’re not,” or for who she is and we are *in potentia*. But that possible “you” is the *self* of self that his songs consistently seek to near. Most people “will help you” only according to the self that you and they want to show them—“what you set out to find”—but for Dylan, to accept such terms leads “you” astray from the essential project he hopes his songs can set off: to encounter the real stripped as much as possible of prescribed preconceptions and regarded from as many angles as comprise a person’s existence. Only then can his songs “save you . . . time”: otherwise, as happens again and again, one goes through life repeating the quest for life’s meaning as if there were an externally determinable solution. Such repetition gets one nowhere: that “train” or quest “leaves/At half past ten” and is bound to return “tomorrow” at the “Same time again.” All quests to find a definitive social definition for one’s self are doomed from the beginning. Those who orchestrate them assume the role of “The conductor . . . still stuck on the line” or hypnotized, so to speak, by the principles endorsed by his social environment. Dylan would have it otherwise: “give [your quest for meaning] to me”; let his songs serve as *self*-directed memos to transform experiences into an inward journey toward the real.

But how can others possibly grasp the loss of this “real” opportunity to get on track *with* the real unless already engaged in pursuing it like himself? Just as important, how can he sustain his own artistic project without wanting a corresponding vocational signal from others? One way is to stage an alter-ego artist as a foil against whom he can at least confirm his “positively” decisive vocational stand. No doubt like other songs on the album, “Queen Jane Approximately” tempts us to muse about its biographical genesis. Among other Dylan critics, Clinton Heylin surmises that this song specifically refers to Dylan’s experiences at Andy Warhol’s “Factory” with its “queer,” gender-crossing artistic scene,<sup>22</sup> in which case the title’s “*Approximately*” therefore could refer to a transvestite “queen.” Even using a biographical perspective, however, one can interpret the song’s topos from a more relevant angle. To begin with, “Jane” and “Joan” are approximate homonyms,<sup>23</sup> and Joan Baez clearly represents a singer-artist once in line with Dylan’s own artistic venue and an erstwhile supporter of his work. Second, the “Jane” figure resembles an amped-up version of “Ramona” addressed in the eponymous song on *Another Side of Bob Dylan*. But where the earlier song occurs in a moment when the woman with whom he has been intimate hasn’t quite decided whether to choose the personal over the political, the later song concerns a woman who has already decided in favor of the political over the personal as a venue for her artistic identity.

More important, one can take “Jane” to represent neither a real person nor a figurative listener but rather a trope for an artist like Dylan who doesn’t yet recognize her essential homelessness in both her artistic work and life. For example, because of her artistic success, she no longer fits into the orbit of her family’s social

support-system. This de facto homeless state will become clearer to her “When your mother sends back all your invitations” to endorse her public success and her father tells her sister that “Jane” has become “tired of” herself “and all of [her] creations.” Even in the public realm, her substitute home-base, she needs to realize that her work no longer merits praise from those who once deemed her a special artist: “the flower ladies” now “want back what they have lent you.” Referring to their transient belief in her work, her artistic epigones, the “children” who once followed, imitated, and helped prove her art’s value for her, now “resent you” for having let them down, whether because she has become a public success or because the various social causes that she has tied to her artwork have become *passé*. She and her activist art along with all the “clowns . . . commissioned” to have fought (“in battle”) for such causes have simply “died . . . in vain.” At best, her former cohorts in the music world will come to resemble to her “bandits that you turned your other cheek to”: people who took from her the social causes and/or style of performance she used to propagate them.

Public discontent with her work comes from every direction. Among others, her “advisers” in and out of the profession inform her that her works no longer possess the in-group, public cachet they once did; that they lack sensational or more radical political bite; so that she needs to “draw [more drastic] conclusions” in them in line with the new social-musical marketplace. Dylan warns her that her erstwhile artistic supporters will soon “heave their plastic” at her, whether their or her own former recordings. If and when she comes to sense the “repetition” of her work, or so the Dylan speaker would like to believe, she might then “want somebody” like him whom “you don’t have to speak to” or have to do songs according to some externally derived criterion. Like Dylan’s, her experience of separation from the many who adhere to public standards might then have turned her vocational focus in an inward direction, for it is the Jane-figure’s commitment to public performance that has prevented her from getting off the beaten track.

Yet this fate affects him as well insofar as his art remains tied to performances. “Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues” tracks Dylan’s situation on the concert tour where he experiences full tilt the onus of performing his songs for other than spiritual reasons. Audiences treat him as if *he* were a freak, or, reminiscent of “Ballad of a Thin Man,” someone to observe as a spectacle. Dylan therefore types his experience “Tom Thumb’s blues.” Like the legendary Tom Thumb, he feels more than a little [*sic*] like a circus performer. The existential breadth of his musical-lyrical work gets reduced to the supporting act of an idiosyncratic celebrity that has nothing to do with whether or not his songs can prompt or confirm audience members into pursuing the real on their own terms. Dylan accordingly feels “lost in the rain” or in despair exactly at a time (the trope of “Eastertime”) when spiritual life is at stake. His success on the concert circuit only serves to expose for him the absent union of his lyrical work with inner, spiritual movement, and he suffers that loss precisely while partaking in what most people would regard as the just deserts of popular success. A border town, “Juarez” Mexico conjures a place that tempts him and other North Americans to satisfy basic appetitive pleasures with minimum interference. The women enumerated in the song

clearly figure sexual options, so that Juarez at first stands for a liberating alternative to the pressures of striving for success US-American-style. But Dylan's sense of spiritual malaise returns to haunt him, no matter the cultural "gravity" with which he takes this occasion of hedonistic freedom.

Given their present venue, his songs thus cannot decisively free him from wanting the recognition associated with his public performances. On one hand, the vocational justification for composing/performing his songs hinges on their minimizing illusions of egoistic self-importance. On the other, his simply denying that importance by a willful "negativity" as inscribed *in* his songs "don't pull you through" or stop his nagging sense of spiritual imposture. Dylan interprets this situation as a form of death: an *external* negation of self that accompanies him everywhere he goes. It is as if he were on "Rue Morgue Avenue," the Poe allusion a metaphor for a mental state that threatens to strip away any hope. His despair turns him into an existentially defined "mess" that no "doctor" can cure with or without drugs, and that in turn makes him ripe for the wiles of "hungry women." "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues" alludes both to Dylan's external tour-traveling and to the inner travails that it forces him to experience.

The song's vocational allegory allows us to read the women figures each as personifying a different generic *song* that *might* have helped but finally doesn't discharge the spiritual aspect of his despair. "Saint Annie" (my emphasis) ironically alludes both to the pretenses of faux holy "folk" singers and songs, and to the erotic core of rock 'n' roll music. Neither satisfies his spiritual-vocational need. "Sweet Melinda" (meaning "pretty one"), otherwise a more somber prostitute than Annie, represents for Dylan what most down-and-out people (e.g., her association with "peasants") term "the goddess of gloom." Although "she" personifies the blues and its downbeat concerns, "she" too at last leaves Dylan spiritually unsatisfied. The blues makes sense to him ("She speaks good English") but only up to a point. While "she" serves as a correlative to and for his despair, when "she" tempts him to embrace precedents of the blues genre ("she invites you up into her room") he finds clichéd tropes for this despair that only diminish its unique aspect for him: "she takes your voice/And leaves you howling at the moon." All this occurs regardless that, "careful not to go to her too soon," he has attempted to keep his style of musical and ersatz spiritual art from objectively expressing the subjective aspect of his existential plight.

In this situation, Dylan can't rely on any alternative popular musical option to alleviate this vocational crisis. The American "pop" music industry has coopted the field, just as "Housing Project" commercializations have negatively affected people's personal lives in US society at large. Marketplace criteria for "fortune and fame" leave him dissatisfied: "neither of them are to be what they claim." Moreover, anyone who tries to "get silly" by deviating from such criteria will return to being a nobody or "go back to from where you came." The people who patrol and enforce the music industry's standards ("the cops") "don't need" him to make their money. To support his vocational sensibility, neither can Dylan capitulate to demands "expect[ing] the same" kind of songs that have made him popular. With regard to musical artists like Dylan, the "authorities" or people running the show take pride in ("boast") how they

can coopt such artists into becoming complicit money-makers. The social system has in fact made him feel Tom-Thumb-like small. Those in power take pride precisely in how often they have “blackmailed the sergeant-at-arms,” an alias for the spiritual artist’s conscience, “Into leaving his post.” Dylan cites one such minded artist gone awry thanks to the system. Appropriately named “Angel,” he at first thought the new music constituted a means to a higher vision of life, but when he realized it didn’t it “left [him] looking just like a ghost.”

How can Dylan neutralize the ubiquitous public aspect of his performing art and how it invades the private relation he wishes to retain with his work? Social diagnoses of this problem, for example that offered by “my best friend, my doctor,” cannot account for its subjective affect and effect on Dylan. He also tries one or another drug from “burgundy” to “the harder stuff” to alleviate the internal ache, but with the same result. One can construe drugs here also as tropes for his relation to songwriting itself. At first he composed songs rife with spiritual insights in a relatively simple fashion, but eventually he has had to resort to convoluted or “harder” ways—consider the present song’s rhetorical indirections—to communicate their import to audiences. The entire enterprise has ironically induced more self-consciousness on his part, or what he went to “Juarez,” here an image for his having entered the rock ‘n’ roll sphere, to evade, the better to deliver the spiritual equivalent of those former insights. Dylan had tried to get himself prepared for this negative turn of affairs. He had thought to have not only his own wit but also like-minded “friends” who “said they’d stand behind me/When the game got rough,” but they all failed/fail to address the inwardness attached to his vocational desire and the contradiction introduced by public performance. Once again, Dylan comes face to face with the difficult requirement of that desire: to pursue it alone, for “There was nobody even there to [call my] bluff.” At the end of his song, he finds that he can only try going back to his artistic beginnings (“New York City”) where his alter ego “Bob Dylan” first wrote and performed songs with a dawning existential-spiritual determination.

#### 4 The private art of desolation

Dylan’s alienation from his *métier* largely stems from his unavoidable internalization of how he perceives others misperceiving his work’s primary concern. One can see him reacting to this misperception in several ways. He can aggressively insist that they see his work his way. He can fantasize an other who might grasp his vocational gambit. He can resign himself to the fact that he might have to go it alone. Before this last avenue appears as his only recourse, however, one other option exists: to assume an imaginary other, whether or not based on a passing experience with an actual person, who seeks what he does. This figure is not the fantasy muse of “She Belongs to Me,” before whom one can only be obeisant (“on your knees”). Instead “she” fulfills an ethical criterion of only two people paradoxically sharing a Buberian “Thou” experience, albeit based, as Dylan forecasts in “Like a Rolling Stone,” on the awareness of “nothing.”

That relation governs the scene depicted in Dylan's "From a Buick 6," a song that plays off the conventional rhythm-and-blues topos of American cars. For one thing, the title specifies a six-cylinder Buick as opposed to its eight-cylinder sibling with more attractive horsepower. Dylan's Buick already suggests a power-limited vehicle, which by now we can read as another trope for the expressive range of his songs. The "Six" arguably possessed secondary value in a 1950s' American consumerist era privileging faster and faster cars and products.<sup>24</sup> But "From a Buick 6" traffics in more than a low-key cultural critique, let alone a celebration of Chuck-Berryish rock 'n' roll esprit. Dylan's song focuses on what inspires its present occurrence: the woman to whom he refers befits a muse-like aid to his work ("she keeps my kid"). At the same time, "she" self-evidently deviates from any traditional inspirational figure. The "She" of "She Belongs to Me" has metamorphosed into a "graveyard woman," a figure for someone who tends to the *real*. If nothing else, she can "keep" his work existentially honest because she recognizes its edgy relation to so-called reality and both its and his imminent annihilation.

Dylan has no illusions about what "she" can offer him aside from this recognition. "From a Buick 6" suggests that his artistic imagination functions as a vehicle for his rock-bottom spiritual concerns. He therefore terms her a "soulful mama" who, fully committed to such values, also allows him to appear incognito or who "keeps" the real "me hid" while in a crowd. This includes how his songs' sometimes explicit social-critical references bespeak a hidden, allegorized spiritual dimension with respect to most people. As "a junkyard angel," moreover, "she" enables him to select what ("junk") he can from his experiences and older artistic precedents, to which he can then lend spiritual (angelic) substance. In that way "she" sustains his vocational *métier*: "she always gives me bread." Yet such sustenance does not offer him or anyone else illusory consolations over the trauma of existence. At best, "her" company alone, or the effect he receives in composing his songs, lets him face that catastrophic fact easier: "Well, if I fall down dyin', you know she bound to put a blanket on my bed." Doing that wouldn't serve to console most people, but for him the same effect occurs even when, as the songs on *Highway 61 Revisited* depict it, his wish to communicate that vision keeps getting blocked. When he despairs over his isolated relation to the real, "cracked up on the highway," "she" remains ready "to sew me up with thread" and offer him company without any permanent let alone sensational fix for his having come upon "the water's edge."<sup>25</sup>

Neither does she demand ("she don't make me nervous") that he proselytize this or that inward spiritual movement, let alone objectively definable social ones for others. On the contrary, his imaginary "she" doesn't require him to write songs that express or "talk too much"; she needs no such "crutch" to be herself, no dependence on his musical-lyrical art simply to *be*. Instead she appears free, walking "like Bo Diddley": preferring to experience life *à la* the sheer rhythmic energy of nonreflective, non-self-conscious sound. Yet as the spirit or genius driving his imagination, "she" also keeps a gun, that is, inspires lyrics "all loaded with lead" or ready to criticize whatever credo imposes its demands on him or his art from the outside. "She" guards him against anything that would distract him from driving toward his goal. Such credos and the

people who propagate them, no doubt including some of his own past efforts, now appear like “the dead.” So if doing his music suffices by itself on one level, on another he needs a heavy vehicle, such as lyrics functioning like “a steam shovel,” to “keep away [those] dead.” His songs say “nothing” to others, yet say something *contra* to what others think they say and that would otherwise distract him from the inner life. In that sense, his lyrics function like a “dump truck . . . to unload my head” of credo-illusions that emanate from external sources and that would define him to himself.

Dylan’s existentialized spirit of imagination enables him (“She brings me everything and more”) to deploy lyrics/words/images precisely as vehicles to face life and himself in the process of becoming nothing (“if I go down dyin”). Nowhere more resolutely does this vision get expressed than in the song “Desolation Row”. One might term its scene as the *real* ground zero of Dylan’s autobiography of a vocation. To be sure, “Desolation Row,” allusively attributes his and other people’s feeling of alienation from life to the Western historical-cultural environment at large. The song clearly smacks of a damning critique of that environment, for example in the Modernist manner of T. S. Eliot to whom Dylan refers in the song’s ninth stanza. Indeed, that explicit allusion has led more than one critic to argue that “Desolation Row” amounts to Dylan’s postmodern version of “The Waste Land.”<sup>26</sup> Yet like the companion figure Dylan ironically adopts for his existential double in “From a Buick 6,” so “Lady” in “Desolation Row” helps return his ruminations about a desolate social world back into his internally focused artistic-spiritual goal.

Over the long course of the song, this goal turns into a wholly private affair, for if nothing else, “Desolation” hardly beckons people to seek it out as *their* self-defining moment. The entire Western social system appears intent on *denying* a pervasive sense of “Desolation,” for which Dylan regards it responsible. In the context of this period, the song also allusively puns on “Skid Row,” but less as the scandal of social poverty than of how everyone has become homeless, inwardly speaking. Ironically, people addicted to evasions of it have also become subject to an even more virulent strain of desolation. That fact alone differentiates “Desolation Row” from Dylan’s earlier “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” where his declared vocational charge (“I’ll know my song well before I start singin”) was to spell out the injustices of our social world, presumably to initiate some sort of social-ethical correction. But now he intimates that no narrative exists to contain that chaos. Whereas Modernist literary ventures like Eliot’s could still opt for at least an ideal order of words, myths and other signposts to shore up against worldly chaos, Dylan’s finds no anti-heroic narrative, literary or ideological, in which to believe.

A more recalcitrant vision of chaos therefore marks his contemporary social environment. Stanza one of “Desolation Row” locates it in the American cultural landscape and points to various mechanisms of escape that people use to deny the personal apprehension of desolation. As it does in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, the “They” to whom Dylan refers signifies the anonymity of a public determined to erase radical personal identity. “They” would leave one subject to mass definition as well affirmed strictures of right and wrong. The same thing, “They” threaten one’s relation to the singularity of death by “selling postcards of the hanging,” which is to say, turning

serious, “capital” issues into media-spectacles.<sup>27</sup> By deploying paper-thin (“postcard”) types of advertising, the mediatised “They” would coerce others into internalizing essentially externalizing social codes of behavior, the better to ward off any inner apprehension of their own “desolation.” But besides social strictures ironically working to turn the forbidden into the desired, they promote various means to forget death that merely turns life into a living death.

And while “They” require approved forms of social identification (e.g., “passports”) that deny existential difference, their “painting the passports brown” only results in irreparably mixing up identity in the social sphere. Hence we witness the sexual-cum-gender confusion of supposedly male sailors ending up in “The beauty parlor.” Dylan’s sketched “circus” of confusion extends to the entire social scene. Official defenders of the law focus on people who break it rather than defining crime as any suppression of the existential. Social law guardians themselves lack any *self*-consciousness. Consider “the blind commissioner” who has become a brainwashed (“blind”) believer in the system: “They’ve got him in a trance,” his “One hand . . . tied to the tight-rope walker” because he doesn’t know who he is except via the system’s narrow-minded grid. Himself walking a fine line between justice and criminality, his other “[hand] is in his pants,” showing him as generally uptight, defensive, always worried about his status vis-à-vis the “They.” Threatened by other adherents to the social, he simultaneously tries to protect his balls (“in his pants”). Another unconscious return of a repressed sense of “desolation” defines his and the actions of law-defenders everywhere. In their rush to deny the burden of assuming separate relations to “desolation,” “the riot squad” act collaboratively and preemptively (“they’re restless/They need somewhere to go,” for example to an external, pseudo-containable version of “desolation”) to quell hints of an inchoate, inner riot.

The opening section sets the stage for the entire song. A pervasive purposelessness lends “Desolation Row” a metaphysical reach, a vision of life invulnerable to social critique and so not politically correctable. Dylan then begins a series of exposés of different so-called “truth” positions. In part to puncture their serious, authoritative social status, he provides shorthand references and comically exaggerated names to whoever represents less noticeably egregious strictures than those of the law. The otherwise benign, fairy-tale Cinderella stands for a seductive, sexually available modern woman (“she seems too easy”) whose independence and staged cool (she “puts her hands in her back pockets/Bette Davis style”) tempts only to reject modern, would-be possessive males. So the outdated figure of “Romeo,” today’s updated romancer, is “in the wrong place, my friend” since he fails to understand the modern woman’s liberated values that to him make no sense. For contemporary males, conventionalized romantic relations with “Cinderella” turn into lethal affairs (“the ambulance comes”) even as scenes of male despair help reinforce the modern woman’s sense of sexual independence: “Cinderella sweeping up,” taking advantage of and wholly overcoming someone else. But in the end, “she” herself ironically repeats a futile patriarchal strategy to deny desolation. Moreover, given how even the mod Cinderella is “sweeping up,” that is, still reflexively playing house, both sexes, one could say, now find themselves “On Desolation Row.”



All former social values no longer apply and have left modern people to radically uncertain, desolate fates. Old superstitious ways of reading external phenomena as signs to predict and thereby avoid a threatening future simply don't work: "The fortune-telling lady/Has even taken all her things inside." Traditional religious examples prove impotent in helping people recognize and escape their desolate plights, and actually now work to suppress such recognition. War ("Cain and Abel") still futilely promises to end everyone's socially defined oppression, and in that way continues to foment anti-existential distractions. So does forcing others to suffer for their born vulnerabilities, the gist of Dylan's evoking "the hunchback of Notre Dame." The never-ending modern fixations on "sex" ("Everybody is making love") fail to fill the inner void no less than do apotropaic anticipations of external catastrophes ("expecting rain"). Doing good for others, the mythical provenance of "the Good Samaritan," has itself become suspect insofar as, thanks to capitalist infiltration, it willy-nilly courts self-aggrandizing motivations. One can now perform good and bad deeds alike as if addicted to the desire for public recognition, as with the "Good Samaritan" figure "dressing" and "getting ready for the show." For a main characteristic of the modern world consists in how it everywhere promotes a public masque ("the carnival tonight") in which one can there again mask the fact of one's inner "Desolation."

All the events narrated in "Desolation Row" consequently occur in conspicuous public venues: beauty parlors, cathedrals, ivory towers, and so on. It is as if no private zone any longer exists where one once might have thought to avert the external distortions of existential "Desolation." Dylan accordingly takes to task the committed social-political activist for in essence worshiping someone else's vision of life ("neath the window") just as "Ophelia" did with Hamlet's. She stands as a shorthand figure for whoever naïvely believes in a social-communal utopia and yet who condemns those who do not. She lives her life adhering to fixed, outward-directed ideals that she regards as absolute truths worthy of martyrdom ("To her death is quite romantic") and vocational devotion ("Her profession's her religion"). Since for Dylan the two come to the same, such idealism ends up restricting both her creativity and the way she "lifeless[ly]" lives her life. Her politicized position works to censor her imagination ("She wears an iron vest") and thus suppresses her ability to experience endlessly changing truths: "On her twenty-second birthday/She already is an old maid." Moreover, despite how she dedicates her work to effect apocalyptic, social change in the external world ("And though her eyes are fixed upon/Noah's great rainbow"), her idealism suppresses an unconscious desire to witness social desolation in order to justify doing that work: "She spends her time peeking/Into Desolation Row."

Other socially endorsed visions of life reproduce but end up producing external forms of desolation. The allegorized figures in the fifth stanza concern how science, religion, and for that matter any cerebral form of knowledge about nature or the social world we live in work to diminish human misery or desolation as conventionally understood. Yet anyone adopting the pursuit of knowledge as gospel ends up wanting power for his, her, or its own sake. For example, modern science and especially physics, here signified by the synecdoche of "Einstein," accumulates knowledge with the putative justification of helping a mankind, subject as it is to an unpredictable nature.

Science acts out the role of a “Robin Hood” figure: it would take from rich nature to help free us from its arbitrary power. Yet modern science has ended up doing the opposite. “Einstein” a.k.a. the modern physicist “disguised as Robin Hood/With his memories in a trunk”—with the equation of science and human progress no longer self-evident—has of course become responsible for a theory resulting in the creation of the atomic bomb and who knows what other life-negating, technological fallouts. At the same time, science’s albeit morally questionable success in the modern world has made religion envious of the cultural dominance that it once had, hence the Einstein figure’s “friend” appropriately designated as “a jealous monk.” No less than science, religion, too, of course, was and is responsible for wars, bitter social divisions, in short for reeking external forms of desolation on human lives.

This state of human affairs defines the “frightful” fate of all dedicated intellectuals who would abstract human experiences, yet remain strapped to concrete human experiences and absurd grabs for power. The Einsteinian figure who “looked so immaculately frightful/As he bummed a cigarette” on one hand suggests what intellectuals have in common with average people, smoking being common back in the 1960s. On the other hand, they *don’t* have in common with average people the intimidating (“frightful”) authoritative pose of possessing absolute (“immaculate”) knowledge. Moreover, the intellectual’s compulsive thinking about even the smallest thing (e.g., “sniffing drainpipes”) serves only to feed a further addiction for irrelevant knowledge and truths (“reciting the alphabet”). The modern intellectual, in short, has forgotten (“With his memories in a trunk”) the child-like origins of his desire to know things and to enjoy a formerly playful relation to technological artifacts:<sup>28</sup>

Now you would not think to look at him  
 But he was famous long ago  
 For playing the electric violin  
 On Desolation Row.

There seems no way back to this playful relation to doing things in our social environment, and not least in Dylan’s world of songwriting and performance. Modern versions of psychoanalysis only make things worse. Particularly in reductive Freudian practice, it produces a sense of human desolation vis-à-vis promoting obsessional phallic self-consciousness. At least to average middle-class persons, the psychoanalyst ascribes unfulfilled “dirty” sexual wishes as the root cause of human alienation: “Dr. Filth, he keeps his world/Inside of a leather cup,” that is, a privileged, phallic explanation that guards itself against other kinds of explanation for human desolation. Yet quasi-Freudian or what Freud himself termed “vulgar” psychoanalysis ends up both licensing and inflating (“blow[s] . . . up”) the value of sexual liberation for people who attribute their spiritual malaise to a lack of literal sexual activity: “all his sexless patients/They’re trying to blow it up.”<sup>29</sup> They overestimate sex, as if it could answer the sense of “Desolation” that continues to haunt them. Sexually frustrated women, here illustrated by the doctor’s “nurse, some local loser,” are made to feel complicit with this phallic ideology. Reduced to their genitals here pejoratively portrayed as

“the cyanide hole,” women become sexually frustrated because males anxiously regard them as figures of castration.

If not of the “Cinderella” persuasion, the so-called modern woman also gets traduced into believing that psychoanalysis can cure all spiritual-made-psychic ills: “And she also keeps the cards that read/‘Have Mercy on His Soul.’” Whom does the “His” refer to here if not the death of God and so desolation whole? Ideally to anyone who can “lean your head out far enough/From Desolation Row,” the experience of desolation includes more than political and psychological modes of salvation would allow. Those who subscribe to a psychological escape from desolation indulge in futile quick fixes. They “play on penny whistles,” an ironic if humorously periphrastic homonym for the penis or else for too-easy phallic explanations; and they “blow,” as in fellatio, on “sex” itself, as it were, to account for their ills. Many people accept this sublimation of “Desolation” (“You can hear them blow”), but blowing on penny whistles also evokes child’s play, exposing the impotence [*sic*] of modern configurations of sexual happiness. They only distort by working to displace an intuited awareness of desolation.

Can people like Bob Dylan who accrue heroic stature in the modern American world temper that intuition? But captured and/or captivated by the mass media, very few people think to face and wrestle with the hard real of “Desolation.” “The Phantom of the Opera,” a figure representing mass-media hype or the exaggerated drive for public acclaim, here acts like a secular “priest” in our modern social scene. The media especially associates sensationalized figures with a sexual prowess and overall charisma reminiscent of a “Casanova.” Gaining such power, one signs a Faustian bargain since the media leads audiences to perceive such a hero as living an exciting and so a non-desolate life, but which he eventually comes to ruin by himself believing too: “They’re spoonfeeding Casanova/To get him to feel more assured.” Most people comprising “the public” cannot escape the gnawing sense of desolation in their lives, but in fantasizing a media star’s having done so, they become complicit with that person’s even greater sense of desolation: “Then they’ll kill him with self-confidence/After poisoning [as in hyping] him with words.” Dylan doubtless alludes specifically to rock stars like himself who accept the media’s superficial gifts of fame, fortune, and sex from the “skinny girls” or groupies. But such stars finally get rejected if and when they deviate from media-inflated expectancies; worse, they tend to become boring by repetitive exposures. Against his or her will, that person just might encounter “Desolation” while the mass-media Phantom “shouts” to the groupies or fans that their star’s star has faded: “Get outa here if you don’t know/Casanova is just being punished for going/To Desolation Row.”

Dylan also indicts the corporate capitalist world in this context. The “agents” of business along with the behind-the-scenes forces of economy (“the superhuman crew”) secretly (“at midnight”) or through advertising work to seduce every person (“round up everyone”) to spend his/her time looking for the means to avoid the primal, desolate real. Most people recognize the absurdity of trying to avoid it. They “know[] more than” what the social establishment values, but the business world as if deliberately sets out to elide that knowledge and suppress opportunities for people to linger on the existential. For example, fostering anxiety not only over health but also success or failure in the public world, the determination to make money straps one to a “heart-attack machine.”

Conversely, the privileged few reproduce an environment conducive to others burning out in Kafkaesque scenarios: "And then the kerosene/Is brought down from the castles." The system then uses all kinds of illusory cushions, such as promises of "insurance" to ensure "that nobody is escaping/To Desolation Row."

As noted, some critics regard the ninth stanza as the song's thematic center. In it, Dylan arguably disassociates his song and by extension his other songs from would-be literary expressions of "Desolation." He himself hails or at least ironically mimics a typical poet's conspicuously citing ("Praise be to Nero's Neptune") humanity's sailing on a doomed ship of state and state of mind: "The Titanic sails at dawn." Despite or even because of their communicative effect on listeners, such poetic or faux poetic expressions merely end up providing one more crutch by which people try to deny "Desolation." "Nero's Neptune" ironically refers to the poetic act in its debased form: first, the fiery, destructive implications of the Emperor Nero's alleged fiddling while Rome burned; second, how that act is and points to a melodramatic literary expression, which in fact ironically waters down (as per Neptune) any of its apocalyptic implications.

The same dilution occurs in high-brow *and* low-brow modes of literature alike, both of which demand readers to decide "Which side are you on?" This question of course served as a well-known political slogan during the 1960s' protest years when Dylan composed "Desolation Row," but in his hands, this either/or slogan refers only to the vulgarized brand of "desolation" one decides to follow. Conversely, academic versions of apocalypse devolve into ivory-tower debates and poetic niceties, here imaged by "Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot/Fighting in the captain's tower." Dylan emphasizes their effete vision of existence in the "mermaids" lines ending the stanza, which alludes to the escapist protagonist of Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." But Dylan unexpectedly also assigns failure to countercultural or putatively anti-elitist versions of poetic practices. If Eliot and his "Waste Land" approach to desolation fails to represent *or* motivate vocational voyages to real "Desolation," the same applies to songs-cum-poems favored by unpolished, ersatz poets like "calypso singers" (including both "folk" and "beat" artists) "who laugh at" or mock High-Modernist artists like Pound and Eliot.<sup>30</sup> But even anti-artists lose sight of "Desolation": even "fishermen hold[ing] flowers," a plausible trope for many of the so-called 1960s' "flower children" who fantasized a "back to nature" communal existence and who apparently could care less about high culture and/or literary art. All of them, from doom-saying *littérateurs* to neo-Romantic lovers of nature and life, essentially adopt positions that would block one's sense of real desolation: "And nobody has to think too much/About Desolation Row."

All the foregoing dilutions of "Desolation" finally possess an autobiographical relevance for Dylan and his composing this and his other songs. The last verse begins by referring back to "All these people that you mention" where the "you" stands for an imaginary audience as if objecting to his exposé of faulty escapes from the real. The "faces" he "has [had] to rearrange" and re-name in the song signify shorthand, caricatured figures for the endless series of (other) supposed Euro-American heroes whom the "you" relies on for such escapes. The song at this point points to Dylan's own vocational situation in metaphorically extending the sense of desolation to wherever he sees people's various attempts to escape "Desolation." It evokes his situation, that is, were it not that he assumes a position *in* "Desolation Row" as if he had indeed purged

his external and internalized audience (the addressed “you”) who would take even this song as the final word on the subject. The experience of desolation transcends Dylan’s own verbal attempts at expressing it: “Yes, I received your letter yesterday” or your supposed understanding of what my songs mean. Thinking one *has* understood them always occurs “About the time the door knob broke” or when access to his inner vision has in fact become closed to outside observers. The “you” wants to take his song as evidence that he has the answer to the riddle of an otherwise desolate existence, which he insists he does not: “When you asked me how I was doing/Was that some kind of joke?” But of course that misprision here again leads Dylan to face the primary condition for experiencing “desolation” *as* real: the necessity of encountering it alone.

“Desolation Row” in principle links his songs to other Western cultural events and figures important to the “They,” but by employing a comical and synecdochal typology, Dylan’s song has just dismantled those figures and the honorific significance others grant them. If anything, he has found them all lacking a vision of real “desolation”:

All these people that you mention  
 Yes, I know them, they’re quite lame  
 I had to rearrange their faces  
 And give them all another name.

*His* song paradoxically construes *real* “Desolation” as a vocational desideratum that from external viewpoints nevertheless signifies a radical form of negativity and even nihilism. Dylan’s goal envisages a condition of life that transcends all of its particular cultural formations. “Lady and I,” a.k.a. Dylan and his song emphasize that this and his other songs at best can help him and possibly others to *approach* an inward relation to existence as “Desolation.” This vision steadfastly remains subjective and therefore communicable to others only by analogy:

Right now I can’t read too good  
 Don’t send me no more letters [understanding] no  
 Not unless you mail them  
 From Desolation Row.

In a very *real* sense, “Desolation Row” evades meaning insofar as it says nothing more than what its title and the final two words at the end of each stanza signify. Even at the very end of the song, “Desolation Row” arguably repeats itself in a mantra-like hum just below the threshold of the song’s signifieds:

**Don’t send me no more letters no**  
**Not unless you mail them**  
**From Desolation Row**

Do the “letters” here congeal into an anagrammatic homonym “Des-o-la-shun Row” that finally signifies nothing but itself: Nothing ad infinitum?



## Reflections on Self-reflections: *Blonde on Blonde*

Thence comes it that my name receives a brand,  
And almost thence my nature is subdued  
To what it works in, like the dyer's hand.

– William Shakespeare, Sonnet 111

The mob within the heart  
Police cannot suppress  
The riot given at the first  
Is authorized as peace

– Emily Dickinson, #1763

That's me in the spotlight  
Losing my religion

– R.E.M.

### 1 The repetition of *Vox Clamantis in Deserto*

More than one critic has noted the acronym attached to the title of Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde* (BOB). If nothing else, it teases one into suspecting the album's autobiographical subtext. Yet in exactly what sense of "autobiographical"? The title equally flirts with an in-group reference: code for a then type of marijuana; and one drug or another arguably constitutes a leitmotif in several of the album's songs. Is that the self-referential aspect to which the title alludes? Or does the album traffic in conventionally autobiographical references such as Dylan's romantic and/or sexual contretemps with certain women?

But Dylan's interior autobiography acts like an undercurrent that continually pulls away from otherwise more plausible, objective readings of the album's songs. On that level, they make his vocational passion and especially its discontents the sub rosa subject of *Blonde on Blonde*. More often than not, the Dylan of this period puts pressure on his audience/other to accept its existential yield. A song like "I Want You," for instance, invites a conventional reading as a seduction poem, but as such hides in plain sight this vocational desire.<sup>1</sup> The song concerns how rock 'n' roll audiences themselves become seduced into apprehending songs like Dylan's in terms of familiar codes, in particular that of sexy sexual innuendo. Such audiences "want you" or popular

song itself to remain unconcerned with the real. "The guilty undertaker sighs" because such songs exhibit only spiritual deadness and therefore have no serious relevance for others. From Dylan's perspective, even a down-and-out musical entertainer such as an "organ-grinder" fares better in this light since at least he "cries" over feeling "lonesome" while entertaining anonymous listeners in public venues. Everything about the glitter and glamour of the contemporary musical scene (those "silver saxophones") suggests that anyone who wants to take his artistic vocation seriously should "refuse" the popular venue altogether. With its "cracked bells and washed-out horns," it clearly seems bereft of creative and spiritual potential for Dylan. Nonetheless *he* remains determined to make it engage spiritual issues: "it's not that way/I wasn't born to lose you." With the "you" doubling as both song and its audience, "I want *you*" refers to his determination to save *them* from spiritual banality.

Dylan then sketches how this artistic alienation has come about. The contemporary social world is composed of people like "The drunken politician": persons completely subject to the desire for power in the public realm. Political machinations leave average people suffering, such as "mothers [who] weep" for losing sons to wars. Given this social setting, pressures abound to use art to save or at least protest social wrongs, yet Dylan sees all would-be artists who assume the role of "saviors . . . fast asleep," impervious to pervasive outer and inner occurrences of "desolation," the first principle of Dylan's own songs. One can only "wait for" his peers to follow suit and interrupt/Me drinkin' from my broken cup." This posture of course verges on an oxymoron: that he *self-confidently* adopts an existential stance. Yet the "broken cup" image confesses the semiotic limitation mentioned in the last chapter: that his songs cannot directly convey the subjective sine qua non of this position. Moreover, his peers and their audiences unthinkingly adhere to the objectifying social standards of the so-called musical establishment, whether its Tin-Pan-Alley criteria *or* the countercultural folk and rock protest songs of the period.

This awareness of reformist futility defines the beginning point of the Dylan song, the where and when others can "ask me to/Open up the gate for you." In effect, he asks the pop-musical scene to aim for a truer if harsher mode of salvation than that proffered by accepted or trendy conventions of spirituality.<sup>2</sup> The *Blonde on Blonde* Dylan regards this goal as an unprecedented vocational task. To him, even "my" revered precursors ("fathers") in musical art, certainly now including his once "folk" hero Woody Guthrie, have all "gone down," their affect on others no longer relevant or else themselves having failed to live up to their art's spiritual potential. In the end they lacked "true love" or devotion to what defines *his* vocational effort. Holding to that criterion explains why pop-music traditionalists ("daughters") now "put me down," which is to say, for not adhering to the present objectified standards that rule popular music and contemporary "folk" music.

But again, Dylan's is no self-certain vision of his art. Indeed, the song's "You" also subtly doubles for his imagination of his own powers of imagination, specifically the narcissistic illusion to change the world through his songs. By the end of "I Want You," he appears to recognize the futility of his own wish to proselytize his vision of life and art. He finds himself constantly returning to a firm sense of desolation, this



time personified by “the Queen of Spades,” a feared trump card in the card-game Hearts. His only solace stems “From a Buick 6” type of other (“my chambermaid”) who accepts his effort to embrace the regnant “Queen” of his art without any cushion: “She [the chambermaid figure] knows that I’m not afraid/To look at [the Queen].” Like his female double “From a Buick 6,” this helpmeet respects and simply accepts the difficulty of what he’s trying to do: bring existential soul to life and musical art. Moreover, “she” does so in the face of the goal’s impossible realization: “She knows where I’d like to be/But it doesn’t matter.” Here the refrain “I want you” refers to his wanting appreciation by individuals who, if only by analogy, would support his desire for a “Queen”-like muse.<sup>3</sup>

The song ends with Dylan assessing his place within the contemporary musical scene. He sees himself as having replaced (“I took his flute”) more ostentatious rock ‘n’ roll peers, no doubt like Elvis, Fabian, et al., each one “with his” exotic “Chinese suit.”<sup>4</sup> Dylan, the “Napoleon in rags,” doubtless appears to them a bedraggled, unkempt peer: “I wasn’t very cute to him/Was I?” The same pertains to what his songs concern. His justification for fantasizing a takeover of this musical scene comes down to his judgment of its spiritual bankruptcy: “I did it . . . because [that type of artist] lied” to you.” On one level, such art promised to bring something more than mere entertainment to mass audiences; but the agents of such faux art betrayed that promise (“took you for a ride”). What still possesses poetic-spiritual potential for Dylan fizzles in the hands of his peers whose musical-lyrical practice seemed as if it might go on indefinitely before he arrived on the scene: “time was on his side.”

But the phrase “I want you *so bad*” shows Dylan fretting more and more over the already tenuous “us versus them” pact that I have argued backgrounds his vocational concern during this period. Most people including artistic peers self-evidently do *not* share it. He himself confesses to losing sight of this goal due to the exigencies of his artistic *métier*. What if concert touring, an ineluctable aspect of his vocational medium after his music and/or lyrics, were to dictate his intercourse with listeners in a way that contaminates the very possibility of eliciting the spiritual dimension of his work? The song “Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again” addresses just this issue while exhibiting Dylan’s spiritual conscience able to isolate and keep him apart from it. An image of the breakdown of existential communication appears in the song’s very first line. The “ragman,” a familiar figure in cities in the first half of the twentieth century, collected worn-out clothes that here figuratively represent analogues to Dylan’s own former folksongs, themselves once functionally relevant for others.<sup>5</sup> *His* ragman, however, doesn’t collect such items but instead “draws circles,” that is, raises the prospect of endlessly repeated acts that, like Dylan’s view of his songs in this context, don’t lead him anywhere spiritually relevant. They “don’t talk” or speak for him or others. His most devoted followers superficially support what he says (“the ladies treat me kindly”) but in the end “furnish me with tape,” that is, with perks like sexual favors that keep his spiritual mouth shut.

But even though one part of him feels that he can’t “escape” this dilemma (“can this really be the end?”), he can’t cease trying to express his vision of existence. “Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again” plays on two registers of meaning

related to Dylan's vocational stalemate. "Mobile" conjures a place like Mobile, Alabama where he finds himself on tour and before an audience who he thinks doesn't grasp the subjective side of his songs as he performs them. He therefore has the "blues again," with "Memphis" referring not only to a southern home of the blues but also to the Egyptian city of the dead. Dylan finds himself confronting spiritually dead souls, for "Mobile" also connotes his being in motion yet paradoxically "stuck" in place. Like this song about his songs, Dylan now feels that he is just going through the motions of what they signify for him. As he frames his performance of his songs, they also produce useless movement as to their effect on others and through them on himself, which in turn threatens to diminish his vocational incentive when judged against the personal, creative standard he aspires to in "I Want You." Dylan consequently splits himself in two, so to speak. He imagines being before others in the twin roles of "Shakespeare" alias a poet and a mere jester-cum-entertainer "With his pointed shoes and his bells." The dissonance of Dylan as the faux English-language bard par excellence yet "Speaking to some *French* girl" itself bespeaks the gap between his art and how his audience probably (mis)understands it. Despite the girl's protest that she "well" understands what his songs concern, he "would" like to "send a message" to "her" to see if "she's talked," that is, if she *does* in fact get his work's subjective side. But he has no way to determine an answer, not least because the American musical-industrial complex, a system that could care less about a song's spiritual *raison d'être*, has "stolen" or taken control of "the post office," the material means by which he can reach others. The infrastructure on which his work literally depends has all but blocked the possibility of Dylan's communicating what he most cares about.

Besides making this point, Dylan's Shakespearean self-reference juxtaposed to contemporary rock 'n' roll theater shows his willingness to situate his artistic work within both high *and* low cultural contexts, and his reference to "Mona" in the next stanza does the same inasmuch as it provocatively alludes to the *Mona Lisa*. Here "she" represents a standard of artistic production that dramatizes the disparity between the serious aspect of his lyrics and their obtuse public reception. The ersatz Mona's artistic bent prompts her to warn him "to stay away from the train line," a thinly disguised trope for the wearing repetition of concert performances. The "railroad men" signify the music industry's businessmen and directors as well as drug-dealers and other concert hangers-on—all who "drink up your blood like wine": suck the spiritual essence out of his songs.<sup>6</sup> But Mona's warning seems redundant to Dylan, who responds ironically that he's "met" "only one" such figure in that vein, say a musical honcho who at best has taken the Dylan song for passing pleasure. "He just smoked my eyelids": used Dylan's vision of life to make money, whether to sell records, write articles, or simply certify his hipness in the countercultural community. In the process, he "punched my cigarette," meaning aggressively resisted Dylan's tiny burning affect on others. Dylan's rock 'n' roll fame works to a different end as well by attracting those on the national political stage, whom he exemplifies by citing "the senator." This figure willfully usurps the Dylan public image by "Showin' ev'ryone his gun," a metonym for wanting power over others such as he imputes to Bob Dylan, and which the "senator" would possess for himself and his kind by inviting ("Handing out free tickets" to) *that* Dylan and others who

possess a similar public cachet. Dylan can only inwardly hide (“beneath a truck”) from this kind of staging, unlike wannabe peers who, imaged by “the [teen] preacher” no doubt of Barry McGuire ilk,<sup>7</sup> use the medium precisely to get such attention: “dressed/with twenty pounds of headlines/Stapled to his chest.” Dylan imagines such artists having “cursed me” for exposing their suppression of the existential, and so who, judged in terms of the *real*, have accomplished nothing with their songs and/or fame: “You see, you’re just like me/I hope you’re satisfied.”

If nothing else, these willed misprisions of his work serve to justify Dylan’s designation of his plight in the mode of a blues, here referencing not a social-racial abjection but one defined by existential isolation. This isolation appears all the more the case for its lack of precedent. To Dylan, would-be precursors for his type of desired musical art arguably avoided the consequence of their visions and even ended up contradicting them. His “Grandpa” figures an older Dylan artist-hero who once expressed revolutionary visions at least indirectly touching on the real. But that older, perhaps even Guthrie-like hero and his vision have “died” or become artistically *passé* in the modern public scene. At best, he has become a stone-like monument, a canonical figure “buried in the rocks,” which leaves his work without any relevant existential force. In worse-case scenarios, that artist’s followers became “shocked” at how their so-called hero later “shot . . . full of holes” or discredited the revolutionary “fire” he once “built of Main Street,” a quintessential metaphor for the public world. Dylan understands how the same fate could befall his presently serious artistic status (“Oh, Mama, can this really be the end?”), especially if he continues on his seemingly endless round of *self*-numbing performances.

The repetition of situations that threaten Dylan with vocational debasement occurs from all sides and leaves him to think there exists only makeshift means for ever escaping it. Drugs, hand in hand with rock ‘n’ roll performers on tour, only make him feel “uglier” than usual. His having “no sense of time” repeats his sense of not moving, certainly not toward any vocationally genuine goal. And “the ladies” whom Dylan encounters along the way evoke sexual opportunities to the same dead “end” of getting nowhere. “Ruthie,” for example, personifies the sexy, “honky-tonk”-like pleasures of rock ‘n’ roll music at its “lagoon”-like shallowest, which is to say intoxicating but absent any spiritual inflection. “Her” ostentatious sexuality alone distracts him from the spiritual focus of his work. In the moment, it tempts him to think that he will suffer no spiritual consequences while “watch[ing] her waltz for free” as if in some exotically promising world (“her Panamanian moon”). He tries to hold off from succumbing to “her” allurements (“Aw come on now/You must know about my debutante”), but she resists his resistance by responding that “Your debutante just knows what you need/ But I know what you want.” This repartee makes it appear as if the debutante figure, after all a woman associated with genteel and even prissy social formality as opposed to erotic realism, falls short of Ruthie’s proffered sexual excitement. Yet the debutante stands for someone who helps him “come out” (what a debutante does) and face his long-term spiritual task as opposed to indulging momentary aesthetic pleasures.

“Stuck Inside of Mobile” underscores the failure of success in the public realm. Dylan references his own success on “Grand Street,” his making it big time, where

publicists and media figures (“neon madmen”) have turned him into a famous celebrity. Events (“the bricks”) have “perfectly” fallen into place, contributing to that end. All of it, including his ability to write songs, makes it appear “well timed,” or to have occurred at the right moment in American popular musical and social history. Yet this success only serves to frame the inward locus of Dylan’s musical-lyrical project. It is as if for all his efforts to insist on the existentially oriented aspect of his vocation, he still finds himself forced to repeat them:

An’ here I sit so patiently  
 Waiting to find out what price  
 You have to pay to get out of  
 Getting through all these things twice.

How can he avoid the public mediation of his artistic labor and give himself over to writing/performing songs as it were privately? One way is to imagine that since his rock ‘n’ roll *métier* rejects his spiritually inflected lyrics, he in turn can reject *it*. He adopts this position most explicitly in a *Blonde on Blonde*-period song entitled “She’s Your Lover Now.” The song’s conventional scenario consists of a dramatic monologue in which the Dylan speaker addresses a woman whom he formerly loved, here accompanied by her latest lover. The meeting reminds him of his painful breakup with her, but if he more or less blames her for that, some of his words hardly show himself blameless. The indeterminacy of their relationship still seems to rankle him, and he attempts to resolve it by making the statement “she’s your lover now” mean that she’s her latest lover’s problem now.

Yet an allegorical reading of “She’s Your Lover Now” tells a somewhat different story. The lover changes into a figure with whom Dylan once invested his primary vocational concern, but whose new lover prevents him from believing any new reconciliation with “her” is possible. Moreover Dylan revises her apparent initial compatibility with his work as a false match.<sup>8</sup> He probably never felt the song was complete, given a telling stanza that he left out of the song’s transcription. Clinton Heylin provides this missing stanza while maintaining that it softens the song’s otherwise harsh tone,<sup>9</sup> but the stanza makes feasible the foregoing “allegorical” speculation about the song’s depiction of his then-present scene of creative composition:

Why must I fall into this sadness?  
 Do I look like Charles Atlas?  
 Do you think that I still got what you still got, baby?  
 My voice is really warm,  
 It’s just that it ain’t got no form.  
 It’s just like a dead man’s last pistol shot, baby.

Here Dylan sees himself doubting (“fall[ing] into this sadness”) if he fits in with the time’s dominant mode for popular rock ‘n’ roll compositions. Yet the stanza shows Dylan homing in exactly on popular music’s ambivalent spiritual status. If in his hands it can deliver the equivalent of “high” poetic goods (“My voice is really warm”

though “it ain’t got no form”), it also tends to sell out its visionary potential when pitching lyrics for a public resistant to its *real* tenor. *This* situation has left him in a state of “sadness” and without any strength (“Do I look like Charles Atlas?”) to resolve his relation to his “baby.” He at first wonders if he still has what he thinks she’s “still got”: a vexed combination of public appeal and the promise to forward his inward-turning vision of existence. But her having chosen a new lover makes him doubt that promise. He himself once experienced something similar in his career such as in the “folk” music scene when he felt he had to compromise and even sell out (“The pawnbroker roared”) his dallying with the real. The “she” spirit of his folk music back then assumed the status of his “landlord,” namely with regard to social-political agendas and their audiences that worked to quash his creative freedom. Even then, however, “she” couldn’t quite “leave me,” whereas the spirit associable with his rock ‘n’ roll medium has left him with “her” demands to keep doing the same thing, and leaving him on the outside looking in: “Now you stand here expectin’ me to remember something you forgot to say.” True, the popular musical world “she” personifies still tempts him to express “high” poetic-cum-spiritual visions. But “she” has finally reneged on forwarding them. On one hand, he finds “her” being “nice to me,” in the sense of proffering him a public venue in which to present his musical-lyrical work. On the other, this exposure (along with its material bonuses) keeps reminding him about his failure to pursue his inward notion of creative freedom.

Marked by this recurring vocational *déjà vu*, the music scene keeps sending this mixed message to him and makes him feel more alone than ever. Acting like an avatar from his past “folk” scene, “her” present “lover” wears a (pseudo-rural) “cowboy hat” and “keeps on sayin’ everythin’ twice to me.” As “her” unquestioning follower, he also assumes a faux authentic costume and only mimics or double-talks an authentic “folk” music. A similar situation infects his present musical-lyrical scene in which Dylan thinks that “she” too easily capitulates to external values. Her lover, for example, extols “her” mimicking sensational, time-immemorial subjects (e.g., “her picture books of the pyramid”) or else socially risqué ones as suggested by “her postcards of Billy the Kid.” Dylan tries to resist the impulse to consider his art in the context of public monuments and myths (“Why must everybody bow” down to them?) and rejects his former lover’s impulse to climb “the castle stairs,” meaning “her” desire for quasi-royal acclaim for the work she sponsors. Where “everybody” else apparently “cares” about acquiring such status, Dylan doesn’t: “I’m not up in your castle, honey.” He notes how her present lover, allegorically a successful entertainer, “just sit[s] around and asks for ashtrays”: he needs something in which to place mere leftovers or imitations of the best, once burning precedents of the art Dylan feels “she” can still inspire.

Trapped in an either/or dilemma, the personified figure in “She’s Your Lover Now” hovers between symbolizing both possibilities for Dylan. “She” reflects his own problematic relation to his art at this pivotal point in his vocational career. He sees that “she,” along with the *métier* of popular rock ‘n’ roll songs, recognizes this vocational position. Something about his visionary-lyrical art still attracts “her.” Why, “If you didn’t want to be with me,” didn’t she “just . . . leave”? Yet Dylan recognizes his own complicity with “her” present “lover.” After all, his songs obviously possess a

quite visible public cachet in *their* current rock 'n' roll world. Moreover, his repetitive phraseology in the song ("You know I was straight with you," "you . . . didn't have to be with me") protests a little too much. It shows him still located on the cusp of wanting both the private and public kinds of work that "she" can sponsor.

## 2 Close evaders of the real

In Dylan's specific case, the public/private dialectic gets overwhelmed by how the public world defines him as a certain type of artist. His effort to resist that typologization serves as the creative spur for the inaugural song on *Blonde on Blonde*, "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35," which obviously plays on a popular countercultural colloquialism of the time. Even if one missed the drug allusion in the title "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35,"<sup>10</sup> one can hardly avoid noting that Dylan's reiterated recommendation that "everybody must get stoned" refers to "turning on" to one or another hallucinogenic drug and experiencing the supposedly self-transforming experiences it can induce. The raucous, carnivalesque tone of the song's performance on the album obviously tends to reinforce the interpretation that everybody *should* "turn on."

But just as it does in "Stuck Inside of Mobile," this song's refrain possesses enough ambiguity to press the allegorical button. From the Dylan speaker's viewpoint, it is mostly "They" who are stoning "you," and the second-person addressee could refer to us listeners, to the speaker himself or to anyone in general. Getting stoned seems applicable to anyone and everyone, whether someone "so good" or simply "tryin' to go home." The likely drug reference also doesn't block the biblical resonance of what getting "stoned" means. For that matter, it even serendipitously flirts with an arcane "biblical" reference, namely that forty-seven scholars (12 plus 35) were initially commissioned to translate the King James version of the Bible.<sup>11</sup> But the most obvious biblical allusion of course occurs with the image of stoning. The refrain intimates that an anonymous group of people ("they") continually punish by stoning a particular "you," including the Dylan speaker. This biblical context dovetails with the "Salvation Army" tone of the song's performance.<sup>12</sup> Is, then, "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35" a parody of the benign modes of "salvation" proffered by Christian New Testament religions? But then the image of "rainy day women" also resonates with an Old Testament source: "A continual dripping on a rainy day and a contentious woman are alike" (Proverbs 27:15).

If nothing else, the song's biblical echoes indicate the self-isolating spiritual context in which Dylan registers his pursuit of the real: "But I would not feel so all alone." This statement makes of the sociality backgrounding Dylan's performance little more than a temporary reprieve from a constantly engaged aloneness. One might say that he even envisions a perverse sociality, a community of similar loners who mitigate his aloneness and thus could make him "not feel so all alone" (my emphasis). For that matter, stoning, in biblical contexts a social act, in Dylan's song turns out an anti-social one. Metaphorically, stoning connotes the hardening or fixing of anyone's "self" into a stone-like "it" by others, which is what they do to Dylan the well-known

celebrity figure. Even he tends to internalize the “They,” who thus invade his “home” including moments “when you’re there all alone.” Such invasive judgments of self can occur anywhere at any time: while “walkin’ ’long the street” or trying to remain anonymous in a crowd or even when doing nothing (“when you’re tryin’ to keep your seat”). No “walkin’ to the door” can lead one to escape such stoning.

For the most part, the songs on *Highway 61 Revisited* showed a Dylan still believing in the possibility of eluding the typologization of self by others. In the brief interim from then, Dylan now walks into the room of a relentlessly typologizing “Mr. Jones” whom Dylan himself mockingly typologizes. But on the whole, “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35” specifically refers to how typological stoning tends to stymie his artistic growth. People, as it were, judge his songs before he has even composed them (“They’ll stone ya when you’re at the breakfast table”) or when, “young and able,” he is still evolving as an artist. They cynically assume that his workaday musical venue (“when you’re tryin’ to make a buck”) disqualifies his work from serious artistic consideration. Judgments like these repeat themselves (“come back again”) ad infinitum. “They’ll” even “stone you when you’re playing your guitar”: reduce his musical work to this or that mundane motivation such as for-entertainment-only or biographical pretexts. Right to the end of his artistic life and after (“when you are set down in your grave”), “they” will assume that they knew him one way or another. But of course, Dylan’s “they” negates existential differences among others. He stones the stoners, packs them all into “they,” on the premise that “Everybody” does it, so why not he? Here the biblical allusions and Salvation-Army-sounding performance of “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35” mimic the punishing and misogynist ethos expressed in the “contentious [rainy women]” passage: “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:6-8). The only thing that exempts Dylan from such ironic judgments stems from his doing it in the context of a spiritual turn.

This sentiment dictates his criticism of the “you” in “Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat.” Most critics take this song as a put-down of a woman enamored with frivolous commodities. From that angle, it doubles as an incipient critique of American capitalist culture. Exposing “the void of materialism,” Dylan “satirizes the superficiality of fashion, with the inane millinery (and the woman who lives under it) being the object of the author’s ridicule.”<sup>13</sup> Not a few commentators linger on the song’s supposed biographical subject: Dylan’s relationship with Edie Sedgwick, a rich socialite, model and actress in Andy Warhol’s salon during the mid-1960s period.<sup>14</sup> But here again, “Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat” allows an allegorical reading that transcends both social critique and high-toned critical gossip. What we witness is a woman resisting the vision of life Dylan considers the entrance-fee for apprehending his work. On one level, the hat symbolizes what it almost literally represents, a permanently tamed Nature, a mock image of a defanged real leopard, along with a pill-box defensiveness against his no less dangerous vision of life. On another, the woman employs her ersatz violent pet to defend herself against anything or anyone challenging her fixed vision of life precisely by holding off the existential.

Yet Dylan holds back final judgment of the woman and simply wonders if she feels the onus of having to defend “something like that.” Like her, most people employ

similar defenses to defer facing the real, among them money, beauty, fashion, acting. Oriented toward the socially acceptable, they can “look so pretty” on the outside. But Dylan’s songs would test just how impervious to inner change that kind of “hat” truly is: “Honey, can I jump on it sometime?” How much loss of soul does it cost to wear “it” or keep keeping the real out of sight? How “expensive” is it in *that* sense? Dylan surmises that such defenses themselves exist precariously: “Just like a mattress balances/On a bottle of wine.” This phrase, a movement from wine to bed, points to how transitory even sexual satisfaction can seem. So great is her defense against facing the real bare-headed, as it were, that as a surrogate listener “she” prefers songs in which nothing happens or *means* in any pressing, existential sense. She would rather do little more than “sit and stare” at “the sun rise” and take no meaning from its miraculous because arbitrary occurrence. For Dylan, that would restrict his use of mind (“Me with my belt/Wrapped around my head”) and fail to communicate what matters most “with you just sittin’ there.” Society’s representatives also conspire to prevent her serious engagement with life. The “doctor,” protector of the common, empirical order, refuses to let Dylan “see you” or that aspect of her that always has an appointment with the real: “It’s bad for your health, he said.” Dylan rejects the doctor’s orders; he wants his songs to reach her *real* potential (“I came to see *you*”) in the face of how the doctor continually substitutes the rational for the existential. This scene with the “doctor” predicts her (or the audience’s) preference to “cheat[] on me” by accepting the social alibi and its pseudo-rational repression of the real: “I’d sure wish he’d take that [leopard-skin pill-box hat] off his head.” Not just so-called doctors but even artists can offer audiences like alibis. The woman’s “new boyfriend” (artist) proffers a crass vision of life by which, as the saying goes, he takes her for a ride. Dylan thus sees her “Makin’ love to him/You forgot to close the garage door” or place where car-rides terminate.

The woman in “Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat” represents a blatant type of listener/other whom Dylan regards as exiled from his work. “I Wanna Be Your Lover,” another song contemporary with the *Blonde on Blonde* album, catalogues a less conspicuous type: persons who mimic the motions of but finally fake the spiritual drive to engage the real. The allegorical “baby” in this song refers to someone whom he wants to believe pursues her own relation to the real, but who in the end gives up. The song provides several examples of what inhibits “love” understood in this sense. “Mona,” for instance, aborts her capacity for it by consuming drugs (“the rainman . . . with his magic wand”) or, the same thing, by imbibing self-certain illusions of social freedom that insulate her from having to face the real alone. Dylan regards these illusions as forms of self-imprisonment, for which reason “the judge says, ‘Mona can’t have no bond’” or escape the consequences of evading “real” demands on her. From Dylan’s perspective, whatever promotes or facilitates these kinds of illusions eventually turns into the big bad “wolfman.” This fate can occur in unconscious ways as well. Dylan relentlessly exhibits impatience toward others who refuse to face life as if it were not simultaneously a matter of death, in this song personified by an “undertaker.” He enacts a role-reversal when he looks bemused (“Ain’t you cute!”) at efforts by an appropriately named “masked man” to conceal death from himself. The repression of death equally bespeaks an ironic obsession with it. Thus, “the mask man he gets up on



the shelf”: he stops *real* living and now, a merely ornamental person, acts as if he were already dead. Accordingly, he “says” to the undertaker, a double for death, “You ain’t so bad yourself”! Wanting cultural influence in the public sphere results in something similar. Gaining power there promises to satisfy a male’s fantasized sexual conquest of some imaginary super female: “jumpin’ Judy can’t get no higher.” But the opposite occurs if and when he thinks he already possesses the other, for then his presence prompts her aggressive reaction (“She had bullets in her eyes, and they fire”) to where she overcomes *him*.

Rationalizing his would-be dominance, Dylan imagines himself coming to resemble a “Rasputin . . . dignified,” a trope for how Dylan would overwhelm the other with a spiritual passion and by indirect means (“back of her head”). But even a Rasputin/Dylan fails to tame the wild intoxication or sensation of her sexual presence: “He touched the back of her head . . . an’ he died.” The other’s narcissistic sensibility nullifies his efforts at every turn. “She” resembles a mythical figure like “Phaedra” of the Greek myth, perhaps with whom Dylan became familiar in a 1962 movie starring the actress Melina Mercouri. In the myth, Phaedra’s narcissism (“with her looking glass/Stretchin’ out upon the grass”) brooks no admission of others with desires that might run counter to hers. This especially turns out to be the case with the youth Hippolytus who resists her obsession with him. But where the mythical Phaedra experiences a well-known tragic end (“gets all messed up and she faints”), Dylan’s modern-day “Phaedra” subtly disguises her narcissistic mania: the literary Phaedra is “so obvious” but “you ain’t.” In “I Wanna Be Your Lover,” Dylan essentially declares that he can’t really “be your lover” because the gulf between his sense of self and others who think to fix him one way or another is just too great to overcome. Like the lust of Phaedra, the other’s obsessional need to know “Dylan” comes with the force of sex and runs so deep as to displace his relation to his own work. He himself often finds it difficult to distinguish between sexuality as a mode of escape and as a staging area for fully engaging the absurd.

Are songs like “Absolutely Sweet Marie,” then, examples of his simple sexual frustration or of rejected love allegorically understood as frustration with the other’s failure to realize her a.k.a. his desired listener’s spiritual promise? As a song, “Absolutely Sweet Marie” has several precedents, although Dylan’s version ultimately reduces them to embryonic existential efforts.<sup>15</sup> This song fits John Hinchey’s view that the *Blonde on Blonde* songs in general deal with women as a “metonymy for the perplexities and incitements of sex.”<sup>16</sup> “Absolutely Sweet Marie” unquestionably traffics in sexual innuendo from first to last. The song’s very title suggests that the once as if total sexual allure of “Marie,” whom Dylan mockingly portrays as “sweet,” has now turned into its opposite for him. Her “railroad gate” that he can’t “jump” represents her blocking his present sexual advances, thus resulting in his masturbatory malaise: “it gets so hard” with him “just sitting here beating on my trumpet.” The rest of the song arguably plays out this situation of male sexual frustration. He exercised extreme patience for receiving her erotic attention (“I waited for you when I was half sick/I waited for you inside of the frozen traffic”), but it has all come to naught: “But where are you tonight, sweet Marie?” In this clearly plausible reading, we see him in the grip of self-pity: he blames

her for his plight, claiming that “anybody can be like me” and end up subservient to a dominant other, especially when it comes to the issue of sexual desire.

But the song allows one to read Dylan’s idealizing sexual relations with her to the point where “Marie” proffers him the illusion of “absolute” self-presence, the sense of timelessness in time. This view shifts the song’s tenor from a barely coded sexual frustration to regret over what stymies his effort to arrive at the truth of life per se. What “Marie” thwarts, to employ Derridean terms for the moment, is Dylan’s desire for logocentric revelation: as if the “nothing” discussed in the previous chapter *didn’t* shadow living life everywhere and at all times. The “railroad gate” that he can’t “jump” represents what invites yet bars his finding life’s purpose, and Marie personifies his former view that he *could* find it. Once embodying a very attractive relation to existence that would never change, “she” now rushes by like a train, a metaphorical conceit dramatized by the song’s musical performance on the album.

Yet even as a figure of truth, Marie doesn’t represent a creatively inspiring muse figure for him in any traditional sense. To be sure, the “six white horses that [she] did promise” point to a promise of salvation, as if “she” possessed the power to save him from fronting the meaninglessness of life. White horses are associated with royal occurrences or special public occasions, and as such they might simply figure as a very important moment in the Dylan speaker’s life. Regardless of how “sex” also happens to mean “six” in Latin, the white horses signify her ability to provide him with something *more* than sexual pleasure. Indeed, such pleasure has only prevented him so far from realizing a more existentially meaningful goal: “I waited for you/ When you knew I had some other place to be.” Put in the context of Dylan’s vocational focus, “Absolutely Sweet Marie” confesses his longing to share the spiritual dimension of his vision with others. This context adds a twist to the image of six white horses as signifying a public, celebratory occasion,<sup>17</sup> for now they connote the aborted promise of nothing less than personal salvation. In fact, the most likely source for the image is the medieval and well-known folksong “She’ll Be Coming Around the Mountain When She Comes”:

She’ll be coming round the mountain  
 When she comes  
 She’ll be driving six white horses  
 When she comes  
 She’ll be driving six white horses  
 When she comes

If only metaphorically, that song exudes messianic hope.<sup>18</sup> Therefore Marie’s failed promise of delivering six white horses indicates her failure to bring Dylan anything resembling the usual understanding of spiritual salvation. On the contrary, she has sold it out “to the *penitentiary*” (my emphasis): has reduced her messianic potential to imprisonment by mere penile-cum-sexual desire. “She” has transformed her potential for providing more-to-life-than-pleasure into its exact opposite, namely the obstruction of self-freedom that he would experience if and “when she” *truly* “comes

[sic] round that mountain.” For then she would indeed be a poetically inspiring figure delivering spiritual revelation with orgasmic force.

But “Marie” brings anything *but* this absolute “more” to their relationship, to which sexual exchange should have led but hasn’t. Unlike the promiscuity that Dylan suggests Marie has indulged at “the penitentiary,” her transforming their relationship into something more akin to a spiritual experience would have left them each free to explore the intricacies of their relation to the real. The image of “six white horses” can also connote high funereal occasions, therefore referencing death as much as sex;<sup>19</sup> and bringing death into the equation is perforce to engage a “real” issue. For Dylan, exploring life on such terms is what his musical art is all about. For example, the “river boat captain” who “knows my fate” conjures Mark Twain’s Bixby, the captain who teaches a young apprentice, who later re-names himself “Mark Twain,” to become a full-fledged steamboat pilot in *Life on the Mississippi*.<sup>20</sup> Like Twain there, Dylan also intends to learn a vocation: essentially how to navigate the ever-changing river of life, which makes it that *this* captain “knows [Dylan’s] fate.” He imagines someone analogously related to his own vocational determination to risk the loss of self in order to face existence as defined by ceaseless, chaotic flow, which Twain tried to order by notebook data and, later, his artistic narrative. Whether or not Dylan realizes this goal, too, constitutes his standard for judging his vocational success: “everybody else, even yourself/They’re just gonna have to wait.”

“Absolutely Sweet Marie” announces Dylan’s passionate determination (“I got the fever”) to pursue that goal, which he considers central to his very being, here figured by the phallus “down in my pockets.” One can rationalize away frustrated sexual goals but not existential ones. “The Persian drunkard” who “follows” Dylan in his quest represents the principle of irrationality versus common-sense tactics that work only to fend off of the real.<sup>21</sup> He recognizes, of course, that he can’t make “her” aware of the same irrational quest, which in this case also pertains to Dylan’s imagined intimate listener. Through his songs, he can “take him [the Persian] to your house” or self, but left without the “key” to it he “can’t unlock” how to convey that vision to “her” in the end. In other words, Dylan lacks any immediate linguistic means by which definitively to communicate his vision. This semiotic stalemate applies to most people, but here specifically applies to his general audience. Their reactions to his work (“my mail”) demonstrate that they don’t grasp its singular impetus toward singularity, which once again locks him into a sense of isolation: “I’ve been in jail when all my mail showed/ That a man can’t give his address out to bad company.” “Marie” typifies anyone who grooves on the musical energy of the Dylan lyric but doesn’t grasp its inward trajectory and take *it*, so to speak, to heart. Her “railroad” is “yellow” because of her cowardly moving away from rather than toward a spiritual-existential relation to life. Dylan is thus left “standing in the ruins of your balcony,” for where she once represented for him a Juliet-like figure committed to the romance of spiritual quest, now he wonders if she ever justified that idealization.

On the other hand, Dylan’s semiotic conundrum moves *him* in an inward direction. Since he can’t rely on an intimate audience figure to grasp the radical particularity of his song’s concern, he keeps flirting with something like a spiritually directed masochism.

In this respect, the woman in “Just Like a Woman” allegorically represents at once two vocationally related self-references: both the state of his contemporary musical-lyrical *métier* and his own tendency to sell out the spiritual potentiality of his work. On one level, of course, this allegorical reading resembles one more *apologia* related to feminist charges about the song’s showing Bob Dylan’s misogyny and/or sexism.<sup>22</sup> Yet the refrain’s repeated “like” preposition surely ought to make one pause before doling out definitive ethical judgments one way or another. Taken grammatically, “like” almost literally leaves the “you” *without an identity*, both in the sense of gender and person. Conversely, this self-deracination places the Dylan speaker in the same existential quandary. “Who are ‘you’ to define the ‘me’ of the artistic me?” becomes the question underwriting the song.

At any rate, this grammatical-cum-rhetorical ambiguity, a common practice in Dylan’s songs, redounds to the issue of *self* with which the Dylan “I” begins. The “pain” he experiences “inside the rain” conjures the (watery) formlessness that he encounters in his relationship with the song’s identity-challenged “you.” In the allegorical terms of Dylan’s vocation, the “Baby” about whom he speaks further lacks an identity in regard to her recent (“lately”) disaffection from pursuing a parallel spiritual vision of existence to his. From that perspective, Dylan disparagingly targets the other not for her lack of independence but for how she has left him all too independent or alone, the reason for his “pain.” Her erstwhile mature (“like a woman”) acceptance of that pursuit has now “fallen from her curls.” In other words, she has become figuratively childish (cf. her “ribbons and her bows”), therefore indeed meriting the designation of “Baby.” But as a metaphor for the social self-identity she now prefers, her “new clothes” point to her having opted for a different, more public-oriented vision of existence than Dylan’s.

As occurs in other *Blonde on Blonde* songs, the other in “Just Like a Woman” represents for him contemporary musical art’s proclivity for a showy, lyrical sensationalism. Such songs only mime the seriousness (“make[] love just like a woman”) and sufferings (“aches”) endemic to the promise Dylan regards songs as possessing, for which reason she “break[s down] just like a little girl.” In contrast, he prefers a full-fledged “woman” who befits the interiority required to absorb the absurd grounding of his art. That is why he keeps returning to (“I’ll go see . . . again”) the mysterious figure of “Queen Mary.” Some critics not surprisingly equate “Mary” with marijuana slang, and so a drug by which he would escape the pain of loss. Yet “Queen Mary” could pose a more positive vision, say if one takes it to refer to the famous sixteenth-century Mary, Queen of Scots, beheaded by her cousin, the authoritarian English queen Elizabeth I. Like this Mary, metaphorically speaking (“she’s my friend”) Dylan has been cut off from the capitalist-cultural world dominating his *métier*; but that world too has, as it happens, fortuitously beheaded his lingering ambition for fame in the public realm. Instead, Dylan sees “Baby” occupying that space. Put another way, the “her” in him still yearns for an Elizabethan-like dominance of his art’s public scene. But this only makes him seem “like all the rest,” that is, as having become a type rather than held out for radical selfhood. Given her “fog,” she resembles most people in that she lacks any spiritual direction or insight; more to the point, she seems driven, as though energized by “amphetamine,” to succeed in terms of dominant public criteria. Even the “pearls”

she wants simply represent a common desire for elite status among others. At the same time, they connote how her real beauty, which comes down to her spiritual potential, lies elsewhere, and which she throws away in the manner of the biblical “pearls before swine.” Like his attribution of her as a “little girl,” so she exhibits a naïveté in finally misunderstanding the requisites of soul.

“Baby” in “Just Like a Woman” fails to represent an external *or* internal other who if only indirectly could help Dylan realize his vocational goal. Unlike his alternative of a real “woman,” she lacks independent otherness and threatens him with the same. In effect, “she” stands for an *anti*-muse figure representing the all-too-knowable attributes that he consequently concludes he ought to *expel* from his artistic agenda. The image of “rain” also evokes the wearing down of *self*-pursuits, to which “Baby” contributes. If once she inspired him, now she has left him “dying there of thirst” or wanting something more from and *in* the act of artistic composition. He once “came in here” or desired the immediate affect that rock ‘n’ roll music initially proffered him, and at the same time to get away from the public pressures associated with his success in the “folk” movement. But for different reasons, “she” too, as the latest type of public receptor, rejects the spiritual aspect of his art (“your long-time curse hurts”), all but leaving him without any faith in what he’s doing.

Since Dylan clearly senses that he doesn’t belong with “her” style of art (“I just can’t fit”), what can he do but inscribe his disaffection from “her”? He feels it necessary to “quit”; and even though he may still compose and perform his work in that genre (“When we meet again/Introduced as friends”), it will be without his former naïve faith in “her” promise to bring his vision to fruition: “Please don’t let on that you knew me when/I was hungry” to pursue the real, but “it was your world” instead. In “Most Likely You Go Your Way (and I’ll Go Mine)” Dylan reaffirms his intention to divorce “her” inwardly. The song’s *mise en scène* has him addressing a woman with whom he has had an intimate relationship on the verge of an imminent (“most likely”) disintegration. Less decisively judgmental than in “Just Like a Woman,” Dylan does not quite want this relationship to end. Still, since his remarks more than suggest that he rejects her apparent protestations of “love” for him, he wants to think that *he* has decided to end it: “I’m gonna let you pass.” Conversely, he leaves the impression that she made the decision first, and has done so more than once (“I just can’t do what I done before,” i.e., keep the relationship going). He therefore entertains a moment of revenge when in some indefinite future (“time will tell”), he thinks she supposedly will have realized her mistake (“who has fell/And who’s been left behind”) in their breakup.

But at the allegorical level, Dylan construes the “you” as an intimate audience figure who doesn’t dismiss or resist his song’s visionary focus, but even professes a strong attraction to it: “You say you love me/And you’re thinkin’ of me.” Nonetheless, “her” protestation of support (“You say . . ./That you wanna hold me”) can’t sustain him (“you know you’re not that strong”) since it elides the necessity of his engaging the real alone. As we have seen many times before, Dylan has tried to forewarn others about the self-isolating aspect of this quest; but now he feels he “can’t do what I done before,” that is, “beg” the other to embark on “her” own analogous quest and in *that* way “love” his. To pursue his goal, he must let her “pass” (“I’ll go last”), and really

go off on his own. Time, or so he wants to think, will prove him right in holding to what matters most for him, and would for “her” too if she followed through on her “love” for his songs’ vision of life. One reason for misreading his work stems from “her” obsequious relation to it (“You say . . ./you don’t deserve me”). This view places Dylan in the role of an authoritative teller of objective truths about self, society, and the world. That idealization itself is a “lie” insofar as it disables listeners from seeking their own independent, subjective relation to the real. The excuse that his work alleviates one’s existential pain (“You say . . ./you’re always achin’”) only works (“you know how hard you try”) to prevent her from encountering the cul-de-sac posed by existence as such. He has no patience for such adulation (“it gets so hard to care”), and instead speculates about an entirely different audience for his musical art: “It can’t be this way ev’rywhere.”

Yet the song’s bridge suggests his suspicion that most audiences will tend to fix his artistic position to mitigate the existential anxiety his art otherwise induces. To Dylan, muffling the subjective trajectory of his work turns back on the person who judges it otherwise, for each listener has an inescapable existential conscience, a grudging “judge” who’s “gonna call on you.” The higher truth for which he aims in his work (“he walks on stilts”) uncontrollably (“he’s badly built”) must descend on the listener: “Watch out he don’t fall on you.” This fantasy judgment of the judge falls especially hard on those who think they know the real Dylan but who don’t know his *real* artistic desire. Such listeners “tell[] stories” about him in two-faced ways. First, they helplessly reduce his songs to empirical referents about his life, or else about life at large in the social world. They claim that they’re “sorry” to do this even as they insist that he knows the stories are “true”—that his songs are reducible to specific persons, places, events and ideas, rather than to subjectively conditioned visionary issues. Second, the “you” also represents the public defined by its promiscuous or fickle adulation of artists besides him: “You say ya got some/Other kinda lover.” Their relation to his work amounts to a superficial attraction. He would rather have it that his “kisses,” a trope for the visions they can immediately sense in his songs, linger in the audience’s unconscious. Even if partially understood or unfinished business, in *that* way “I’ll go last.”

Something nonetheless continues to bother this concluding wish. As he himself intimates, he has expressed it before: “*this* time I’m not gonna tell you why that is” (my emphasis). Dylan’s letting the other “pass” and not attend to his work’s spiritual point confesses a state of resignation. His wish remains just that: more and more a private but tired wish to inch listeners toward an existential mood of reception. Time and again, that ethical justification of his work gets tested and returns him to resignation over his artistic isolation. “One of Us Must Know (Sooner or Later)” inscribes just that sort of resignation. No matter how much Dylan wants to resolve this issue, he can’t. Even the parenthesis in the title signifies anything but a definitive outcome to his unresolved relationship with a would-be intimate other. In terms of his vocational agon, Dylan begins by apologizing for his previously “so bad” rejection of “you” as egregious misreaders of his songs. On the other hand, he insists that this rejection wasn’t “personal” or perverse, as many might construe it, but rather stems from the criterion of striving to maintain a certain visionary standard. He did not gratuitously criticize actual persons, or if he did (one thinks of “Positively 4th Street”)

it was purely accidental: “you just happened to be there, that’s all.” One might want to assign “you” to an actual person like Joan Baez again, but Dylan moves beyond biographical reference when he states his inability to have known the other (“Your scarf had kept your mouth well hid”) or her vocational desire: “I couldn’t see when it started snowin’/ . . . /I couldn’t see where we were goin’.” The “you” serves as a trope for any type of artist and/or of song that “sooner or later” appears creatively stale to him.

But “One of Us Must Know” equally suggests that because he didn’t know the other’s vocational path, she couldn’t have known his, thereby imaginatively moving himself beyond her or any audience’s typology. Dylan acknowledges that at least for a while, he “took your word” that a spiritually vital goal directed the art they both practiced. Folk music, for example, once signified for him the potential to engage the real, but he soon began to doubt it could, at which point he inwardly “apologized” to this folk muse for leaving their once common vocational path. The “you” or intimate audience figure protested that she *did* know the point of his work, and at first “I believed you did.” But when he continued to pursue his new direction, which he associates with “her,” a second inspiring muse figure, “you” wanted him to decide “if I was leavin’ with you or her.” His choice came down to accepting his commitment to a familiar if promising visionary style of life and/or lyrical art, the one by which “you knew me,” or to “her,” a different inspirational source for him.

Ultimately, then, “you” failed to realize the stakes of the game: “I didn’t realize how young you were.” She reacted negatively to his decision to “go [his] way”: she “clawed out my eyes,” she became jealous of his visionary priorities and showed that “you weren’t really from the farm,” or not really concerned with *fundamental* (farm-like) issues of existence the way he has come to be. Even so and despite her resistance, he didn’t realize at the time “that you were sayin’ ‘goodbye’ for good.” The finality of this breach makes things all too clear: “You just did what you’re supposed to do.” Despite giving her every chance to “show me” evidence of her engaging life and/or his work on its own terms, he believes no possibility ever really existed for communicative rapport between him and his still misunderstanding “friend.” But if Dylan left one artistic venue for another, that one too has become subject to question. The allegorical-autobiographical script in “One of Us Must Know (Sooner or Later)” jives with the song’s title and chorus: Dylan’s growing disbelief in the possibility that *any* popular musical venue can translate his drive to discern the real.<sup>23</sup> On one level, Dylan’s position is like Thoreau’s, say, where he would have both his peers and audience not only understand the philosophically *life*-inflected point of his songs, but also pursue their own Waldens, as it were. But whereas Thoreau left the impression that one could measure Walden Pond’s a.k.a. the self’s depth, Dylan qualifies his quest with a boundlessly abyssal self. Understood that way, the refrain “sooner or later,” far from intimating a tentative vision, tilts toward meaning “inevitably.” At best, since the “real” end-game is the same for everyone, Dylan imagines his songs as having at least tried to make the other appreciate that fate: “Sooner or later, one of us must know/That I *really* did try to get close to you.”

“Tell Me, Momma,” another song composed during the *Blonde on Blonde* period, shows him similarly perplexed about how this doubt affects *his* creative work. The song’s elliptical images make it difficult to decipher,<sup>24</sup> but it at first appears addressed to

someone who seems completely indifferent to the Dylan speaker's spiritual task. Just as "Ol' black Bascom" a "Cold black water dog" suggests,<sup>25</sup> "Momma" lacks the capacity for self-judgment; she "don't break no mirrors" or shed any "tears." She also suppresses the innocence that he once thought defined their relationship: "Don't you remember makin' baby love?" Even now she aggressively (with a "steam drill") quashes any sign of that former innocence and looks for some other kind of lover: "you're lookin' for some kid/To get [the drill] to work for you like your nine-pound hammer did" with me.

Yet the refrain has it that despite her obtuse front, Dylan believes that this personified muse figure manifests something like a spiritual conscience: "Something is tearing up your mind." The song's chorus also insinuates that "she" feels something's "wrong . . . this time," or that on occasion she just might get what he really wants to help him realize in his work. So he tries to warn her off a would-be friend ("John") who could distract him and "her" from this concern by offering "some candy goods," whether drugs or any other like distraction. This supposed friend has made Dylan feel as if he's gotten nowhere with his quest (at best, somewhere "in the woods"), coldly shut out (on "your January trips") where scary as opposed to creatively productive images of death ("tombstone moose") and the threat of punishment ("brave-yard whips") have absorbed his creative attention. This friend is Dylan himself as the ironic nay-sayer to others, as if prodding them to follow his vocational path; or else a Dylan reduced by them to "Bob Dylan," cultural icon, blocking *him* from that path. Either way—both are operative in the song—if "Momma" ever wants a true, that is, a spiritually supportive, friend, he, the real Dylan, is it: "Come on, baby, *I'm* your friend!" (my emphasis)

But when both he and she rely on such understanding ("bone the editor"), they find they "can't" acquire it. What often looks like an attractive venue (e.g., "[the editor's] painted sled") for visions of existence quickly turns into "a bed" or pseudo-secure, restful medium. "Tell Me, Momma" outlines Dylan speaking to an internalized double who alternates between representing his source of creative inspiration and an audience that could but so far has failed to nurture that source. Since this ideal remains out of reach, he can only keep reiterating the same vocational conundrum, which in turn can easily segue into despair over doing his work at all. Songs like the present one come close to that condition. They repeatedly air and embody what amounts to a pointless creative failure: "I can't tell just how far away you are from the edge." Of course, Dylan knows that some people might enjoy listening to intimated confessions of despair (it's "just gonna make people jump and roar"), so he asks his "momma" "what is it?" To what end will his inspired collusions with the real really lead him? And do his complaints about his work's final reception constitute one more distraction from that goal?

### 3 Final moments of seduction

Meanwhile, Dylan all along allows for a certain compatibility with his imaginary listener. After all, one can never confirm the degree of any person's subjectively conditioned "spiritual" dedication. Why not force the issue, then, as one way to postpone the radical aloneness his vocational stance entails? "Temporary Like



Achilles” and “Pledging My Time” make this option clear, one in the manner of wish, the other as a virtual vow. “Temporary Like Achilles” ostensibly depicts a speaker’s desire to break down his would-be lover’s “temporary” resistance to his sexual advances. Like “I Want You,” this song also takes the form of a traditional seduction poem, with “Achilles” more an image of her unyielding position than “her new (evidently disposable) boyfriend du jour.”<sup>26</sup> Will she allow the speaker ever to love her the way he wants? “Standing on your window” and “Kneeling ‘neath your ceiling,” he has been waiting for her to say yes.

Yet the “Achilles” figure allows that the sexual meaning of the Dylan speaker’s request may itself be temporary. Dylan depicts himself “Standing on your window,” which is to say, trying to communicate his *vision* of life to the other through this very song just as he has tried to do in the past: “I’ve been here before.” Unlike an “Achilles,” he feels “harmless” insofar as he doesn’t want to force her directly to understand what his songs concern. Despite this restraint, however, he still finds himself “looking at your second door.” A possibly prurient reference to a woman’s genitalia, in this context the image evokes William Blake’s notion about “the doors of perception.” If the woman represents Dylan’s would-be intimate listener, what Dylan discerns, then, is her awareness of life’s spiritual potential. The song’s refrain (“You know I want your lovin’/Honey, why are you so hard?”) shows his persistence in wanting to reach her in just that sense, despite how right now she shows no awareness (“send[s] me no regards”) of understanding the level of “lovin’” that he desires.

If she seems adamantly determined (“why you so hard?”) *not* to hear what he is trying to express, Dylan remains no less determined to tap what he refers to as her higher (“Kneeling ‘neath your ceiling”) calling: “Yes, I guess I’ll be here for a while.” The song stages him precisely in the process of trying to figure how to do that. He manifests the difficulty he encounters in his use of certain phrases verging on the oxymoronic such as his “tryin’ to read your portrait” and feeling “helpless like a rich man’s child.” They show him unable to know if she understands him or not, which in part is due to the subjective stipulation complicating such communication. She, however, continues to rely on external authority figures (“someone” like “Achilles”) to deny or “bar[]” the import of what his songs mean for her to do. Still, he thinks that the other is close if not close enough to understanding his vision of life, for “Like a poor fool in his prime” or someone dissatisfied with her spiritual poverty and ripe for change in *that* context, “she” can catch glimmers of what his songs concern: “Yes, I know you can hear me walk.” On the other hand, the lines “I watch upon your scorpion/Who crawls across your circus floor” point to the poison of runaway sexuality and play (“your circus floor”) as potentially defining her fundamental self. The song ends with her not taking the last step. It is as if her “heart,” her ability to understand the inner directive of his represented and representative communication, stays hard like “stone” or “lime” or even “solid rock” to keep from taking *in* this vision.

But the fact that he phrases this sentiment in the form of a question (“How come you don’t send me no regards?”) also bespeaks his uncertainty about the depth of her resistance. He sometimes feels that he *has* come close to reaching her: “I rush into your hallway” or what leads to her most intimate site of being, with her “velvet door” here

referring not her sexual private parts but to her inner spiritual self. Dylan wants to communicate *with* rather than *to* her: "Just what do you think you have to guard?" Far from any jealous motive, he wants the self-other intimacy that sexual relations intimate but finally obstruct. The "Achilles" figure stands for common, would-be seducers who cater to this last reduction. Not caring for the likes of Dylan's songs ("He don't want me here/He does brag"), he waits in her "alleyway" to keep "her" from grasping their spiritual point. The obstacle "Achilles" represents insists on a sexual (or materialist) vision of life that would seduce Dylan's desired listener from concerning herself with the real. The "Achilles" person pretends to a high vision of life ("he's pointing to the sky") but explains everything in a rapacious, appetitive manner: "he's hungry like a man in drag." This homosexual trope underscores how "his" desire only mimics self-other (figuratively *hetero*) relations per se, and thus occludes any ethical apprehension of the other *as* other, which in turn justifies Dylan's asking, "How come you get someone like him to be your guard?"

Dylan wants "her" to keep open to the possibility of living in terms of the real. The plea running throughout the song "Pledging My Time" testifies to his determination not to abandon all hope for genuine communication with others on those visionary terms. His songs constitute exercises in "pledging [his] time to you/Hopin' you'll come through, too." In part meant to assuage his own sense of vocational isolation, this determined patience defines his creative efforts from "early in the mornin'/'Til late at night." Although he can't forget it ("I got a poison headache"), he still maintains his commitment to ("I feel all right" about) the validity of his position. Dylan's stance echoes D. H. Lawrence's passion to contact another self's infinity, such as scripted in a series of poems collected in the 1917 volume *Look! We Have Come Through!* The two poets' spiritually grounded visions of life pivot around a paradoxically universal singularity that never meshes other into other. In the poem "Manifesto," Lawrence accordingly envisages a time with the "two of us, unutterably distinguished, and in/unutterable conjunction," or where "all men/detach themselves and become unique."<sup>27</sup>

Moving toward a similar vision in "Pledging My Time," Dylan at first rehearses a brief catalogue of contingent obstacles to his desired "baby"'s receiving his work's aim to get to the real. For instance, quasi-artists call attention to themselves by the public sensation they make in composing songs and "jump[ing] up" when performing them. But they can't sustain whatever promise their lyrical efforts might have had: they "came down natur'ly," as if subject to the law of gravity. Figuratively speaking, they turn into transient or "hobo"-like figures, and not in the good sense Dylan means by that figure in former songs. He doesn't underestimate the attraction these so-called artists' work might have in seducing some people away ("stole my baby") from the sustained, spiritually driven art Dylan most respects. Their art can even attract *him* ("Then he wanted to steal me") and temporarily keep him from adhering to his vocational path in musical art. But their kind of art defines the rule and not the exception, for the entire artistic milieu has become "so stuffy" that he "can hardly breathe," that is, leaves him little room to express his spiritual concern.

In "Pledging My Time," Dylan pleads for at least one way out of this dilemma: to pledge his artistic time to one specific other ("me and you" alone) and forget others understood in general. He wants to believe that they both possess the wherewithal to

remain committed to higher artistic concerns and can coexist in spiritual synchrony despite the changing contingencies of “Merely in living as and where we live” (Wallace Stevens). But the outcome still remains uncertain and to some extent depends on random circumstances and occurrences in the other’s life that could bring him/her to the existential brink. That situation accounts for the emergency call for an “ambulance” in the song. The scene refers to an existential crisis from which something good can come in Dylan’s vocational terms, namely the revitalization of a subjective life in relation to the real. But such a crisis would stem more from an external, accidental collision with the finitude of existence than from *one’s own* decisive conviction: “Someone got lucky but it was an accident.” Dylan’s conviction nonetheless persists as to where we each *really* “wanna go”: coming upon that existential elucidation of the “spiritual” (my marks), our conscious efforts to avoid that end notwithstanding; and so “Won’t you come with me, baby?”

Dylan’s relatively helpless relation even to an ersatz double can lead to a second option. What he equally tries to simulate in his *Blonde on Blonde* lyrics is independence from his own wish to have any audience apprehend his work in the spiritually motivated way he composes it. In other words, he wants to rid himself altogether of how “they” mediate his relation to his work. Others are then left to believe in the spiritual valence of his work or not, an either/or made all the more acute since little-to-no objective evidence appears to support such an interpretation. This theme plays out in *Blonde on Blonde*’s “Obviously Five Believers,” which from an objective viewpoint we might regard as a humorous blues song with a hint of gang-banging, almost sexual menace in the penultimate stanza about the “Fifteen jugglers.”<sup>28</sup> As with “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35” and “Fourth Time Around,” the title-numbers in “Obviously Five Believers” arguably exhibit an “absurd numerological specificity” by which Dylan refers “to the impossibility of presumptive knowledge,” instead aiming “to reach trustworthy and *final* conclusions based on apparent evidence.”<sup>29</sup>

But no “evidence” appears in the song to assert that there are “*obviously* five believers,” and for that matter believers in what? One can quickly move to the song’s allegorical consistency with the other *Blonde on Blonde* songs to venture a surmise: at minimum, Dylan looks for listeners who believe in and remain dedicated to the equivalent of his spiritual-vocational quest. He himself pursues this calling all the time, as if from “Early in the mornin’” and throughout the day. To be sure, his calling to an intimate other “to/Please come home” points to his wish not to be left alone in *his* “calling”: “I could make it without you/If I just didn’t feel so all alone.” We hear him beg the other not to “let me down” in that specific spiritual sense. But neither can he sustain his dedication not to “let *you* down” (my emphasis) with absolute certainty. Nothing is guaranteed in this implicit relationship with his audience-other. His statement that “You know I can [let you down] if you can [let me down]” shows its precarious nature. If the other doesn’t pick up on the spiritual-existential drive behind his songs, then Dylan might abandon “you” altogether. The image of the “black dog barkin’” stands for finally failing to say something *to* others. Almost literally saying nothing, the “barkin’” image and the dog’s “black” color signify their own and the Dylan song’s absence of content, otherwise the very warp and woof of human communication. A semiotic

*nothing* defines what his songs express. And they do that “Outside my yard”: in places beyond his immediate control, as on records, the radio or in concerts. Dylan could inform her “what” the barking “means,” but since it means “nothing,” he would have to “try so hard” to do it. To explain it directly contradicts what this same lyric is in the process of expressing: for “you” to come upon that “nothing” by and for yourself.

Dylan believes that she has the imagination (“Your mama”) to care about her spiritual-existential state. Everyone feels, he guesses, one’s own spirit “moanin;” inwardly if not consciously mourning (“cryin’” over) that fact. But if “you” can’t sustain such a state, “You better go now,” by which he means: give up any pretense to grasping his song’s import. Dylan acts as if he’s in the know (“I’d tell you what [your mama] wants”) but finally still can’t speak for “her”: “I just don’t know how.” So his songs inevitably encounter *their* semiotic dead-end. “Believers” in *real* visionary goals are outnumbered three-to-one by the “fifteen jugglers,” those who only juggle or play at believing in his songs’ spiritual trajectory. And they do so for all the false reasons noted previously: taking the songs essentially for their entertainment value or else to confirm a distinct social position. Both types of Dylan listeners are “dressed like men,” that is, appear *as* types, with “All” of them resembling superficially responsible adults.

Yet this general blockage of genuine communication doesn’t halt Dylan’s vocational will: “Tell yo’ mama [a.k.a. *your* creative spirit] not to worry because” his songs are “just my friends.” His entire musical-lyrical complex, he claims, testifies to its spiritual drive, whether audiences apprehend it or not. He will continue to try making them into “believers” in the real to which his work points, but he leaves behind listeners with their own duty to arrive at this interpretation of his work. Such a rationale justifies his disaffection from any conventionally understood ethical commitment. To paraphrase Philip Larkin’s judgment of Emily Dickinson’s poems, Dylan seems “determined to keep [his “spiritual” goal] hidden,” hence with his “inspiration derived in part *from* keeping it hidden.”<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, he can’t elide the dialectic of determining subjective apprehensions of the real against habitually objectivist ones. On one hand, Dylan indulges in a repetitive effort—note the album title’s virtually endless iteration of blonde-on-blonde-on . . .—to keep his goal subjective. On the other, he engages patently objectifying social media, musical performances, and verbal lyrics to do this.

This rhetorical impasse, one might say, points to where a Dylan *Blonde on Blonde* song like “Fourth Time Around” manifests an inward, autobiographical turn. Even on one level, the song allegorizes a conventional autobiographical review of Dylan’s career up to the point where he exercises an imaginary veto of that same level. If not criticizing “Fourth Time Around” on aesthetic grounds, many commentators take the song for a parody of the Beatles’ near-contemporary song “Norwegian Wood.” Moreover, the Dylan song’s mood changes markedly when his surrogate speaker notices an enigmatic “you in your wheelchair” near the end of the narrated episode. Michael Gray argues that if “Fourth Time Around” “begins as a cold, mocking put-down of a woman and a relationship untouched by love,” it eventually turns into “something more urgent and compelling,” which for him means a “second and love-tinged relationship.”<sup>31</sup> Yet

Gray's "something" points to the song's problematic because indefinite scenario. Who precisely is the "you"?

The song's narrative scene never quite makes literal let alone thematic sense. The song begins with an apparently angry woman throwing out the speaker and accusing him of lying. In reaction to some unspecified violation of their relationship, she now goes so far as to attack him physically: "And she worked on my face until breaking my eyes." It seems reasonable to suppose that he lied to gain recently procured sexual favors from her. At least from his narrative, we have good reason to suppose she may be a prostitute; for just as he is about to leave her and while she "buttoned her boot,"

she said, "Don't forget  
Everybody must give something back  
For something they get."

In lieu of money, however, he gives her his "gum," which one might construe as a dismissive gesture, critical of her failure to pleasure him fully; and it is at that point that she tosses him "outside/. . . in the dirt where ev'ryone walked."<sup>32</sup>

The song clearly has all the makings of an absurdist comedy. After the Dylan speaker leaves the woman's house or room, he remembers that "I'd/Forgotten my shirt," and he returns to her place to get it back. But when she goes to retrieve his shirt, he suddenly notices something that puzzles him and us:

And I tried to make sense  
Out of that picture of you in your wheelchair  
That leaned up against . . .  
  
Her Jamaican rum.

Still pleasure-oriented and as though no serious breach had occurred between them, he then "asked her for some" rum, and once again an argument ensues with physical and mental repercussions. This time, however, she becomes so apoplectic at his request that she breaks down and falls "on the floor." With her supposedly incapacitated, the Dylan figure proceeds to ransack "her drawer" during which he "filled up my shoe/ And brought it to you." Once he did that, Dylan claims, "you took me in" and "didn't waste time." Yet the more things change during the course of the song, the more they don't, for he ends by warning this *other* "you" not to depend on his fidelity: "I never asked for your crutch/Now don't ask for mine."

If this narrative makes (a) little sense, allegorically it goes clickety-click, for "Fourth Time Around" arguably exhibits autobiographical leanings of a more elusive kind. It inscribes Dylan's reflection on how he became an artist able to compose the *self*-engaging song lyric to which we are now listening. The woman who accuses him of lying represents the raw, eros-suffused experiences to which anyone, not least a young male artist, is immediately drawn. Dylan at first plays the role of the eager and perhaps naïve (*à la* gum-chewing) artistic self, and in that context his "lies" refer to his renditions of his experience with her that "she" considers distortions. But this judgment in fact

represents Dylan's own temptation to view his experience that way. Breaking into his "eyes," "her" earthy reduction of existence attempts wholly to occupy or define *his* vision of it. Insofar as "she" personifies his stubbornly maintained, youthful demands for physical experiences of life, "she" resists his effort to recast them into artistically valuable "lies."

But Dylan doesn't think his lyric compositions express lies at all, certainly not in any conventional sense. On the contrary, he insists that they evince ad hoc, subjective truths about life. He therefore gets up to leave just when he recognizes how the pleasures not only of sex but also of material success would subsume his vocational charge. This recognition points to a re-imagined moment in which he decisively chooses to pursue the real over the acclaim and rewards that composing and performing songs in public can bring him. But "she" doesn't buy that decision. Rather, "she" feels that he owes "her" for having provided him with the kind of experience that grounds his present artistic success. After all, one could claim that any artist owes a debt to the heightened life-experience that result in his or her art. In yet one more turn of events, the Dylan figure demurs at this demand ("I asked her how come"). Having changed into a spiritually motivated artist, he thinks that his lyrical art can illuminate existence rather than vice versa. Impervious to his artistic rationale, however, "she" still requires payment for the pleasures "she" supplied him with. One cannot easily walk away from the visceral sensations of even casual sex ("she buttoned her boot/And straightened her suit"), existentially secondary as they might be. Dylan's "very last piece of gum," a paltry metonym of his youth, signifies his payment for having accepted such past pleasures. In a US context at least, gum-chewing signifies a brash, naïvely self-confident demo of youthfulness. This his "very last" act indicates that he has now sacrificed his former, narcissistic relation to life in exchange for experiences that will yield something more than common pleasures. No one can get (to) that something for nothing.<sup>33</sup>

Yet giving "her" his gum also signifies a *refusal* to surrender to life's invasive demand that he *wholly* give up his youthful relation to existence. This act bespeaks his continued flexibility or young derring-do as a would-be artist. He simply won't let the false lure of mundane pleasures deny the kinds of changes he thinks his art can effect with respect to living and representing life. Moreover, giving her his gum plays on a commonplace phrase, again with a positive vocational connotation: that having "chewed things over," he has come to understand the jejune value of what "she" had offered him. Needless to say, "she" doesn't accept his ersatz payment for pleasures rendered. Thrown out or rejected in the way most people live life, he has to endure its persistent, depressing drag on his imagination, regardless of his vocational decision to leave "her" behind. In particular, Dylan now feels compelled to find out whether or not, as the commonplace phrase has it, he has "lost his shirt" in the process, meaning lost something of existential import that he now wants back from "her." So he returns to the scene of his preceding impasse to see if he can't recover whatever fueled his vocational desire: "I went back and knocked." His newfound insistence on subjective selfhood also counterintuitively instigates his artistic sense of commonality with others, which explains the "picture of you in your wheelchair" that he only now sees in "her" place. The "you" represents *us* as an alienated hence crippled humanity.

“Fourth Time Around” conveys a shorthand, autobiographical script of Dylan’s vocational genesis, subliminally recording how he came to compose the very songs we are listening to in *Blonde on Blonde*. Even asking for “some” of “Her Jamaican rum” evokes a vision of his possibly practicing a Dionysian style of art, which of course many songs on the album surely exemplify. Through his artistic work, he would commit himself without reservation to reconfiguring life as he sees it in terms of the real. No doubt, obstacles will continue to resist his newly formulated request to take back from life a renewed passion to effect his imaginative reconfigurations of it. These obstacles consist of the inescapable quotidian pressures of life that as if continually say, “No dear,” you can’t do that. But since his artistic goal means to sustain a subjective relation to life, Dylan responds no less continuously that “her” rejection makes no sense to him: “I said, ‘Your words aren’t clear.’” To *make* “her” make existential sense, he tells her that “she” must first “spit out your gum,” a mandate that refers back to his former, youthful relation to “her” as determining his relation to life. It is *that* relation that he now determines to recover in imaginative terms, and he must do so in the face of her representing a quasi-physical obstacle (“she fell on the floor”): the deadening repetition of empirical life that would resist any such recovery. In essence, he now holds the view that life is a human fiction that he can recast through his art in innumerable ways. This vision licenses him to look in “her drawer,” another way of saying that from his new perspective he will reexamine and reshape the different kinds of experience life has already offered and may yet offer him.

“Fourth Time Around” finally figures an internalized autobiographical scene of writing: how Dylan has composed his songs from his findings (“I filled up my shoe”), their primary ethical charge being to inspire us (“And [I] brought it to you”) to examine life analogously. Toward the end of the song, he even acknowledges that we have made him famous for the creative depths that he has rendered in songs like the present one: “You loved me then/You never wasted time.” Yet he warns us that if we truly appreciate his work’s import, we must resolve our alienated or crippled relation to life on our own terms. We ought not primarily to depend on him and/or his work to keep inspiring us to do so. Retroactively, he realizes that has been his vocational premise from the very beginning of his career:

And I, I never took much,  
I never asked for your crutch,  
Now don’t ask for mine.

#### 4 First-person singular

Dylan’s stance in “Fourth Time Around” can lead him straight to acknowledging the aloneness endemic to his existence-centered vocation and expressed most elegiacally in “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands.” The song literally stands alone on *Blonde on Blonde* in that it takes up an entire side of the two-record vinyl album. Biographical readings inevitably abound as to whom Dylan imaginatively addresses here, with commentators most often assigning the “lady” in question to Joan Baez and/or Sara

Lowndes, whom Bob Dylan had married near the time of the song's composition.<sup>34</sup> Some critics also maintain that the song's cataloging of the woman's attributes don't even add up to an autonomous whole. The biographical tease and what Michael Gray terms the song's vague imagery and arbitrary rhymes arguably make for an irreparably fragmented lyric.<sup>35</sup>

But read in allegorical terms, "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" possesses the autobiographical coherence found in "Fourth Time Around." The song's otherwise contradictory images reference a notably singular love-figure whose sadness Dylan basically attributes to her unalleviated immersion in mundane, empirical reality or what he here terms "the lowlands." Moreover, the song's refrain reflects his vision of his art's effort to keep such depression at bay. Most of the song moves in that direction as well. Even how its images appear chaotically profuse signifies the song's virtually infinite effort to execute this anti-depressive task. Dylan's artistic vision would transform mundane reality by deploying stored images of his experience as ultimately envisioned through "My warehouse eyes": the lens of a spiritually tasking vision of existence. His "Arabian drums" calls attention to his song's exotic sound and "prayers like rhymes." Their reiteration in the refrain at first mimics a monotonous recitation, but combined with its steady rhythm and elliptical imagery, it all has the effect of a private prayer.

The song's entire formal complex partakes of a concentrated effort that would infuse a poetic dimension into the otherwise reductive pressures of mundane reality, which the song simultaneously assumes as given. Dylan enlists a traditional trope for the imagination ("where the moonlight swims") to move what most of us term reality into a spiritual zone. Each stanza converts what might have been actual persons and places into pretexts for this movement toward a nether *real* that he envisions as isolated from familiar or objective ways of explaining experiences. The "real" itself begins to appear as an ineluctable nothing impinging on the self in a private imaginative sphere: "Where the sad-eyed prophet says that no man comes." In contrast, people in the world at large live according to sacrosanct truths as if pontificated "in the missionary times."<sup>36</sup> Resorting to poetic double-talk ("With your mercury mouth"), "she" a.k.a. his song turns away from such monosyllabic truths toward a free-spirited messianic agenda. Dylan regards his ideal song as resisting the accepted conventions and restrictive rigmarole of how people come to terms with the unexplainable. Instead, "she" indulges "her" own brand of the spiritual, hence wears a faceless "silver cross" and speaks with a "voice like chimes," another image for his existential spirituals. Absent any institutional identification, Dylan's songs nevertheless come trailing an incense-like, spiritual aura, as with "[her] eyes" or *visions* "like smoke."

Like his other *Blonde on Blonde* songs, "she" helps him register and resist external influences such as listeners who would interpret his songs at their most literal level, yet whom Dylan internalizes while composing his work. They would deny or "bury" *their* existential mode of reference. Having gained a measure of creative independence in his musical-cultural environment ("pockets well protected at last"), a Dylan's song need not conform to public demands, however defined. Even so, his "Lady" can make his work available to anyone; turn any experience into, say, a Whitmanian lyric (with its "streetcar visions which you place on the grass") while retaining its utter uniqueness:



“And your flesh like silk, and your face like glass/Who among them do you think could carry you?” Dylan’s “sad-eyed” imagination doesn’t make for easy hermeneutic access since it is his own poetic rhetoric that mimics “sheets like metal” while keeping images together in a special, precious way, as with a “belt like lace.” Neither do his songs reduce to something like a game of “cards,” as if they might hold an “ace” or a wildcard “jack” so as to short-cut access to the real. Rather, his best songs lack privileged alibis; they traffic in basic visions of life and yet use “hollow” or ambiguous images to express them, difficult to pin down: “Who among [others] can think he could outguess you?” To others, Dylan’s songs metaphorically mime a “silhouette,” an anonymous vagary in a world demanding externally available definitions, just as in musical-lyrical terms “she” has no definitive generic identity either. “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands” only outlines a definition for what other Dylan songs strive to become or judge themselves as not being. They, too, comprise a variety of musical-lyrical genres: from “matchbook songs” (like popular romance ballads) to “gypsy hymns,” (say nonmainstream folksongs) that eventually segue into personal, existential spirituals like “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands.” Here again, we see Dylan archly resisting the typologization to which others lend themselves so easily. No one kind of song is privileged in his canonical repertoire; each is finally elusive: “Who among them would try to impress you?”

This vision of his *musical-artistic* visions ultimately manifests a wish for an inner relation to his art. The Dylan song belongs to him alone with his “sad-eyed” muse of the moment. Obviously, certain obstacles to realizing such autonomy proliferate, not the least being pressures from the “kings of Tyrus” or ersatz Phoenician traders, tropes for persons from the culture industry responsible for selling and distributing “her” to the public at large. Whenever a creative work breaks through the mundane, it gets tabbed criminal and put on the music industry’s “convict list.” To make matters worse, thanks to their function of advertising songs, music businessmen and critics expect what amounts to superficial gratitude (e.g., receiving a cheap “geranium kiss”) for whatever success musical artists do achieve. When beginning his career, Dylan didn’t anticipate this complication in creating his art (“you wouldn’t know it would happen like this”), but now everyone from businessmen, critics, audiences to artistic peers who play the game can interfere with the artistic passion that he holds dearest: “who among them really wants just to kiss you?”

None of this has the last word on Dylan’s words. The inspirational sources of his imagination (analogous to “childhood flames”) work best in stolen moments and hidden from public purviews, as “on your midnight rug.” He simultaneously takes special care not for his work’s likely public reception but rather for what it means to and for himself. The muse figure’s “Spanish manners” might well evoke the craftsmanship that he once attributed to “boots of Spanish leather,” a very early song figuratively referring to how his personal pain over lost love might translate into his art of the moment. As with “your mother’s drugs” or his verbal wit (“your cowboy mouth”), that art can assuage and draw terse insights from the raw hurt of actual experience. But above all, Dylan relies on “curfew plugs,” that is, images to thwart any public distraction from his vocational focus. His inward movement can even occur in the midst of otherwise explicit biographical allusions like those ostensibly referring to Joan Baez with her

"Spanish manners"; or how her former rendition of songs affected both "the farmers and the businessmen," figures at odds in the workaday world but who in different ways wanted her "to sympathize with their side." Such references soon glide away from their external meanings and are instead configured "to show you the dead angels that they used to hide," which refers to the loss of their former spiritual possibilities. Dylan turns such externalist references into his own vision of his relation to the real. With "the sea at your feet," he asserts that his songs primarily mean to uncover the ego-negating infinity ("the sea") of his and by extension any self.

We see Dylan again abjuring "the phony false alarm" of worldly defined apocalypses to which some song-artists resort. No doubt the Dylan song can embrace "the child of the hoodlum wrapped up in your arms" as well; but this act pertains to whoever transgresses *all* prescriptive social norms and values on the basis of inner determinations of self and world. Alluding to the title and social tableau of John Steinbeck's novella, Dylan muses about "your sheet-metal memory of Cannery Row," a recollection of characters living off the beaten path. No one could "persuade" him not to have his songs focus exactly on such nonmainstream modes of living.<sup>37</sup> His notable reference to his and Baez's well-publicized relationship ("your magazine-husband who one day just had to go") also serves to disguise Dylan's rejection of *his* "husband," the "Bob Dylan" of public-celebrity fame, the better to determine himself as subjectively related to his work. Similarly, "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" makes "her" stand with "your thief," his sometime metaphor for the artist who steals from his own and others' experiences (and songs) and proceeds to convert them into a more existentially tasking avatar of popular musical-lyrical art. Being "on his parole" means that his art occurs always on precarious reprieve from imprisonment within reductive, group-consensus notions of a mundane reality that makes "her" profoundly "sad" in the first place. That reality inevitably tugs at his own work; but like the repetitive "Arabian" refrain, "she" or his song at its core assumes the status of a holy memento or, as noted earlier, a private prayer: "With your holy medallion which your fingertips fold." "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" constitutes a meditation on experiences of existence more permanent than any of the world's ephemeral activities: "Oh, who among them do you think could destroy you?"

What he finds indestructible about his art are his "visions of Johanna" in the song most Dylan critics regard as among his canonical best. "Visions of Johanna" also invites biographical readings from which it soon disaffects. One can hear the name "Joan" in "Johanna," but to what end? At best "she" metaphorically evokes the sheer lyrical sound that Dylan once associated with Joan Baez's voice as pure beauty.<sup>38</sup> The "visions of Johanna" that he says now "conquer my mind" point to his ideal for a musical-lyrical art that would comprise an indefinite acoustical space where word-meaning remains on permanent hold.<sup>39</sup> In this poetics, Dylan uses words to suspend what words normally do, so that, as a significant bonus, their meaningless [*sic*] effect would facilitate a relation to his songs absent the mediation of others. The song at least exhibits a skittish poetics as a whole. Aidan Day, for instance, regards it as everywhere undermining "the security of licensed forms and structures."<sup>40</sup> Such dishevelment marks the rhetoric of most Dylan songs in this period: an eclectic, poetic language (e.g., surrealist, folk,

beat) that yet relies on conventional speech and even clichés. The “Johanna” figure arguably personifies the ideal Dylan muse by “eluding rational and narrative ordering” and even “fixture within the words of this lyric.”<sup>41</sup> Being neither poetic fish nor fowl, neither conventional song nor poem, the Dylan “song” exemplifies a generic literary anomaly and slippage of rhetorical constraints, which Day nicely regards as a positive poetic move: “Visions of Johanna” possesses an “anarchic potency” or vision of unconstrained *jouissance*.<sup>42</sup>

At best, the figure of “Johanna” ironically serves the function of a traditional muse, “ironically” because the song’s title all but verges on an oxymoron. If one identifies “Johanna” with the “Madonna” figure mentioned near the end of the song, the “she” who “still has not showed,” then he envisions only her absence. “Johanna” represents a missing muse figure who, as in the earlier “Mr. Tambourine Man” or the later, provocatively unfinished “I’m Not There,” at best constitutes an elusive genetrix for the present song. But Dylan’s intangible figure of pure beauty and a haunting absent presence provocatively resonates with Poe’s brazen assertion that the “most poetical topic” of all was “the death of a beautiful woman.”<sup>43</sup> Analogous to Dylan’s lyrical practice, Poe also depicted poetry as essentially a form of musical composition resulting in indefinite feeling. At the same time, this Poe connection should alert us to the elegiac rather than positive tenor of “Visions of Johanna.” For that matter, distinct from any naïve, neo-Romantic apostrophe to Imagination, the song expresses Dylan’s lapse of faith in its capability to effect changes in the public realm. If there always exists an existential limit to his desire to affect others existentially, this very conundrum generates his songwriting. But unlike the vocational positivity that defines his experience of commonality in “Fourth Time Around” (e.g., “I stood in the dirt where ev’ryone walked”), the *mise en scène* of “Visions of Johanna” exudes vocational crisis.

One thus can overhear his concentrated effort to focus on this situation in the song’s very first lines. The sense of life’s darkness (“the night”) intrudes on his “tryin’ to be so quiet.” He notes how this darkness destabilizes (“play[s] tricks” with) his sense of so-called reality, in the process undermining not just his but also our (“We . . . all”) ability to speak any meaningful truth about it. Do we share this “reality” (my marks) at all? None of us can secure a firm ground from which to determine it or conversely our socially sponsored identities. This is so despite our various efforts “to deny” that lack, which Dylan himself admits to doing. For example, thanks to “Louise,” a generative force behind his musical lyrics and style, he has adopted the tempting stance of negation, an as-if existential positivity of despair, arguably evident in songs such as “Like a Rolling Stone” and “Desolation Row.” Her “hold[ing] a handful of rain” even echoes Dylan’s affirmatively asserted vocational stance in “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall.” In his signature gesture as both a folk and rock artist, Dylan alias “Louise” defies his audience (“you”) to deny how “We sit here stranded,” that is, are essentially alone without recourse to any salvific, communal consolation.

In “Visions of Johanna,” however, we also witness him trying to separate from “Louise.” Through “her,” Dylan stages his recognition that his rock-lyrical stance has ironically turned into a formulaic negation of others’ efforts to deny their primal insecurity, which *exposé* has become his *own* means of such denial. This *self-*

recognition in essence confesses that his work up to now has amounted to nothing special. His visionary negations are no better than what transpire in “the opposite loft,” namely all the various group-think denials of existential isolation. Both feebly attempt to rationalize ways (“Lights flicker”) to avoid the too-dark vision of permanent aloneness, which underscores why his and other people’s opposing social and/or political stances finally don’t matter. The same contingency applies to different styles of musical expression. With Dylan the performer “so entwined” with “her,” the aggressive immediacy of rock music synonymous with Louise—“The ghost of [e]lectricity howls in the bones of her face”—represents a countercultural, group-oriented vision of life that denies *its* existential ground as much as does the supposedly conservative, “soft” escapist mode played on “The country music station.” If anything, Dylan’s anti-conventional brand of song instances the greater temptation in posing as an energized denial of such denial. “Visions of Johanna” tracks precisely his awareness not only that he has failed but also that he may be unable to deliver what he regards as the spiritual goods.<sup>44</sup> It is as if he were once again “Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again,” but this time not because of others’ inability to grasp his spiritual point but rather because he himself doubts his work’s ability to forward his *real* vision of existence.

Dylan cites this failure everywhere in his musical-artistic vicinity. He finds his songs inviting the illusion that it can suffice for others to know instead of personally confront what “stranded” really means. He imagines his music fans (“ladies”) as blindly dabbling in or “play[ing] blindman’s bluff” with his art (“the key chain”), and therefore not realizing to where it leads. Others treat his lyrics as if they didn’t require analogous existential responses but instead conform to the “empty” social tropes used to define reality. Dylan also targets people in his audiences who act like conforming non-conformists, not least the groupies (“all-night girls”) fascinated with the negations lining his lyrics. Though aware of the dark side of existence, they only follow the serious *self*-oriented ramifications of his lyrics as “escapades out on the ‘D’ train”: commonplace modes of transport spiced with *danger*, say, but not grasping the D train as the Death-train.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, the custodians of mainstream culture like the “night watchman click[ing] his flashlight” end up questioning their own tenuous views of reality. The sexual force propelling the rock medium disarms so-called “rational” judgments of it, and since no discursive ground exists by which *to* judge such songs, who can say who is “insane” and not?

That judgment clearly applies to people who disregard the artistic value of his musical-lyrical venue. Dylan’s awareness especially of the “jelly-faced” audience’s obtuse, “mule”-like ignorance of his art’s existential goings-on threatens to paralyze or “freeze” up his artistic act altogether. If he were to take such mis-receptions seriously, it would make his art akin to a “primitive wallflower,” something that shies away from engaging what matters most to him. (Mis)understanding his musical art by people unable (“Jeeze/I can’t find my knees”) to see its effort to articulate the stranded situation of self makes them an ancillary target of the artist’s art. Just as Duchamp painted the da Vinci *Mona Lisa*’s figure with a mustache so as to de-fame its revered public status, so Dylan de-fames others’ elevation of his work by manifestly inscribing their egregious misreading of it: “Hear the one with mustache” mistake its “Visions.”

But Dylan remains stranded even in this judgment since he too has fallen for the sensation-ridden attractions of “Louise.” As “the peddler,” he confesses the pull of business and lure of fame (e.g., cavorting with “the countess”) infiltrating his artistic drive. He can try to rationalize away such motivations by again aggressively demeaning them, but even then, Dylan realizes that thanks to “Louise” he does so only in word as opposed to deed: “As she, herself, prepares for him.” Otherwise appearing harmless (“she’s all right”), his sexy medium provokes and promotes his own immediate immersion in it (“she’s just near”) given the public excitements ignited by rock ‘n’ roll performances. As occurs in innumerable Dylan songs, this aesthetic effect overrides how “she” can traffic in gnomic (“she’s delicate”) intimations of the real. With its multiple pronominal switching, the very style of the Dylan song automatically resists stable, rational apprehension. Yet his attraction to “her” hasn’t lasted, for his medium-cum-Louise’s mirror-like lure has become all too evident: “she just makes it all too concise and too clear/That Johanna’s not here.” Vulgar subjectivism in no way constitutes spiritual subjectivity. The amplified, electric immediacy of Dylan’s Louise-like work from the *Bringing It All Back Home* through *Blonde on Blonde* periods has left it bereft of spiritual point to others but not to him: “these visions of Johanna have now taken my place.”

Yet this realization leaves him without even the self-presence faultily afforded by Louise’s acts of negation. Where before he could *imagine* encountering “nothing,” thus motivating his composition and performance of lyrics, now he regards that goal only as a long-range possibility. His former vocational impetus has now come into question because, like a “little boy lost” who “takes himself so seriously,” he then took “nothing” not *as* nothing but rather as *a* nothing that he wanted to be something after all. In the grip of “Louise,” Dylan became prone to “brag[] of his [spiritual] misery,” which in fact makes *that* the topic of his *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde* songs. Before, he could believe in acts of self-negation as part of constantly becoming the anonymous *self* of self, what Emily Dickinson termed “That polar privacy/A soul admitted to itself”<sup>46</sup> with the compensatory sighting of the pure beauty of things. Now, he can only “speak[] of [Johanna’s] farewell kiss to me,” or the loss of that enabling artistic ideal. Dylan thus reckons all of his present lyrical negations as “useless” or pointless “small talk at the wall,” whereas who he really is to himself still stands apart (“while I’m in the hall”) from such self-serving complaints. This state of vocational affairs leaves him alone without the *élan* of private spiritual *self*-encounter.

How can any of this make sense to others? How can anyone follow the dialectically determined contours of this vocational dilemma: “How can I explain?” “Johanna” tracks Dylan’s realization that he must forfeit efforts to communicate such “visions” in any immediate, lyrical way. He must even give up the (self-)reflexivity of his lyrics insofar as their aural-performative mediation unavoidably reinstates the promise of immediate communication. Dylan’s new poetic focus consists in his striving to become inspired *again* in the face of such restrictions: a commitment to “visions of Johanna . . . past the dawn.” Yet his “stranded” artistic situation alienates him even further from how others apprehend his work within public venues (“the museums”), whether as lyrical text or musical performance. When performing his songs, “Infinity goes up

on trial," people take him for an external spiritual authority, hence construe especially his performance of his work as the site of "what salvation must be like after a while." In saying that "Mona Lisa musta had the highway blues," Dylan suggests that like the famous painting, his notion of true art suffers the inevitable fate of typologization: the onerous pressure of being watched and defined. For him, the *Mona Lisa* exhibits the "highway blues" in having suffered and endured such public scrutiny. In the same way, "Visions of Johanna" consists of an internal scene of writing in which Dylan watches others watch him as he performs his work on stage, most of them framed as bourgeois voyeurs (with "jewels and binoculars") with little or no awareness of or investment in his artistic agon. But then, his ongoing concern with reception by itself confesses his not having done the most probing, *self*-directed artistic work that he set out to do. At what point can he convert his work into its becoming meaningless, by which *post*-meaningful terms his art might bring him nearer the real?

That ideal now only serves to fuel his present sense of vocational failure. Dylan refers to the muse of Renaissance art, the "Madonna" who "still has not showed," to tell of his once having wanted to believe that he *could* render his "Johanna" self in public terms: "her cape of the stage once had flowed." But that former artistic goal now resembles a "cage" to him: a corroding and imprisoning ideal. So the performing Dylan ("The fiddler") acknowledges ("writes") that all he owes the public as an artist has "been returned." *In* public, his "old" songs delivered what they could of his subjective vision of life, but in the end seem no better than commonplace ("fish truck") fare that feeds people's mundane appetites. This realization "explodes" his artistic "conscience." At best, "harmonicas play the skeleton keys of the rain": while he would have his songs unlock the doors of perception for others, skeleton-like they instead withdraw from referentially vital meanings and merely dissolve in a "rain" of words that leaves him "stranded" alone with "these [remaining] visions of Johanna."

## Fire Down Below: *The Basement Tapes*

On “The Basement Tapes”. . . the whole point is the lightness; that all demands for perfection and completion, for flawlessness, have been suspended.

– Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Saga, Part 2*

There comes a time when what is to be revealed actually conceals itself in casting off the mask of its identity, when the identity itself is revealed as another mask, and a lesser one, antecedent to that we had come to know and accept.

– John Ashbery, *Three Poems*

It’s hard to imagine sharecroppers or plantation field hands at hop joints, relating to songs like these. You have to wonder if [Robert] Johnson was playing for an audience that only he could see, one off in the future.

– Bob Dylan, *Chronicles I*

### 1 Lyrical nonsense/Vocational sense

After his accident in 1966, Bob Dylan began experimenting with a private musical-lyrical modus operandi. With musicians later called The Band, he composed and performed songs in which he arguably addresses the problem laid out in “Visions of Johanna.” He clearly composed these new songs, later entitled *The Basement Tapes*, in non-pressured circumstances, with many of them appearing more playful than bitingly focused on the critical vocational issue of his previous song-releases. Were they in any sense his remaining “visions of Johanna”? Right before this workshop scene, Dylan hand-wrote some unfinished lyrics, one of which contains the following lines:

I knew that I was young enough  
 And I knew there was nothing to it  
 for I’d already seen it done enough  
 And I knew there was nothing to it

There was no organization I wanted to join  
 So I stayed by myself and took out a coin.<sup>1</sup>

The phrase “nothing to it” seems a good way to characterize the songs he wrote for what became *The Basement Tapes*. One could say that there was nothing *to* composing

and informally performing them far from the madding crowd. "Nothing to it" might also refer to how each song happily signifies nothing special. Not a few of *The Basement Tapes* songs like "Odds and Ends" and "Please, Missus Henry" appear blatantly nonsensical if no less playfully rife with sexual innuendoes. Clinton Heylin goes so far as to claim that "Any attempt to render sense from the published lyrics to these songs" goes "against the whole spirit of [*The Basement Tapes*] sessions."<sup>2</sup>

Yet one can still ask if "nothing to it" constitutes another of Dylan's vocational dodges. "Tapes" in his case memorialize playing songs all but covertly, that is, apart from intended public consumption. Of course they have become public over time, first in "bootleg" versions, and eventually officially released by the Sony Corporation. So if Dylan anticipated this eventuality, does he compose the songs all the while *still* baffling future listeners as to their serious content? At least some of the *Basement* songs like "I'm Not There" and "I Shall Be Released" intimate his personal and perhaps spiritual pain, while others like "Tears of Rage" seem rife with social-critical implications. More or less reflecting this "serious" reading, Greil Marcus's interpretation of Dylan's "tapes" has come to dominate most critical views of them. Marcus insists that like the songs found in the *Harry Smith Anthology* record collection, the "tapes" evoke a benign and to us today a "weird" fictional America represented by "Smithville" and "Kill Devil": "There is no guilt in Smithville; here it's second mind. . . . In the town made by the basement tapes no crime comes sufficiently into focus for it to become more than a rumor—or for justice to be done." Further, Smithville displaces "the familiar into nowhere,"<sup>3</sup> perhaps like the "one-track town" in "Yea! Heavy and a Bottle of Bread" or the "absolutely flattened world of 'Clothes Line Saga.'" Dylan's "tapes" refer to imaginary, American rural communities where the inhabitants "measure themselves against the idealism—the utopianism, the Puritans' errand into the wilderness or the pioneer's demand for a new world with every wish for change. . . . The old, weird America is what one finds here."<sup>4</sup>

This "social" *apologia* for Dylan's "basement tapes" tends to override their autobiographical-vocational strain, first referenced by Paul Williams. In these songs, Williams reminds us, Dylan "isn't necessarily singing to anyone but the people he's performing with, and yet at the same time he knows he is recording, his cleverness isn't just vanishing . . . so there's a . . . a freedom from purpose in his communication somewhat different from anything he's done before." Moreover, "this freedom . . . has the effect of encouraging every song and performance to take off in a different direction, even when they start with similar concerns."<sup>5</sup> The apparently nonsensical aspects of the "tapes" seem to bear out Williams' observation about Dylan's casual relation to composing and performing them. Clinton Heylin draws out this point when he argues that the "basement" songs come down to "jam sessions [that] catered to two of Dylan's deepest desires, the quest for anonymity and an environment where he could just play, making music stripped of any expectations, simply for the moment."<sup>6</sup>

But Dylan's desires arguably go even deeper. His "basement" songs not only instantiate his desire to play free from audience expectations, but also allegorically inscribe his "quest for anonymity" in line with the vocational project that undergirds his *Bringing It All Back Home* through the *Blonde on Blonde* cluster of songs. Consider,



for example, the song “Tiny Montgomery.” Like so many others in *The Basement Tapes* collection, on the surface this song makes little to no sense.<sup>7</sup> Yet while the critic Andy Gill likewise thinks that the song’s “phrases” seem “chosen more for sound than sense,” he adds that the song possesses “the weird, hermetic logic of a private language, the kind of thing that members of cults or secret organizations use to communicate with each other.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the initials of Tiny Montgomery match those of Dylan’s earlier “Mr. Tambourine Man,” a song addressed to a pre-linguistic muse figure expressing his desire to compose and perform songs without their having to “mean” for others or himself.

Does “Tiny Montgomery” embody the same sentiment? For Gill, the song’s persona “has languished in one of America’s jails” and is now “bidding farewell to a cellmate about to be released, asking him to send regards to his chums back in his old stamping ground.”<sup>9</sup> Even this reading dovetails with a figurative vocational theme where the eponymous Montgomery represents how Dylan sees his own present artistic predicament most recently expressed in *Blonde on Blonde* songs. He too has languished in the jail of his public reputation as a popular musical artist. Moreover, he feels incarcerated by having put too much unnecessary pressure on audiences to take in his songs’ existence-oriented significance. Jettisoning that pressure, Dylan alias “Tiny Montgomery” intends (“Well you can tell ev’rybody”) simply to greet the other in the relaxed manner of his present set of songs: “Tell ‘em/Tiny Montgomery [just] says hello.” This quasi-message, he tells himself, should justify his continuing to compose songs. Dylan asserts that “Now ev’ry boy and girl’s/Gonna get their bang” from just reveling in the lyric swirl of the (new) Dylan song in which he’s simply “Gonna shake that thing.”

If one considers his *Basement Tapes* period, the songs he proposes to do that stand in marked contrast to the psychedelic, message-ridden songs notably associated with contemporary San Francisco rock groups. Dylan’s aren’t composed for some in-group or “cult” audience, but rather in a long tradition signified by “Ol’ Frisco” (my emphasis) and for any boy or girl.<sup>10</sup> Representative of his vocational aim, “Tiny Montgomery” doesn’t criticize others as he once did, but rather finds allies with any person who promises to but for whatever reason doesn’t derive significant nourishment from his work. That person might resemble a “Skinny Moo” or non-fertile cow, someone who would pursue spiritual goals either with half-hearted passion or else an aggressive willfulness associable with a war-machine like a “Half-track Frank.”<sup>11</sup> “Frank” could unexpectedly (to then Dylan fans) figure a pun on “Frank” Sinatra’s song “tracks” that contemporary fans of psychedelia would have construed as rife with empty, vocal sonority as opposed to meaningful visions. But that turns into the very point of the new Dylan-style song in which he wants to dispel any anxiety stemming from what others sense to be even its “half” meanings. He wants not to judge or demean audiences of his songs: “They’re gonna both be gettin’/Outa the tank,” that is, out of semantic jail, freed from having to find meaning in them. Ditto the person prevented from expressing his talent in the normal world like the “Birdman of Alcatraz” (his location of course in San Francisco Bay) with his limited “One bird book”; or even derivative singer-artists who, in the manner of “a buzzard and a crow,” feed off past artistic works. They too now escape Dylan’s vocational censure.

This context makes sense of the otherwise nonsensical phrases that occur throughout "Tiny Montgomery." If anything, Dylan means to take experience any which way it comes and convert it into song without any self-conscious effort to make a point, let alone to secure his public reputation. Yet a slightly different poetic view appears in "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere" that plays with his desire to meld the heft of high culture ("Buy me a flute") with a rough, country-like force ("a gun that shoots"). The trope "shoots" also take aim at the next line's "Tailgates and substitutes": those who would invade his private life or else imitate his musical style and supposed vision of life. At the same time he warns himself not to become bothered by them to the point of losing sight of his vocational roots: "Strap yourself/To the tree with roots." These no doubt include what Marcus cites as the "roots" of American music composed/sung for its expression of an ideal mode of living. Yet Dylan equally feels that his art ought to engage common, everyday reality as *he* experiences it, which will afford him and his song sufficient visionary ("we gonna fly") material.

The template of vocational autobiography also makes sense of the final verse of "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere" with the seemingly incongruous image of "Genghis Khan" being unable to "keep/All his kings/Supplied with sleep." In figurative terms, the scene signifies Dylan's imaginary notification to others that he can't assuage their existential woes. His *conspicuously* hyperbolic image implies that "*even* Genghis Khan," the Ur-controller of his domain, could not do there what Dylan's followers are asking him to do here and now: make sense of their existence. If he once thought to try, he has since given up the willful aspects of this artistic quest and wants to put them aside for now: "We'll climb that hill no matter how steep/When we get up to it." This casual act of procrastination reflects the vision of life he once ached for in "Mr. Tambourine Man": "Let me forget about today until tomorrow." Now "Tomorrow's the day" when he *might* remember to effect his former goals, but not here, not in *The Basement Tapes* songs, and, one can add, perhaps never at all. That semiotic suspension becomes the song's point or "meaning": to confront listeners and himself with nonsequitur logics that instantiate meaninglessness, but without lapsing into the willful existential moralism that keeps breaking through his meaning/less 1965–66 songs.

Dylan equally addresses how he should approach composing these new songs. In "Tiny Montgomery" he advises himself not to fear musical or other artistic influences, but instead "Scratch your dad," that is, drop the demand for complete originality and even explicitly embrace past precedents when composing songs. Conversely, he would let his imagination fly ("Do that bird") and immerse himself in sensory including sexual realities. Why not just "Suck that pig": simply enjoy such kinds of experience and don't worry about the immediate spiritual yield of his lyrics? Dylan would internalize this approach and create art *that way*: "bring it on home" and "bake that dough." Such can occur even when he feels that he lacks inspiration and has to "Pick that drip." This panoply of experiences defines what he *wants* to encounter and "say[] hello" to; he would "Tell . . . all" his audiences that his songs now mean to thrive as an utterly innocuous activity. This very "tiny" song expresses his wish to become a free spirit in and through composing/performing songs *like* "Tiny Montgomery." Dylan confesses that "he squeezes" words, too, as he does in having them refer to the vocation that

enables this song. His self-referential poetic gambits still occur, but only on the run. They instance a freedom that mimics and even rivals (“Watch out” and just “Take it”) that exercised by jazz musicians like “Lester” (Young) and “Lou” (Armstrong). “Tiny Montgomery” also tells of how this freedom finally collaborates with the existential. He exhorts himself to “grease that pig”: make his art simultaneously meaty or rich with promised if slippery meaning.<sup>12</sup> In that way, he can simply call attention (say “hello”) to existence as such. He wants his songs to “sing praise” or praise life by loading and even blowing up his experiences of it: “gas that [performing] dog.” He would place a trope or two to tease listeners into lending them closer scrutiny (“Trick [them] on in”) while dealing with the down and dirty real: “Honk that stink.”

Dylan works to “Take” and make all these mixed elements into songs: “Take it on down/And watch it grow.” That defines the lyrical side of his newly minted or at least experimentally envisaged song-lyrics. In performing them, he likewise means to “Play it low” or do no more than intimate their meaning and *then* “pick it up” or raise the spiritual decibel level of their tropes here and there. In general, he wants to compose/perform songs that way (“Take it on in”) as if by his “plucking” he were drinking it all “In a . . . cup.” On one level, this creative moment has all the energetic earmarks of engaging life as in raw sexual play, say like the “Three-legged man,” figure for the male genital, with “a hot-lipped hoe” or woman wholly bent on sex. Yet all the while Dylan’s songs retain a serious, self-referential focus. The poetic gambit in his *Basement* songs allows his art to partake of holy matters on a par with “monks” or any person with religious-like passion. He can even allow his art to have a moral point, hence edge toward being a “social” enterprise (like “The C.I.O.”) in that it works to engage the other *as* other. That is how he ultimately wants others to construe his work: “Tell ‘em all/That Tiny Montgomery *says hello*.” In the basement of *The Basement Tapes* still lies a serious Dylan hankering for the real.

The poetics of ethical-existential rumination cut by a comical and an often frivolous posture has its potent correlative in the song “Quinn the Eskimo (The Mighty Quinn).” Even its playful narrative confronts readers with a mystery that has invited a spectrum of interpretations about who or what “Quinn” represents. Some critics (and even Bob Dylan in his notes to *Biograph*) park “Quinn the Eskimo” in “nursery rhyme” territory, consigning it to just a fun and “trivial” song to sing and listen to. Others like Tim Riley hear messianic rumblings, possibly via the route of drugs. Clinton Heylin argues that the song’s messianic motif, if any, is essentially ironic. He finds the “narrator . . . wholly detached from the hubbub surrounding Quinn’s arrival,” and the song as a whole warning people to watch out for “wicked messengers.”<sup>13</sup>

Yet the song simultaneously outlines Dylan’s playful confession of his self-conscious relation to his art. In one sense, he recognizes his own tendency to avoid his serious vocational pursuit and to experience easier pleasures like everyone else: “I like to do just like the rest, I like my sugar sweet.” That goal would have him reject imposing any spiritual either/or on himself or others. But how does he stop that impulse once it has begun, since both he and they constantly seek to impose their ideals on each other (“Ev’rybody’s ‘neath the trees/Feeding pigeons on a limb”)? Hungry for ways to mitigate existential emptiness, they find themselves abandoned, as the saying goes,

“out on a limb”; consequently they become vulnerable to this or that ideology to escape their respective predicaments. In “Quinn the Eskimo,” Dylan’s surrogate would have no one submit to such an ideal, just as he himself won’t waste time either proselytizing or defending his vocational preference: “guarding fumes and making haste,/It ain’t my cup of meat.” Yet this meaty image simultaneously confesses his own otherwise rapacious appetite to gain spiritual yield from his work. Paradoxically, only when he and his listeners learn not to impose their values on each other will the first and most important condition for pursuing spiritual well-being be realized: “when Quinn the Eskimo gets here/All the pigeons gonna run to him.”

But how can one willfully abstain from the will to mean for others, and how can this ideal goal not frame “Quinn” as an outright fiction? As an artist Dylan acknowledges his limitation in helping others through his songs. We have seen him try to take this position before, but here he attempts to enact it in and through the song’s un-meaningful rhetoric. Worldly wisdom mouthed by him or others comes down to no more than “A cat’s meow and a cow’s moo.” Occasionally he can diagnose what really ails others (“tell you where it hurts . . . honey”), but what he can’t do is fix their existence-problems. He can only “tell you who to call”: not the empirical Bob Dylan, but the Dylan-seeker instantiated in his songs. At the bottom, no one can finally reduce, never mind eliminate, the despair coincident with existence: “Nobody can get no sleep.” Just the fact that others always get in one’s way and/or invade one’s thinking foments such tension: “There’s someone on ev’ryone’s toes.” But the anti-ideal stance that “Quinn” brings to this scene can at least stall such despair. The double negative in the statement “You’ll not see nothing like the mighty Quinn” means to affirm the Quinn figure’s incomparable nonmeaning for others (“No one’s like him”). As with his status *as* myth, “Quinn” embodies nothing per se. “He” exists as a self-evident existential fiction, a heroic ideal that, although representing “nothing,” signifies who we are and are not at the same time. Realizing that fact as absolute would free us from willful pursuits of the real.

This line of thought leads one to the primary conceit of “Quinn the Eskimo”: “Eskimo” connotes cold, which given the song’s playful images turns into a lighthearted pun on the slang phrase “chill out” or “cool it.” Dylan’s song advocates cutting the tension induced by others’ expectations of him, his work and themselves. He delivers something else entirely by his statement “When Quinn the Eskimo gets here/Ev’rybody’s gonna wanna doze”: they’ll want to sleep, meaning: relax making meaning [*sic*], accept life as it is and thus become able to witness the unexpected, non-teleological occurrence of “nothing.” This ideal anti-idealistic outcome would exempt Dylan from any Christ-like or other prophetic role that certain fans had imputed to him during this period. For example, just such expectations infect the otherwise straight hymnal tone of the song “I Shall Be Released.” Aidan Day notes how the Dylan speaker there at once yearns for a “transcendental” completion of self and yet splits himself into two, as when referring to himself in the third person as the “man who swears he’s not to blame.” He can no more meld his finite self with that perfect self-image projected “so high above the wall” than, as Day alertly remarks, “the sun should rise and shine from the West.” Yet doesn’t the speaker here unwittingly internalize the very role from which he ostensibly

seeks release? For the transcendent movement he yearns for accords with a Christian image of resurrection: from the traditional site of death, the trope of the setting sun, to a (re)birth via the dawn of the sun-cum-Son in the east.<sup>14</sup> And isn't Dylan's anxiety equally motivated by what "They say," at least implicitly, namely that everybody, including himself, "can be replaced" just like "everything"? "I Shall Be Released" reads like Dylan's send-up of his alter-self stuck in a state of wanting and not wanting to give others what they want him to give them, that is, what comes down to a quasi-spiritual or *non-real* mode of salvation.

"Quinn the Eskimo" strips away such messianic pretensions and expectations. For Dylan/Quinn, bringing peace to others remains a steadfast human activity: to accept an existence that includes the fate of death and its framing of life as "nothing." But in "Quinn the Eskimo," that most notable source of existential despair gives way to existential joy. Even if Dylan's "Quinn" represents a consciousness that he and others can *only* mimic imperfectly, "Quinn" embodies an existential acceptance that in Dylan's particular case willy-nilly result in lyrics that resist their own efforts to convey heavy meanings. To "cool it" requires him not to *thematize* the real while living his life. In that one respect, the song's "he" appears synonymous with the actual figure many critics have associated with "Quinn." In *The Savage Innocents*, a film Dylan's song likely alludes to,<sup>15</sup> the actor Anthony Quinn represents an Aleut who simply tries to survive/exist in the face of a "cold" or impersonal Nature *and* human legal system (civilization). The latter would incarcerate the Quinn character for having killed a priest, a faux "spiritual" authority, whereas Quinn represents a basic, non-self-conscious relation to existence as is.

But in Dylan's *métier*, such self-consciousness keeps returning. He therefore adopts a stratagem to deflect this return in "Goin' to Acapulco" where he airs the possibility of escaping the entire rock 'n' roll scene and whatever else frustrates his spiritually motivated musical art.<sup>16</sup> From a typical US cultural viewpoint, Acapulco stereotypically represents a more sensual lifestyle such as promised by the women at "Rose Marie's." A notable vacation resort for North Americans, Acapulco also presents Dylan with an opportunity to take a vacation from his work *as* work. Unlike his baroque, rhetorical reactions in *Blonde on Blonde's* "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues," for example, here he puts aside the anxiety stemming from any pressing need to compose vocationally related songs. Not only does he compose and perform "Goin' to Acapulco" in relative privacy,<sup>17</sup> he also inscribes his wish to write songs "plain as day" or with minimal rhetorical-poetic contortions. He now prefers a simple muse who "gives it to me," namely the song primed with spiritual-existential yield, "*for* a song" (my emphasis), or both *as* a song and as the phrase's colloquial meaning has it, as if for free. He knows that this change in career-direction reneges on his ethical commitment to tell the hard truth as he once did: "It's a wicked world but what the hell/The stars ain't falling down." The world doesn't depend on his work, his new poetic rationale goes, so why not relax his *self-chosen* vocational mandate as well? After all, even monumental artifacts like "the Taj Mahal" sooner or later get forgotten as to their original existential function: "I don't see no one," no *real-seeking* tourists "around" such structures.

So Dylan is "Goin' to Acapulco . . . on the run" or without a care for heavier thoughts before his former artistic ambitions can again take over his vocational conscience. With that relaxed goal in mind, he would gorge himself on the irrelevant: "see fat gut" and "have some fun." Physical pleasure such as gained at "Rose Marie's" in the afternoon serves to ward off a spiritual despair that can come to him anytime or "whenever I get up/And I ain't got what I see." The "modest hedonism" that Paul Williams views "Goin' to Acapulco" expressing thus exists in the context of Dylan's effort to subdue his vocational anxieties. In the end, such pleasures provide a salutary if temporary respite from attempting to realize the goal he still has in mind: "There are worse ways of getting there." The ambiguity of the word "there," whether to realize or procrastinate his goal, allows him to prefer it either way: "I ain't complainin' none." Short of an actual calamity ("If the clouds don't drop") or the need to perform his work continually ("if the train don't stop"), his spiritual movement and direction remain intact. Dylan's being "bound for glory" *à la* Guthrie now means being "bound to meet the sun," here an image for the real, while having "some fun" along the way.

On one level, "Goin' to Acapulco" invites a "blues" interpretation in the way its language traffics in thinly disguised sexual and other socially unconventional innuendoes.<sup>18</sup> The phrase "if someone offers me a joke," for example, doubles as street argot for being offered marijuana. And besides what Dylan intimates will likely transpire at Rose Marie's (or with her), he proposes masturbatory stratagems to deal with times in a relationship when a man's "well breaks down" or when he becomes creatively stymied. In that case, he should "go pump on it some." These quasi-hidden allusions find their artistic and spiritual analogues in the "basement" scenes of Dylan's songwriting as a whole. In the last case, he also rejects offering "a joke" ("I say no thanks") to his listeners. He would "keep away from pranks," meaning not treat his songs as *no more than* frivolous acts. In spite of his time-off mode of composing them, Dylan still wants his songs to "to tell it like it is."

Having Rose Marie wait on him "to come" in the song's last line again suggests unlicensed sexual play, but "Goin' to Acapulco" also discloses a limit to such pleasures. To be sure, he sometimes needs to push his vocational quest into the background. But when his creative urge ("the well") fails him, he can always use songwriting to "pump on" his imagination "some" and come up with a song like "Yea! Heavy and a Bottle of Bread." Sid Griffin calls this song an entirely playful "goof" with "Lewis Carroll lyrics." Oliver Trager terms it a "great piece of rollicking whimsy," and Andy Gill "pure nonsense" with "its meaning" ultimately "unfathomable."<sup>19</sup> Is this one more instance of Dylan's deliberate evasion of making sense throughout his *Basement* songs?<sup>20</sup> He himself has his song all but admit its "comic" genre when he remarks, "the comic book and me, just us, we caught the bus." But the means (the "little chauffeur," i.e., his lyrical genre) by which he tries to effect this goal turns out a woman who very soon ends up "back in bed" with a cold ("a nose full of pus"), or, one might say, unable to "make sense" of what's going on around her. The woman personifies a "little" muse figure who inspires Dylan songs like this one to be at once "heavy" in the colloquial sense of serious, and yet also seriously nonserious. This oxymoronic poetics dovetails with the song's mixed-metaphorical title of "a bottle of bread": that which provides

entertainment (as in drink, hence the metonym of the bottle) and food or “bread” meaning not money but what can satisfy the songwriter-self’s soul. Repeating this mixed poetic manifesto, Dylan feels compelled to escape the “one-track town,” the equivalent of dull or “brown” music. We see him “headin’ out” after he “Packs] up the meat” and potatoes of his imagination in an out-of-the-way artistic scene (“Wichita”), but only to where a “pile of fruit” awaits him: tropes for the simple pleasures of song that yet might lead to something *more* fruitful. So Dylan will take what he knows has value (“the loot”) from his previous songs in order to “catch a trout,” a fish-image evoking either a special *or* simple imaginative song. The “we” in this stanza points to his imaginary cohorts in doing these kinds of songs: the Band members who delight in the Dylan song’s apparent nonsense but are not necessarily aware of its vocational subtext for him.

“Yea! Heavy and a Bottle of Bread” keeps balking at the very metaphoricality it can barely stop from practicing. In the third verse, Dylan again moves his art toward something more “heavy.” The phrase “pull that drummer out from behind that bottle” could represent a wish to halt making music for drunken-seeming entertainment (the metonymical “bottle”) or point to his desire for him and his cohorts to play less raucous, less *publicly* noticeable music. So too his request to “Bring me my pipe” points to a wish to relax in private, whether the “pipe” figuratively refers to smoking pot or evokes the vacuous calm conventionally associated with pipe-smoking. But the pipe could equally serve as a figure for the contemplative or wise self, and in that case, the dictate to “shake it” means to drum up meaning, spread it around, give “that drummer” songs analogous to a simple “pie that smells” or that easily mean something pleasurable to him and possibly to others.

## 2 Hiding in plain sight

The pressure to compose meaningful lyrics keeps breaking through in other otherwise nonsensical songs in *The Basement Tapes* collection, and Dylan there resorts to a comical rhetoric while training his critical guns on audiences who ask not what his work can *really* do for them. “Please, Mrs. Henry” shows him fantasizing the possibility that he just might expunge those who oppose what he wants his songs to effect. The song’s comical *mise en scène* manifestly concerns the Dylan singer’s drunken and likely sexual plea to a woman.<sup>21</sup> But this situation easily turns into an allegory of how different listeners incoherently respond to his songs: as if they had “already had two beers.” The speaker himself stands for a listener formally addressing a female barkeep half-seriously referred to as “Missus Henry,” but who here subs as a muse comedienne. In this context, the listener/reader admits to not understanding anything of value about the Dylan song and therefore dismisses it out of hand as “ready for the broom.” His defensiveness stems from the song’s too many referential possibilities. He needs a stable space (“Take me to my room”) not for sex but for escaping from all those possibilities. Conversely, eggs, literally found in many bars and the other dominant image in the song’s first stanza, unexpectedly depict the response of a typical

countercultural audience. This listener's admission of "sniffin' too many eggs" points not just to his having taken one too many drugs, but also to having got overwhelmed and thwarted by all of the nondrug images and thoughts Dylan's songs serve up. His songs evoke too many meanings related to different social constituencies and contexts: "Talkin' to too many people."

Confronting them with so many "kegs" of meaning, the Dylan song leaves its listeners with virtually no clue that it reflects this very fact. "Missus Henry" personifies the Dylan "basement" song as such, and since its imaginary listener can't make any sense of it, he asks "her" to give him at least a little (a "dime's" worth) interpretive purchase on it. Without that, the song promises never to make any sense to him: "Please . . . / I'm down on my knees/An I ain't got a dime." With her nondescript, barmaid appearance, "Missus Henry" herself doubles as an under-determined figure for what looks like a simple Dylan song but which is nonetheless rife with vocational passion. Another imagined listener asks "her" if the songs "she" inspired can help him escape what feels like his *inescapable* loneliness. He stays "in a hallway" or apart from main places where existence occurs, which only brings him to the verge of becoming "mad." He clearly needs reassurance from an authority figure ("Take me to your dad") to rid his sense of alienation. In allegorical terms, he wants the Dylan song to tell him what to do, who he is, what's what. But this listener just flows with the songs "like a fish"; he abjectly submits to Dylan's threatening visions of life (they "crawl like a snake") or to how they criticize others (they "bite like a turkey") and act macho in putting them down ("slam like a drake"). In short, he would do anything to forget his existence-plight.

Then we have the listener who resents the Dylan song for "crowd[ing] me, lady" or reminding him precisely *of* that plight and thus works to "fill up your shoe": its tough tenor burdens the listener so that he seeks to distance himself from it. He prefers to hear the song in terms of the entertaining, rock-'n'-rolling Dylan, for then he can imagine becoming drunk like "a sweet bourbon daddy" and get into a happier state of mind. Right now, though, he feels "blue" because the song leaves him feeling "a thousand years old," dumbly resigned to or angry about ("I'm a generous bomb") an unhappy existence that the Dylan song exposes about him ("T-boned and punctured"). Even when it comes across as if strangely "calm," the song brings this listener to his "knees," begging for a modicum ("a dime") of peace. All told, he simply can't interpret let alone make it his own: "I'm startin' to drain."<sup>22</sup> It threatens his usual set (seated) relation to life's happenings: "My [*bar-*]stool's gonna squeak." If he tries to read into the song ("If I walk too much farther") his secure, machine-like way of living will break down: "My crane's gonna leak." As he tells Dylan's *Basement* muse "Missus Henry," "There's only so much I can do."

Dylan song(s) lead(s) some listeners to resist becoming aware of the impersonal world of the real. Another listener wants "*her*" (my emphasis) to care for him personally ("Why don't you look my way?") and in that way ("An' pump me a few" intoxicants) distract him from Dylanesque run-ins of self with *self*. This plea ("Please, Missus Henry") testifies to how Dylan imagines his songs bringing others to a sense of existential insecurity, for only then might they respond creatively in their respective



milieus. But can he hold to that possibility when the public aspect of his artistic métier, for example the large, pseudo-celebratory setting of “Million Dollar Bash,” militates against any such response?<sup>23</sup> This song’s occasion has private ramifications for the Dylan speaker who frames it and its likely consumers in satirical fashion. Thus, the superficial listener mimics “that big dumb blonde” who is going nowhere but toward an unwelcome experience of despair: “her wheel in the gorge.” In the current musical scene, there’s also the slow-witted listener (“Turtle”), anyone who listens to songs for tidbits of wisdom, or the unavoidable entertainment-seeker gullibly inclined to capitalize on what’s not his (“checks all forged”). And what about the music-industry businessmen who would use Dylan’s songs not only for financial gain but also to acquire a “hip” cachet (“cheese in the cash”) from having produced and/or promoted them? Together such consumers reduce his work to a crass “million dollar bash” that merits the sarcastic reaction in the refrain: “Ooh, baby, ooh-ee.”

Yet for all his *Basement* efforts to leave behind his vocationally “Stuck” circumstances in the *Blonde on Blonde* songs, Dylan comes to recognize that he can still do here what he did there. Particularly in the second verse, he mocks “Ev’rybody from right now,” and not least the coterie of uncritical fans and sycophants whom he will directly criticize in his later “autobiographical” *Chronicles I* for not respecting his privacy.<sup>24</sup> Regardless of his efforts to shake off public adulation (“The louder they come”) and/or the temptations of what one can term “cultural capitalism,” such fans would follow him “To over there and back,” but their idolatry only proves that they really don’t see or care for the inner spiritual direction of his work. With not a little sadistic glee, he would have his songs “flash” insights so as to entice (as with “sweet cream”) such people the better to have their views of music and life “crack.” Crowds come to his concerts expecting his songs to “mean,” but as to exactly what, they don’t know. This time a “Mr. Jones” figure appears as someone who ironically “emptied the trash”: the essentially low value that he ascribes to the Dylan song. Jones typifies those who go to the public rock ‘n’ roll “bash” and avoid the Dylan work’s “million dollar” value in spiritual specie. In any case, the real site of that work lies far distant from such scenes. He shows his managing “counselor” what he’s doing in the songs played in “the barn,” a self-reference to the present “basement” songs,<sup>25</sup> but the muse inspiring them makes them seem “Silly” nonsense (“a yarn”), hence anything but what his manager expected or wanted. To him, Dylan’s new songs’ public worth also amounts to nothing but “trash.”

When he says “My stones won’t take,” Dylan thus alludes to how his “Stone” songs have failed to reach his audiences his way. But then such thinking can lead to wholesale vocational despair, a subject he airs in “Too Much of Nothing” where he implies that complaining about one or another malaise in public merely exacerbates it. It can raise or freeze one’s “temper” while accomplishing “nothing.” Complaints like the ones he wants to make can also lead to what he terms this era of “long confession.”<sup>26</sup> He and other peers can boastfully complain about social problems, but to no avail, for where no moral standards obtain, chaos (“too much of nothing”) ensues and “No one has control.” No principle provides us with authoritative direction, which sets up an environment that “can make a man abuse a king.” The song’s chorus (“Say hello to Valerie”) indicates Dylan’s despair over this situation, which he consigns to the

apocalyptic “waters of oblivion.” He flirts with a certain prophetic fatalism here, for his pervasive sense of “nothing” has occurred time and again throughout human history, not to mention in his own past work: “it’s all been written in the book.”

No “Mighty Quinn” will come and relieve such despair, and “Too Much of Nothing” itself verges on becoming one more complaining contribution to this external conception of “nothing.” Indeed Dylan’s own songs have arguably helped foster the personal and social complaints that dominate the contemporary rock ‘n’ roll “bash.” Clinton Heylin suspects that Dylan’s own confession peeps through references such as a man’s feeling “mean” and “eat[ing] fire” in reaction to the scene around him. They express “a surprisingly forthright evaluation of [his] previous shortcomings.”<sup>27</sup> Dylan all but berates himself for uselessly exposing layers of “nothing” in his past songs, for he too “can . . . boast like most” but not really “know a thing.” Hasn’t his existentially driven art also “all been done before,” say as “written” in the “book” of *Ecclesiastes*? Why, then, should anyone including the most receptive listener “look” at *Dylan’s* songs tracing his march toward the real? What exactly is their compelling value? It is as if his vocational activity has transpired in the delirium of “a dream.” At best, his songs may have prompted others to resist socially established views of reality, but they did so, at least to him, without hope of resolution. In that sense as well, his work has had the effect of “nothing,” a reading that the chorus in “Too Much of Nothing” tends to reinforce. The names of T. S. Eliot’s wives, Vivian (actually “Vivienne”) and Valerie, do more than fit rhymes for the following words “salary” and “oblivion.”<sup>28</sup> For Dylan, Eliot’s wives double as ersatz close supporters of Dylan’s work, yet who apparently still don’t grasp its existential implications for them. He would send them all of his work’s superficial fallout (“my salary”), the satisfactions of fame and fortune, which for him simply consign his work to the “oblivion” of worthless “nothing.”

So he comes back to the question about why continue to compose songs at all. One possible reaction to his work’s communication failure appears in “Tears of Rage,” in which Andy Gill and others see an impassioned complaint against US America, especially the egregious morality of the US-sponsored Vietnam War. The song’s larger target centers on how American materialist values have superseded those thought to have defined the country’s founding: “as one of its founding fathers . . . the song’s narrator watches sadly as his ideals are diluted and cast aside by succeeding generations, who treat them as ‘nothing more/Than a place for you to stand.’”<sup>29</sup> This song alone justifies Greil Marcus’s thesis about Dylan’s allegorical evocation of a more communal “old, weird America” in *The Basement Tapes*. “Tears of Rage” concerns a vision of America gone wrong, and Dylan acts as “the thief because what others no longer want, he has kept; this places him outside of [an American] society that no longer exists. In his voice, the words ‘Independence Day’ still have grandeur, but no one knows what he’s talking about.”<sup>30</sup> The opening “We” tends to corroborate this “social” reading. If not activist protestors, “We” could simply stand for the many silent citizens, the “We the people” of the US Constitution, trying to hold onto what now appears an “old, weird” but ideal America. This “We” also comprehends the Founding Fathers whom a (here personified) modern United States has abandoned (“now you’d throw us all aside”) by exhibiting restricted *or* profligate modes of freedom. This general “social” reading of

the song further helps explain its *King Lear* allusion, namely the “dear daughter” who “Would treat a father so.”<sup>31</sup> The daughter refusing to play the Lear-figure’s patriarchal game surely alludes to Cordelia, but who in the song’s context is made to reject him—she “always tell[s] him, ‘No’”—since his literal-minded patriotism misinterprets the ideal justifying the country’s founding “Independence Day.”

But in making this social complaint, why does Dylan resort to the roundabout rhetoric that characterizes “Tears of Rage,” the social markers of which seem ambiguous at best? For example, do they refer to historical figures or present-day ones? More important, the vocational allegory running through *The Basement Tapes* plays fast and loose with identity-references so that one can even regard Dylan himself as the Cordelia figure in relation to his Lear-like, politically aggressive, in other words patriarchal *audiences*. They want Dylan’s songs to “wait upon [others] hand and foot” the better to bring those songs into the fold of either an established or “weird” US America. But like Lear’s daughter, Dylan here inwardly says “no” to these demands, since his steadfast vocational goal requires him to “wait” for others to grasp *that* as the site of “independence.” He himself, then, additionally acts like a “thief” by stealing back his songs from audiences who (would) (mis)appropriate(d) them for social-political agendas alone. Instead, he would have others “Come to” his work and grasp that “We’re so alone,” and not just because of egregious social circumstances. Patriarchal through and through, patriotism, after all, promotes communal sensibility ultimately at odds with existential fact.

Dylan arguably emphasizes this aloneness in autobiographical terms. His complaint refers to his own past practice of criticizing others for misunderstanding his work, which criticism he now types as “a childish thing to do.” In another instance where we can observe him make words, phrases, or even commonplace thoughts do double duty, the chorus in “Tears of Rage” similarly records him berating himself (in “tears of rage”) for devaluing or taking away, like a “thief,” what his songs *have* communicated for others, even if not what he wanted. Both on the level of delivering effective social messages *and* in terms of his failing to convince others of their subjectivist imperative, Dylan again almost judges himself as having failed completely: his work only let others “receive/All that false instruction.” Yet that way of thinking to madness leads, to revert back to *King Lear*. Devoid of either social or spiritual justification, was his work’s value materialist alone, his “heart . . . filled with gold/As if it were a purse”? But such second-guessing could apply to anyone, and in that one sense his work truly expresses what anyone can inwardly experience: “Come to me now, you know/We’re so low/And life is brief.”

“Tears of Rage” expresses Dylan’s and, as he sees it, our potentially redeeming disaffection from public criteria to which we each contribute and in terms of which we tend to tailor our respective relations to existence. In particular, the song evinces *his own* muted rage if not at specific others, then justifiably at a surrounding American public addicted to the “bash,” and whose invasion of his creative acts he wishes to tear out of himself. “Million Dollar Bash” subliminally records how Dylan starts composing songs (“I get up in the morning”) filled with the positive intention to wake up himself and listeners to the plight of human existence. But he can feel that his song fails this charge,

that “it’s” always “too early to wake,” which ironically turns his song into a different kind of “wake”: to mourn their respective living deaths. Dylan recognizes the pattern—

First it's hello, goodbye  
Then push and then crash  
But we're all gonna make it.

And if he still holds that everyone can get beyond this initial failure, can't *that* possibility merely turn into an illusion that can lead to permanent doubt? Yet faced with this conundrum, Dylan feels that he must not delay his vocational decision any longer: “I looked at my watch.” One way out of this impasse would have him do his work in the private or “basement” setting of his mind. However, composing/performing his musical-lyrical art in a private venue (“I looked at my wrist” = playing his guitar) and his willful determination (“I punched myself in the face”) to sign up for his own “Independence Day” lead him reluctantly to accept the ethical limitation of his artistic practice. In the outside world, his songs will appear no more than marketplace, rock ‘n’ roll fare: “I took my potatoes/Down to be mashed,” which is to say, reduced to consumable goods: “Ooh, baby, ooh-ee.”<sup>32</sup>

Private disaffection from his *métier* equally informs the otherwise outer-directed apocalyptic *Basement* song “Down in the Flood (Crash on the Levee).”<sup>33</sup> In line with a tradition of blues songs especially referencing the 1927 Mississippi flood, Dylan’s use of this image connects up with his “too much of nothing” reaction to his social environment generally and the songs generated by it in particular. The water that’s “gonna overflow” and a swamp that’s “gonna rise” where no “boat’s gonna row” echo a biblical-apocalyptic motif that soon can apply to any social-critical situation. One can even associate this “flood” with the rash of apocalyptic songs marking Dylan’s social-musical scene at the time. He sees that he too can compose songs befitting a grand social bash: if “you can bust your feet/You can rock this joint.” Yet in the end he chooses to leave the “mama” or muse of contemporary rock music: “But oh mama, ain’t you gonna miss your best friend now?” He once was her “best friend,” composing and performing songs with surrealistic flare, but even then he wanted to engage something more and not just occasionally land on existential ground like a “Williams Point.”

Now he would resist the efforts of “mama” and his presumptive audience to “try an’ move me” to join the rush for public condemnations: “And mama, you’ve been refused.” For him, the social-musical scene has resulted in a critical “crash on the levee,” for which reason he feels compelled to direct his artistic attention elsewhere. Others (“you”) ought to make a similar decision, for in the present social climate no one gains any advantage by either adhering to the status quo or bitterly criticizing and predicting its doom. Both positions reduce to the same: “it’s sugar for sugar/And salt for salt.” Besides, anyone taking either viewpoint is “gonna miss” what his art primarily concerns. Since things are coming to a head in the world (“that high tide’s risin’”), he asks the listener of his songs to decide like him (“don’t you let me down”) and leave all positive or negative illusions behind: “Pack up your suitcase.”

Moreover, just as he does in composing songs for the *Basement Tapes*, Dylan himself prefers moving without “mak[ing] a sound,” thus refusing to engage in any high-profile counter-argument to justify his disaffection. But such passivity inevitably entails artistic ostracism. As expressed in more than one *Blonde on Blonde* song, Dylan’s vocational alienation can still affect his belief in creative work and even threaten to silence him from his musical-lyrical art altogether. At the literal level, the song “Silent Weekend” has him “pleading for his woman to give up her silent treatment” of him,<sup>34</sup> but she, like “Louise” in “Visions of Johanna,” doubly embodies the generic attraction of contemporary rock music. That “she” has expelled him (“she gave it to me”) from “her” precincts and left him to face a “silent weekend” alone, as if with nothing to compose or perform that others would want to hear: “She says it ain’t my party.” Yet Dylan doesn’t exactly plead for the return of “My baby” as he sometimes does. Rather, he states his perplexity (“My baby she took me by surprise”) at his veritable expulsion from “her” domain. And being unable to share “her” commitment to the musical scene, he can observe her “rocking’ and a-reelin’” as if “she” were besotted with its unconstrained rhythmic sound (“Head up to ceiling”) and abjectly beholden to the mundane wishes of other musician-artists (“some other guys”).

Dylan would have “Monday . . . come” and find a fresh way to break out of his creative “silence.” His problem isn’t a simple matter of composer’s block, for he acknowledges “her” still attractive aspects: her sheer energy (“she’s rollin’”), her fit with the times (“she’s in the groove”), and her immediate pop-accessibility to others (“she’s strolling/Over to the jukebox”). But such attributes come without spiritual concern, so he notices her “playin’ deaf and dumb” to issues of existence as such. True enough, to a certain degree he himself has “done a whole lotta . . . cheatin’,” that is, composed songs “just to please” others within the pop-musical medium. Yet he always came to realize when he had indulged this impulse (“I just walloped a lotta pizza after makin’ our peace”), and then curbed it, as in the present song, in ways that covertly “Puts ya down.” “Silent Weekend” records Dylan’s desire (“I’m burnin’ up on my brain”) to follow his own creative direction at all costs despite “her” neon promises and as if total cooption of the popular musical medium.

So deep down he has been “just teasin’” about wanting to come back to “her.” Dylan even expresses the urge to get out of the “rock” scene altogether in “Get Your Rocks Off,” yet another song loaded with sexual double entendres. The possible allusion to biblical stoning<sup>35</sup> perhaps frames the song as a redaction of “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35,” but the phrase “get your rocks off” mostly plays on the colloquial expression for sexual orgasm and metaphorically includes the hope to discharge previously suppressed psychic energy. Dylan repeats the phrase in the chorus except for the final line that both personalizes and ambiguates matters. There, “Get your rocks off-a me! Get ‘em off!” can mean not only “Come [sic] and take your pleasure from me” but also “Go away and leave me alone.” At first the song hints at a homoerotic scene, what with two old maids in bed and the two men, one of them the speaker, “layin’ down” together. Soon enough, however, the explicit allusion to “Blueberry Hill” and image of a bus “crusin’ down the highway” conjure the rock ‘n’ roll demand for touring.<sup>36</sup> The song thus plays off a *vocational* double entendre. Even accepting the sexual register, the

two "ol' maids layin' in the bed" outlines a nonprocreative sexual liaison. Childless, they have an uncomplicated, pleasure-determined relation with each other that by analogy mimics that of the listener with his song. Consequently, the refrain "get your rocks off-a me" evokes a situation where one of the two figures judges the demands of the other as if weighed down by "rocks": as too serious or, colloquially speaking, too heavy.

This "heavy" demand has two sources. First, Dylan feels that public criteria for "good" rock songs privilege the immediacy of musical performance over the reflective force of the lyrical text. Acceding to the former demand would defeat the synthesis governing his poetics of songwriting. Words still counted even in earlier rock 'n' roll songs like "Blueberry Hill," whereas now, "late [at] night . . ./One man turned to the other man" and speaks the lines from the chorus "with a blood-curdling' chill." Adopting the perspective of the average Joe, "late" rock 'n' roll has become synonymous with performers raising the ante of pure sensation.<sup>37</sup> That criterion pressures Dylan to follow suit, but he would rather have *this trend* in "rock" music "Get . . . off-a me." Other pressures equally attenuate his artful pursuit of the real. Dylan points to himself and another man "layin' down around Mink Muscle Creek," a scene keynoted by two tropes: commercialized "mink" a.k.a. the money and social status that come with rock 'n' roll success; and the power ("muscle") a celebrity figure like Bob Dylan unavoidably feels he can wield in his (then) cultural environment. Both threaten to block *Dylan's* already weakened (its being merely a "creek") flow of creativity and for him its indissociable relation to his existential vision. In "Get Your Rocks Off!," his vocational alter ego ("the other man [who] began to speak") wants to reject these "rocks," this weighted mediation, in precise relation to that existence-encounter. "Get your rocks off-a me!" here signifies an admonition to himself to evade any such external pressure. But unlike the case in the earlier "Maggie's Farm," Dylan's resistance to doing work for mass-audience appeal includes resistance to resisting that appeal as the defining trait of his work. Hence his shout of rejection: "Get your rocks off-a me! (Get 'em off!)."

But self-consciously distancing himself from the musical scene cannot by itself end his creative stalemate and start him producing a new mode of creative work: "it's not likely in the season/To open up a passenger train." He has yet to find a vehicle of poetic expression that might lead him and at least in principle others to take seriously the pursuit of the real. The fact that he can't willfully pursue that goal, can't conceptualize the frisson of self encountering the real from innumerable variable angles, persists as a problem. "Long-Distance Operator" shows Dylan struggling to determine the proper means to effect such communication.<sup>38</sup> The lyric falls into the generic bracket of a blues "about some lonely guy plunking his last dime into a pay phone trying to make contact with his faraway gal."<sup>39</sup> But allegorically considered, the song has Dylan addressing its very medium in the guise of the "operator." He asks *her* to facilitate his making genuine contact with the other: "Place this call" to reach "my baby," that is, his desired intimate listener, with whom he would communicate the by-definition mercurial relation to the real. What he as musical-lyrical artist really wants to say to the listener, then, is "not for fun." The stakes are high in a *profoundly* low "basement" song. "Operator" engages an issue that his "baby" likely doesn't want to hear, namely to surrender "her" sense of possessing a socially secure self-identity. The interruption

to communicating this anti-message gets further compounded for him by how Dylan's peers propagate the illusion of directly communicating so-called existential truth. He realizes that his voice is only one among many others: "There are thousands in the phone booth." Even if he accepts the possibility that these "thousands at the gates" also work toward a similar goal, he judges that they try to shorten the "long distance" between what they mean to express and how they express it, which to Dylan tends to homogenize or reduce the existential to the same.

He therefore rejects that rhetorical short-cut and chooses to express his vision in the form of a "long-distance" message, difficult to apprehend and that others are "just gonna have to wait" to unravel. In particular, he can't debate the issue, for then he finds himself in the arena of conceptual agreement or disagreement, which would only perpetrate the illusion that others could easily appropriate his vision. Dylan will not answer any calls from "Louisiana," that is, from the warm-weather South or place where, figuratively speaking, one can ostensibly live without tough encounters with the (cold) real. And from this perspective, too, he would reject audiences who want to know and fix his identity as an artist: "Ev'rybody wants to be my friend." Dylan instead pleads with the addressed operator, the stand-in conduit of his present song, to "let it ride," that is, help him "ride" out all such communication-temptations, for in the end they amount to false vocational options ("calls"). But of course, his rejection of them also comes at a cost. Confessing that "This booth's on fire" and it's "getting hot inside" suggests the extent to which his imagination gets overheated due to the friction that originates from his desire to communicate his relation to existence and his inability to do just that.

### 3 Beyond autobiographical discontents

One variant in Dylan's internal examination of self-other relations assigns the failures of spiritual communication to him more than to listeners at least willing to trace down his work's spiritual intimations. In "Nothing Was Delivered," a song that has attracted not a few contradictory interpretations,<sup>40</sup> he admonishes himself to face up to "this truth": that he has "delivered" nothing of the *real* "nothing" to others or himself. After all, on one level his songs merely concerned what Dylan wanted those others to be. Previously he was determined to make "ev'rybody pay" for not realizing the "nothing" of self that he identified with experiencing the real. Now he knows he must "heed" what he has not done and "provide some answers" for failing to convey or "sell" that vision of life. Ironically, and as I suggested marks "Get Your Rocks Off!," one reason for this failure stems from his own demand that it *be* received by others his way alone. The Dylan of *The Basement Tapes* "can't . . . sympathize" with who he once was when "telling all those lies." He confesses having resisted what we see him no longer wanting to resist ("I hope you won't object to this") as expressed, for example, in "Quinn the Eskimo": relaxing his demand on others. That "Nothing is better" or "best" means just that: lighten up and "get plenty of rest." An ironic echo of "Visions of Johanna," the song finds Dylan "giving back all of what you owe," that is, intending to compose songs focused on what he needs to do to realign his art with his vocational desire.

Recognizing (“Now you know”) the deficiency of having delivered a false nothing, he vows to express the *real* “nothing” as best he can without making demands on himself or others, and so simply “to say/Just what you had in mind.” Insofar as even this self-directed complaint can distract him from spiritual focus, Dylan also wants to sidestep emotional reactions (“spite or anger”) regarding this failure. Instead, he means to express what’s “true” for *him* without its becoming one more “long confession” in his surrounding world: “The fewer words you have to waste on this/The sooner you can go.” Otherwise, for “as long as it takes to do” that, “that’s how long [he’ll] remain” stuck in his present spiritual/creative dilemma.

Do the words in this song’s refrain express his resignation at not having resolved this dilemma? “Nothing is better, nothing is best” can mean: “Since that’s *all* my work comes down to, it’s what I have to accept.” Or do the words signify an existential fact: that the *real* “nothing is best” for everyone? Even under nursery-rhyme cover, Dylan can still muse on the potential of his creative vision as it pertains to him alone. “Apple Suckling Tree” shows him paradoxically fantasizing its connection with others on this basis. Obviously nonsensical at first glance, the song yet incorporates a biblical reference to “a little Garden of Eden.”<sup>41</sup> Marcus argues that it therefore transcends nonsense. If it relies on “the melody of ‘Froggy Went A-Courtin,’ the ancient children’s ditty,” it also “chang[es] from the uproarious to the ominous in a blink of an eye.”<sup>42</sup> The image of an apple suckling, an infant tree nurtured by a maternal source or “Mother Nature,” surely flirts with a “Garden of Eden” allusion, but the song arguably has little to do with paradisaic innocence; just the opposite, it wryly deploys the “nursery rhyme” genre to express the despair of despair, in other words a willed negation of life that gets one nowhere. “Apple Suckling Tree” first portrays a “man sailin’ in a dinghy boat”: a man alone in his/her individuated body floating on the waters of existence. The situation evokes a spiritual fall (“Down there”) with Dylan’s “baitin’ a hook,” which allegorically refers not only to his search for meaning in life but also for a way out of aloneness. Both turn out an endless enterprise that makes him feel “old.” It also ends up a naïve venture to boot, aptly expressed by an otherwise nonsensical reference to “a suckling hook,” a metaphor of the weak human mind confronting the large existential conundrum. This venture can only land human beings in a hopeless strait: it’s “Gonna pull man down into a suckling brook.” Translated, the image suggests that “man” will apprehend life like a child, but also, as with this watery medium, life will turn out ever indifferent to whatever meanings “man” wants to impose on it.

We are all innocent “underneath that apple suckling tree” only in the ironic sense that we don’t know where let alone who we are. This becomes all the more the case after experiencing life (when one is “old”) no longer as a young “suckling.” Still, at both ends of the spectrum of age, we remain stuck “Under that apple suckling tree,” wholly and naïvely at the mercy of the Tree of Life. Dylan’s songs indirectly lead us to face not just that “there are no truths outside the Gates of Eden,” but that there are no truths inside it as well: “There’s gonna be just you and me/Underneath that apple suckling tree.” Yet he admits that he still wants at least to express that “truth” for us whereas other artists like the “Old man” have so far tried and failed: “I push him back and I stand in line” ready to do his best. To *do* that, however, Dylan must “hush



my Sadie,” a commonplace name hinting at a rural muse figure and suggesting how he would like to express that truth inconspicuously, say in the style of folksy songs. Better for him to get “on board” with this nursery-rhyme project while fully aware (in “two-eyed time”) of what he can and cannot fully communicate. At the same time, he hopes, as the song’s refrain has it, that the listener (“just . . . you and me”) can get it, too. Dylan remains bothered by “who’s on the table, who’s to tell me?” or who’s playing the existential game the way he is. That uncertainty makes him question whether he “should . . . tell” anyone at all what he’s about: “oh, who should I tell?” Heylin’s version of the line “The forty-nine of you can go burn in hell”<sup>43</sup> underscores that doubt. Should he try, as he has in the recent past, only to fail again? The number forty-nine signifies one short of the ideal round number of fifty and so symbolically represents *almost* but not quite everyone.

“Apple Suckling Tree” portrays what Dylan thinks his songs deal with once he gives up any implicit, normative wish that others should hew a parallel line to approach “nothing.” That Dylan sets out to realize that “nothing” for himself, if no one else, defines the poetic manifesto sketched in “Odds and Ends”: “I plan it all and take my place.” His songs comprise “odds and ends” that as such will likely have little to no import for others; but partly for that reason, they represent “what [he] had in mind” in his musical art from the start. In “Minstrel Boy” and other *Basement* songs, he confesses his vulnerability to how others might only intuit but not fully grasp the “real” direction of his songs.<sup>44</sup> Along these lines, Heylin surmises that “Minstrel Boy” likely stages Dylan’s perceived relation to devoted fans (“ladies”) who yet have left him “lonely,” probably in a sexual or romantic sense.<sup>45</sup> Just as likely, however, it occurs in a spiritual sense. In “Nothing to It,” Dylan has himself throwing a “coin” to himself after intending to go it alone, but in “Minstrel Boy” he appears as a third-person “boy,” someone young enough to have his career still before him. Whomever he requests to throw that “boy” a “coin” does not represent the present, hectic, commercial demands on his songs. Rather, Dylan wants the other to “let [the coin] roll”: to allow some value *other than monetary* come to him slowly, or without urgent demands on him as a “minstrel” artist.

Only that level of response could “save his soul” from his propensity to settle for the counterfeit “coin” of success. Dylan refers to himself as having “been drivin’ a long, long time” for fame and fortune, the achievement of which he feels was more a matter of accident (“Lucky”) than certain destiny. But his “long hard climb” to public success has only left him “stuck on top of the hill,” in effect crucified on a cross of gold. Despite “all of them ladies,” he feels “lonely still” with his real vocational desire, and left to wonder (“Who’s gonna . . . ?”) if he can escape *this* lonely situation. He knows that he has produced many significant songs (a “deep number”) and performed them to the point of feeling “heavy in toil.” He also recognizes that many of them possess moral merit thanks to his having assumed the role of a “Mighty Mockingbird” criticizing social and personal wrongs. But a limit exists (“Beneath his bound’ries”) as to “what more he can tell” in that vein. Now he finds himself in the process of “traveling’ . . . still on the road,” which is to say, trying to go deeper still. In the meantime, he would appreciate it if someone would “throw” him “a coin” not for more material success, but rather to show him a pittance of spiritual understanding for his work as a musical-lyrical artist.

This is where “Odds and Ends” comes back into the conversation, for in it Dylan marks his transition from one mode of vocational practice to another. Playing the title’s commonplace expression and the song’s easy rhymes, he casually compares it to his former discursive obsession. When he says, “You break your promise all over the place,” “place” refers to something like “every which way” and “you” to an intimate listening figure who can’t sustain the “promise to love me” or match his vocational determination. This metaphorical lover comes to him and spills “juice over me.” At first an apparent image of sexual *jouissance*, it allegorically signifies a distraction from the spiritual point of his work. No matter how juicy the listener’s objective interpretation, for Dylan himself to misread the subjective thrust of his songs merits his admonition that “Lost time is not found again.” Despite its relaxed and colloquial rhetoric, “Odds and Ends” hinges on what he considers an absolute either/or. There is no second chance or “again” regarding his or anyone’s vocational mandate: “You know what I’m sayin’ and you know what I mean.” Here the “you” includes all listeners, whether they know it or not. In principle, *he* and others need to give up fixed, referential interpretations of his work: “you take your file and bend my head.” Thinking to know it, “you” distort (e.g., “bend”) the fact that his songs occur within the orbit of continual, subjective becoming. Even well-intentioned listeners (“you promised to love me”) carelessly “spill[] juice on me,” that is, praise his work’s significance in passing or “like you got someplace to go.”

But Dylan no longer wants to struggle to overcome such misprisions: “I’ve had enough,” meaning that “my box is clean,” or what he can express in his work requires no more effort. It contains no objectively meaningful messages for others to discern. If “you” want those, “you’d best get on someone else.” And if some other artist’s work happens to do for “you” what his hasn’t, keep that vision for yourself alone: “While you’re doin’ it, keep that juice to yourself.” Still, and as the song “Open the Door, Homer” makes clear, Dylan would of course like to be that artist. The song’s title plays off the 1947 popular hit by Count Basie, “Open the Door, Richard,” itself based on an earlier comical Harlem song. Given that background, Sid Griffin’s judgment about Dylan’s version seems the most sensible: “this is a nonsense song based on a nonsense song.” The name “Homer” even conjures an in-house allusion to Richard Manuel, a member of The Band performing these *Basement* songs with Dylan.<sup>46</sup>

But like all his “comic” songs on *The Basement Tapes*, this one too drifts into spiritual territory. Dylan notes how “healing begins with forgiveness,” a rather moral statement at odds with the “lighten up” motif in other *Basement* songs. Similarly, the name “Homer” connotes a country-yokel figure, the stereotype of someone incapable of opening any “door,” specifically of an existentially earned spiritual perception, and therefore in line with the Harlem joke-routine. The name comes freighted with other associations as well, for example someone possibly facilitating the speaker’s wish to explore his door of perception via drugs. And the name above all evokes the Western poetic precedent par excellence. In that context, Dylan employs a familiar poetic practice: seeking inspiration from a major poetic precursor like the Greek poet. But why does Dylan then appear to reject this precedent: “But I ain’t gonna hear [the “Open the door, Homer” refrain] said no more”? Does he feel unable to live up to such a precedent, say in his more serious lyrical works?

“Open the Door, Homer” fits into Dylan’s “basement” project to shun the “major” literary limelight and any of its associated pressures. He opts instead for homey truths, even homilies by friends, whose nondescript names underline their common versus privileged status.<sup>47</sup> “Jim” tells him in idiomatic terms that “he’d always make sure I’d understand” to live and apprehend life (“swim”) in a “certain way” to get the most out of it or to “live off/Of the fat of the land.” Behind such homespun advice lies the declaration of a no less homey vocational direction. “Mouse,” who “blushes” and in that way enacts his own advice, states that “ev’ryone/Must always flush out his house.” That is, one must remove one’s bad thoughts toward others, for otherwise one will end up “housing flushes,” Dylan’s play on the phrase “go down the toilet.” To extend the metaphor, a waste of one’s creativity will accrue from one’s backed-up negativity, not least directed toward oneself. Dylan’s characters are not so much “friends” as imaginary tutelary spirits advising him how to live and compose songs. “Mick” warns him to “care” for his “memories,” specifically how he thinks of his past relations to others and his work. To “relive” and nurture old slights only stunts spiritual focus. Dylan essentially tells himself not to blame others for failing to live up to his spiritual code. He should avoid construing his work as pretexts “to heal the sick,” at least not before “First forgiv[ing] them”; he should act, in other words, as if they *can* follow through on such possibilities, whether or not they actually do. “Homer” opening the door symbolizes Dylan’s affording himself with one as if final opportunity (he won’t “hear it said no more”) to reform his relations to the world and self in its infinite makeup.

Like an old homiletic saw, “Open the door, Homer” counts as a directive to himself to “Wake up and move on to the next level,” albeit a move ultimately leading to the maximum of his creative potential. He regards his career as having come to this point, so it is no surprise that some of his *Basement* songs review his vocational career. In “Lo and Behold!” he provides a shorthand sketch of how he got to where he is now. The title and apparent tenor of the song obviously point to a biblical-cum-spiritual motif, specifically a human encounter with the miraculous, as per the gospel tale of the angel appearing at the crucified Christ’s tomb and telling Mary Magdalene about his resurrection: “And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you” (Matthew 28:7).<sup>48</sup> Two different objective readings of this allusion come to mind. Andy Gill thinks the biblical motif ironic. He claims that the song’s *mise en scène* of a “train journey” shows Dylan in “search for his own identity. It’s a fruitless pursuit of revelation . . . always ending up in dreary places like Pittsburgh.”<sup>49</sup> Greil Marcus considers the song a reclamation project that goes “back and forth between adventures in nothingness and a cry to hear the truth or tell it”; and in that way exemplifies “the country” as “still new, still unsettled.”<sup>50</sup>

But an emphatically subjective reading of “Lo and Behold!” lends it a quasi-objective coherence. Even the geographical references to “San Anton” and “Pittsburgh” arguably allude to how “hard travelin’” has tested his vocational resolve. Just four years after Dylan anticipated “hard travelin’” in his inaugural “Song to Woody,” he desires to keep open the spiritual possibilities in composing and performing his songs. “Lo and Behold!” begins with him recalling having begun his artistic career in optimistic mettle: “I never

felt so good” than when going to “San Anton,” Dylan’s approximate evocation of the Southwestern United States that he specifically associates with Guthrie. In this case, it also conjures Dylan’s potential for becoming a new kind of American artist. Early on, he assumed he could communicate his vision of life via his imagination: “My woman” who “said she’d meet me there.” He had every reason to suppose he could do that (“I knew she would”) until “The coachman, he hit me for my hook.” The “coachman” could refer to an old-fashioned means, for instance “folk” music, by which he was driving to “San Anton” and toward artistic success. In that context, he also signifies a slang reference to someone who eventually took Dylan “for a ride” (my marks) or in a false direction. In musical terms, “hook” can refer to a catchy tune, but here to whatever initially attracted audiences to his work: the social-political collateral of his original lyrics.<sup>51</sup> When asked, he proceeded to “give” public inquirers “my name,” in part alluding to Dylan’s first name-change. But from his present viewpoint, he judges that very soon after his initial success he felt himself a sell-out (“Then I hung my head in shame”) given what he really wanted to do in the musical-lyrical medium. He had lost the primacy of a “lo and behold!” vision for his work, namely to seek revelation stemming from *his* relation to the real.

Continuing this figurative shorthand, Dylan then recalls that in order to recover that goal he had to leave “folk” work behind: “Get me outa here.” Traveling from one musical-artistic scene to another, however, didn’t work for him either. Going to “Pittsburgh,” a city once noted for its old-style industrialism, here signifies Dylan’s own move into the music-industrial complex or world of rock ‘n’ roll. There he staked out an unorthodox niche by doing what the genre had never before attempted to explore: “I found myself a vacant seat,” but he soon became troubled after settling down (“I put down my hat”) in this medium. His imagination (“Molly”—a commonplace name signifying his non-elitist pretensions and the low-brow *artistic* cast of popular music) had problems with satisfying his sexual-cum-creative urges. “Her” (rock music’s) sexual pulse didn’t satisfy him: “What’s the matter, Molly, dear/ . . . with your mound?” Her response proposed that in his chosen artistic “town” or venue, his big [*sic*] vocational ambition, the philosophical *à la* “Moby Dick” pressure he placed on his work, doesn’t matter either: “What’s it to ya, Moby Dick?/This is chicken town.” The rock ‘n’ roll medium only allowed for less venturesome (“chicken”) fare. Yet he finds himself still looking for his “lo and behold!” revelation of self through the musical-lyrical medium personified by Molly. Buying his “girl/A herd of moose” that she “could call her own” puts one in mind of the major Dylan rock songs that “she” inspired. Like “Desolation Row,” they possess philosophical breadth and have led people to try deciphering them, which Dylan here expresses as like hunting for “moose.” But the songs kept escaping for places unknown. Indeed, not even he could “see where they had flown” to, especially after critics got through with them. Such interpretive pursuits have led him to dream of going to “Tennessee”: of turning into a simple, redneck songster, as in the stereotype of someone driving a “truck ‘r something.” He then intended just to “save my money and rip it up!” or compose/perform songs for his own pleasure far from the madding crowd. The monetary trope paradoxically expresses how much he wants to write them in a way that precludes their exchange value in the public marketplace.

Yet the serious side to Dylan's project keeps pressing against any sheer aesthetic esprit, however private even *that* can become for him. He imagines reentering "Pittsburgh" and the media circus ("ferris wheel") in a "slick" or ironic way. This tactic fits the poetics defining the non-pressurized, lyrical contributions of the present *Basement Tapes*. No less than his earliest songs, as he recollects them in "Lo and Behold!," his new ones "come in like a ton of bricks" or similarly loaded with "heavy" aims. As in the case of "Odds and Ends," he means to keep his audience interested by laying "a few tricks on 'em," for example by layering his songs with images and phrases rife with semantically provocative nonmeaning. Since a wholly experimental gesture characterizes how he composes those songs now, he need not worry about how others read them. He hesitates ("Count[s] up to thirty") before he presents his "herd" of songs "Lookin' for my lo and behold." His "rid[ing] that herd" additionally suggests simultaneously keeping potential audiences close to this work even as it leaves his vocational position indecisively resolved.

Despite his wish to keep others in spiritual talking distance with his work, he still has to contend with its immediately contingent importance for himself. Dylan's willingness to accept certain listeners into his vocational corral necessarily occurs in the context of his musical-lyrical medium. If he can judge the pop-musical world devoid of value as he does in "Million Dollar Bash," he can equally admit his care for it in a song like "Santa Fe."<sup>52</sup> Santa Fe figures a place known for its artistic community, not the least of which includes Native American folk art. Apropos that association, the song confesses "folk" elements in Dylan's present musical art, albeit calibrated differently from those at the beginning of his career. In announcing his satisfaction with living in "dear, dear, dear, dear Santa Fe," the very repetition of "dear" protests his continuing care for the "folk" element he brought to the more popular medium of rock 'n' roll. When a female figure, again personifying Dylan's relation to his art, states that she "needs [Santa Fe] everyday," he suggests his own contentment with work he is now doing: "She promised [him] she'd stay." His new work has added something to his artistic repertoire, and for as long as he continues to explore this lyrical vein, he will keep receiving simple "bread" or obtaining creative fuel and intimate social satisfaction for and from his work: "She's rollin' up a lotta bread to toss away." At the same time, Dylan questions any success, remunerative or other, stemming from his pre-*Basement* songs. It would make him feel as if he has "opened an old maid's home," or taken early retirement. He resists *any* idea of vocational achievement. Even as Santa Fe has become a conventional or settled artsy community, "she" a.k.a. his imagination occasionally feels a bit restless ("needs to roam").<sup>53</sup> In such moods, he admits being able to produce creative work, although it stays within the community's contingent boundaries: "She's gonna write herself a roadside poem about Santa Fe," which just so happens to be the present *Basement* song.

But Dylan already foresees the end to this phase of his career. He needs to keep moving ("never gonna cease to roam"), as he informs "dear, dear Santa Fe" in an apostrophe that combines both the place and the female personification of his present state of imagination. Artistic "Home," for Dylan, is portable (I'm never . . . far from home), a goal he can envision in any social circumstance and that can produce a

strong, self-referential body of work analogous to “a geodesic dome.” But by intending to “build a geodesic home *and sail away*” (my emphasis), he also reasserts his vocational inclination for an unconventional *self*-definition of homelessness. His tentative disaffection from the “Santa Fe” artistic option doesn’t mean that he denigrates its value altogether, but only how it can lure him into a false sense of vocational security. Sure, the place has “the best food I’ve ever had”: the raw life-materials for special creative projects. He can even feel “glad” working in terms of an established art: “That she’s cooking in a homemade pad.” But Dylan ends up infecting his *Basement* songs and this aspect of his imagination (“her”) with his restless quest. “She’s never caught a cold so bad when I’m away” but only when he comes home: only when he returns to composing songs dealing with different ways of coming upon the real, which by itself calls for a continually changing artistic practice and process. He sees himself as an artist always ready to leave what he’s accomplished so far and at a moment’s notice: “My shrimp boat’s in the bay.” He rejects any single artistic tableau (“I won’t have my nature this way”) and stays prepared “to drift away from/Santa Fe,” no matter how “dear.”

Nevertheless, he holds to the middle ground in executing his imaginative work. In keeping a tentative relation to the Santa-Fe mode of art and artist, he refuses to reject such work out of hand, but accepts how other artists, whether of folk or rock ‘n’ roll pedigree, produce songs here and there on a spiritual par with his. These artists resemble his “sister” or imagination staying within generic boundaries: “My sister looks good at home.” But a part of Dylan holds such artists at arm’s length, for sooner or later their work shows itself, at least to him, to be existentially lax if not complacent. He registers how some of his peers enjoy the spoils of their work (“lickin’ an ice cream cone”) so that they never push further; or else eventually tailor their creative work according to public standards of “good” art (“She’s packin’ her big white comb”), which for Dylan seems too heavy a price to pay: “What does it weigh?”

He prefers a different kind of public, which he inscribes in the lyrically disheveled song entitled “Don’t Ya Tell Henry.” Here he uses an aw-shucks barnyard and a drunkard’s imagery along with perverse sexual intimations<sup>54</sup> to point out people’s repression of visionary pursuits in favor of living according to common-sense values. In this instance, Henry stands for one’s existential conscience, an at-bottom intuition of the absurd *real*, which accounts for the song’s polymorphous sexual allusions. “Don’t Ya Tell Henry” intimates that as opposed to some internalized objective super-ego, a wholly subjective criterion can make one’s average, secular life appear incomplete. Dylan here again slingshots what seems low-class slang into an existential semiotic register of meaning, which helps explain the otherwise nonsensical, cryptic phrase “Apple’s got your fly” recurring throughout the lyric. There the second-person pronoun refers to others and himself simultaneously. The phrase constitutes a sub rosa reference to how the forbidden fruit (the apple) has taken possession (has “got” hold) of and contaminated our appetites, with sex (“has got your fly”) their prime metonym.

More important, “Don’t Ya Tell Henry” doesn’t just state but plays out the human lockout from the gates of Eden. When the speaker goes “down to the river” of life on the Jewish Sabbath (“Saturday morn”) to see if anyone’s been “born” in a spiritual sense, he only finds a “little chicken”: a baby meaning a spiritual coward. He happens

upon someone anxiously aware of his inability to pursue or live in terms of the real, and who figuratively confesses to the Dylan speaker fear of retribution for putting off this pursuit: “Don’t ya tell Henry.” Persistently looking for the right person who could help Dylan realize his vocational goal results in the same impasse. He goes “looking around” for “her” at different times, “at a-half past ten” and later, “I wouldn’t say when”; he searches for “her” everywhere, even just “down to the corner.” Lacking inward spiritual direction, he looks for it outside himself, most often in some intimate double like a woman able to pleasure him sexually (“I looked down low”), or someone who supposedly possesses high or virtuous ideals (“I looked above”). But always on closer inspection, the person he falls in “love” with confesses guiltily (“Don’t ya tell Henry”) that she can’t live up to his criterion for spiritual companionship. Indeed, she all but accuses him, or rather Dylan as much as accuses himself through her, of a faulty spiritual idealism. He too has fallen due to his attraction to various external means to arrive at a paradisaal state. In short, the “Apple” distracts him from working toward a wholly subjective relation to existence. “Don’t Ya Tell Henry” warns how this fall can keep one falling. Going to the marketplace (“the beanery”) or public realm where most people congregate at its busiest time (“at half past twelve”), the narrator looks “around just to see myself.” Again he seeks the paradisaal “Apple” outside himself, this time in public venues where he might discover heroic figures to emulate but who always finally fail to deliver the spiritual goods. He sees a “horse” there, a rhetorical figure for successful persons quick with the fast answer. Or he encounters a “donkey,” a non-spiritually motivated person too lazy or care-less [*sic*] to answer at all. The speaker even “looked for a cow” or guru-like other who could provide him with the milk of wisdom, only to conclude at last that the entire human menagerie lacks what he seeks. Worse, all these others know it too, which is why they also don’t want “Henry” to know.

The “Apple’s got your fly” indicates one reduced to the equivalent of a base, animal consciousness, yet with a conscience that keeps one mindful of its reduced spiritual status. Why not, then, take the monastic route and remove oneself as if physically from others and their temptations of substitutive *self*-realization? The Dylan speaker admits to having tried this option of getting away from it all: he went to the “pumphouse the other night,” a masturbatory metaphor that represents a false private alternative, an external site supposedly inaccessible to the distractions fostered in the public realm. It turns out to be a self-centered rather than a *self*-centered action: “I did go upstairs but I didn’t see nobody but me.” For that reason, he again fails to escape his internal “Henry.” External erasures of one’s externalist inclinations are no substitute for attempting to turn inward even as all of us must live in and engage the external world. Only in that turn if anywhere might one find “that big ol’ tree”: the Tree of Life or the existential core of the “Apple.”

The dialectic between self and other never ceases in the Dylan song. When he moves away from objective (including religionist) definitions of the “spiritual” toward his own subjective relation to the real, he also willingly allows his songs to serve as memos for listeners to do the same. That is the tenor of “This Wheel’s on Fire,” a song that adds to a long list of Dylan songs presumably broadcasting an apocalyptic warning to the social world. Seth Rogovoy, for example, cites Dylan’s reliance here on

Jewish-Biblical tradition, specifically the Ezekial story detailing his “unique mystical experience”: “From the midst of the fire, in its midst there was a likeness of four creatures supporting the chariot” and appearing “as if there would be a wheel within a wheel.”<sup>55</sup> Rogovoy reads the song’s verses as God speaking to the prophet, the prophet to God, and/or the prophet paraphrasing God. In the biblical passage that Dylan begins with (“If your mem’ry serves you well”), God claims that he will end prophecy “until . . . His people prove their faith by remembering Him . . . the single most important commandment and refrain running throughout the entire Bible.”<sup>56</sup> The apocalyptic motif manifests itself in a literary context as well. Andy Gill, for instance, points out that the song’s title derives not only from the Ezekial passage but also from *King Lear*, first noted by Robert Shelton in *No Direction Home*: “But I am bound/Upon a wheel of fire.” Gill judges the “mood” of the song “portentous, capturing a soul suspended on the cusp of torment and deliverance, unable to arrest its headlong drive towards destruction.”<sup>57</sup>

Yet “This Wheel’s on Fire” proceeds to complicate these connections. Of what religious or anti-religious significance is Dylan’s confiscation of “your lace” in the second verse? The song also carries with a certain contingent note that disturbs any impulse to elevate it into high apocalyptic prophecy. For instance, just like the image of heaving “plastic” in “Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window?” the “wheel” could simply refer to the literal materiality of the vinyl record on which we hear him recording this impassioned (fiery) vision of existence.<sup>58</sup> Here the trope for a record is itself a trope for Dylan’s interpretation of how he would have his songs affect others in existential terms.<sup>59</sup> For that matter, why not regard “This Wheel’s on Fire” as a redaction of “Like a Rolling Stone”? Where the latter proclaimed the “nothing” of self-identity as a fait accompli, this *Basement* revision turns that position into a promissory note at best: “This Wheel’s on Fire” construes the self’s “nothing” as always what he is yet to realize. Conversely, Dylan also addresses good-faith listeners who once sought significant meaning in his work but who for whatever reason failed to take it *in*. Despite these mutual mis-communications, he insists on the remaining potential spiritual relevance latent in his past songs. Reiterating the line “If your mem’ry serves you well” throughout the song, Dylan insinuates that the addressed listener has the capacity to recollect and interpret anew the existential demand of his songs’s reception.<sup>60</sup> That remains the still vibrant remnant of “this wheel,” a compacted image of his disc-record *and* the record of his career, still “on fire/Rolling down the road” and so as if perpetually headed for the real.

Spiritual point as Dylan intuits it exists in a state of suspended possibility: “We were goin’ to meet again and wait.” Waiting is necessary since *self*-realization can never take final, conceptual form but rather remains contingent on his or each listener’s situation when encountering it. This is the only message one can convey to the other, this absolute but non-objective point where he and we “meet.” All roads lead back (“But you know that we shall meet again”) to what his songs concern once one recollects their spiritual import. “Rolling down the road” of one’s life, they finally come to “nothing.” This Dylanesque truism accounts for the song’s allusion to *King Lear* with its own repetitive play on “Nothing,” a notable example of which is “Nothing can



come of nothing" (*King Lear*, I.1). Through his songs, he intends to "notify my next kin" or those compatible with this vision of existence. Dylan then indirectly confesses his determination to make other lyrical notifications even as he reinterprets his past musical efforts as doing the same. The spiritual aspect of his vocational charge was there from the beginning of his career and spelled his desire to change the minds of those seeking only an aesthetic relation to his work. That is why he originally intended to "confiscate your lace" (a delicate fabric): precisely to overcome mere aesthetic appreciation of his art by complicating it. He thus meant to "wrap it up in a sailor's knot" and by such complication make it part of the listener's own existential experience ("hide it in your case").

As noted many times before, Dylan finds himself unable to determine whether or not others care at all for his work at this level: he can't determine "for sure that it was yours" because "it was oh so hard to tell." Nonetheless, the subterranean visionary charge of his songs was/is bound to bother those who listen to them, including those who once "called on me to call on them" "To get your [social-political] favors done." Given his disappearance from the pop-public scene and the manifest failure of those "favors" to have changed social inequities in any essential way ("after ev'ry plan had failed"), his songs now stand by themselves absent any former, objectively oriented charge: "there was nothing more to tell"—another vocational double entendre. Now those songs can appear to "you" as what they are to him: affective or explosive memos of the subjective relation to the real.

On one side, the Dylan song blasphemously negates any other vocational goal. On another side, the self-referential significance of "This Wheel's on Fire" in effect works to redeem Dylan's past songs for himself. In this song he reminds himself of their enduring visionary-existential value. From that viewpoint, the "you" stands as much for him as for an intimate listener. Now *he* intends to "sit before it gets too late"; by composing new songs continuous with his past works ("unpack all my things"), he will try to wrest spiritual-vocational direction away from the distractions promulgated by an ever-present public pull on his work and self. This *subjective* aim has now become his compositions' sole ambition: "No man alive will come to you/With another tale to tell." His newly emboldened vocational charge also has wider implications, for at least in principle it can uplift his listeners regardless of their past or present spiritual indifference. Whether admitting it to themselves or not, others want(ed) the same thing from his songs. That is why he

was goin' to confiscate your lace  
 And wrap it up in a sailor's knot  
 And hide it in your case . . .

By showing the existential relevance of his and others' experiences, Dylan would give intricate spiritual-artistic form to them. To do that would make their experiences special, belonging, to use the metaphor of a suit-"case," inside the inner space of each listener's non-public self.

#### 4 The privacy of the Dylan Lyric

One aspect of *The Basement Tapes* songs is typified by Dylan going “upstairs” in “Don’t Ya Tell Henry” and not coming back down, as if one part of him wishes to become entirely private within a public medium. The song “Clothes Line Saga” makes a similar vocational gesture despite its most cogent objectivist reading, Greil Marcus’s lengthy treatment of the song for its social-musical significance. Marcus notes how the title originally included an additional parenthetical “(Answer to Ode),” presumably a reference to “Ode to Billy Joe” by Bobbie Gentry, a then popular song with a laconically delivered narrative hinting at an unexplained suicide in a rural Southern town. The song also airs the possibility of a baby having been thrown off the town’s bridge. Marcus regards Dylan’s song (helped out by Rick Danko’s co-arrangement) as a response to Gentry’s “language and . . . tone of voice,” which one could characterize as ironically in contrast to the self-evident traumatic event(s) she narrates. Dylan’s “Clothes Line Saga” seems to deny that any such event can occur in *his* small-town setting. Marcus argues that Dylan’s statement in “Clothes Line Saga” that “Everybody is feeling fine” makes special sense “because in the town the song has so quickly called up it is a moral certainty that absolutely nothing can happen. That certainty . . . is what the song is about . . .”<sup>61</sup>

Does Dylan’s response to “Ode,” then, concern *that* “nothing”? Most other critics accept the gist of Marcus’s interpretation, but John Herdman offers a telling deviation when he claims the song a masterpiece for rendering “a sequence of doings with absolutely no significance,” but that nevertheless says “something about the way things are, the way people are, and has made us laugh about it.” Andrew Muir fine-tunes this observation, stating that the song “is not so much an ‘answer’ to Gentry’s ‘ode’; rather [Dylan] extends it to cover all of America, and by extension all of mankind’s absurd existence.”<sup>62</sup> The song exposes, one might say, the degree to which, given the opportunity, American people wish not to care about any lurking trauma, social or personal. So we come back to “Clothes Line Saga” being about “something” after all. But that too becomes problematic. Andy Gill returns the volley to these other critics when he argues that the song allows for an autobiographical loophole. The line “Nobody said very much,” for instance, “can be read as Dylan celebrating his release from significance, enjoying the opportunity just to write songs without having to have them mean something.”<sup>63</sup>

When read self-referentially, even the song’s very first words (“After a while”) connote the lack of any determined movement in his life and/or artistic career. Only the sheer momentum of time mandates any change in his circumstances. Moreover, the clothes topic includes how one represents oneself to others in public, and so simultaneously serves as trope representing what the public can assign (not least, biographically) to the experiences reflected in his songs. Read that way, *this* song intimates how Dylan’s past and present songs consistently maintain a spiritual-existential focus about which he thinks most people don’t care and never “*really* wanted to touch” (my emphasis). In “Clothes Line Saga,” reference to his vocational issue comes through even in the Dylan speaker’s depiction of his family. They respectively personify his own imaginative

activity (“Mama”) along with a traditional, perhaps Guthrie-esque folk figure (“Papa”) whose precedent initially gave him vocational direction and still might. “Mama” reads “a book” to inspire the poetic side of Dylan’s work, while “Papa” asks the book’s name (“what it was”) to judge if it has any *real* vocational relevance.

These artistic sources mainly serve to inspire the composition of Dylan’s songs (“they started to . . . /Hang [their clothes] on the line”) right in the middle of winter (“January the thirtieth”). Why that specific time of year, or, in other words, why compose songs during a particular social period of “too much of nothing”? Both in the song and its “January” setting, nothing moves, even for Dylan. Making meaning would appear to be a meaningless activity regardless that meaningful contexts abound all around him. From one angle, for example, the date could refer to the step-up in US bombing of Vietnam that occurred on January 31, 1965. Yet if so, does the song announce its own social-political hesitancy by taking place the day before?<sup>64</sup> “The next day,” another supposedly major political event occurs, broadcast by the main stoker of the modern public sphere, the mass media. But the Dylan “family” (my marks) eschews this happening, too. Instead, he checks to see if his so-called clothes have “dried up,” or, as this commonplace suggests, whether his songs any longer possess a public cachet. In this “wild” scenario of clothes-hanging, even “dogs . . . barking” evokes the cacophony of fans and inquisitive audiences whom Dylan as if hears in the background. The only news that matters to him is what appears obvious (“of course”) in his personal but also art-oriented here and now, for instance how his imagination (“Mama”) deals with daily events close to home or, more to the point, with the trauma of existence as such: “Mama, of course, she said, ‘Hi’” to “a neighbor” who just happened to pass by. The recent news that “The Vice-President’s gone mad” “Downtown,” a place where people congregate, seems humorous (the neighbor “said, with a grin”) and finally of secondary importance (Mama replies, “that’s too bad!”), both reactions neutralizing any social-political import.

At most, the scene portrays Americans feeling impotent about being able to affect, never mind change, their present macro-social scene (“Well, there’s nothin’ we can do about it”), or else their simply wishing not to think about it all: “it’s just somethin’ we’re gonna have to forget.” Christopher Ricks terms this rendition parodic.<sup>65</sup> “Clothes Line Saga” clearly constitutes a send-up of such attitudes if one adopts a mandatory social perspective. Moreover, in a double disaffection related to the song’s allegorical subtext, the scene inscribes how Dylan construes imaginative work apart from progressivist *or* reactionary attitudes toward public affairs. The “‘Yes, I guess so,’ said Ma” response to the neighbor’s news amounts to a nonchalant dismissal of both. One can infer Dylan’s own inclination not to care, at least not self-consciously, about his songs’ relevance to such affairs. The same goes for the “poetic” (my marks) relevance of the Dylan song, as when Papa asks Mama about the book she’s reading and “Somebody else asked, ‘What do you care?’” Papa further underscores this indeterminate response when he literally says nothing more: “Well, just because.”

Still, Dylan’s artistic conscience has him ask whether his songs at least still mean something to *him*: “she asked me if the clothes was still wet.” Do they possess creative value beyond whatever defined their former topical value for others? Similarly, the

imagined listener a.k.a. “neighbor” asks him if the *Basement* songs he’s presently doing are his (“Are those clothes yours?”), to which he answers “Some of ‘em, not all of ‘em””: some are original, others explicit covers of songs already in the public domain. And when the neighbor asks if Dylan “help[s] out with the chores,” he responds that he does. Isn’t that what he’s doing with the songs that The Band performs? Dylan, one could say, assumes no special privilege or takes no special pride for any of these songs, which he instead regards as simple “chores.” But even this dialogue gets him to think about the meaning/nonmeaning dilemma broached by his compositional acts. His spirit of imagination calls him to come inside and forget about any need to answer his neighbors, here as well a figure for a non-demanding public and not just rabid fans: “Mama wants you t’ come back in the house and bring them clothes.”

This taking “in” of clothes doubles for Dylan’s removing his songs from public view. Their de facto absence suggests that they now possess little to no public value both for him or others: “Nobody said very much.” Dylan ends “Clothes Line Saga” at the point where his imagination turns private and he feels himself ready to compose and play his quasi-nonsensical *Basement* songs. To do that, he would shut inquisitorial public demands on his work of all kinds: “And then I shut *all* the doors.” This shut out in turn refers us to “I’m Not There,” the topical strand of Todd Haynes’ biopic film based on Bob Dylan’s career. The song’s permanently obscure lyrics have the performative effect of a “Keep Out!” If no critic quite seems able to transcribe Dylan’s muffled words on the recording, one plausible transcription by the writer Tony Attwood can help place the song in the present discussion. Attwood categorizes the song as “the reflection of a man who was not always there when needed by the woman who has the toughest of experiences and who really needs his support.”<sup>66</sup> But the song as Attwood transcribes it at least allows for an auto-allegorical vocational reading that parallels Greil Marcus’s observation (quoted by Attwood) of the song as “a trance, a waking dream, a whirlpool . . . . Words are floated together in a dyslexia *that is music itself*—a dyslexia that seems meant to prove the claims of music over words, to see just how little words can do” (my emphasis).

In the critical fiction of this book, however, “I’m Not There” purveys words and vocal performance not to demonstrate music’s objective superiority to them but rather to mark the point at which Dylan would use music to signify his subjective turning away from listeners. This turn has none of the self-confident esprit of his previous “farewell” songs where he heads for another, supposedly more freewheeling future. And unlike his damnation of his “rock” métier in “Get Your Rocks Off,” “I’m Not There” laments his reluctant disaffection from his medium’s colluding with the desire for public attention. The song locates Dylan privately removed from this “Christ-forsaken-angel,” who fails to “hear me cry” precisely for the failure to realize “her” spiritual potential. Here the feminine figure represents “music itself” in the way it caters to public criteria. Reversing his relation to the innocent creative muse he pursues in “Mr. Tambourine Man,” Dylan finds lacking what he thinks he can otherwise bring “*her*” with his brand of lyric. “She” herself mourns how he’s “not there” for her now:

Things are all right and she’s all too tight  
In my neighbourhood she cries both day and night

I know it because it was there  
 It's a milestone but she's down on her luck  
 And she's daily salooning about to make a hard earned buck; I was there.

"In my neighbourhood" of composing songs, "she cries both day and night" thanks to "her" existential *unconscience*, so to speak. "She" wears, one might say, not a "milestone" but a millstone for having to "saloon[] about [i.e., play to the crowd] to make a hard earned buck."

Dylan confesses that he himself once did the same ("I was there") but that now he's "not there." He declares himself not beholden to any public, even as he still believes in composing songs the way she otherwise might have done:

No, I don't belong to her, I don't belong to anybody  
 She's my Christ-forsaken-angel but she don't hear me cry  
 She's a lone hearted mystic and she can't carry on  
 When I'm there she's all right, but then she's not, when I'm gone.

So for him, she remains a "lone hearted mystic" whose spiritual potential "she can't carry on" or forward toward his subjectively conditional relation to life and song. If he still believes in her spiritual capacity ("I believe that she'd look upon the side that used to care"), in her present state she has denied it or doesn't "honour" *his* effort to honor that potential, all of which reinforces his terming her "my Christ-forsaken-angel." In a very real sense, "I'm Not There" brings us back to Dylan's *Bringing It All Back Home* song "I Want You," only with the vocational stakes more spiritually than lyrically centered. He now unequivocally wants his lyrical medium to reach for "the kingdom . . . so high above her."

This inward movement paradoxically away from the song that records it characterizes the deeper basement of Dylan's *Basement* songs and positions them in spiritual territory. One might call each song a veritable "sign on the cross," a phrase deriving from another song in this collection. "Sign on the Cross," part song-lyric and part recitative prose poem, expresses two notable themes, perhaps the most obvious pointing to the Christian crucifixion scene: "that sign on the cross just layin' up on top of the hill." But noting Dylan's humorous performance of it, some commentators take the song for a "mock spiritual" or an "ironic prank," itself ironically in line with the traditionally understood intention behind the mocking Roman sign placed on Jesus' cross: "King of the Jews." If so, the song might do more than suggest Christianity's final ineffectiveness.<sup>67</sup> Both readings, however, elide the autobiographical review, affirmed from Dylan's singular existential perspective, tugging at the song's surface. In the past, he tried ("oh for so awf'ly long") to maintain a certain artistic self-integrity ("I just try to be"). He has inscribed that effort in many songs from *Bringing It All Back Home* through *Blonde on Blonde*. Yet quite literally capitalizing on the spiritual drive that motivated his work from the beginning ("oh it's a gold mine/. . . so fine"), he became "all so misled" by having achieved exceptional public notice. Even when he was starting out ("when I was just a bawlin' child"), he had made his vocational choice ("I saw what

I wanted to be”) and still holds to that self-image. “And it’s all for the sake/Of that picture I should see,” despite having got distracted from this goal (“lost on the moon”) by caring about his public image.

Dylan’s fickle and flickering desire for public approbation cut him off (“As I heard the front door slam”) from the spiritual motivation behind composing and performing songs; and so the “sign on the cross” signifies what “worries me” now. Yet his sense of having lost his spiritual relation to his work, which for him constitutes “that old key to kingdom,” allows him to gauge how he “used to be.” And when he now holds to that ideal (“when I hold my head high”), he can see how others close to him fail that test as well: “I see my ol’ friends go by.” If “that ol’ sign on the cross” at all has the ironic overtones some critics suppose, it consists of Dylan’s mocking himself for sometimes betraying the primacy of his subjective relation to his work to the public powers that be.<sup>68</sup> The song’s title primarily refers, then, not to the Jesus whose followers came to worship him by the “sign of the cross,” but to a Dylan attempting to inscribe the “X” or cross for “nothing” in his consciousness: a sign of both the failure and yet persistently generative ideal of a self become *self* that marks his work. And the prose section of “Sign on the Cross” extends this viewpoint to others besides himself. Each of us carries within us a criterion or “sign” of vocational integrity that we proceed to surrender. “We” can all “see” it: the sign hovers over us (“layin’ up on top of the hill”) making us mindful of what to do with/in our lives.

Understood as a signifier of vocational direction, the “sign on the cross” stands for human conscience absent its religionist or externally imposed meaning: “Yes, we thought it might have disappeared long ago, but I’m here to tell you, friends, that . . . it’s there still.” This subjective reappearance of the “sign” in everyone justifies Dylan’s continuing to inscribe the same “X” in his songs. Neither he nor they can postpone deciding for vocational integrity, for “just a little time is all you need, you might say.” Sooner or later, procrastinating that decision *becomes* one’s spiritual decision. This reading makes sense of the otherwise baffling statement about “the bird is here and you might want to enter it.” Heylin and others transcribe the line as Dylan sings it on the *Tapes*: “Later on you might find a door you might want to enter, but of course the door might be closed.” Christopher Ricks and his companion editors transcribe it a little differently:

Because the bird is here and you might want to enter it, but, of course, the door  
Might be closed, but I  
Just would like to tell you one time  
If I don’t see you again, that the thing is, that the sign on the cross is the thing  
you might need the most<sup>69</sup>

All of these versions indicate that he and anyone else deserve mockery for not heeding the subjectively qualified criterion or ideal that the “sign” signifies. Such an eventuality results in a double irony that can also redound to any one of us. Whoever mocks the ideal, here imaged by the “bird,” as if crucifies it. For that act nullifies the opportunity (“the door/Might be closed”) for one to confront the real as much as any person can

confront it on one's own singular yet infinitely various terms. One instead reduces freedom to definitions of self sanctioned by one's objective and objectifying cultural situation.

This conclusion inversely outlines Dylan's own vocational decisiveness. "Sign on the Cross" constitutes an *apologia pro sua vita* in which he justifies his pursuit of self through art on the basis of its making him continually aware of "the sign on the cross . . . the thing you might need the most." With "you" a self-reference at this point in the song, for him to take "the sign on the cross" as "*just* a sign on the cross" (my emphasis), an object to worship rather than a pretext for existential becoming, would amount to turning his songs into vocational nonsense. Through the lens of his *Basement* songs, he can instead "chisel" or turn every experience, even of external celebrity ("the championship") and most of all his songs, into a positive vocational move. They would then allow him to elude entrapment within this or that fixed identity ("in prison") or sense of fatalism (as if "your days are numbered") or sense that they had no possible relevance for others but were just mumblings made in his solitary confinement. The only way to resist public dictations of self is to stay "strong" by letting the "sign on the cross/. . . begin[] to worry you."

Dylan composes "Sign on the Cross" with the same subjective sensibility that impels his other *Basement* compositions. It reaffirms his artistic motivation: to regard all positive and negative experiences as pointing back first and foremost to his inner relation to existence through the intimate conduit of his art. He would construe his songs as signs of *that*. A kind of *aide-de-mémoire*, "Sign on the Cross" defines Dylan's other *Basement Tapes* and his lyrical work at large as a means to keep his attention focused on the X or final anonymity of his *self*.





## Confessions of a Cowboy Angel: *John Wesley Harding*

Before I wrote *John Wesley Harding* I discovered something about those earlier songs I had written. I discovered that when I used words like ‘he’ and ‘it’ and ‘they’ and talking about other people, I was really talking about nobody but me.

– Bob Dylan

To judge others is to view matters from the standpoint of externality rather than inwardness. It is arrogance and impertinence. What others owe to me is none of my business.

– Simon Critchley

Autobiography is an exercise in self-forgiveness.

– Janet Malcolm

### 1 Dylan making peace with Bob Dylan and others

Most critical interpreters of Dylan’s *John Wesley Harding* have cited the “allegorical overtones” of its songs.<sup>1</sup> If, as I have tried to maintain in the last four chapters, most of his other songs exhibit this characteristic as well, the album *John Wesley Harding* is special for its explicit reliance on this Dylanesque rhetorical reflex. To begin with, cited personages such as John Wesley Harding (a.k.a. John Wesley Hardin), Tom Paine, St. Augustine, and even the three wise kings in the album’s liner notes written by Dylan are not who they are in any conventional, historical or legendary sense. They symbolize something else, in a quite different register of meaning, the only question being which one.

At first glance, the songs clearly possess the air of moral parables like the line from “The Wicked Messenger”: “If ye cannot bring good news, then don’t bring any.” Even then, the moral point most often remains elusive, at times precisely because it flirts with banality. Paul Williams contends that the *John Wesley Harding* songs come across as half-finished artifacts, even “puzzles ready to be solved, but [which] . . . are for the most part unsolvable because the songwriter either has not tried to or has consciously chosen not to resolve the contradictions arising from his spontaneous techniques of generating phrases and images.”<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, many critics have tried to solve these puzzles. Taking his cue particularly from “I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine,” Tim Riley

argues that the songs outline Dylan's specific declaration of independence from his audience: "this record is . . . the beginning of Dylan's detachment from his audience as a generational hero, as somebody listeners identify with as a spokesperson for their age group."<sup>3</sup> But again as I have argued, Dylan had attempted one or another version of this divorce before.<sup>4</sup>

From a different angle, other critics note that *John Wesley Harding* marked Dylan's concerted separation from his contemporary rock 'n' roll métier. By themselves, his low-keyed vocal and acoustic performances on the album arguably constitute a de facto rejection of the psychedelic goings-on in his pop-musical environment at the time. The same effect even surrounds the apparently simple black and white photograph on the album cover. It shows a modestly bearded Bob Dylan, shorn of his *Blonde on Blonde* locks (while wearing the same jacket), alongside several adult figures, each one seemingly at odds with stereotypes of the countercultural generation. Behind them, moreover, the viewer can see a large, dark tree pockmarked with sunlit spots. Both aspects of this visual scene, and what his *Basement Tapes* songs covertly imply, all but dissociate Dylan's artistic identity from the celebrity theatrics of rock 'n' roll peers like the Beatles with their multifaced album cover for *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and a little later in the year the Rolling Stones' holographs on their *Their Satanic Majesties Request*.

Yet such critical efforts to solve the "puzzles" that the *John Wesley Harding* songs pose have to contend with how Dylan, especially as I have argued with his *Basement Tapes* songs, often struggles to determine an ethically parallel if still radically distinct accommodation with the supposed audience of his songs. Williams' judgment that the new songs lead to intractable ambiguities extends even to the just mentioned album's cover. That apparently straightforward photograph and what it likely signifies within the social, political, and musical milieu of the US American mid-1960s might in fact entail a double irony, for one could maintain that faces actually *do* appear in the spaces on that sunlit-speckled tree.<sup>5</sup> On one hand, then, the photograph suggestively undermines Dylan's relation to musical peers, such as he had already done in the *Basement Tapes* song "Too Much of Nothing." On the other hand, he arguably ends up doing *what* his peers do, that is, goofing on middle-class audiences and/or would-be interpreters, or at least toying with conventional codes of how others might regard him and his latest musical-lyrical work.

Readings of Dylan's album cover, however, obviously provide only a tenuous example of his double-meaning practices, which more convincingly appear in the *John Wesley Harding* songs themselves. If they sketchily criticize Dylan's surrounding social-musical sphere, they also allegorize an ethos that dialectically counters this implicit criticism, a move that itself goes in two semiotic directions. One allegorical thread holds that the songs refer to Bob Dylan's personal and artistic life, even as they veer away from any such bio-objectivist translation. Both the album's inaugural and eponymous song and Dylan's own jacket notes illustrate these two movements. "John Wesley Harding" invites commentators to connect its abbreviated narrative with Bob Dylan's life and work up to that time, including his then contemporary status as a celebrity figure and cultural icon. The song consequently falls into the genre of conventional autobiographical

composition, and hardly any critic of the song misses the opportunity to read it that way. It is Bob Dylan whose “name . . . it did resound” over the national airwaves or “All across the telegraph.”

Other critics note that Dylan infuses his self-referential subject with the social-mythological patina of the American Western, in which he casts himself as an outlaw hero. Thus, Andy Gill endorses this generic mix when he lifts the song’s protagonist and topos into the more general sphere of Dylan’s “writing . . . about the outlaw myth” in “American folklore,” especially the outlaw as a Robin Hood figure. Gill argues that the song also stands for “an allegorical reflection upon [Dylan’s] own career”: his return to composing and performing songs after his 1966 motorcycle accident, and his “helping emancipate the disenfranchised . . . smiting with his pen only those who most deserved it, before evading the attentions of fame and the futile attempts to pin him down to specific stance or message.” Tim Riley gets even more specific with this kind of biographical reading. He maintains that the song stands as “a metaphor for [Dylan’s] self-conscious relationship with the world of rock,” with the outlaw Dylan figure “the music’s dry sage, the reputed gunslinger-in-exile who suddenly shows up back in town, downs psychedelia’s show-biz camp with understated aplomb, and rides into the sunset with his woman at his side.”<sup>6</sup>

Plausible as these biographical readings of “John Wesley Harding” are, they bypass the inward trajectory of Dylan’s autobiographical act. In the end, of what relevance is that subject to listeners except for those with an ethically irrelevant curiosity about all things “Bob Dylan”? The same goes for Dylan’s attention to his ambiguous moral probity as an artist. Why should one care about him using the occasion of songwriting to pound his chest while declaring his independence from the current “show-biz camp,” or to remind us that his songs speak for “the disenfranchised”? Indeed, where in *this* song does he manifest any such “Robin Hood” attributes? What we actually encounter in “John Wesley Harding” is Dylan’s withdrawal from *any* biographical-ethical interpretation of it. Conventional autobiographical readings of the song miss taking to heart the consequences of his conspicuous mythologizing of his own public myth. Simply by adding the “g” to John Wesley Hardin’s name constitutes an elusive, minimalist signifier that declares his work as fictive through and through. That spontaneously deconstructive act makes all the difference, since it in effect frees Dylan from his songs’ dependence on external including ostensibly biographical references. Like its namesake album consisting of songs riddled with characters like Tom Paine and St. Augustine, “John Wesley Harding” quickly complicates other historical allusions as well. Clinton Heylin and Gill outline the “real” (my marks) John Wesley Hardin’s life and, as one could best term them, his non-Dylanesque, psychopathological exploits.<sup>7</sup>

But Dylan’s perverse doubling with Hardin is anything but innocuous or simply a demo for a Dylan once again unsurprisingly doing the unexpected. If nothing else, it rhetorically dramatizes his separation from his art’s performing some pro bono social service. Calling himself “a friend to the poor” in the song surely makes “Harding” resonate with the early “protest” Dylan. Yet if the Harding-Dylan persona acknowledges having taken “a stand” in that social-political sense, what stand, as he states near the end

of the song, does he then claim to take “With his lady by his side”? Why refer to another stand unless it differs from the former? The song’s last stanza actually suggests his deliberate complication of *any* social stand: “no charge against him/Could they prove.”<sup>8</sup> Dylan here comes out of one vocational closet only to go into another, more private one, for which in this book I have reserved the term “autobiographical.” The song’s semiotic register shifts from an externalist autobiographical view of his career to a very different auto-*inscription* that slides away from its empirical-biographical source.

The last section of “John Wesley Harding” intimates Dylan’s self-conscious sense of his vocational nonposition as understood in public terms, and yet simultaneously his conviction about moving in a different vocational direction: “He was never known/To make a foolish move.” In *what* direction, if not, as my argument has it, toward a concentrated encounter with the real on his own terms? What anyone can say publicly about Dylan’s personal and/or artistic life only serves as a pretext for him to determine his ongoing, subjective relation to both his life and work. Far from exemplifying a narcissistic project, moreover, the attractive force of a Dylan song consists in its tracking and approaching its own mind-numbing void, while this same move provides an ethical ground to his otherwise wholly *self*-concerned work. The reference to his being “a friend to the poor” has to do with the poor *in spirit*: anyone who feels alienated in/from her or his existence, and not necessarily just because of egregious social circumstances. As he retroactively interprets his past songs, he sees that they simultaneously transcended social notions of alienation. Dylan judges his work as having “opened many a door” in his social environment (“the countryside”), but in accord with William Blake’s well-known vision about opening the “doors of perception” in “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”: “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.”<sup>9</sup>

Dylan’s having “opened many a door” refers to possibilities of freedom specifically regarding any person’s ability to commit him-/herself to coming upon the ego-erasing real. That encounter uncovers the residual “self,” as much as possible shed of both reactionary and revolutionary social definitions, so that his vocational quest amounts to a subjective affair even as it has potential objective ramifications for others through the venue of his artistic work. If his past songs criticized certain people like those on “Maggie’s farm” who demanded that he practice noncreative work, it was also because *they* did not analogously engage in “honest” spiritual-existential pursuits: “But he was never known/To hurt an honest man.” Likewise he takes a “stand” with “his lady” precisely to *forestall* inquisitions into his private life. In this Dylan song as in so many others, “she” stands primarily for his own mus/ing double. In composing his *John Wesley Harding* songs, he likewise reminds himself not to succumb to temptations about his social-artistic status as promoted by musical acolytes and fans. But since these temptations persist, Dylan acknowledges the incompleteness of his “stand”: “soon the situation there/Was *all but* straightened out” (my emphasis). At most, he can “lend a helping hand” to others: as if “with a gun in every hand,” he deploys his lyrics to re-mind [*sic*] if not direct them to determine their own vocational direction on a spiritual par with his.

The other bookend to *John Wesley Harding* makes much the same point about personal vocational determination combined with an ethical reconsideration of others. What could be more openly allegorical, cuing reader-listeners to engage the songs in similar fashion, than the album's extended, liner-note narrative entitled "Three Kings"?<sup>10</sup> The kings represent three species of audience, meaning the way Dylan imagines the public might apprehend both his work and him as artist. First we have the fan-listener characterized by poor sensitivity to the question of existence and to the Dylan song that raises it: he has "a broken nose." What with his "broken arm," the second listener fails to really grasp [*sic*] or enact in his/her own life what the Dylan song calls for: vocational change. Last comes the person simply "broke": someone so messed up (e.g., with drugs or other psychological problems) or else, given the pun on "broke," wholly taken by materialist desires, that he can't begin to comprehend the existential tenor of the songs. The three kings also represent three typical attitudes toward Dylan's work as he imagines them. The first listener's relation consists of idolatry. He takes for self-certain wisdom everything Dylan says or what he thinks Dylan says in his songs: "Faith is the key!" said the first." Punning on the image of "broken arm" of a record player, the second "king" reduces sense to sound. He stands in for the rock-music buff who misses the existence-gambit grounding Dylan's lyrics. The third audience figure focuses on Dylan's work in terms of "Bob Dylan," the authoritative cultural celebrity: "the key is Frank!" This listener can even accept Dylan as someone writing songs mostly to make money, whether to avoid becoming "broke" or else simply to gain fame and power in the public marketplace.

But "Frank" represents the artist Dylan simply trying to be "frank" about if not directly expressing his vision of life. This Dylan appears "late in the evening," or what he judges to be relatively "late" in his career. He writes his *John Wesley Harding* songs keeping in mind the strong stuff of existential frankness ("preparing the meat"), which intention amounts to his confession of his real or bottom-line self: "dishing himself out" to and before others. This is the present Dylan whom the three kings, various aspects of the public, now confront. Unlike before when he openly resisted them, Dylan alias Frank now allows the public their say, and unlike his stance in his most recent officially released album *Blonde on Blonde*, he no longer regards the public as an obstacle to his creative activity. The real "Frank" therefore "opened the door" to others, despite the so-called kings' abject relation to his celebrity status: they "crawled in" to his place. He himself construes his sanctum as comprised of his wife and a figure named "Terry Shute." Some critics have taken "Shute" as a thinly disguised, autobiographical reference to Bob Dylan's business manager at the time, Albert Grossman, with whom he was at odds over financial control of his work. But in allegorical terms, Terry Shute's name connotes an ironic pun on Terre Haute (Indiana) meaning "high land" or "high ground." Compared with "haute" or higher standards for his work, this "Shute" figure regards it from a decidedly second-rate, far lower perspective.<sup>11</sup>

When the kings arrive, Shute's "in the midst of prying open a hairdresser," thus playing on Dylan/Frank's public image for the sake of popular appeal in the most superficial sense. Shute also represents Dylan's *own* (remaining) care about that image, something he can no longer deny. His wife informs him that "They're here," signifying

that he can't avoid the public any longer and must decide what his relation to them will be. Hearing this decision-time bell, Dylan a.k.a. Terry drops his "drawer." This act could of course figuratively refer to his underwear, a trope for what he previously kept hidden and prevented from open expression in the past. With his new album, Dylan feels forced to expose that vision once and for all. On the other hand, "drawer" could instead signify the present *album* as a container-like object filled with visions that up to now have made him famous. In that case, they now appear alien to him, which is why he then rubs "the eye," a trope for "vision" (my marks). Together these images suggest that Dylan regards himself as having recently been more or less in a state of creative abeyance.

More accurately, given his interim *Basement* compositions, he admits to not having done any serious artistic-musical work for public perusal, so that outsiders might very well wonder if he has done any creative work at all. Dylan/Terry understandably wants to know what the kings are like, apparently concerned about their reaction to his present public appeal. Does he still have any? Frank's wife says one of the kings, probably the "broke" one concerned with the issue of fame and fortune, has "got a broken vessel," meaning that Dylan's present work can't make him any more famous than he once was or, alternatively, can't take others any further in visionary terms than what it once did. But more to the point, the broken vessel augurs that from the perspective of his present spiritual-existential stand, all materialist goals are out of the question for Dylan/Frank. Insofar as Terry represents a Dylan still concerned with his reception in the public world no matter his newfound determination not to be, he wants to know how many so-called kings are knocking at his door. Not surprisingly, he guesses "three," of course in accord with the Jesus myth, here insinuating how a side of Dylan remains attracted to the cachet of a public savior.

As a counter to Dylan/Terry, "Vera," Latin for "true," is Frank's wife, the vision of existence to which he is wedded in his work. Dylan/Frank tells the kings to "Get up off my floor," that is, don't worship him as a mythic figure who once supposedly possessed a truth that he could disseminate to others at will. The second king, who construes Dylan as a performer making a major impact on the contemporary rock 'n' roll and cultural scene, thinks that Frank should pursue his "better half," musical talent. But Frank takes even that recommendation "lightly." He notes that the former muse who inspired his rock 'n' roll songs is "in the back of the house, flaming it up with an arrogant man," that is, the former Dylan and any performer committed to rock 'n' roll for the public splash he or she can make. Whatever their avowed intentions, for them the quest for personal truth comes second. Frank eschews that vocational notion; he wants to know "what's on our minds today," the existential here and now, to which "Nobody answered."

Dylan's old performing self might have taken this lack of response as further evidence for his alienation from others. As "Terry Shute," he stages himself criticizing the general public's lack of concern for serious issues, its tendency to "scorn" and "abuse" him as well as the downtrodden, and for not practicing "Forgiveness." That's why Dylan/Terry instinctively blames the kings as a "motley crew," for they represent the public's pressure on him to compose work that "travels outward." At first, he feels

no one can save people who succumb to such values. But the new Dylan/Frank sees through this Dylan-as-Terry fatalism. He recognizes it as a subtle temptation to get him back to performing if for nothing more than material self-interest. "Frank" rejects this option outright ("Get out of here") and uses a comical inflation of biblical idiom to underscore his determination: "Come ye no more!" Shute quickly metamorphoses into a figure more representative of the music industry's attitude than of Dylan's: the subtle publicist Shute/Dylan "left the room willingly," thinking that other artists-cum-celebrities can now replace the new Frank/Dylan.

Shute also leaves Dylan/Frank alone with a more responsible spiritual viewpoint. In fact, the "Frank" aspect of Dylan ends up defending the three "wise" men after all. His altered view of others features them "astonished" as they recognize the elusive yet somehow more important tenor of his new work. The first king, we recall, was already cognizant of Dylan's past spiritual bent, but in a "lopsided" or sensationalist sense: this king's "shoes were too big and his crown was wet," that is, due to soppy claims about Dylan's putatively privileged wisdom. Now, however, he speaks for the other kings and, a verbal *trompe l'oeil*, refers listeners to Dylan's "new record" where "Frank," now openly focused on the real, gets acknowledged as the "key" to what the new songs concern. The key to Dylan's *John Wesley Harding* songs lies in this new spiritual stance: "'That's right,' said Frank, 'I am'" that key. Representative of Dylan's public following, the first king yet asks for guidance to understanding the specifics of Dylan's work in his new album; he wants Frank/Dylan to "open it up" for the three. Frank plays with this locution, revealing himself in a state of intense reflection: "his eyes closed . . . suddenly," opening "them as wide as a tiger." In effect, Frank asks his audience, "how far would you like to go in?" His songs, that is, ask listeners to enact a parallel inwardness by moving beyond inherited social interpolations of selfhood.

But as average listeners, the kings only want to go "just far enough so's we can say that we've been there." In the end, they only want the old, iconoclastic Dylan, of which Frank suggests the *John Wesley Harding* songs partly consist. He gives them what they expect: breaking social norms, "he sprung up, ripped off his shirt and began waving it in the air." But while his ensuing songs might provide his audience with the occasional social aperçu ("A lightbulb" or insight "fell from one of his pockets"), Dylan aims for more. His songs contradict tidbits of social wisdom: "he stamped it out with his foot." Breaking the bulb tells us that his songs strongly ("he moaned") confront the listener with "real" issues that pertain to her or his life. In that way they break the barrier between life and art: he "punched his fist through the plate-glass window." Frank asks the kings if that would satisfy them. The second king thinks it would, but only because he essentially deals with the forceful attraction of Dylan's pop-musical work. The third king doesn't know, since for him the lyrics are secondary to the singer/celebrity they advertise. The two types of audience effectively elide the vocational stakes of Frank/Dylan's songs, and even the first king remains "silent" before Dylan's question, since he can't see how the lyrics transcend an iconoclastic critique of the social status quo.

At this point, "Vera," Dylan's vision of the "true," enters the room stating that "Shute" is going: Dylan is leaving behind the commercial aspect of his work that he

acknowledges to himself once played a role in his vocational concerns. “She” then asks if the three kings can contribute anything beyond the “Shute” misunderstanding of Dylan’s work. Yet when “Nobody answered,” a frank Dylan in effect asserts that it doesn’t matter how exactly audiences encounter his work. There’s no one way anyway, and he believes that his new songs can coax others into eventually assimilating their spiritual import, even if incompletely. The first king therefore gets his nose “fixed”: he can *sense* the spiritual-existential drift of Dylan’s songs. His “arm . . . healed,” the second king now has the potential to *grasp* their existential thrust, if only in a very general way. Just by being drawn to or somehow “made rich” by the songs from Dylan’s public reputation, the third king stays in the realm where he might possibly understand them. Dylan’s three imaginary audience representatives suddenly feel fulfilled by encountering the “frank” Dylan behind the *John Wesley Harding* album. He lets them think what they want, with each of them “blowing horns” about their respective relations to his work. Even the “pop”-oriented “king” comes away from this encounter without having to surrender that viewpoint: “I’ve never been so happy in all my life,’ said the one with all the money.”

Dylan can now accept it all. He need not hide his reconciliation with his public the way he has done in *The Basement Tapes*. Through his latest muse “Vera,” he states that his vocational intention all along was to “moderate” his demands both on his efforts to come upon the real and on the capacity of others to grasp *that* about his work. This was so despite his previous anxious antics (“goosing yourself all over the room”) to justify his artistic ways to the public orientations of the three kings. Dylan accepts a modest poetics, one in which he no longer needs to combat his “Shute” self. Nor need he hold others to the absolute standard he maintains for his work. After all, he realizes that he still possesses a competitive edge (“cleaning his ax”) regarding both his “pop” musical status and, the better to urge his vision of life on others, his artistic ambition. In other words, he still cares about his public image, dialectically qualified as not an imperative. Thus, Shute “places his hand on [Frank’s] shoulder” near the end of the parable and asks him if he “hurt” his hand when he punched the window while trying to break free from such concerns. The replaceable window signifies that a new Dylan will appear in the album’s songs, one less anxious in poetic and spiritual ambition. Perhaps unexpectedly, he keeps modest in stating this new poetics, for “I don’t believe so” is his response to Shute’s question. But this statement also possesses a “tentative” option-clause allowing that he may yet believe in breaking through.

## 2 Self-judgments

As Dylan’s beginning and ending parables outline, *John Wesley Harding* comprises a group of songs in which he variously stages his along with others’ failures to live up to a spiritual ideal understood as dedication to getting to the real. But he also tries to forgive both himself and them for this failure, even as he holds to this standard in composing his lyrical work. Neither goal is easy to achieve. For instance, one can sense an almost overwhelming peremptory pressure for him to judge his previous



artistic work in harshly negative terms. This is the case with the song “The Wicked Messenger.” Who is the messenger, why is he “wicked,” although almost certainly not in the then-colloquial argot of “wicked” as meaning special? Critical readings of the song accordingly vary. Perhaps taking his cue from the messenger’s thumbing his nose at others’ questions, John Hinchey thinks “Wicked Messenger” concerns Dylan’s “crisis of faith in his audience.” Oliver Trager, however, views the figure as also a poet who has forfeited his role as a “teller of truth,” since he has served up a “message for his own ends.”<sup>12</sup> This reading resonates with the song’s biblical allusion that Paul Williams cites from Proverbs 13:17: “A wicked messenger falleth into mischief; but a faithful ambassador is health.” Yet Williams himself remains uncertain about whether Dylan’s final determination to be the deliverer of “good news” is ironic.<sup>13</sup> Using a different biblical precedent, Seth Rogovoy sees Dylan accepting his part in the sacred prophetic tradition. Dylan here “portrays the plight” not of the poet but “of a prophet whose prophecies are unwanted by those who need to hear them.” For Rogovoy, Dylan’s messenger specifically conjures up a passage from Ezekiel where “the messenger has returned from a mystical experience” in which he claims to have seen figures whose “soles of their feet . . . glittered with the color of burnished copper” and who appeared ‘like fiery coals, burning like torches’ (Ezekiel 1:7, 13).<sup>14</sup>

These wide-ranging, often incompatible interpretations of “Wicked Messenger” reduce to the question about whether Dylan is claiming or disclaiming prophethood. As we have seen from “Three Kings,” however, he regards both himself and his audience, whose attitudes he internalizes vis-à-vis his own work, in multiple terms. This complicates judgments about what the song actually narrates: neither his having quested for true prophethood (Rogovoy) nor, as Anthony Scaduto sees it, having “deceived” others “into believing he was a prophet who had been given the Truth.”<sup>15</sup> But Dylan as the self-referenced messenger in the song judges himself as once having succumbed to the role of prophet *as such* and at the bequest of others, which according to his present ethical standards in itself qualifies his former vocational position as “wicked.” He had assumed the role of a false “messenger” in his songs simply by having adopted a quasi-prophetic, authoritative stance: “From Eli he did come.” More, he directed his criticism against others mostly for their spiritual impoverishment.

Dylan abjures precisely *that* vocational role in “Wicked Messenger.” For instance, he reflects on how he “multiplied the smallest matter,” often at first motivated by petty grievances, such as biographical readings of “Positively 4th Street” would suggest. His previously defiant stances in those songs and relations with the public, both journalists and various types of listeners, also stemmed from his having taken a righteous moral-existential position. When doing that, he had mimicked the vocation or calling of biblical prophets who believed unequivocally that God authorized their words to others: “When questioned who had sent for him/He answered with his thumb.” But in Dylan’s case, his artistic position, ultimately grounded in a hard-earned “nothing,” hardly endowed him with such authority, so that now he regards those songs as a means essentially to “flatter” himself by rejecting others.<sup>16</sup> From a different angle, “Wicked Messenger” relates how he surrendered and tied his artistic reputation to public performances (“the assembly hall”), restricting his very ability to assess his vocational role.

On the other hand, if only in mind he had already moved away from such performances. He stayed “*behind* the assembly hall” (my emphasis) where “he made his bed,” already retaining a private space and sense of self from which “Oftentimes he could be seen returning.” Others could sense that he held something back from his performed work. Unable to avoid it yet frustrated with his own public demand on himself, he abruptly stopped performing: “Until one day he just appeared” leaving behind only a “note” to his audience stating that he has had to move on because “The soles of my feet, I swear they’re burning.” That “note” refers us back to the present set of *John Wesley Harding* songs. The pun and image of “soles” signify the “burning” pressure he places on himself to pursue a spiritually honest art on his own non-public terms. This choice results in his envisioning a dwindling audience for his work. But if “the leaves” and leavings “began to fallin;” Dylan adopts an Old Testament trope to express his wish to escape from what had become the tyrannical, enslaving demands on his artistic *métier*: “the seas began to part.” His adoption of the Jewish precedent of exile underscores his single-minded spiritual intention regarding his future artistic work. Conversely, he reverts to a Christian trope to express how his new poetics will concern a secular-spiritual version of the “good news,” the words for “gospel,” which he intends to tell others: “If ye cannot bring good news, then don’t bring any.”<sup>17</sup>

Casting himself as this *good* messenger, Dylan clearly means to invite a more diverse audience for his work than any ideologically minded countercultural crowd at the time would have valued. But then why does he continue to compose songs expressing this wish in what amounts to an elliptical style demonstrated by the gnomic parable of “Wicked Messenger”? His songs have become ruminations on the existential spirituals that he wants his songs to instantiate. Governing Dylan’s latest acts of composition, this poetics risks isolating him from the very audiences to whom he now wishes to bring his brand of “good news.” But that inscribed wish alone marks his difference from before. In the song “I Am a Lonesome Hobo,” he stages the logical consequences of his former complaints about others, which makes the song a complaint about such complaints. Before, his songs protested others’ “bad faith” (my marks), understood in relation to his own spiritually driven concerns.<sup>18</sup> For example, feeling spiritually homeless or hobo-like became a bellwether of his hold on the existential truth in his *Bringing It All Back Home* album. But in *John Wesley Harding*, the hobo figure represents his artistic self now imaginatively framed as having lost his artistic-cum-spiritual way. Like an inner-directed jeremiad, “I Am a Lonesome Hobo” confesses Dylan’s having delivered “nothing” but *bad* news to others. In metaphorical terms, the song fits Clinton Heylin’s surmise about its resembling eighteenth-century ballads that often staged “the last words of criminals on the gallows . . . recanting their wanton ways and warning others ‘not to do what I have done.’”<sup>19</sup>

So the song propagates a simple moral anyone can grasp.<sup>20</sup> Criticizing others for their spiritually bereft vision of existence, he imagines himself ending up without anyone (“family or friends”) with whom he would want to share his songs. His work would seem pointless, for he would have nothing and no one to write for: “Where another man’s life might begin/That’s exactly where mine ends.” Dylan had tried to avoid this dead-end vocational state of affairs. As the case of the second king in the

album's parable expressed, he arguably used the popular cachet of rock 'n' roll to entice others ("tried bribery") to take a spiritual slant on their lives, but as he sees it he failed to become either a wholehearted performer or a spiritually dedicated artist. He therefore suffered artistic isolation in both contexts. He "served time for everything" even as he ironically became rich and famous, certainly not an artist "'beggin' on the street." On the contrary, he felt "prosperous," seeming to have everything and everyone at his disposal to listen to his songs: "There was nothing I did lack."<sup>21</sup> His public success as a singer/songwriter/performer ("I had fourteen-karat gold in my mouth" and "silk upon my back") was self-evident to everyone. But he soon realized that getting famous by "blam[ing]" others *in* his songs ("I did not trust my brother") constituted an act of pride that both negated their spiritual value for himself and left him an idiosyncratic "lonesome hobo" in relation to others. Unlike what occurs in his previous songs, Dylan's couched, parabolic confession of "shame" about this past defines this song as a private act of penance in the form of his drawing a simple moral about how anyone ought to live his or her life. The style he employs to deliver this message appropriately takes the form of a traditional precedent: "Kind ladies and kind gentlemen" suggests a humble relation to them, as does his confessing to "petty jealousies" during his climb to fame.

However, the song carries a second reading that has the makings to upset the first. The representative moral at the song's end quickly turns idiosyncratic by leaving the listener with a paradoxical message in which Dylan opines that one should "live by no man's code." Besides holding that each person has his/her own vocational path to follow, "I Am a Lonesome Hobo" advocates not playing the game of social success *at all*, which patently precludes adopting the criteria of others' values to judge himself as well as them.<sup>22</sup> Isn't that what he has just criticized himself for having done in the past: gone off on his own? Just when Dylan offers a hermeneutic olive branch to his listeners, he appears to legitimize grounds that would take it back, for while he acknowledges the value of not judging others but only himself for a lackadaisical spiritual awareness, he eschews their judgment *of him* on the same grounds. One should "hold your judgment for yourself," but only because applying that code to others will lead one to the state of isolation that Dylan admits to now experiencing "on this road" of his vocational journey.

"I Am a Lonesome Hobo" ends on a note of moral ambiguity that applies to more than one song on *John Wesley Harding*. Take Dylan's "The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest" with *its* questionably morally nonmoral ending: "Nothing is revealed." The song traffics in a dialectically unnerving ethical position. Tim Riley terms this lengthy song the "centerpiece" of the album, but quickly qualifies this judgment by citing its "knowing odyssey of contradictions, philosophical patter, and open-ended suggestion" within "a mock-linear narrative with a punch line that sends home the comedy of phony truisms." An overexposed rhetorical and even self-certain assertion "keep[s] you guessing at the storyteller's intentions."<sup>23</sup> Other critics take the song as Dylan's thinly disguised autobiographical complaint about the business relations surrounding his art. Paul Williams gives a succinct depiction of what that allegory concerns. The young, eponymous character, Frankie Lee, obviously a pun for "frankly,"

is a screen for "Dylan as the rube who greedily accepts the money offered by his 'best friend,'" which "sets him free in a world of unlimited sex and power, lets him bop till he drops, which he does."<sup>24</sup> Williams' reading depends on the biographical equation of Judas Priest with Dylan's business manager at the time, Albert Grossman, also alluded to in "Three Kings," who had capitalized excessively on Dylan's musical-lyrical success. One might therefore claim that the "guilty little neighbor boy" appearing at the end is "maybe the side of [Dylan] that knew better but said nothing."<sup>25</sup>

But these what one might term "vulgar" autobiographical readings tend to gloss over the subterranean autobiographical current of the song where Dylan plays out the possibility that he could have succumbed to the "Judas" temptation. Its biographical context notwithstanding, "The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest" more particularly stages a situation in which his vocational will to compose songs at an existential-cum-spiritual pitch has arrived at a critical impasse. As "the best of friends," Frankie and Judas represent two contradictory sides of Dylan: Frankie corresponds to that part of him wanting to live and disclose life as "frankly" or squarely as one encounters the "nothing" that grounds it; Judas exemplifies Dylan's temptation to make his vision about this situation palatable to others and receive public credit for doing so. But how can he do the second if the first requires a subjective relation that he can only communicate indirectly? In any case, Dylan's incompatible selves make for his failure to live up to his vocational ideal. Even adopting the name "Judas Priest," a euphemism for the "Jesus Christ!" curse, confesses one side of Dylan's former willingness to have compromised the radical aspect of his vision of existence.

More to the point, his "Judas" side wanted to capitalize on performances of his songs stemming from the understandable desire for financial security. "Frankie Lee needed money one day," and performances could provide him with "a footstool" by and from which he could gain a firm purchase on such security. But by definition, a footstool is a small and figuratively impermanent base to rely on. It exposes Dylan's past vocational illusion that gaining financial security and/or fame might have afforded him space and time in which freely to do creative work. Moreover, his quest for security soon segued into an effort to ply a surefire method ("above a plotted plain") that would script his career. Finally his working to gain security turned into an alibi for spiritual laxity. Composing his songs *for* their public-performative value won him the usual perks of pleasure ("Take your pick"), and at first the "Frankie Lee" Dylan thought he could avoid their costing the loss of spiritual yield. After all, didn't his early songs criticize the social establishment? As Dylan alias Judas told him(self), "My loss will be your gain," and in fact his protest songs did "gain" him more and more capitalist largesse and fame.

"The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest" records Dylan's having wavered over this Mephistophelean pact. Frankie "put his fingers to his chin," but his "Judas" impulse to calculate his vocational moves for fame and fortune soon overwhelmed him: "But with the cold eyes of Judas on him/His head began to spin." He tried to resist the Judas "stare," the lure of pursuing further fame. "It's just my foolish pride" was how Dylan put it to himself while still hoping he might pursue the vocational goal he had begun to embrace in his *Bringing It All Back Home* period. But he couldn't find anywhere where he could feel "alone" or separate doing his art from performing it before a mass

public: "This is no place to hide." Dylan's vacillation didn't last, however, for he felt that he had to capitalize on his fame before the opportunity passed: "you'd better hurry up and choose/Which of those bills you want/Before they all disappear." Dylan/Frankie claimed he was going to "start my pickin' right now," that is, choosing between the external-popular and the internal-spiritual. But simply because he asked where Judas would be while he chose, Dylan knew what he was going to decide all along. His vocational prevarication didn't last vis-à-vis the strong attraction of becoming a major celebrity. More important, Dylan/Judas claimed that he could offer Dylan/Frankie "Eternity," the kind of immortality only fame can confer. Judas' cold bearing represents Dylan's having coldly tried to equate this promise with the worldly equivalent or bad infinity of "Paradise."<sup>26</sup> Dylan/Frankie could then only ironically protest, "I don't call" such immortality "anything."

But this stance turned out a papier-mâché defense against the temptation to acquire immortality in the public sphere. His minor resistance to "Judas" took the form of an aggressive, critical stance toward the spiritual failure of others: "Frankie Lee, he sat back down/Feelin' low and mean." He even thought he had eluded Judas' offer, but then "a passing stranger/Burst upon the [musical-artistic] scene," say in the guise of the latest rock star whose success resurrects the attractive dynamism of the popular medium for Dylan. In his recollection, he had by then cut his ties with past paternal influences like Woody Guthrie (his "father . . . deceased"), but like a "gambler" he felt that he had nothing to lose by returning to "Priest" and trying out a new strain of popular musical art akin to the "spiritual" (my marks) claims of many rock performers of the period. So once again and despite his doubts, he responded to the stranger who asked him who he was now that he had cut off ties with his past work, "Oh, yes, [his Judas self] is my friend." Dylan then finally experienced "fright" at having to face up to his Judas self's decision to mix his spiritual questing with the ethos beholden to the mass media or, the same thing, an amplified version of his public self-image.

Complicit with this trade-off, the stranger spoke "quiet as a mouse," that is, in a cliché-ridden fashion that signified Dylan's *own* effort to muffle his vocational compromise. The public-minded stranger informed Dylan/Frankie that Judas was somewhere "down the road/Stranded in a house." Frankie thus had a chance to escape Priest's hieratic clutches, but instead he panicked, "dropped everything and ran" straight back to Judas. Dylan momentarily feared that he would have lost his opportunity for social security and artistic fame if he left the Judas part of himself. Only then did his rationalization that he might be able to balance the spiritual with the material aspects of his vocation fail him completely. Judas' "house" figuratively represents the traditional "house of fame" that Frankie/Dylan didn't recognize as such at first: "What kind of house is this, he said,/Where I have come to roam?" Frankie had deluded himself not least because there was little real room to "roam," both creatively and spiritually, in this confining "house." Calling to mind the tenor of *Bringing It All Back Home*, Dylan/Priest had wrongly taken this pseudo-spiritual substitute as more of a "home" in keeping with his having sold out any semblance of a priestly activity.

The part of Dylan that chose fame and embraced celebrity status caused his Frankie side to experience an ineluctable anxiety: he "trembled" at this offering, a debased

version of Kierkegaard's "fear and trembling," with Dylan's version promising a loss rather than any leap of spiritual faith. Frankie lost "control" of his former vocational impetus: "Over everything which he had made/While the mission bells did toll," or when he had assumed he was adopting a spiritual stance in his songs. He had become blinded by fame ("that big house bright as any sun") and the manifold sexual opportunities associated with rock 'n' roll stardom, the figurative equivalent of a "house" with "four and twenty windows/And a woman's face in every one."<sup>27</sup> Yet Dylan's apparent choice of a materialist-oriented life and art included an existential proviso that resulted in an inverted "leap of faith." Frankie went "up the stairs" of public success "With a [my emphases] *soulful*, bounding *leap* [*sic*]," meaning with such a passion that he came to sense the uncanny vacuity of fame and fortune: "He began to make his midnight creep." Dylan here stages having pressed his "Judas Priest" relation to life and work to the point of where he experienced its vocational emptiness head on: the final inability of fame to provide him with spiritual sustenance, "Which is where he died of thirst."

One could claim that this experience exclusively pertains to Dylan "alone" given the exceptional circumstance of his fame, so that the song's recorded scene lacks a morally representative codicil. This is why he imagines others taking his self-involved crisis "out in jest," or as if comically irrelevant to their own lives. In the end, only in the guise of a figurative quasi-child, a "neighbor boy" or still innocent self, can Dylan treat his past situation with compassion: he "carried [his older self] to rest." The "neighbor boy" is *close* to his "Frankie Lee" and "Judas Priest" selves (my emphasis), but at last not identifiable with either. For some critics, the boy represents an unconvincing *deus ex machina* delivering a pithy yet enigmatic or frustratingly ambiguous moral commentary on what has transpired.<sup>28</sup> Yet he could also represent Dylan's guilt over having let himself down in terms of his vocational ideal: "he just walked along, alone/With his guilt so well concealed." The ersatz moral of Dylan's fall matters to no one but himself, so that instead of a representative moral lesson, he finds that "*Nothing* is revealed." Nothing about this allegorically recited experience is relevant to others, but *his* experience of it is the point. To be sure, the idea "that one should never be/Where one does not belong" could apply to anyone anywhere at any time, but precisely as a cliché it not only says "nothing" but demonstrates it.

To a certain extent, this generic ending is indigenous to the "ballad" genre at large. But that, too, works to keep Dylan's vocational scenario away from public inquisitions. It applies to him particularly: to *his* "mistaking Paradise/For that home across the road" by having sought fame and public immortality. In his work, he intimates, he failed to concern himself with his "neighbor." Yet the "moral" of this song also gestures toward a truism that applies to anyone enduring the burden of existence ("carryin somethin"), and so could make of his singular vocational experience an ethically representative one after all. Like most of the songs on *John Wesley Harding*, "The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest" works in both a private and public referential direction at once.

### 3 Judging past judgments

While one set of songs on *John Wesley Harding* focuses on Dylan's "bringing it all back home" to his unique spiritual calling, another transforms others into spiritually compatible doubles even as both right and wrong relations to them continually stymie his vocational decision. "Drifter's Escape," for example, presents Dylan reflecting on the external or non-*self*-determined event that saved him from surrendering to external determinations of self. As if in a repetitive Kafkaesque dream, the song's protagonist circles around "some unnamed crime, only to escape punishment by some unnamed divine intervention," another *deus ex machina* but different from the interiorized "neighbor boy" in "The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest." Certain aspects of the song's mystery undoubtedly invite plausible biographical connections. Oliver Trager takes the image of lightning striking the courthouse to "symbolize" Dylan's ironically fortuitous motorcycle accident "the year before" the song was composed. Both "Drifter's Escape" and the album as a whole figuratively express "Dylan's backdoor escape from the constraints of popular culture."<sup>29</sup> Likewise, Anthony Scaduto sees Dylan staging how others had drafted him as an iconic hero for this or that social cause; thus the lightning strike, as if "an illumination from the Lord," signifies his breaking away from that imprisoning function: "While everyone kneels to pray the drifter escapes, slipping out of the grasp of the idolizers."<sup>30</sup>

But "the jury," the public that doesn't idolize him or his work, represents the criteria by which Dylan himself would evaluate his creative work. With its own autobiographical history, this internalized public formerly put him on "trial" when he simply first sought to get a hearing and recognition for his work. But that past pressure has now become "ten times worse" insofar as the celebrity that he achieved has estranged him from the inner-directed vocational quest he regarded as his *apologia pro sua opera*. Even those internalized idolizers who as if "knelt to pray" to him like a prophet have forced him to become a "drifter," alienated from himself beyond his already outlier status as a sometime social critic. Dylan thus asks *himself* to "Help me in my weakness," in other words his inability to avoid criteria at odds with his passion to come upon the real on his own terms.<sup>31</sup> Complicating matters further, in the "courtroom" of his own spiritual-artistic conscience, he experiences the demand to do what he by definition can't: deliver his subjective, vocational truth to the external world. His inability to do that in his brief artistic career ("my time it isn't long") can only result in his internalized public "taking him away," or with him judging himself a failure.

The entire experience has soured him with regard to his vocational quest. If Dylan's past vocational "trip hasn't been a pleasant one," worse is his response to remain passive before external forces that appear beyond his control: "I still do not know/What it was that I've done wrong." He stages a part of himself still vulnerable to internalized external judgments of his work. As the "judge" of his own predicament, he "cast[s] his robes aside," meaning that he can no longer "understand" ("Why must you even try?") nor do anything to stop others from putting him in this situation. Once Dylan looked for relief from the outside as the public "cried for more" of the same old Dylan, his only means of escape being that "bolt of lightning." But the Dylan narrating this fantasy

episode recognizes this very dependence as such along with his complicity in allowing it to occur. In a double-meaning use of the lightning image, *this recognition* struck him like “a bolt of lightning” and isolates the public he internalizes as meaninglessly external to him. Accordingly, it becomes something he needs to move beyond.

“I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine” proposes that the new Dylan won’t spend time in self-recrimination for his former vocational “weakness.” From a decidedly private perspective, the song retraces the same self-referential subject aired in “Drifter’s Escape” even as it at first flirts with external references. The Augustinian song’s tune and central phrase openly allude to an old “protest” labor song, “I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill,” referring to the Wobblies hero who himself was a songwriter; meanwhile the reference to “St. Augustine,” noticeably historically inaccurate and ambiguous,<sup>32</sup> tempts commentators to favor the song’s conventional autobiographical aspect. Tim Riley argues that it concerns Dylan’s vexed “relationship with his [then contemporary] audience,” especially due to their “craving for heroes.” Many commentators take the line “go on your way accordingly” for Dylan’s refusal to become a martyr for his audience.<sup>33</sup> For Seth Rogovoy, the St. Augustine figure figures Dylan renouncing his former role as “protest” savior for a generation of “folk” followers: Dylan here tells them to “go on your way” to pursue their own modes of vocation, which appears a kinder, gentler put-down, say, than that in a song like *Blonde on Blonde*’s “Most Likely You Go Your Way (and I’ll Go Mine).”<sup>34</sup>

At the very least, “I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine” provokes listeners by setting up and violating certain semantic expectations. Both the “Joe Hill” and Augustinian allusions become moot, appearing along the lines of Dylan’s outlaw protagonist “John Wesley Harding.” The references to Augustine also fail to accord not only with him but also with any Christian saint. Which one would ever have worn “a coat of solid gold,” for instance? Nor would the ethics and impulse to proselytize the Christian vision at large likely have allowed the real St. Augustine to abandon others to their fate: “So go on your way accordingly/And know you’re not alone.” For that matter, if each listener follows his or her own path as the Dylan speaker advocates, how would such a person *not* feel “alone”? And what *is* the speaker’s relation to the Augustinian figure? He at once idealizes him (e.g., as in a dream), but just as much for his high social status before others. The “coat of solid gold” signifies his hieratic status and materialist bent. But Dylan not only confers “Augustine” with honorific status, he also confesses his wish, if only in a dream, “to put him out to death.”

The song further raises the question of its own generic identity, for it appears to evoke two or three genres other than the “Joe Hill” social protest. First, we have the “confession” per se, which by itself resonates with the actual St. Augustine given his well-known *Confessions* that many scholars regard as the beginning of Western spiritual autobiography. The song alludes to another religio-literary precedent, the medieval love complaint (“hear my sad complaint”), adverted by Dylan’s reversion to the archaic “ye” mode of address. This genre often references human relations to gods or God and in essence pivots around a spiritual relation to existence. In “complaint” poetry, a protagonist figure often appears in a state of mourning, usually over a beloved person who has died or has left him. A dream incident then frequently occurs in which



the mourner dreams of another figure, an alter ego who epitomizes his loss in such dramatic fashion that it leads to the mourner's self-reformation.<sup>35</sup> In "I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine," Dylan's other self appears when he places his hands "against the glass" or mirror in which he perceives his double. This projected self instigates an encounter with itself, but in a way that leads Dylan to realize his self's lack of ground.

If nothing else, the song's generic affiliations of confession and complaint direct us to a spiritually motivated context. Like a "saint," Dylan sees himself as having tried to communicate the spiritual aspect of life to others trapped in a state of alienation—"the utmost misery." He too once acceded to and perhaps even sought the contrary to this spiritual task, namely the fame and fortune that he tracks in "The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest." In "I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine," the "coat of solid gold" image metaphorically refers to his success as a musical-lyrical artist become public celebrity. Dylan proceeds to confess to having tried to unite the two different vocational goals. As in a dream, he realizes that despite his past attraction to "gold" or fame and fortune, his songs somehow called him and others to higher values: "Come out, ye gifted kings and queens." In order to keep others from falling back into the error of idolizing persons or things in the external world, he would have them reject him as some social or religious guru: "No martyr is among ye now." He must reject the image that others want *him* to be, which he admits to having been tempted by and that has left him feeling "So alone." This aloneness now recurs in a different context, for even if others grasp the spiritual tenor of his work, it will necessarily differ from theirs: "So go on your way accordingly."

Hardly framing himself in hieratic garb, then, Dylan assumes the democratic ethos endemic to a past American dream. He revises the frontier myth that at bottom anchors the "Western" genre and myth, that is, performs a spiritual revision of his own once aggressive, outlaw-like status, itself already a conspicuous upgrade over any "John Wesley Hardin." Dylan's confession points to how close he has been to judging himself a vocational failure or sellout: "I dreamed I was amongst the ones/That put him [i.e., my past self] out to death." He admits that he came close to rejecting the "fiery breath" of his earlier artistic-cum-spiritually inspired work. Had he done so, it would have meant the death of any vocational justification for his songwriting, a near miss that resembles the close call he refers to as a "bolt of lightning" in "Drifter's Escape." But in this case, Dylan explicitly no longer assigns his salvation to an external event but rather to his inner discernment. That close call not only "anger[s]" but also humbles him. Having remembered his vocational spirit just in time, he "bowed [his] head and cried" before the possibility of any such self-damning judgment. Even given his social-material success, he realizes that he was and for that matter still is spiritually "Alive."

"I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine" comes down to a song of self-forgiveness. The re-confirmation of his spiritual selfhood accounts for Dylan's creation of the present *John Wesley Harding* songs, and in that sense constitutes an analogue to the historical St. Augustine's conversion responsible for *his Confessions*. But Dylan's *self*-realization also accounts for his spreading the "good news" to others. This marks the allegorical subject of "As I Went Out One Morning," another Dylan song that has attracted widely disparate interpretations. Andy Gill believes it addresses and criticizes a specific audience reaction to his work, namely "the ingrained, autocratic attitude [Dylan] had

encountered in his dealings with the civil rights movement of a few years earlier.” Like John Hinchey, Gill sees the Tom Paine figure in negative terms: he works with the “damsel” to rope the Dylan persona into a libertarian (read: a 1960s revolutionary) cause, which Dylan claims to have rejected. In the literal biographical terms that seldom go away in Dylan criticism, more than one critic even wants to equate “Paine” with Bob Dylan’s experience at receiving the Tom Paine Award at the 1963 Emergency Civil Liberties Committee soon after the Kennedy assassination. There he notoriously gave a speech evincing some sympathy toward Lee Harvey Oswald, against which the liberal audience expressed outrage. Relying on both meanings, Gill gives no reason, however, why “Paine” seems to assume a positive role at the end of the song where “it’s he who in turn rescues the singer from the damsel and apologizes for her presumption.”<sup>36</sup>

But just as he does in “The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest” and “I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine,” Dylan uses an old folk genre to frame an allegory suffused with the issue of spiritual self-liberation. Right from the start, the “fairest damsel” surely represents the lures of American capitalist culture,<sup>37</sup> and Dylan stages himself as a young artist having tried to protest freedom for others precisely within this social environment. He actively sought “to breathe the air around Tom Paine’s,” here a trope for the freedom of self able to explore itself on its own terms, as ideally promised by the American Revolution. However, Dylan (like most Americans) eventually found himself getting caught up in what fame and fortune could offer him, that is, by the “fairest damsel/That ever did walk in chains.” “She” represents the materialist success story, an ethos unable to comprehend spiritual-existential pursuits of freedom to which Dylan had inchoately committed himself early in his career. Enchained by the idea of such success, “she” cannot hope to help him realize the potential, self-exploratory freedom represented by Paine’s vision for/of the American Revolution.

Dylan stages his younger self’s attraction to this ethos (“I offered her my hand”), but the temptations of fame and fortune soon would take him over completely: “She took me by the arm.”<sup>38</sup> Throughout his work, as I have noted, he has consistently criticized this same ethos, of which he reminds himself when he told her, “Depart from me this moment.” But this command smacks of mere lip service, for he says it only “with my voice” and so not with full inner conviction. This personification of American Capitalism has no desire to change “her” ways (“I don’t wish to”), regardless of his verbal insistence in the songs he was in the process of composing in his past: “Said I, ‘But you have no choice.’” “Her” failure to satisfy people’s overall sense of spiritual well-being seems self-evident to him. To rebut this argument, she tries to defend “her” case in a liberal manner, but can do so only with a barely contained grimace: “From the corners of her mouth.” As Capitalism’s personification in this song, she argues that she can do *some* good if he agrees to her values. He can have his ethical cake and eat it too, as it were, for she will “secretly accept” or allow him to criticize her in public while he gains more fame and fortune to confirm the power of her values. In that way, both he and she will arrive at a place where material pleasure, signified by the trope of the “south,” defines their mental and physical environment: “And together we’ll fly south.”

Seeming to come out of nowhere (“from across the fields”), Tom Paine interrupts the American-Edenic-cum-materialist temptation by chasing away “this lovely girl.” The spirit of freedom that Revolutionary “America” signified and which Dylan recollects at the last moment “command[s] her to yield”: to give up “her [materialist] grip” on how he would define his relation to his work, world and self. Yet this rejection of prevalent social values differs from how Dylan once had tried to effect the same end in his pre-*John Wesley Harding* songs. This time, Paine/Dylan has her apologize “for what she’s done,” namely for having debased US America’s original ideal.<sup>39</sup> This is a song, then, in which he once more reverses the expectations that one might otherwise plausibly draw from its other allegorical intimation of an unfettered critique of American culture or society. The song instead proffers a way to forgive the American turn; at least not to regard it as irredeemably materialist or out for sensationalist gain and little more. But at the same time, this otherwise conservative social judgment comes steadfastly pinned to Dylan’s autobiographical project. “As I Went Out One Morning” tells the story of his effort not to waste his creative energies blaming the lures of his US environment and/or his pop-musical *métier* for turning him away from his inwardly directed vocational quest. The responsibility for his affair with American materialism belongs to him and him alone.

Yet Dylan also feels compelled to resist any aspect of the public world that might define him to himself. A good example of this critical situation appears in “Dear Landlord” where the addressed “landlord” figure personifies an authoritative external pressure to regard his songs solely in a public light, whether for materialist or other egoistic gains. Doubling for Dylan’s then business manager who himself doubles for a music industry at large that mostly regards Bob Dylan as a cash cow, even the landlord figure of this song presents a biographical and consequently public temptation.<sup>40</sup> Other critics take the figure more generally to represent authoritarian, including religionist pressures affecting one’s sense of self. Wilfrid Mellers goes so far as to suggest that the landlord figure could represent God, with Dylan “trying to establish a relationship with him that combines respect with an awareness of his own dignity.”<sup>41</sup>

But whereas the “jury” in “Drifter’s Escape” represents others whom he internalizes but who remain external to his work, the landlord figure in “Dear Landlord” stands for any person whom Dylan wishes to reach through his work but hasn’t so far.<sup>42</sup> This is a song in which he openly acknowledges vocational differences: “Now, each of us has his own special gift.” With a similar vocationally minded reader in mind, he protests his freedom to create his work without inhibition (“My dreams are beyond control”) and to dedicate himself to facing the real (“My burden is heavy”) in his own exemplary fashion. One cannot underestimate the social ramifications of this dedication, for as I have noted, Dylan sees his work facilitating a spiritual pursuit that he continually hopes will have value for others: “When that steamboat whistle blows,” or when his career is coming to an end, “I’m gonna give you all I got to give,” which is to say, his body of songs. As he sees it, that principle defines his primary ethical duty as a musical artist, regardless if his art adheres to the values of this or that regnant community. Even so, “Dear Landlord” insinuates that he still wants others to interpret his work with similar vocational stakes in mind (“I do hope you receive it well”), that is, in terms of their own subjective passion: “Dependin’ on the way you feel you live.”

But in acknowledging these *possible* readings, Dylan also declares his difference from them at present. Other views of his work do and likely will continue to occur; therefore he must allow for the possibility that his songs will not at all mean for others what they do for him. The second stanza shows him pleading with others at least to understand the analogical sense of his work ("Please heed these words that I speak"), for what *content* can this self-referential turn convey to others? His lyrics remain allusively indirect and state nothing substantial as to a specific vision of life. No Woody Allen character's declaration of life's objective meaninglessness matches the Dylan song's relentless, subjective march toward the meaning/less real. This song thus asks others to take to heart ("heed") the real in terms of which he composes songs as subjective events. Still, insofar as his song holds to its spiritual line, he can construe his own project as something distinct from the daily problems people endure and try to overcome, such as working "too hard" or wanting to realize external goals "too fast and too much." These interfere with one's adhering to a genuine vocational choice. They make it too easy for anyone to "fill his life up/With things he can see but he just cannot touch" because they lack the qualification of subjective choice, the first condition for any movement toward the real.

Dylan realizes the difficulty his request entails, but if he airs the suspicion that most people will resist trying to internalize this vision of existence, he nonetheless appeals to some at least to suspend if not entirely curb that resistance: "Please don't dismiss my case." His personal commitment to a spiritual-existential vision of life entails his absolute determination ("I'm not about to argue") not to change that vision: "I'm not about to move to no other place." His songs will remain *in* "place" as if waiting for others to commit themselves to envision their lives along their own "special" vocational lines. Paradoxically moving forward *in* "place" constitutes the "special" vocational "gift" his songs have to offer "each of us." Dylan gambles that listeners already suspect what his particular vision entails: They "know [it] to be true," if only in a subliminal sense. If he sets the bar high for anyone attempting to understand his work in the way he desires, he yet does not reject them if they fail to follow his direction. He prefers looking for the (spiritual) best in others and expects the same from them: "And if you don't underestimate me/I won't underestimate you."<sup>43</sup>

Dylan's projected compatibility with others uneasily extends even to those who systematically practice denying the existential. His notion of "pity" in the song "I Pity the Poor Immigrant" brings them closer to this vision of life and self than ever before. At first glance, no doubt, he appears to judge at least some others as too obtuse or lacking in any spiritual awareness to concern himself with. The biblical source for the song's image-motif possibly derives from the rather unforgiving Leviticus 26:20: "Your strength will be spent in vain, because your soil will not yield its crops, nor will the trees of the land yield their fruit."<sup>44</sup> In Dylan's context, the song specifically refers to others who (will) have nothing at all to do with his expressed desire to view experience in terms of the real. Here he at least seems to exhibit a subdued yet firmly judgmental ("I pity") form of damnation on them, as if Dylan himself were adopting a Godlike, biblical perspective.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, Oliver Trager argues for the song's redemptive move, which he thinks accounts for the melancholic tone of Dylan's performance of it,

underlined by his having borrowed its tune from a Scottish ballad and/or from Ewan MacColl's "Come, Me Little Son." From this viewpoint, "I Pity the Poor Immigrant" mitigates the immigrant figure's cataloged harsh deeds, so that the final line, "When his gladness comes to pass," "hints of redemption" for *all* immigrants.<sup>46</sup>

This redemptive move appears more latent than manifest, however, leading other critics to question the song's failure to express a decisive vision at all. Andy Gill finds the song confusingly "balanced between compassion and condemnation," with the immigrant figure coming across as "a displaced visitor in an alien society."<sup>47</sup> But doesn't this figure simply point to anyone alienated in or from life within any social setting? And this "anyone" surely includes Dylan as well, as his remark to Anthony Scaduto in this chapter's epigraph clearly posits, provided one there substitutes "Until" or "Right before" for "Before."<sup>48</sup> Scaduto sees Dylan viewing himself as "an outsider, an immigrant, a man who did not really know his inner Self and had no place in the outer world,"<sup>49</sup> which I have argued accords with his apparent indictment of himself in "I Am a Lonesome Hobo." One can take this viewpoint even further: the autobiographical aspect of "I Pity the Poor Immigrant" essentially redounds to Dylan's finally self-questioned misanthropic judgment of others, including especially anyone who could care less about this very same judgment. Formerly, as in a song like "It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry," he would peremptorily criticize such people and settle for their getting "lost." But in this *John Wesley Harding* song, Dylan ironically redeems them by attributing to them a suppressed despair behind their seemingly ad infinitum efforts to deny it.

For example, some people invest in familial or tightly communal beliefs to evade the individuated collision with the existential. But such beliefs inevitably break down and then leave one "wish[ing] he would've stayed home" and/or maintained that illusion. Some people elevate themselves at the expense of others, the equivalent of one's "do[ing] evil," since one then alienates oneself from them in a radical way. One then becomes "left so alone," isolated not by a subjectively embraced choice, in principle still compatible with others, but by one's deliberately inviting an externally imposed ostracism. Another person tries to "cheat" others or "lies with evr'y breath" about what existence *really* entails; or even tries to preempt despair by means of a faux despair: "Who passionately hates his life/And likewise, fears his death." Idealists, too, require others to support their beliefs in something, say religionist and/or ideological scripts with their "heaven . . . like Ironsides" because they actually defend against "nothing." For "Ironsides" connotes a quasi-spiritual rigidity, besides alluding to the famous US ship emblematic of a former rallying cry of American patriotism.<sup>50</sup> In Dylan's view, no one can avoid the existence game. Persons who either work hard at their jobs or follow leaders unthinkingly in military exploits ("Who tramples through the mud") end up lost, just as does the person who tries not to take life seriously at all ("fills his mouth with laughing"). Even to those for whom "gladness" does "come[] to pass,"<sup>51</sup> it at best provides temporary relief from existential facticity, at worst makes them vulnerable to ambushes by unexpected intimations of the real.

All anti-existential "visions [of life] in the final end/Must shatter like the glass." This position echoes the Kierkegaardian argument that everyone experiences "an anxiety about an unknown something . . . he does not dare to try to know, an anxiety about

some possibility in existence or an anxiety about himself” that “he cannot explain.” Kierkegaard further claims that *this* anxiety, contrary to being “depressing . . . instead is elevating, inasmuch as it views every human being under the destiny of the highest claim upon him, to be spirit.”<sup>52</sup> Because Dylan can ascribe this view to himself, he can do so with others; and this disclosure necessarily takes us back to his previous all but existentially draconian judgments of others, which he can now see derived from a species of spiritual pride. A de facto “immigrant,” he like they can succumb to existential alienation: a reactionary despair resulting from futile attempts to evade the real. But precisely on the basis of the universal singularity of despair, Dylan can equate himself with others, even with the person “who hears” the Dylan song “but does not see” what it (or he or she) can do. He can convert this despair into something akin to what I am terming existential “spirit.” “I Pity the Poor Immigrant” expresses not a self-righteous or patronizing pity for others, nor one’s wallowing in self-pity as usually understood, but rather the potentiality of *self*-pity for anyone.

This spiritually grounded democratic framing of both his relation to others and theirs to him through his songs leaves him free to compose them minus his former anxiety about their public reception. Strangely enough, this resolution leads directly to the inward-turning scene of vocational resolution represented in one of Dylan’s most popular songs, “All Along the Watchtower.” Of course, one can’t avoid the social-critical references largely responsible for this song’s public appeal. With the “watchtower” a figure for the social establishment, the two riders approaching it surely mean to upset the status quo. They signify a “menace” to things-as-usual, as Michael Gray depicts it. In that sense, the song aptly echoes apocalyptic prophecy, specifically Isaiah 21 about the fall of Babylon. Among others, Seth Rogovoy notes how Dylan had been studying the Torah and Talmud during the *John Wesley Harding* period. Rogovoy proceeds to argue that Dylan recasts the Isaiah passage as a midrash, so to speak, to express the “impending doom” of the modern social equivalent of “Babylon”:

- 23-21:4. My heart panted, fearfulness affrighted me: the night of my pleasure hath he turned into fear unto me.
- 23-21:5. Prepare the table, watch in the watchtower, eat, drink: arise, ye princes, and anoint the shield.
- 23-21:6. For thus hath the Lord said unto me, Go, set a watchman, let him declare what he seeth.
- 23-21:7. And he saw a chariot with a couple of horsemen, a chariot of asses, and a chariot of camels; and he hearkened diligently with much heed:
- 23-21:8. And he cried, A lion: My lord, I stand continually upon the watchtower in the daytime, and I am set in my ward whole nights:
- 23-21:9. And, behold, here cometh a chariot of men, with a couple of horsemen. And he answered and said, Babylon is fallen, is fallen; and all the graven images of her gods he hath broken unto the ground.<sup>53</sup> (Isa. 21: 4-9)

Amidst contemporary student protests and a sharply divided country over the Vietnam War, Jimi Hendrix’s audio and video performance of “All Along the

Watchtower” then and now has lent support to the view of the song’s social-apocalyptic significance. Tim Riley buys entirely Hendrix’s performative slant on the song. Given his minority racial identity, Hendrix’s “take on Dylan’s song” becomes “the more clinching, the more difficult to sit through comfortably. . . . There’s no mistaking for why the wind howls . . . for Dylan it howls in place of talking falsely; for Hendrix it howls for what his guitar can’t say.”<sup>54</sup> Riley implies that the apocalyptic sentiment belongs to the social scene of the 1960s, a point that Mike Marqusee underscores when comparing the song to early Dylan “protest” songs like “When the Ship Comes In,” “Chimes of Freedom,” and “Farewell Angelina.” But for Marqusee, too, “here, history is no longer vindication or revelation or unbearable chaos; it’s a universal and inescapable judgment.” He adds that the song’s opening dialogue between the joker and thief render them “disembodied voices from an interior discussion” appropriately related “to an outside world of chaos, injustice, and violence.”<sup>55</sup>

Something ineradicably personal nevertheless clings to the dialogue of the joker and thief that possibly turns the song away from determinate social commentary. One can at least query how deep its biblical references go. Is “All Along the Watchtower” more concerned with religious matters per se than with social-political ones? Oliver Trager states that the song echoes not just Isaiah’s prophecy but Jesus’ putative words in the New Testament’s Book of Revelation: “I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee” (3:3). Other critics like Scaduto take these religious allusions as central rather than ancillary to the song’s overall meaning. For him, the entire scene conveys the idea that “chaos is on the way,” setting up a situation in which the Lord’s “Coming” will upset the earthly apperception, to say the least. Or perhaps Dylan’s two riders approaching the watchtower at the end signify his “facing a personal Armageddon,” so that in Christian-religious terms he “must die now, in order to live.”<sup>56</sup> Or perhaps the joker and thief’s dialogue occurs between a “lapsed Jew and his Redeemer,” an interpretation supported by certain scholars who maintain that the album’s title accords with the Jewish mode of not expressing God’s name in public: Jahweh a.k.a. JHWH a.k.a. JWH.<sup>57</sup>

What these different “religious” views have in common is how the joker and thief upset their conventional social roles, what with the joker as anxious and the thief as the secret agent of worldly wisdom. This reversal calls attention to Dylan’s poetic act, which in turn sets us back to the song’s self-referential import. As some critics have argued, the two figures outline Dylan’s specific relation to his career and particularly his “conflict within himself or perhaps his uneasy relation with the demands and obligations that his fame brought on him.”<sup>58</sup> So we come back to a bio-referential reading of this scene as far more “interior” than one might initially suppose. In basic terms, “All Along the Watchtower” represents what Aidan Day terms Dylan’s “self-dialogue,”<sup>59</sup> which we as the song’s listeners in effect overhear. We need not go the biographical route to read the joker as referring to Dylan’s wish to do his musical-lyrical art without restraint. He feels trapped precisely by how others reduce it to various social or religious utilitarian functions, and in the process interfere with its inner-tending movement. The “thief,” on the other hand, has the last word and refers to the Dylan who all along steals from his experience and other artistic precedents to make an art with spiritual point.

Dylan as artist-thief also has a more realistic view of what he can expect from his works' listeners. A different, more innocent joker-artist might purvey a simpler truth, such as that one should make or listen to music for sheer pleasure. But Dylan finally judges this function to be an unrealistic goal. In contrast but also to his dismay, "businessmen drink my wine," that is, treat or *taste* his songs as commodities, and tempt *him* to think of them that way too. The same goes for critics who foster an intellectual, non-subjective, relation to his work. As we have just seen, they tend to lead him to consider its social or religious "meaning." Fame and critical attention, positive or negative, also misdirect Dylan's own would-be relation to his work. Quite distinct, then, from the monumental Jesus figure of Revelation or even a version of the "good" thief at the crucifixion, Dylan's "thief" serves as his artistic conscience and insists that it shouldn't matter how others take his songs. Instead, and as Dylan has tried to tell himself in previous songs before *John Wesley Harding*, he admonishes the joker not to "get excited" by what they think or say about it: "But you and I, we've been through that, and this is not our fate."

The "fate" that Dylan refers to, which arguably began in earnest with his *Bringing It All Back Home* songs, consists of the urgent determination to face the real with minimum public distractions and/or values, mainstream or not. Thus, he declares anew his vocational vow to express ("talk") this vision of life through his songs: "So let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late." The lateness signifies Dylan's having frittered away opportunities to focus his full artistic attention on his existence-defined vocational goal. Since the "watchtower" represents the public sphere that to him oversees and would control everything that threatens its collective self-image, it constitutes the source of his vocational malaise. Neither a biblical promise *nor* warning, "the watchtower" represents the lasting hierarchical makeup of societies, each with their various spectrums of "Princes" to "barefoot servants too." On the whole, no nonhierarchical societies exist, not even in countercultural communes, for sooner or later, social organizations spawn distinctions between leaders and followers, social-democratic shibboleths notwithstanding.

Just as important, the "watchtower" equally impinges on the listener's relation to "All Along the Watchtower." The song's secular impulse, its deconstruction of high-toned social or biblical-apocalyptic ambition, is manifest even in how certain images echo High-Modernist precedents like T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in Dylan's "all the women came and went" and, contrary to its more honorific source in the Isaiah passage, perhaps Wallace Stevens' use of the plural "barefoot servants" in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction."<sup>60</sup> The watchtower also represents the place from which people *watch* each other and not just him, a practice doomed to miss the interior movement grounding his songs' rhetorical reliance on "self-dialogue." In other words, everything "Dylan" takes place as if within the song's own inner recesses. "All Along the Watchtower" therefore conceals even as it indirectly intimates what goes on in Dylan's composing a song like "All Along the Watchtower." The thief's retort to the joker/Dylan's complaint expresses his resolution not to care about how others affect his work; "not [to] talk falsely now" *to himself*; not to waste words blaming others, as he did, for example, in his *Blonde on Blonde* songs. But the two sides of Dylan approaching



the “watchtower” further show that he need not keep completely private, or not share his songs with others at all.

Ending his interior monologue with this resolution, Dylan as joker and thief “approaching” the (social) watchtower does not stand for some imminent protest, social or religious, prophesying a soon-to-occur apocalyptic coup or catastrophe. Nor do the words “a wildcat did growl” and “the wind began to howl” announce radical change about to be unleashed on the world through the help of songs like his, not to mention the Hendrix rendition of the song or even its resonant allusion to Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” in mind.<sup>61</sup> Dylan here holds off imminent external apocalypse, social or religionist, and does so in spite of the cachet that any such meaning was bound to garner from ideological cliques of the 1960s, or simply from critics and fans applauding its enigmatic conclusion. By this time in his career, Dylan recognizes that he has no control over his songs’ reception, least of all how others might exteriorize their significance, but which for him represent a wholly interior vocational move.

“All Along the Watchtower,” then, is only superficially a song of retribution. Within its allegorical chambers, it counts as one more “forgiveness” song in the *John Wesley Harding* album. It confesses that Dylan remains uncertain about being able to judge let alone criticize those of us “watching” or reading the song. While Dylan alias the joker and thief indirectly addresses us via the words and musical arrangement of his song, at the same time he literally remains in the state of being always *about* to communicate his vision to us. Some critics and even Bob Dylan have suggested that the ending of “All Along the Watchtower” keeps cycling back to its beginning, as if in some continuous loop.<sup>62</sup> For that reason, Trager argues that the song ends mysteriously, and Aidan Day that it leaves the listener feeling that “apocalyptic powers of transformation may not be placeable within neat categories of either good or ill.”<sup>63</sup> Yet this ambiguity about the beginning and end of Dylan’s famous song leads to a more exacting judgment: it invites only to forestall apocalyptic thinking. Just as the album cover of *John Wesley Harding* possibly trumps even as it traces the period’s countercultural conventions, “All Along the Watchtower” does much the same with the period’s revolutionary zeitgeist, and with the ever-reborn messianic revolutions bound to recur in the future.

#### 4 The renewed vocation

Like “I Pity the Poor Immigrant,” “All Along the Watchtower” essentially asserts that one cannot resolve the riddle of one’s own existence *as it appears to oneself*. Nonetheless, the song does point to how each individual can adopt a stance in relation to this fact. Like “This Wheel’s on Fire” from *The Basement Tapes*, the “Watchtower” song adverts its social-apocalyptic tenor even as it promotes a scene of inward *self*-change. One can go so far as to claim that in its interior workings, the song revolts precisely from the contemporary charge of social revolution, whatever form that putative goal might have taken. From external viewpoints as Dylan perceives them, his final charge will appear modest vis-à-vis those calling for sensationalist, social changes. No less important, this

song in relation to the others on *John Wesley Harding* itself exemplifies a move inward, that is, toward private spaces and away from public venues, just as occurs in songs like “As I Went Out One Morning” and “I Am a Lonesome Hobo.”

No surprise, then, that the sequential aspect of the album carries us listeners toward “Down Along the Cove,” a private space where lovers meet, and to the even more private room in “I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight.” In the album’s final songs, communion with a single other becomes specific and takes place casually, or without any conspicuous, frustrated concern that this other “doesn’t get it” (my marks). Neither song calls for much critical explication. Up to a point, they in fact allegorically resist explication. On one hand, Anthony Scaduto and others want to extract a moral message from the two songs: that “Down Along the Cove” has a deceptively simple appearance, for in it Dylan “says: ‘Yes, we understand’—only within love can man deal with a depth of reality that is akin to faith.” Robert Shelton claims the two songs convey the “good news” of how “Love” realizes Dylan’s (and our) “search for salvation or answers.” On the other hand, Andy Gill finds the two not only presaging Dylan’s next move into “country music,” but also having “no import whatsoever beyond offering Bob an opportunity to express his guileless, open affection for” the wife he loves and perhaps “two newborn children in his actual life.”<sup>64</sup>

But “Down Along the Cove” stages a situation in which Dylan’s love connection occurs in a space out of public sight, therefore not apt to be noticed. His “true love,” moreover, doubly refers to an intimate other and to his mus/ing self: whoever or whatever inspires him to compose his songs in the moment. While the song has a plausible external reference to Dylan’s literal retreat from crowds, the “cove” more radically figures a space that allows him to connect with and/or do his work his own way. “Cove” evokes a restricted space; in an artistic sense, a small, lyrically sized verbal canvas for his art. So does terming his agency of inspiration a “little bundle of joy.”<sup>65</sup> The tropes and images he deploys in this song (e.g., “true love,” “little bundle of joy,” walking “hand in hand”) and in “I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight” confirm his vocational turn toward a lesser and notably non-apocalyptic relation to his artistic subject. Indeed, in the latter song Dylan self-consciously withdraws pressure from his act of composition by turning it into effortless rhetorical acts such as his child-like rhyming of words like “moon” and “spoon.” At the very least, they show him willing to rely on conventional songwriting argot to express his allegorized visions of life instead of resorting to his former, lyrically periphrastic efforts to express them.

Dylan’s acceptance of this vocational change amounts to a check on his previous pop-musical and artistic (including poetic) ambitions. It also points to the “good news” of salvation by accepting personal and imaginative modes of relaxation, a practice he here enacts for himself and, as he thinks, for others, at least in poetic principle. This explains the way he greets his tutelary double in “Down Along the Cove”: “It sure is good to see you comin’ today.” Unlike the elusive inspirational figure in “Visions of Johanna,” for example, the songs on *John Wesley Harding* rely on an everyday, here-and-now imaginary figure who/that in effect says to him: “I’m so glad you’re my boy!” The intimate bond between *them* walking “hand in hand/Down along the cove” occurs apart from “Ev’rybody watchin’ us go by.” The public can observe them in

passing by, and infer their love for each other primarily on the evidence of the resulting song. The same injunction for a non-urgent relation to his lyrical work appears in the opening lines of "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight": "Close your eyes, close the door." With its invitation to relax, the line recalls the significance of Quinn's allowing others to "doze" in "Quinn the Eskimo," as I discussed in the preceding chapter. In both cases, Dylan enjoins others to forgo anxiety ("You don't have to worry any more"); but here that injunction particularly applies to how his songs might cause the listener anxiety due to their elusive lyrics. The refrain invites his audience to make their own meanings from his songs and not worry about looking for or missing some covert "objective" or coded significance that he privately intended in composing them. It's as if he were saying to listeners: "As with the present song, take from my works whatever gives you pleasure or, if you want, illumination."

For that reason, Dylan reverts to conventional (here country-western) song-images or tropes like "moon," "shine like a spoon," the mockingbird, and even the desire to "bring that bottle over here." The latter phrase addresses the social anxiety that potential, contemporary mainstream audiences possessed regarding countercultural drug-preferences with which Dylan was still associated. In effect, he here all but asserts that one need not turn on, tune in, drop out with psychedelic drugs (alone); instead drinking booze, no heavy, social-critical symbolic gesture, suffices for one to enjoy both life and his work: in short, a state of mind just a tick beyond social norms. With that qualification, his songs will deal with noncontroversial issues, shutting out or at least muting those that even resemble a complicated quest for the "light" of truth in the metaphorical dark of existence: "Shut the light, shut the shade." One need not "be afraid" of his songs' existential tenor. His work will avoid complaining critiques of society and/or of others that his past songs appeared to indulge. He will no longer adopt the mocking or critical attitude found in earlier songs such as "Like a Rolling Stone": "that mockingbird's gonna sail away/We're gonna forget it." Instead, like a "baby" totally vulnerable to its parents, he will offer himself up to his audience with no social or existential strings attached: "I'll be your baby tonight."

And yet complications *do* always remain in Dylan's songs. Lightening up his lyrics so that others might enjoy them isn't altogether easy for him to do. To play fast and loose with lyrical clichés like "that big, fat moon is gonna shine like a spoon" requires his and any supporting audience's willing compliance: "But we're gonna let it" and not "regret it." More, the relaxed, non-anxious attitude Dylan now calls for ("Kick your shoes off, do not fear") pivots on the lurking presumption of its temporary status. Although he promises a long-term respite with no need "to worry anymore," the specificity of "I'll be your baby *tonight*" suggests an insulated, intimate relation between self and other that will occur far from any "assembly hall" or, in other words, in relative privacy, and yet that won't last. The Dylan song requests and is still predicated on an albeit transitory one-to-one relation for its proper apprehension, that is, right before he's "not there." As a later Dylan might have stated it in 1967, "I know it looks like I'm moving, but I'm standing still" ("Not Dark Yet").



## Epilogue

As he grew famous—ah, but what is fame?—  
he lost his old obsession with his name,  
things seemed to matter less,  
including the fame

– John Berryman, *The Dream Songs* #133

With the appearance of his *Nashville Skyline* in 1967, Dylan's vocation became a matter of public debate. Summarized by Andy Gill, negative critical reactions to the album concerned how Dylan's new set of songs seemed to "abandon allusion, allegory and anything approaching deep meaning or mystery in favor of trite blandishments like 'Love is all there is, it makes the world go round.'"<sup>1</sup> Formerly supportive Dylan commentators also reacted negatively to the political perversity of his composing and performing songs openly associable with "country" audiences, stereotyped at the time for their patriotic, support-the-War set of values. What could be more at odds with the war-protesting, drug-taking countercultural youth for whom Dylan had once supposedly served as a major spokesperson?<sup>2</sup> *Nashville Skyline* appeared, after all, during a time when student protests were occurring at fever pitch across the United States and Europe.

So on the surface, Dylan's vocational move invites cynical judgments. Bob Dylan himself gave credence to one more when he later informed Dave von Ronk's wife that the album "was all a shuck for the masses."<sup>3</sup> But of course Bob Dylan's career-long misdirections regarding his songs make for an ambiguous genre of its own. As I maintain in the previous chapters, his "politics" at best comprised ad hoc or tangential allegiances to social agendas that happened to coincide with his existential drive and not vice versa. In many songs covering the *Bringing It All Back Home* to *John Wesley Harding* period, he inscribed disaffection from the perceived demands of all kinds of audiences, mainstream or countercultural. Moreover, an allegorical, existence-oriented vocational concern lurks even in the *Nashville Skyline* shadows. For openers, the album's very title points to Dylan's *provisional* commitment to doing "country" songs. One usually perceives a big city's "skyline" from a remote access highway, which in this case suggests options of entering *or* passing by "Nashville," a synecdochal site of country music par excellence.

This temporary vocational position signals the dilemma that the songs themselves raise and try to answer with varying degrees of brash insistence and doubt. In "Tonight I'll Be Staying Here with You," for instance, Dylan states that he will stay doing country music—like songs at least for the time being. In the process, he proposes to let other

would-be Dylans ("If there's a poor boy on the street") do songs like those for which he had become famous ("let him have my seat"). From one angle, then, Dylan's *Nashville Skyline* songs ironically allegorize a wish *not* to allegorize their scene of composition. Dylan as it were instructs them to forestall any teleological impulse. Such instruction accounts for his wish, say, to immerse himself in their "colors," as the album's popular hit "Lay, Lady, Lay" puts it. He wants to experience their non-representational feel and its lack of ideological tension.<sup>4</sup> Yet the same song records his *plea* to his country muse to "Stay, lady, stay, stay with your man *awhile*" (my emphasis), but accompanied by the rhetorical roadblock that the song's listeners can't "hear" the song's allegorization in any immediate sense but only, if at all, its tenuous intimation later. So the Dylan song mitigates the illusion of its objective self-presence both for him and its listeners.

But this dialectical recovery of his song's subjective turn would again leave it isolated from its audience, which as I argued in the case of the more democratic poetics of his *John Wesley Harding* songs he would prefer not to do. Throughout his career, Dylan often oscillates between wanting to compose songs with their "real" goal eminently accessible to others, yet simultaneously needing to allegorize this same vocational desire. If, as he thus almost says in "Lay Lady, Lay," he wants to have his existential "cake and eat it too," Dylan continually finds that he can't immediately communicate his visions of approaching the real without forfeiting his own subjective relation to them. Performing his songs serves to cover that rupture in the moment, but no longer than that. He can only "mask" or fantasize his desire to do so, such as in "Man in the Long Black Coat" on *Oh Mercy* (1989) where *as* that "man," he thinks to abduct his mus/ing self (the woman) from the town's public "dance hall." There people distract themselves from the "real" concern ("But people don't live or die, people just float") much as do Poe's revelers in his tale "The Masque of the Red Death."

Is this vocational dualism between public and private, between Dylan's desire to communicate his movement toward the real and its absolute subjective condition, a case of irreconcilable differences? He goes back and forth over this issue throughout his career to the point where one can say it constitutes his primary artistic tableau. This theme surfaces, for example, in the late *Modern Times* song "Someday Baby" (2006) where he arguably assesses how others take his dealings with the real ("you take my money," i.e., my creative work) and muddle his relation both to it ("fill[] me up with self-doubt") and his performing, artistic life: "Living this way ain't a natural thing to do/Why was I born to love you?" Yet Dylan also writes songs attempting to reconcile this potential conflict in his vocation. That subject defines the musings, for instance, of "Sweetheart Like You" from the 1983 album *Infidels*, which like many other Dylan songs allows for a conventional reading: a man praising a woman with what might very well instance an excessive dose of idealization. Indeed, the song has attracted charges of blatant "sexism" from feminist critics, especially for the lines:<sup>5</sup>

You know, a woman like you should be at home  
That's where you belong,  
Watching out for someone who loves you true

But the song also evades such supposedly objective interpretations by insinuating an “infidels” motif altogether outside the courtroom of gender politics. “Sweetheart Like You” is a post-Christian Dylan song in which he inscribes how he no longer feel obligated to make his songs work on this latest version of a Maggie’s farm. Thus, the otherwise context-vague lines “the pressure’s down, the boss ain’t here,/He gone North for awhile” sketch a fictive moment when religionist, ideological, and expected commercial demands no longer “boss” his scene of songwriting. Instead, they have “gone North” or left his creative scene of composition at least “for awhile.”

Might he then go back to writing songs once again in a “freewheelin” manner? Dylan in fact here questions whether he *can* go back to composing songs the way he once did, and this time without the artistic “vanity [that got] the best of him” in his pre-religionist period. As I have argued, his 1965–67 songs continually warn against the lures of the popular musical marketplace—“a dump like this”—which he subsequently thought he had “left” behind for good. At this moment in his career, he wants songs that he can appreciate for their simple beauty: her “cute hat” and “smile” that’s “so hard to resist.” Something about the sheer aesthetic aspect that Dylan once experienced in composing songs still compels him. On the other hand, he remembers how his former relation to a musical art that “looked like you” once demanded his total attention: “She wanted a whole man, not just a half.” At first, “she” inspired him to write songs that way (“She used to call me sweet daddy when I was only a child”), and he thinks “she” might do the same again as with the present song: “You kind of remind me of her when you laugh.” To compose musical-lyrical art in “this game,” Dylan tells himself, he should regard songwriting as a normal as opposed to an exceptional act. If fans and critics alike keep pressing him to show his artistic originality of old, he has “got to make the queen disappear” or rid himself of thinking that he *should* compose elite poetic-lyrical work.

But ridding himself of the need to prove his creative mettle in public is easier said than done. At first it seems to require a simple act of will (“It’s done with the flick of the wrist”), but Dylan has now arrived at the point where he accepts the limitation of what his art can effect for him in spiritual terms. He regards it as an affair of plain if still poetic expression with minimal pressure “to wrap . . . up” or complicate human experience “in a sailor’s knot” (“This Wheel’s on Fire”) to realize a definitive spiritual yield. This “plain” creative goal (my marks) applies to a “sweetheart like you,” which Dylan emphasizes when stating that “a woman like you should be at home.” Musical-lyrical art deserves artists who not only care for “her,” which their “first kiss” or musical performances might suggest, but also care for “her” alone (“who loves you true”). They ought not to make “her” submit to external agendas that would “abuse” song as a means to an end. Given “her” being “the most beautiful woman,” “she” possesses the wherewithal to go all public; but even if she could do that (“crawl[] across cut glass to make a deal”), Dylan sees her holding off from making that move.

In one sense, “she” reminds him of the traditional literary muse: “news of you has come down the line” even “before ya came in the door” or he started composing songs. Dylan resorts to a biblical passage, “In my Father’s house are many mansions” (Jn 14:2),<sup>6</sup> not to insist on his song’s orthodox spiritual significance, but rather to frame it as part of a tradition with “many mansions” or genres endowed with poetic potential. In short, he invokes this tradition to endow honorific status on *his* kind of plain song,

whereas the average popular song that appears in the marketplace “dump” makes no such poetic claims. For anyone to succeed or “make it” in the present musical-artistic climate, one has “to have done some evil deed,” for instance by having competed for fame and fortune at the expense of others. Or else one has to have accumulated a mass of adoring fans (to “own a harem when you come in the door”) and kept endlessly performing same-seeming songs for them (“play your harp until your lips bleed”). Dylan’s song also occurs in that “dump” and yet makes “beautiful” claims. Plain as it might appear, “Sweetheart Like You” as one listens to it includes a subtle symbolic language on a par with honored literary works. Hence, his art need not question its value (“Snap out of it, baby”), and artists of both popular music *and* high-toned literary art have good reason to be “jealous of *you*” (my emphasis).

Dylan’s notion of song has nothing to do with the fame defined by marketplace or academic values. In effect, he deems himself disloyal (an “infidel”) to upholders of either position, which accounts for his troping Samuel Johnson’s famous phrase about “patriotism” as “the last refuge to which a scoundrel clings.” Blind loyalty or fandom fails to meet Dylan’s criterion for appreciating the plain value of and existential drive behind his artistic work. This viewpoint allows him to reinterpret songs by other artists in the same way, for Dylan finally regards his criterion as having originated from musical-lyrical antecedents who did their work with no literary *or* large public marketplace pressures surrounding them. Dylan confesses to having borrowed “a lot” from these influences, for which he has been ironically made to appear a “king” in the popular musical-lyrical sphere. In this song, he attempts to demystify that status, for if he could ever wholly abandon or at least lower his desire to demonstrate his creative originality (“There’s only one step down from here, baby”), he then would find himself living and working in “the land of permanent bliss.”

To be sure, this goal hinges on a big “if.” Some of his songs allegorize his despair over missing out on the thrill of creative originality.<sup>7</sup> But as I tried to argue in the case of Dylan’s *John Wesley Harding* songs, this aspect of his poetic-cum-spiritual vocation remains important to him only insofar as he can limit its idealization. In part accounting for his later creative surge especially during the mid-1990s, his reliance on established musical-lyrical precedents continues this poetic blueprint of the plain song that yet orbits around the real. Songs that reference past musical figures, whether a Blind Willie McTell, Charlie Patton, or John Lennon, have a way of ending up references to Dylan’s own existential investment in song. In these late lyrics, one can discern him still attentive to his vocational situation from a virtual infinity of perspectives. In “Not Dark Yet” (1997), for instance, he wonders about the value of poetic lyrics inspired by his own mus/ing self—

She wrote me a letter and she wrote it so kind  
She put down in writing what was in her mind

—when juxtaposed against the coming void of self:

I just don’t see why I should even care  
It’s not dark yet, but it’s getting there<sup>8</sup>



Conversely, in “Duquesne Whistle” (2013), co-composed with Robert Hunter, Dylan watches himself being appreciatively watched by the people attending his concerts—

You’re smiling through the fence at me  
Just like you always smiled before

—and asserts his determination to go forward with performing his songs all the way to the end and free from concern about their (mis)readings:

Listen to that Duquesne whistle blowing  
Blowing like it’s gonna sweep my world away  
I’m gonna stop in Carbondale and keep on going  
That Duquesne train gonna ride me night and day

When the latter-day Dylan covers Frank Sinatra covers of Tin Pan Alley tunes, Dylan equally appropriates them within his subjective sensibility, although not always with a whistle-stop optimism. In performing Irving Berlin’s “What’ll I Do?,” for example, Dylan’s long-standing vocational tableau again snaps into focus, this time less happily: what will he do when he can no longer compose songs (the “you”) the way he once did? For then those past songs will resemble photographs of past occurrences, frozen in their tracks as if for a different kind of album. But that surmise again testifies to the vocational issue that I have argued marks Dylan’s lyrical work (and care for others’ songs) from early in his career even through his last-placed cover on the album *Triplicate*: the aptly titled Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II song “Why Was I Born?”



# Notes

## Introduction

- 1 “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 407. One can of course adopt different existentialist-oriented readings of Dylan’s works. For example, in *Invisible Now: Bob Dylan in the 1960s* (London, UK: Routledge, 2013; released in the United States as a paperback, 2016), John Hughes argues that Dylan’s songs especially of the 1965–67 period resist the interpretive acts that they simultaneously invite from listeners. The songs thus propagate an epistemological “indeterminacy” of meaning and an existential “uncertainty” of self that have Dylan expressing a state of endless “becoming.” On the basis of this vision, the goal of his interpretation-resistant songs is for us “to take responsibility for ourselves” or “force us into autonomy” (pp. 184, 185). I argue throughout the present book that these songs consistently sidestep such a quasi-existential ethical charge, and instead work (positively) for him to experience what Hughes otherwise insightfully terms their orbiting around “the very groundlessness of subjectivity” (p. 183).
- 2 “I Shall Be Free No. 10” on *Another Side of Bob Dylan* (1964). Many critics dispute the attribution of Dylan’s lyrics as poetry. See, for instance, Sam Leith, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3642416/Bob-Dylan-is-a-genius-but-hes-no-poet.html/>. Conversely, see Jeffrey Side, “Ambiguity and Abstraction in Bob Dylan’s Lyrics,” <http://www.argotistonline.co.uk/Side%20essay%202.htm/>. The issue perplexes Dylan’s “literary” identity, and came to the fore especially after Dylan received the 2016 Nobel Prize for literature. See, for instance, “Does Bob Dylan Deserve a Nobel Prize?” by Geoffrey Himes, September 27, 2016, at [https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2016/09/does-bob-dylan-deserve-a-nobel-prize.html?utm\\_source=PMNL&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=160927/](https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2016/09/does-bob-dylan-deserve-a-nobel-prize.html?utm_source=PMNL&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=160927/). But Dylan clearly works in a hybrid genre and composes what to me defines “literature” in the best sense: works that lead listeners into reflecting on their off-centered verbal images and uncannily write scenarios; and which give precise expression to the world, society, intimate relations, and the self as enduring enigmas.
- 3 Louis A. Renza, “Bob Dylan’s 116th Dream: Reflections on the Lyrics,” *Auto/Biography (a/b)* 23:2 (Winter 2008): 226–44. For another discussion of this issue, see <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/bob-dylan-im-poet-and-i-know-it/>.
- 4 For example, Matthew Burn, an engineer for Dylan’s 1989 album *Oh Mercy*, recalls that, “For [Dylan], the song wasn’t ready to be a song until the lyrics were in place. It wasn’t necessarily about the melody or the chords. The only thing that made any difference to Bob was whether what he was saying was in place. Quite often, he’d rewrite even one line. Even by the time we were mixing, he’d suddenly say, ‘Y’know, I’ve just rewritten that line, can I re-sing it?’ . . . The treatment of the song was secondary. If the lyrics were in place, then it was sort of, ‘Well, what’s appropriate?’” <http://www.uncut.co.uk/features/life-with-bob-dylan-1989-2006-30130/>.

- 5 Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: A Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 270, 272–73 (his emphasis). Cf. John Hughes' position noted in note 1 above, in which he also argues for the Dylan song's halting interpretation. But my argument is that this moment of indeterminacy in the song has autobiographical repercussions of a special kind that, as it were, constitutes a *second* blockage of the would-be interpreter.
- 6 Hazard Adams, "Georges Poulet," *Critical Theory since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971), p. 1212.
- 7 Adam Phillips refers to this view of Freudian wish as the ground of conventional biographies and autobiographies—objective knowledge about a person's life—in *Becoming Freud* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), pp. 1–28 *passim*.
- 8 "Something There Is about You" from *Planet Waves* (1974).
- 9 For example, Buber states that, "Every [Thou] in the world is doomed by its nature to become a thing or at least to enter into thinghood again and again. In the language of objects: everything in the world can—either before or after it becomes a thing—appear to some I as its [Thou]. But the language of objects catches only one corner of actual life. The It is the chrysalis, the Thou the butterfly. Only it is not always as if these states took turns so neatly; often it is an intricately entangled series of events that is tortuously dual." Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Kindle Edition: Amazon Digital Services LLC, 2011), p. 69.
- 10 Not a few critics have plausibly discussed Bob Dylan and his songs in terms of his Jewish background. Thanks to his mid-life conversion to an evangelical brand of Christianity, other critics persist in interpreting his early songs as proto-Christian and/or later ones as still Christian. But Dylan may or may not hold firmly to either religionist belief-system. Cf. "Well I'm sitting in church/In an old wooden chair/I knew nobody/Would look for me there" ("Marchin' to the City," 1997). For general Jewish understandings of Dylan's works, see, for example, <http://www.aish.com/ci/a/Bob-Dylans-Jewish-Odyssey.html>. Also see especially Seth Rogovoy's *Bob Dylan: Prophet, Mystic, Poet*, to which I will have occasion to refer in the present book. Rogovoy traces a good number of Dylan's songs to his Jewish upbringing and to a Judaic context. For repeated "Christian" readings of the songs, see those offered by Kees de Graaf at <http://www.keesdegraaf.com/index.php/98/bob-dylan-song-analysis/>; also David Weir, another critic who finds Christian "God" themes in most of the Dylan songs that he treats. See, for example, <https://bobdylansonganalysis.wordpress.com/2016/03/16/tempest/>. To my mind, the best because least reductive book on Dylan's "religious" leanings as regards his songs is Michael J. Gilmour's *The Gospel According to Bob Dylan: The Old, Old Story for Modern Times* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011). Based on Dylan's lyrics, performances, and other biographical events, Andrew McCarron adopts a traditional spiritual-autobiographical reading of Dylan's career. In particular, he interprets it according to three decisive autobiographical moments that McCarron deems akin to psychological studies showing a person's "spiritual awakening and experience of transcendence that liberates [the person] from negative circumstances by creating an altered and redemptive inner picture of the self." For example and related to the present study, McCarron sees Bob Dylan seeing the "light" after his motorcycle accident in 1966, with "the spiritual growth" subsequently expressed especially in *The Basement Tapes* song "I Shall Be Released" and "the poetic depths of Jewish scripture" that limns his *John Wesley Harding* songs. *Light Come Shining: The*

*Transformations of Bob Dylan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 8, 64, 66). In contrast, I see the “Dylan” of the song-lyrics finessing all such orthodoxical positions.

- 11 Sean Wilentz’s *Bob Dylan in America* (New York: Doubleday, 2010) remains one of the best sources for the social-historical-musical review of Dylan’s entire career. Also see Michael Denning’s insightful critical discussion of Dylan’s major foray into a performative musical politics in his mid-1970s’ Rolling Thunder Revue: “Bob Dylan and Rolling Thunder,” *The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan*, ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 28–41. British critics have led the way in taking Dylan’s songs as serious literary events. See especially Christopher Ricks, *Dylan’s Visions of Sin* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), Aidan Day, *Jokerman: Reading the Lyrics of Bob Dylan* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1988), Michael Gray, *Song and Dance Man III: The Art of Bob Dylan* (New York: Continuum, 2000), and the collection of essays on Dylan’s work edited by Neil Corcoran, “Do You Mr. Jones?”: *Bob Dylan with the Poets and Professors* (London: Pimlico, 2003).
- 12 Besides connoting something wholly made, “invent” etymologically means “to come upon.” Stanley Fish makes his still-compelling argument about interpretive communities in *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1980). See, for example, “Indeed, it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features” (p. 14).
- 13 Spoken by the character Hilda in *The Marble Faun*, Chapter XXI.
- 14 Quoted in Phillips, *Unforbidden Pleasures* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), p. 96.

## Chapter 1

- 1 *The Concept of Irony*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 182.
- 2 “Dylan was beginning to experiment seriously with the contour of language itself while at the same time [to] explore the deeper levels of the human experience, realizing that things were never as black-and-white as they originally might have appeared.” Oliver Trager, *Keys to the Rain: The Definitive Bob Dylan Encyclopedia* (New York: Billboard Books, 2004), p. 14. Yet from many “folk” critical viewpoints, in making a decisive move toward self-autonomy in his lyrics, Dylan also succumbed to the lure of gaining fortune and fame associated with the US American culture industry, that is, with the very capitalist system the “folk” movement consistently worked to protest.
- 3 Mike Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger: Bob Dylan and the 1960s*. Revised and Expanded edition of *Chimes of Freedom* (London: Seven Stories Press, 2005), p. 112.
- 4 *Bringing It All Back Home* illustrates a compromise between Dylan’s folk-acoustical arrangements of songs (the first side of the album) along with their associated social-political ethos, and his electric arrangements (the second side), more appealing to a mass-media, middle-class and mostly white rock ‘n’ roll audience. This dual format has become erased with the advent of recent technological media.

- 5 One might protest that Dylan's earlier "protest" songs don't exhibit any such ambiguity. Yet taken to propagate a "civil rights" ethos, even a song like "Blowin' in the Wind" finally leaves "the answer . . . blowing in the wind." Similarly, his "The Times They Are A-Changin'," supposedly a pro-youth-generation anthem of the mid-1960s appearing before *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, arguably promises cycles of social change rather than some definitively progressive one. Cf. Stephen H. Webb, *Dylan Redeemed: From Highway 61 to Saved* (New York: Continuum, 2006), esp. pp. 38–46, who takes issue especially with what he regards as Marqusee's forced "liberal" readings of Dylan's early songs.
- 6 Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger*, p. 94.
- 7 *Wicked Messenger*, p. 99.
- 8 Larry David Smith, *Writing Dylan: The Songs of a Lonesome Traveler* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005), p. 58.
- 9 Elizabeth Brake focuses on Dylan's apparent illustration of Hegel's notion of "negative freedom" in "'To Live Outside the Law, You Must be Honest,' Freedom in Dylan's Lyrics," *Bob Dylan and Philosophy: It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Thinking)*, Peter Vernezze and Carl J. Porter, ed. (Chicago: Open Court; Popular Culture and Philosophy, 2006), p. 83. Brake also notes how Dylan's "work suggests an imperative of self-realization . . . [He] offers an epistemology of the self, an account of how we come to know it, rather than a metaphysics, or an account of what the self is" (p. 84).
- 10 At the time of *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, Bob Dylan began associating with Allen Ginsberg and had already been taken with Jack Kerouac's work. Kerouac had written *The Subterraneans*, the carefree heroine for which happens to be part African American. In a 1958 *Partisan Review* article entitled "The Know-Nothing Bohemians," Norman Podhoretz cited how Kerouac and the Beats generally tended to patronize "American Negroes" for having "been able to retain a degree of primitive spontaneity," which arguably (and ironically) served as "an inverted form of keeping the nigger in his place." <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B4m7usTbpXWHZIJMaWFhWWY1dzQ/edit/>, pp. 310–11. In Chapter Two of *Bob Dylan in America*, Sean Wilentz describes Bob Dylan's relation with Ginsberg during this period and also his encounter with and possible influence by Kerouac's writing. Wilentz also refers to James Baldwin's view of Kerouac's work as "patronizing and ignorant in its projections about American Blacks" (p. 65).
- 11 Perhaps inadvertently, although Bob Dylan has admitted to being an avid baseball fan on more than one occasion, the title also amounts to a baseball pun. In old baseball lingo, "bringing it" refers to a pitcher's throwing hard and fast to a batter notably located at "home" plate. Metaphorically, then, the title could additionally mean telling the truth straight, hard as it might be for others to take.
- 12 At the time, a good example of this would be how government officials blamed the hippies for social unrest while "new left" revolutionaries blamed not only the government but also the druggies for maintaining the social status quo.
- 13 "Some Other Kinds Of Songs . . . Poems by Bob Dylan" were the liner notes printed on the reverse side of the *Another Side of Bob Dylan* album. In it, the Dylan persona comes to see how even at the unconscious level, political practice, both in its strict and loose sense, amounts to a game of one-upmanship where the other in effect keeps saying to him, "I could make you crawl/if i was payin' attention." The game exists for no other reason than just to "make you crawl" or "to win,/that's all"
- 14 Perhaps an allusion Bob Dylan's early, brief disguise in New York City as a Guthrie-esque ephebe who in fact was of middle-class, mid-western roots.
- 15 See <http://www.bartleby.com/235/335.html/>.

- 16 Cf. D. H. Lawrence: "Solemnity is a sign of fraud," "Him with His Tale in His Mouth," *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine and Other Essays* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Midland Book, 1963), p. 127.
- 17 Dylan both conspicuously *and* subtly announced that rejection at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival where he "went electric" with some songs, but after which he sang an acoustic version of "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue."
- 18 Around the time Dylan first aired "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue," the more usual autobiographical references interpreters thought of for "Blue" were to peers like David Blue and the blue-eyed Paul Clayton. See Oliver Trager, *Keys to the Rain*, p. 321. Cited in Ian Bell, *Once Upon a Time: The Lives of Bob Dylan* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing Company, 2012), p. 407, Pete Seeger claims he heard the song as a farewell to the folk-scene crowd. A reductive autobiographical reading is always possible as well. In her 1975 song "Diamonds and Rust," for instance, Joan Baez memorably cites the color of Dylan's eyes: "As I remember, your eyes/Were bluer than robin's eggs." In my view, Dylan's autobiographical self-references occur on an entirely different plane.
- 19 Tim Riley, *Hard Rain: A Dylan Commentary* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 108, reads this "orphan" image in passing as possibly "an externalization of the singer," hence referring to Dylan over against the "you" or former lover. But Dylan here plays the card of the uncanny or becoming-homeless, turning it back on to the reader/"you." On one hand, he imagines the song's listeners as *right now* envisioning his/its disappearance from their codes of understanding. In that way, he becomes "Yonder" to them, along with the insecurity or orphan-like status to which that reduces them. On the other hand, he imagines *himself* being orphaned or reduced to homeless status by such listeners.
- 20 Davis Inman, "Behind The Lyric: 'Maggie's Farm,' Bob Dylan" *American Songwriter*, February 14, 2011 at <http://www.americansongwriter.com/2011/02/behind-the-lyric-maggies-farm-bob-dylan>.
- 21 "Maggie's Farm" was one of the songs Bob Dylan presented in electric format at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, causing endless controversy among his fans.
- 22 One of the few Dylan commentators to concern himself with this song's self-referential turn, Aidan Day argues that the "She" equates with "the autonomy of imagination" that ironically undermines the song's title: "'She' does not belong to 'me,' but the other way around." Day, *Jokerman*, pp. 90, 91.
- 23 Cf. Stephen Scobie, *Alias Bob Dylan Revisited* (Calgary: Red Deer Press, 2003), pp. 131–32. Scobie also agrees with the "muse" reading of "She Belongs to Me" (p. 131).
- 24 The Poe "Raven" allusion evokes something akin to the meaningless reiteration of "nevermore."
- 25 To repeat my earlier assertion: the hybridity of the Dylan art work consists not just in its singular cluster of lyric, music, and vocal elements, but as well in its wedding poetic art to spiritual-existential point.
- 26 *Bringing It All Back Home* Jacket notes available at <http://bobdylan.com/albums/bringing-it-all-back-home/>.
- 27 Mike Marqusee terms the song the "prototype for a thousand trippy anthems" (*Wicked Messenger*, p. 198). Dylan's association with Allen Ginsberg at the time lends credence to this reading, especially given his appearance in the background of Dylan's cue-card introduction to "Subterranean Homesick Blues" in the film *Don't Look Back*. Ginsberg often publicly expressed his belief in the spiritual effects of psychedelic drugs. For other possible sources of the song, see Trager's summary, *Keys*, p. 440.

- 28 Shelton, *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1986), p. 313. Sean Wilentz makes the same connection of the Tambourine Man figure as Dylan “again” addressing “his muse.” *Bob Dylan in America*, p. 97. Aidan Day, *Jokerman*, pp. 21, 19, and John Hinchey, *Like a Complete Unknown: The Poetry of Bob Dylan’s Songs 1961-1969* (Ann Arbor: Stealing Home Press, 2002), pp. 94–95. Cf. Stephen Scobie thesis about Dylan’s prophetic role in *Alias Bob Dylan*, pp. 26 and 129–31. Regarding this song, Scobie specifically argues that Dylan at once internalizes the Tambourine Man as a muse figure (with or without prophetic abilities) and identifies with him in passing, if not fully. In either case, Scobie denies the separation that Aidan Day sees between speaker and protagonist in this song.
- 29 Another, closer-to-home precedent for the *mise en scène* of “Mr. Tambourine Man” might be Emily Dickinson’s “Heart not so heavy as mine.” *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1999), #88.
- 30 Cf. Kierkegaard’s phenomenological difference between the medium of music and of language: “If the elemental originality of the sensuous-erotic [i.e., the aesthetic] in all of its immediacy insists on expression, then the question arises as to which medium is the most suitable for this. The point that particularly must be kept in mind here is that it insists on being expressed and presented in its immediacy. In its mediacy and in being reflected in another medium, it falls within language and comes under ethical [i.e., public] categories. In its immediacy, it can be expressed only in music.” *Either/Or*, Vol. 1, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987), p. 64.
- 31 Marqusee who sees “Mr. Tambourine Man” as Dylan’s “unironic pursuit of transcendence,” and also faults it for its “escapism” from social issues. *Wicked Messenger*, pp. 126–27. My position is that Dylan would recover the primacy of the existential or private relation to his art from its American capitalist or musical-industrial environment.

## Chapter 2

- 1 Trager, *Keys*, p. 254.
- 2 An annotated online site has it that the name possibly constitutes a partial allusion to one of Blind Willie McTell’s pseudonyms. See [http://www.geocities.com/temptations\\_page/DylGuide.html#hwy61/](http://www.geocities.com/temptations_page/DylGuide.html#hwy61/).
- 3 Oliver Trager, *Keys*, refers to “Howard” as a “folk figure,” but if so my argument still works: Dylan’s exposing the “folk” movement as somehow turning into a capital [*sic*] enterprise.
- 4 Twain ends his autobiographical *Life on the Mississippi* tracing the River back to (a Dylanesque) Minnesota. The work also happens to engage issues of Twain’s vocation as a former steamboat apprentice-pilot, which in turn serves as an implicit metaphor of his early experience as a writer. Highway 61 in fact passes through Samuel Clemens a.k.a. Twain’s birthplace, Hannibal, Missouri.
- 5 The verse where “Gypsy Davey with a blowtorch he burns out their camps/With his faithful slave Pedro behind him he tramps” sketches a similarly compromising First-to-Third World relationship. “Gypsy Davey,” an ironic revision of a Woody Guthrie figure in one of his songs, here uses others to elevate his own importance. “Davey” evokes the American soldier fighting in Vietnam and thus personifying a country that, with puppet-government support (“his faithful slave Pedro”), destroys



- Vietnamese villages. Far from being a socially marginal gypsy, he purportedly wreaks his havoc to protect [sic] the American way.
- 6 On the album's version, one can also hear these lines to read "the old folks home *in* the college": where people get educated to make money, which amounts to trying to define and thereby restrict the "soul."
  - 7 *Bob Dylan: The Story Behind Every Track: All the Songs*, ed. Phillippe Margotin and Jean-Michel Guesdon (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 2015), p. 195. The entry for "Ballad of a Thin Man" also speculates about who the Jones figure might have been (pp. 195–96).
  - 8 Trager, *Keys*, p. 24.
  - 9 *All the Songs*, *ibid.*, p. 195.
  - 10 To my knowledge, Bob Dylan has never explicitly endorsed "Zen Buddhist" positions, although his direct acquaintance with Allen Ginsberg's eclectic "mystical" ruminations and also Jack Kerouac's Buddhist writings likely made its way into Dylan's awareness during this period. Indeed, Kerouac expressed Buddhist beliefs in *Desolation Angels*, to which some critics think Dylan alludes in the very title of "Desolation Row." Steven Heine's book on Dylan, *Bargainin' For Salvation: Bob Dylan, a Zen Master?* (New York: Continuum, 2009), p. 31, points out the "zen" connection with Dylan's many enigmatic sayings throughout his songs. Heine emphasizes Dylan's "spiritual" quest in Zen Buddhist terms that overlap with what I think Dylan's songs allegorically trace in a more Western and less formal version of that quest. Heine also notes how "Zen literary records expressing transcendental insight into the absurd of human existence help to explain how Dylan's puzzling words consistently critique the limitations of self amid the failings of social institutions as part of his ongoing quest for spiritual fulfillment" (p. 22; also see pp. 66 ff.).
  - 11 The lines read: "You have a lot of nerve/To say you are my friend/If you won't come out your window." The critical tendency is to regard both songs in Dylan's "put-down" genre, which arguably comes to a head in "Like a Rolling Stone." Trager notes, for instance, that most critics especially see "Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window?" as an expression of Dylan's anger toward a woman stuck on someone else. This aggressive relation either to a man or to a woman clearly comes through in his performance of the song. *Keys*, pp. 92–93.
  - 12 Most Dylan critics regard the song as his breakthrough vocational work, freeing him and subsequently other singers from the constraining protocols of subject-matter and performance common to popular rock 'n' roll songs and other kinds of popular music at the time. Greil Marcus devotes an entire book to the song's revolutionary effect on the music world and the times at large: *Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005). Mike Marqusee argues for "the song's intimate rage and almost amoral assertion of personal autonomy: a defiant response to a world that insisted on tearing away that autonomy at every turn" (*Wicked Messenger*, p. 163). Wilfrid Mellers, *Darker Shade of Pale: A Backdrop to Bob Dylan* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 140, judges the song a put-down of "Miss Lonely," stripping away her pretenses, yet also allowing a positive hope for a new beginning. Like other critics, Mellers points to Dylan's later comment, which I cite in the epigraph to Chapter 5, that Dylan's third-person prenominal in his songs really referred to himself (quoted in Mellers, p. 141). Also see Lawrence Epstein's argument about this song and "Ballad of a Thin Man" at [http://thebestamericanpoetry.typepad.com/the\\_best\\_american\\_poetry/dylan\\_watch/](http://thebestamericanpoetry.typepad.com/the_best_american_poetry/dylan_watch/), accessed May 22, 2009.

- 13 Hinchey, *Complete Unknown*, p. 136; Tim Riley, *Hard Rain*, p. 121.
- 14 *Complete Unknown*, p. 26.
- 15 From this point through the rest of this book, I place quotation marks around “nothing” to signify Dylan’s staging the diminishing distinction between the self as something and its *self* as “nothing.”
- 16 *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, #1611. In a different “religious” context, Bryan Cheyette takes note of Dylan’s later expression of his “identityless identity” vis-à-vis “the Hebrew God” in the *Infidels* album’s song “I and I.” Cheyette, “On the ‘D’ Train: Bob Dylan’s Conversions.” “*Do You Mr. Jones?*”: *Bob Dylan with the Poets and Professors*, ed. Neil Corcoran (London: Pimlico, 2003), pp. 249–50.
- 17 Wallace Stevens, “The Snow Man,” *Collected Poems*, p. 10.
- 18 Also cf. another possible reference for his early belief in communication via his songs: “In the NYC subways, trains were named with letters or numbers. Trains that were locals usually had a double letter name, hence there was an EE train, which straphangers naturally called “the Double E.” The Double E would have stopped at West 4th St. station, and Dylan would have been familiar with it.” “Flagging Down the Double Es,” [http://www.edlis.org/twice/threads/double\\_ees.html/](http://www.edlis.org/twice/threads/double_ees.html/)
- 19 The words read “so hot” in the outtake version.
- 20 Clinton Heylin, *Revolution in the Air: The Songs of Bob Dylan, 1957-1973* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2009), p. 203. All references to Heylin will be from this work unless otherwise noted.
- 21 Dylan included the song’s lyrics in his published collections of songs (from *Writings and Drawings* through *Bob Dylan Lyrics 1962-2001*) in the section of *Blonde on Blonde* songs.
- 22 Heylin, *Revolution*, p. 261.
- 23 Among other critics, John Hinchey notes this connection in *Like a Complete Unknown*, p. 148. In a self-evident hermeneutic stretch yet with experimental esprit, one might argue that the song’s title perhaps also evokes the Queen Jane (i.e., Seymour) in British history, third wife of Henry VIII, who finally gave him a male heir to his throne, Edward VI, a religiously contentious Protestant king who died at a very young age. Dylan arguably plays on this allusion insofar as his Queen Jane figuratively gives birth to contentious progeny of a different kind.
- 24 As if in ironic confirmation, Clinton Heylin terms “From a Buick 6” nothing more than album-filler or “light relief” in *Highway 61 Revisited* (*Revolution*, p. 252).
- 25 An outtake to this song has her coming down the highway “with her dynamite and her thread,” suggesting her double function of inducing crisis as much as assuaging it for him.
- 26 Lawrence Wilde sees “Desolation Row” using Eliot’s technique of collage and simultaneously subverting his “commitment to the idea of ‘high art’ accessible only to a gifted elite.” Wilde deploys Theodor Adorno’s view of “revolutionary art” to show how songs like “Desolation Row,” even as they reach a popular music audience, comprise “expressionist” critiques of Western capitalist society. In that sense, they baffle appropriations as commodity-cultural products while simultaneously promulgating “the aspiration to liberty and social harmony.” “The Cry of Humanity: Dylan’s Expressionist Period,” *The Political Art of Bob Dylan*, ed. David Boucher and Gary Browning (Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2009), pp. 129, 133 *passim*.
- 27 Marqesee regards the opening lines this way, also claiming that they suggest Dylan’s sense of how the mass media was turning him into a spectacle as well. *Wicked Messenger*, p. 147.

- 28 Einstein, of course, also played the (non-electric) violin.
- 29 In a 1910 essay, "Observation on 'Wild' Psychoanalysis," Freud himself, unlike many of his followers, dismissed literal sexual activity as a cause of and/or a means to cure human neuroses.
- 30 Lawrence Wilde also argues that Dylan targets both types of the "poetic." See n. 26 above. Wilde takes "Desolation Row" for a place of liberation and escape from the competitive capitalist world as sketched in the previous stanza. It seems to me, however, that Wilde thus turns "Desolation Row" into yet another alibi for *not* facing "Desolation" as such. Strangely enough, Allen Ginsberg apparently takes the Eliot-Pound-fighting line straight: "You know, that's one of Dylan's fucked-up lines, I'm afraid . . . Eliot and Pound were friends, they weren't 'fighting in the captain's tower.'" He also takes the "calypso singers" as genuine minstrels whom he thinks Dylan is extolling. "The Allen Ginsberg Project" at <http://ginsbergblog.blogspot.no/2012/06/allen-ginsberg-criticizes-bob-dylan-mmp.html/>. Marqusee similarly accepts the countercultural binary: "The contrast between the hollowness of elite art and the soulfulness of popular expression surfaces as an explicit theme in 'Desolation Row'" (*Wicked Messenger*, p. 157).

## Chapter 3

- 1 Both John Hinchey and Christopher Ricks, for example, argue that the song represents human "lust" or erotic "desire." John Hinchey, *Like a Complete Unknown*, pp. 216–17, and Christopher Ricks, *Dylan's Visions of Sin*, pp. 151–53.
- 2 Other critics have noted Dylan's allegorization of women along spiritual lines, although not in the sense I am here trying to formulate. Cf. Lawrence Epstein's observation about Dylan's "allegorical love songs": "On the literal level, these songs are about Dylan's love for a woman. On the allegorical level, they are about Dylan's relationship with some aspect of God, represented by the woman." December 1, 2008, *The Dylan Watch*, article by Lawrence J. Epstein on "Red River Shore" at [http://thebestamericanpoetry.typepad.com/the\\_best\\_american\\_poetry/dylan\\_watch/](http://thebestamericanpoetry.typepad.com/the_best_american_poetry/dylan_watch/).
- 3 David Yaffe argues that the "Queen of Spades" refers to Bob Dylan's idealization of black female blues and gospel artists, associating them with the quintessence or authenticity of the kind of art he seeks for himself. Dylan's "aretha" reference in his prose-poetic work *Tarantula* makes the "Queen of Soul" allusion viable in this song as well. Both show him attempting to "merge[] sexual desire with an urge to get inside the meaning of the blues, through an erotic 'co-existence.'" *Bob Dylan: Like a Complete Unknown* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 76. My take is that Dylan here turns the black female singer/song into a trope for an unself-conscious mode of both composing and performing lyrics from which he himself feels socially but not spiritually barred.
- 4 Heylin, *Revolution*, p. 312, links Dylan's reference specifically to Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones, but surely it can refer to any sensationalist contemporary peer.
- 5 An appropriate circular image, rags were collected as materials to make paper, hence serving as a roundabout reference to writing and for Dylan composing the present song itself.

- 6 Dylan's view of touring changes late in his career. A British newspaper notes this about him: "[Dylan] also lives to tour," having "played around 100 gigs every year since 1988. 'A lot of people can't stand touring,' he once said, but to me it's like breathing. I do it because I'm driven to do it." <http://www.mirror.co.uk/celebs/news/2009/05/05/bob-dylan-the-truth-about-the-reclusive-music-legend-115875-21332529/>.
- 7 McGuire had become popular for singing a politically motivated, apocalyptic song that received much radio play at the time, "Eve of Destruction" (1964).
- 8 In this section I will refer to her as the speaker's imagined addressee, and to "her" in scare quotes to signify Dylan's personification of the musical-lyrical medium's potential to help disclose his goal.
- 9 *Revolution*, p. 284.
- 10 Tim Riley points out the "drug slang" of "rainy day women," *Hard Rain*, pp. 130–31. Oliver Trager does the same, also noting the difficulty in determining "whether Dylan was making an unrepentant statement of hipsterism [with a drug allusion] or merely having some fun at his audience's . . . expense." He further notes how "multiplying the two numbers [in the title] equals four twenty—stoner's code for prime time to fire up a joint." *Keys*, pp. 508, 509.
- 11 See <http://www.jesus-is-lord.com/translat.htm/>. "Fifty-four men . . . were put in charge of the [translation] project. At least forty-seven of them took active part in the work, which began in 1604 and included in 1611." Robert Pogue Harrison, "The Book from Which Our Literature Springs," *The New York Review of Books*, LIX:2 (February 9, 2012), p. 44. For that matter, one supposedly can count forty-seven miracles in the canonical Gospels.
- 12 See Michael Coyle and Debra Rae Cohen's essay on *Blonde on Blonde* in *The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan* essay on *Blonde on Blonde*, ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar, p. 144. Trager, *Keys*, p. 509, also cites the Salvation Army-like performance and the connotation of persecution behind the imagery.
- 13 Trager, *Keys*, p. 368. Trager also judges the song as at best "A minor, sloppy blues," influenced by Lightning Hopkins' song that begins much the same in "Automobile (Blues)": "I saw you riding around in your brand new automobile."
- 14 Cf. Heylin, *Revolution*, pp. 289 ff.
- 15 The most notable of these precedents is perhaps "Hot Biscuits and Sweet Marie" (Lincoln Chase), a song famous for its iteration of "caught between the devil and the deep blue sea." Bob Dylan has played this song on his XM radio show, 2008. A TV theme song entitled "White Horses" and sung by Jackie Lee had conspicuously escapist lyrics that echo the "six white horses" image in "Absolutely Sweet Marie" (see below): "On white horses let me ride away to my world of dreams so far away. Let me run. To the sun/To a world my heart can understand. . . . Far away. Stars away." <http://www.cfhf.net/lyrics/white.htm>. <http://www.hsutx.edu/sixwhitehorses/history.html>.
- 16 Hinchey, *Complete Unknown*, p. 186.
- 17 White horses were also used for Hindu religious occasions and wedding events. See <http://www.heberlestables.com/staticpages/index.php/Hindu/>.
- 18 James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), p. 516, relates this passage to *The Song of Songs* and messianic hope. Dylan would later record this song with The Band on *The Basement Tapes*. Andy Gill, *Don't Think Twice: Bob Dylan, The Early Years* (New York: Thunder Mouth

- Press, 1998), p. 105, also associates the six-horses image with “Coming Round the Mountain.”
- 19 See, for instance, the long poem entitled *Six White Horses* by Candy Geer, inspired by the death of John F. Kennedy and the reaction of the young John John. [http://www.etsy.com/view\\_listing.php?listing\\_id=27679560/](http://www.etsy.com/view_listing.php?listing_id=27679560/). Johnny Cash recorded a song entitled “Six White Horses” (written by Tommy Cash) in 1969, which has the horses drawing a funeral carriage. Cash also recorded a similarly titled but differently themed gospel song that included an addressed figure named “Marie,” and in which a parent senses his son’s death: “Come here and look through the window Marie/Open up the shutters, tell me what you see/Was that his knock that I heard at the door/Or is it six white horses coming down the road.” [http://www.hotlyrics.net/lyrics/J/Johnny\\_Cash/Six\\_White\\_Horses.html](http://www.hotlyrics.net/lyrics/J/Johnny_Cash/Six_White_Horses.html). Michael Gray argues that with the “penitentiary” association, the horses suggest that “the narrator” here “declares himself to be on some kind of death row” (*Song & Dance Man III*, p. 396).
  - 20 In contrast, John Hinchey associates the captain with the mythological figure Charon of the River Styx, which again constitutes an allusion to death. *Complete Unknown*, p. 221.
  - 21 The Persian drunkard perhaps alludes to the Persian philosopher Zoroaster’s effort to get to the essence of good and evil by transcending mundane relations to existence. Zoroaster is also known as “Zarathustra,” Nietzsche’s prophet of the superman who affirms life in the face of an “absolutely” tragic nothing of existence.
  - 22 Among the most astute apologists for this song, Christopher Ricks has argued that it does not reference women in general but “a woman” in particular. Ricks, whose argument is of course much more intricate than my paraphrase of it here, gave one version of this paper as an inaugural talk as “Dylan and Misogyny” at the 2006 Dartmouth College Conference, “Just a Series of Interpretations of Bob Dylan’s Lyrics.” Also see Hinchey, *Complete Unknown*, p. 180, and Trager, *Keys*, p. 357 ff. Trager argues that the song in fact criticizes “sexist men as much as the woman, or women, who let them down.” For a “sort of” defense of Dylan’s misogynistic inclinations from a more recent feminist viewpoint, see <http://tigerbeatdown.com/2010/02/10/sooner-or-later-one-of-us-must-know-in-defense-of-bob-Dylan/>. Most biographically minded critics assign the ostensible genesis for the woman in “Just Like a Woman” to Edie Sedgwick, with whom Bob Dylan allegedly had an affair during this period.
  - 23 This artistic skepticism about his own art perhaps accounts for why some critics claim that Dylan adopts an “anti-exegetical” stance throughout *Blonde on Blonde* as a whole. See Michael Coyle and Debra Rae Cohen, “*Blonde on Blonde*,” pp. 145, 147.
  - 24 According to Clinton Heylin, a further obstacle to interpreting the song is its faulty transcriptions from “existing tapes.” *Revolution*, p. 290.
  - 25 Heylin transcribes the phrases as: “Cold black glass don’t make no mirr’r/Cold black water don’t make no tears” (p. 291).
  - 26 Trager, *Keys*, p. 609.
  - 27 Taken from Lawrence’s *Look! We Have All Come Through!*, digitalized volume at [https://archive.org/stream/havecomelookweth00lawrrich/havecomelookweth00lawrrich\\_djvu.txt/](https://archive.org/stream/havecomelookweth00lawrrich/havecomelookweth00lawrrich_djvu.txt/).
  - 28 Hinchey, *Like a Complete Unknown*, pp. 199, 200.
  - 29 Michael Coyle and Debra Rae Cohen, “*Blonde on Blonde*,” p. 145 (their emphasis).
  - 30 Philip Larkin, “Big Victims: Emily Dickinson and Walter de la Mare,” *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1984; rpt.

- from London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1983), p. 195 (my emphasis). Larkin goes on to theorize about Dickinson in a way that could further apply to Dylan: “The price she paid was that of appearing to posterity as perpetually unfinished and wilfully eccentric.”
- 31 Michael Gray cites Dylan’s “fawning, schmaltzy guitar-work” regarding the song’s musical arrangement. *Song and Dance Man III*, p. 147. Where “Norwegian Wood” more or less concerns a sexual situation that never gets consummated, Dylan’s song supposedly concerns the abrupt aftermath of the speaker and woman’s active sexual encounter. Supporting the biographical-intertextual reading of the song, friends of mine early on noticed the metaphorical homonym of “Jamaican rum” and “Norwegian Wood.” But I would claim that this is one more instance of Dylan’s imagining/composing on two levels at once.
- 32 Sidestepping the possible issue of prostitution, John Hinchey argues that the persona’s gum-giving “functions on two levels, both within the game of love—as a mocking and/or self-mocking gift—and . . . as a kind of amulet, a protective time-out from the game itself” *Like a Complete Unknown*, p. 209.
- 33 A related “gum” allusion appears in “Subterranean Homesick Blues” (1965) where it suggests being a clean-cut, middle-class, ergo nonrevolutionary “kid”: “Try to avoid the scandals/Don’t wanna be a bum/You better chew gum.”
- 34 In his film for the tour of the Rolling Thunder Review (1978), *Renaldo and Clara*, Dylan lets both Baez and Sara speculate that Dylan meant the one and not the other in this song. A number of critics have noted how Sara’s patronymic, “Lowndes,” resonates in “Lowlands.” But one can equally argue that certain images in the song, for example about her “Spanish manners,” spring from his relationship with Baez.
- 35 Quoted in Ricks, *Visions of Sin*, p. 101. Tony Attwood also finds the song “plodding” and comprising a “set of images that conjure up . . . nothing.” “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands’: the meaning of the music and the lyrics,” posted on December 19, 2015 by Tony Attwood, <http://bob-dylan.org.uk/archives/1846/>.
- 36 The phrase perhaps also consists of a specific allusion to the self-certain (messianic) left and right political credos being bandied around in the United States during the mid-1960s.
- 37 The critical temptation is to see this reference in biographical terms since it also happens to signify the approximate locus of Joan Baez’s home. From my viewpoint, such a connection only serves to distract attention away from the song’s inward autobiographical movement.
- 38 In the earlier “Joan Baez, Part Two,” Dylan writes that he had preferred the realism of social grit in songs to mellifluous vocal and musical renditions of folk topics. That was until, persuaded by others to listen to Joan Baez singing in a specific instance (“‘Let her voice ring out,’ they cried”), he was struck dumb by it: “I felt my face freeze t’ the bone/An’ my mouth like ice or solid stone.” Yet what he encountered through her voice amounts not to *her* as such but to that person once removed by his imagination, the “Part Two” self or “Baez” as conduit to an experience of otherness he *now* designates as “beauty.” This beauty also enveloped others and himself without a specifiable message or reference to external factors: “I did not begin t’ touch/’Til I finally felt what wasn’t there.” This indefinite definition [*sic*] of a musical-lyrical poesis is also synonymous with Edgar Allan Poe’s definition of poetic work. See [http://www.bjorner.com/WFMH%20-%20Album%20Liner%20Notes.htm#\\_Toc284489499/](http://www.bjorner.com/WFMH%20-%20Album%20Liner%20Notes.htm#_Toc284489499/).

- 39 Cf. Lawrence Epstein: “Visions of Johanna’ (1966) was the first [*sic*] of Dylan’s allegorical love songs. In that song Dylan is with the earthly Louise while yearning for the spiritual Johanna. The exact nature of Johanna’s Godliness is not clear in the song. . . .” December 1, 2008, *The Dylan Watch*, article by Lawrence J. Epstein on “Red River Shore” at [http://thebestamericanpoetry.typepad.com/the\\_best\\_american\\_poetry/dylan\\_watch/](http://thebestamericanpoetry.typepad.com/the_best_american_poetry/dylan_watch/).
- 40 Day, *Jokerman*, p. 115. Day was one of the first critics to note Dylan’s promiscuous switching of “personal pronouns and names” (p. 116).
- 41 Day, *Jokerman*, p. 121. One also has to take note of Bob Dylan’s incessant tinkering with a “published” song’s musical style, which occurred during this period and in his late “Never Ending Tour.” The *Cutting Edge* bootlegs (2015) show such performative tinkering in actual fact.
- 42 Day, *Jokerman*, p. 114. In his later critical works on Dylan, Day retracts this earlier “carnavalesque” view of Dylan’s poetics. For example, see Day’s paper delivered at the 2006 Dartmouth College Conference on Dylan at <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~2006dylancon/>.
- 43 “The Philosophy of Composition,” *Edgar Allan Poe, Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 19.
- 44 Critics like Day and Michael Gray among others conjecture that “Johanna” might refer to “Gehenna” in the Jewish Bible, and by extension to “Armageddon” of the New Testament. But as a former student in my Dylan course at Dartmouth College remarked that connection doesn’t fully account for what follows in the song.
- 45 Another Dartmouth student in my course on Dylan’s lyrics brought my attention to the possible slang reference of this scene. “D train” could be downtown slang for a blow-job or else as in “detrain” meaning “to get off.” The D train in actual fact refers to another subway line that stops at W. 4th St. station. [http://www.edlis.org/twice/threads/double\\_ees.html](http://www.edlis.org/twice/threads/double_ees.html) accessed January 24, 2009.
- 46 Emily Dickinson, #1656, Franklin edition.

## Chapter 4

- 1 Jim James used these verses on the song he completed with the title “Nothing to It.” Other musical artists like Elvis Costello eventually turned Dylan’s handwritten, incomplete lyrics into complete songs, which T. J. Burnett produced for the 2014 album *Lost on the River: The New Basement Tapes*. <http://www.daysofthecrazy-wild.com/exclusive-bob-dylans-hand-written-lyrics-nothing-check-em-now/>, accessed April 14, 2016.
- 2 Heylin, *Revolution*, p. 333; his emphasis.
- 3 Marcus’s phrase echoes Richard Poirier’s American scene and its representation in American literature as a “World Elsewhere.”
- 4 Greil Marcus, *The Old, Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes* (New York: Picador, USA, 1997), pp. 130, 138, 139, 89.
- 5 Paul Williams, *Performing Artist 1960-1973*, p. 229.
- 6 Clinton Heylin, *Behind the Shades Revisited* (New York: William Morrow, 2001), p. 305.
- 7 Heylin, for example, holds that “Tiny Montgomery” demonstrates Dylan’s “love for nonsense” (*Revolution*, p. 333). Sid Griffin simply notes that Dylan is “singing

- some absurd stuff here.” Griffin, *Million Dollar Bash: Bob Dylan, the Band, and the Basement Tapes* (London [UK]: Outline Press Ltd., 2007), p. 177. Oliver Trager claims that the song concerns “sending an enigmatic message to a friend,” yet that begs the question: exactly *what* message? Trager, *Keys*, p. 628.
- 8 Gill, *Don't Think Twice*, p. 120.
  - 9 *Don't Think Twice*, p. 120.
  - 10 Marcus notes that “Tiny Montgomery” might refer to a stock-car racer in the Northern California region.
  - 11 The reference is to a war vehicle of the Second World War. Amazon.com refers to a book by Steven Zaloga that “guides the reader through the early 1930s development of the half-track, its first deployment in action in the Philippines in 1941 and its varied and vital role in international deployments since World War 2.” [http://www.amazon.com/Infantry-Half-Track-1940-73-New-Vanguard/dp/1855324679/ref=sr\\_1\\_2?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1264714285&sr=1-2/](http://www.amazon.com/Infantry-Half-Track-1940-73-New-Vanguard/dp/1855324679/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1264714285&sr=1-2/).
  - 12 Heylin, *Revolution*, asserts that what Dylan actually sings on the recording (as opposed to the official copyrighted text) is “Grease that gig/And play it blank” (p. 333), which pretty much restates his making the performance slippery (and fun) to pin down and say, in effect, nothing of serious moment.
  - 13 Heylin, *Revolution*, pp. 352, 353. Trager also cites Marcus’s notion that “Quinn the Eskimo” concerns “deliverance from nothingness, about a hero’s conquest of boredom” (*Keys*, p. 506). Sid Griffin makes the “nursery rhyme” connection (*Million Dollar Bash*, pp. 210, 211), and Riley with drugs (*Hard Rain*, p. 167). Most critics note the song’s explicit allusion to the then well-known actor Anthony Quinn who had starred as an Eskimo in the 1960 movie *The Savage Innocents*.
  - 14 Aidan Day, *Jokerman*, pp. 49–51. Employing a more traditional notion of spiritual autobiography, Andrew McCarron regards this song as directly expressing Dylan’s desire for “spiritual growth” or “the realization of a deeper self” via “union with a supreme power” (*Light Come Shining*, p. 64).
  - 15 See Trager, *Keys*, p. 506.
  - 16 Paul Williams regards “Goin’ to Acapulco” as a “love song” in which Dylan expresses a “modest hedonism” (*Performing Artist*, p. 229).
  - 17 One can argue that this stratagem marks all of the other *The Basement Tapes* songs given their unofficial scene of writing and performing.
  - 18 Williams, *Performing Artist*, p. 230, offers the following off-color meanings.
  - 19 Griffin, *Million Dollar Bash*, pp. 210, 191; Trager, *Keys to the Rain*, p. 694. Certain aspects of the song no doubt justify such judgments. Michael Gray isolates one specific line, “Take me down to California, baby,” claiming that it “stands out” for its complete irrelevance. Gray, *Song & Dance Man*, p. 160.
  - 20 Marcus senses this double meaning when he comments that “Yea! Heavy and a Bottle of Bread” is “full of riddles, all coming from the pull of Dylan’s serious, bitter demeanor against the apparent nonsense of his words” (*Weird America*, p. 267).
  - 21 See Gill, *Don't Think Twice*, p. 117, Ricks, *Dylan’s Visions of Sin*, p. 112, and Marcus, *Weird America*, p. 259.
  - 22 This same line could of course also refer to Dylan’s own exhaustion in pushing his song to express his spiritual goal to others.
  - 23 Oliver Trager considers it “one of Dylan’s most insane compositions thanks to the campy delivery of delightfully incomprehensible lyrics” (*Keys*, p. 424).
  - 24 See *Chronicles I*, pp. 116–18.



- 25 In conventional autobiographical terms, the counselor reference probably applies to Albert Grossman, at whose house Bob Dylan was staying while recording *The Basement Tapes*.
- 26 Dylan adds the modifier “long” in one recorded performance of the song.
- 27 *Revolution*, p. 350.
- 28 Tim Riley makes this “rhyming” rationale in *Hard Rain*, p. 159.
- 29 Gill, *Don't Think Twice*, p. 118. Paul Williams also agrees with this reading: “the song is about the American nation as seen from the perspective of the founding fathers, an expression of their pain at how she (personified as female, Liberty) has turned her back on the ideals in which she was conceived” (Williams, *Performing Artist*, p. 232). Cf. Riley, *Hard Rain*, p. 163, and Marcus, *Weird America*, p. 212.
- 30 *Weird America*, pp. 212, 215.
- 31 Dylan acknowledged this Shakespearean allusion in his notes to the song's collection on *Biograph*. Also see Riley, *Hard Rain*, p. 163.
- 32 Marcus refers to these lines to show how this song typifies what *The Basement Tapes* songs all concern: “It's a road where a certain nihilism lies within the freedom and hilarity of a perfectly written, perfectly arranged song—‘Million Dollar Bash,’ say—that casts off all meaning” (*Weird America*, p. 79).
- 33 See, for instance, Heylin, *Revolution*, pp. 343–44. The song's sources tend to corroborate this reading. For instance, the “sugar for sugar” phrase appears in “James Alley Blues,” a 1927 song by Richard “Rabbit” Brown “warning about one of New Orleans' more dangerous thoroughfares” (Gill, *Don't Think Twice*, p. 119). As I note, this is not the last time Dylan will refer to another artist's blues song with apocalyptic overtones stemming from real floods like the one in 1889 in Johnstown Pennsylvania or, as in Brown's song, the devastating 1927 one in the Mississippi delta (Griffin, *Million Dollar Bash*, p. 197).
- 34 Heylin, *Revolution*, p. 336.
- 35 Heylin advances the possible biblical connection along with the sexual reading. *Revolution*, p. 377.
- 36 Tim Riley makes the last suggestion in *Hard Rain*, p. 162.
- 37 For example, the Doors's debut album (which included the song “The End”) was released in January, 1967, the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* in June, 1967, the Rolling Stones' *Their Satanic Majesties Request* in December, 1967.
- 38 Dylan has consistently included this song in *The Basement Tapes* section in his *Lyrics* collections despite the fact that, as Clinton Heylin notes (*Revolution*, pp. 272–73), it was likely composed two years earlier when Dylan played it with The Band a.k.a. The Hawks. Two years later, The Band recorded the song in *The Basement Tapes* sessions, which possibly accounts for the final 1970 copyrighted version collected in the *Lyrics* books.
- 39 Trager, *Keys*, p. 395. The fact that today pay phones have become *passé* only adds fuel to this Dylan-framed communication problem.
- 40 Sid Griffin sees the persona as giving “ultimate rural advice to a neighbor,” especially in the line advising “you” to “Take heed” of how “Nothing is better, nothing is best.” More generally, Andy Gill claims the song concerns “somebody being held accountable for nondelivery; but it's flexible enough to accommodate a number of interpretations” that range “from a simple drug-deal gone wrong to more serious political deceit.” Terming the song a monologue, Oliver Trager calls attention to Dylan's “confessional stump-preacher mode” in the “middle section” in which one

- can hear him “trying to persuade a congregation to acknowledge but forgive a murky betrayal of some vague origin—Judas’s, perhaps.” Griffin, *Million Dollar Bash*, p. 213; Gill, *Don’t Think Twice*, p. 122; Trager, *Keys*, p. 449.
- 41 Griffin, *Million Dollar Bash*, p. 220. Williams, *Performing Artist*, p. 228 makes the “biblical” connection. Heylin terms the song a “folkloric nursery rhyme” (*Revolution*, p. 379). Tim Riley speculates generally that “Apple Suckling Tree” has country-music longings that will surface on Dylan’s next album *John Wesley Harding* (*Hard Rain*, p. 160).
- 42 Marcus, *Weird America*, p. 242. The entry for this song in *All the Songs*, ed. Margotin and Guesdon, characterizes it as a “grotesque tale” (p. 258). Trager also regards the song in more serious terms as “veer[ing] from the disorderly to the augural in an eye blink” (*Keys*, p. 15).
- 43 *Revolution* p. 380. Heylin’s other transcribed lines I think underscore this same reading: “like bats out of hell” suggests that everyone is leaving him alone “underneath the apple suckling tree,” or in the zone of what might result in his eventually encountering the “Tree” of brute existence.
- 44 Most Dylan critics agree that “Minstrel Boy” belongs in *The Basement Tapes* era, although Dylan later placed it in the *Self Portrait* section of his 2004 updated *Lyrics* book. The only Dylan recording available to date is his Isle of Wight performance in 1969. The song was copyrighted in 1970. He had aggressively stated this attitude—meaning he still expected the opposite to be the case—in the *Blonde on Blonde* song “Most Likely You Go Your Way (and I’ll Go Mine).”
- 45 *Revolution*, p. 323.
- 46 Griffin, *Million Dollar Bash*, p. 211. Griffin also notes that the reference to healing the sick in the song clearly comes from the Bible (p. 212). Andy Gill, *Don’t Think Twice*, p. 123, notes that Richard Manuel was nicknamed “Homer.” Gill adds further information about the song’s title deriving from the comic routine at the Apollo Theater in Harlem during the 1940s and 1950s, which focused on the “various confusions between the characters stuck on opposite sides of the door never being resolved by the door being opened.”
- 47 Cf. Marcus’s view that the song concerns “how hard it is to maintain friendships,” with Dylan addressing friends to whom he gives informal names in the song like “Jim” and Mouse.” *Weird America*, p. 258.
- 48 An Old Testament example appears in Ezekial 37: “The hand of the LORD was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones, And caused me to pass by them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry.”
- 49 *Don’t Think Twice*, p. 114.
- 50 *Weird America*, pp. 64–65.
- 51 The fishing “hook” also metaphorically signifies Dylan’s own “fishing” for what made him a distinctive artist back then. He uses the image of fishing again in “Apple Suckling Tree.”
- 52 The ever-informative Heylin notes that Dylan apparently wrote this song in 1967 but reworked it in 1973. The original version was “just another discarded ditty” relying “on the usual wordplay and slurred diction to obscure any pretense to a deeper meaning.” Heylin further notes the “dramatic reworking” of the song’s later version, but as to why he doesn’t speculate. *Revolution*, pp. 336, 337.

- 53 Here the “biographical” reduction of this attitude, for example to Bob Dylan’s restlessness in his pastoral “Woodstock” community, only serves to block the *Basement* song’s essentially subjective orientation.
- 54 Marcus sees the song synonymous with “looking for your girlfriend in a whorehouse” (*Weird America*, p. 247), Heylin views it as a “drinking song” (*Revolution*, p. 337), Gill a “cowboy farce” (*Don’t Think Twice*, p. 121), and Griffin even as a song narrated by “a randy sailor on shore leave in a bisexual bar” (*Million Dollar Bash*, p. 302).
- 55 Ezekial 1:4,5, 16, quoted in Rogovoy, *Prophet*, p. 113. Michael Gray hears echoes not only from Ezekial but also from the Book of Dan. 7:9-10 where the prophet sees “the Ancient of days” at the Last Judgment: “His throne was like the fiery flame, and His wheels as burning fire . . . ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him: the judgment was set, and the books were opened.” Gray, *Dylan Encyclopedia* (New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 708. Trager hints at an apocalyptic theme from the New Testament Book of Revelation: “The narrator is a mysterious, shady Messiah figure . . . prophetically returning to settle an old (and final?) score with humanity” (*Keys*, p. 616).
- 56 Rogovoy, *Prophet*, p. 114.
- 57 Gill, *Don’t Think Twice*, p. 123. Gill suggests that the image of the fiery wheel could also refer to Dylan’s motorcycle accident, which led to his doing *The Basement Tapes* in the first place. Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home*, p. 318.
- 58 Dylan will later resort to the same conceit pertaining to one level of meaning in his title for *Blood on the Tracks*.
- 59 Clinton Heylin suggests this line of reading when he cites the song’s initial “mem’ry” line as a direct allusion to Rimbaud’s *A Season in Hell*. *Revolution*, p. 347.
- 60 Technically, this might be better viewed as a revision of Socratic “recollection” or Platonic “anamnesis” into what Kierkegaard termed “repetition,” or recollecting the existential truth forward.
- 61 *Old, Weird, America*, pp. 143, 144.
- 62 John Herdman, *Voice without Restraint* (Edinburgh: Paul Harris Publishing 1982), p. 54; Muir, *Troubadour: Early & Late Songs of Bob Dylan* (Bluntishman, Cambridge shire, UK: Woodstock Publications, 2003), p. 158.
- 63 Gill, *Don’t Think Twice*, p. 115.
- 64 “Escalation of the Vietnam War officially started on the morning of January 31, 1965 when orders were cut and issued to mobilize the 18th Tactical Fighter Squadron from Okinawa to Da Nang Air Base.” Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation\\_Flaming\\_Dart](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Flaming_Dart), accessed June 9, 2010. The January 30 date also happens to mark when Hitler assumed the Chancellorship of Germany, with of course dire human consequences for Jews. Given Dylan’s own Jewish background, the date could thus be a roundabout, conventionally understood autobiographical reference. But perhaps more specifically autobiographical is the fact that he first came to New York City in late January of 1961, in effect thus marking his vocational birth.
- 65 Ricks regards the song as a near parody of Gentry’s “Ode” and as expressing the “sin” of “classic boredom” and “pointlessness” (*Dylan’s Visions of Sin*, pp. 129, 128).
- 66 Tony Attwood at “Untold Dylan: The meaning behind the music and words of Bob Dylan” on “I’m not there,” posted on February 16, 2016 at [http://bob-dylan.org.uk/archives/2052](http://bob-dylan.org.uk/archives/2052http://bob-dylan.org.uk/archives/2052/).
- 67 Trager, *Keys*, pp. 559, 560, terms Dylan’s song a “tongue-in-cheek amalgamation of tradition and oddball fantasy,” an interpretation supported by his singing it

- while “barely containing his laughter” or “as if straining not to blow the joke.” But Paul Williams argues that the song comes across like a “symphony,” with Dylan addressing Christianity in serious terms. Both Heylin and Williams suggest that Dylan might be expressing true sentiments under the influence of drugs. Sid Griffin rejects this referential reduction and holds out for the song’s religious significance, even regarding it as Bob Dylan’s “publicly beginning his quest for Salvation.” Griffin, *Million Dollar Bash*, pp. 183, 184, 186; Williams, *Performing Artist*, pp. 234–35; Heylin, *Revolution*, pp. 334–35.
- 68 John Herdman makes overtures to this inward-turning Dylan when remarking that “Behind Dylan’s prophetic utterances of doom directed towards society lies . . . personal fear . . . about his own salvation. Now for the first time [*sic*], instead of projecting that fear outwards in apocalyptic imagery, he begins to examine its source within his own consciousness” (*Voice without Restraint*, p. 96).
- 69 From the excellent edition of Dylan’s songs, *The Lyrics: Since 1962*, eds. Christopher Ricks, Lisa Nemrow, and Julie Nemrow (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), p. 422.

## Chapter 5

- 1 See Mellers, *Darker Shade of Pale*, pp. 151–52.
- 2 Williams, *Performing Artist*, p. 239.
- 3 Riley, *Hard Rain*, p. 176.
- 4 Cf. the discussion of “Fourth Time Around” in Chapter 3. Earlier examples include “Restless Farewell” on *The Times They Are A-Changin’* and “It Ain’t Me, Babe” on *Another Side of Bob Dylan*. I read a late Dylan song like “Honest with Me” from “*Love and Theft*” along the same lines.
- 5 In objecting to what he considered this over-reading of the *John Wesley Harding* photograph, Allen Ginsberg once told me and several students at Union College (Schenectady, New York, Fall, 1967) that no such pictures existed since the scene was photographed with a Polaroid camera near Woodstock, New York, at which he himself was present a week or so before the album was released. Even so, the photograph obviously could have been doctored in the interim, and in any case faces arguably appear there. Clinton Heylin also sees them, in fact those of the Beatles. *Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades Revisited*, p. 284. What also should one make of Dylan’s wearing the *Blonde on Blonde* jacket on an album cover purporting to differentiate itself from conspicuous rock ‘n’ roll precedents? Is it a layered “don’t rush to conclusions” warning?
- 6 Gill, *Don’t Think Twice*, pp. 126–27, 128; Riley, *Hard Rain*, p. 172. Robert Shelton noted the connection between “Harding” and Dylan’s situations in *No Direction Home*, p. 392. Also see Hinchey, *Complete Unknown*, pp. 228–29.
- 7 Ian Bell, however, regards the real, historical outlaw John Wesley Hardin as in fact backgrounding Dylan’s song. See *Once Upon a Time*, pp. 489–98.
- 8 Heylin quotes Bob Dylan about his apparent *absence* of intention in composing the song: that it “was the one song that I had no idea what it was about, why it was even on the album.” Heylin holds that the “stand” that Harding-cum-Dylan supposedly takes remains ambiguous to the core. Heylin, *Revolution*, p. 368.
- 9 William Blake, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” at [http://www.levity.com/alchemy/blake\\_ma.html/](http://www.levity.com/alchemy/blake_ma.html/).

- 10 John Hughes regards these liner notes “as a zany, mazy, dream-like parable about the interpretive illusions of seekers after truth,” a quest that the *John Wesley Harding* songs provoke in the album’s listeners (*Invisible Now*, p. 178).
- 11 “Shute” pronounced “shoot” can reference “Shit!” as in “Oh shoot!,” a common US euphemism formerly used in “polite” society. <http://www.phrasemix.com/phrases/oh-shoot/>. Cf. Dylan’s use of “Judas Priest,” discussed later, in “The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest.” “Chute,” another word pronounced as “Shute,” also references “A person who is generally an asshole [*sic*] and/or white trash. They like to fight everyone.” <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=shute/>.
- 12 Hinchey, *Complete Unknown*, p. 247; Trager, *Keys to the Rain*, p. 683, here quotes from a work by Robin Wittig. Andy Gill insists that the song’s reference to prophets has a specific autobiographical meaning. Where other critics like Wilfred Mellers regard the messenger as a symbolic figure, say as “the devil disguised as an angel, who cannot speak truth but only flattery,” Gill like Hinchey thinks the messenger refers to “Dylan himself, the bringer of harsh home truths” to his audience. *Don’t Think Twice*, pp. 134, 135.
- 13 Williams asserts that “the closing lines” might be both “sarcastic” and “sincere,” given that the “after-the-crash” album’s songs convey “if not good news, then at least encouraging messages,” including straightforward “folk truths” (*Performing Artist*, p. 246).
- 14 Rogovoy, *Prophet*, p. 120. Rogovoy goes on to claim that Dylan’s song ends with “a scene right out of Exodus,” and that the song’s Moses allusions specifically refer to Dylan’s finding comfort in the biblical story after his rejection by the folkies and leftists (p. 121). Robert Shelton regards the “Eli” reference as also lining the song with prophetic intimations: “Eli” can mean “God is high,” pointing back to Dylan’s feeling compelled to tell others the truth of the Lord. *No Direction Home*, p. 394. I would contend that at this point in his career, Dylan here and elsewhere in his songs inscribes existential midrashim of biblical passages both from the Torah and the New Testament.
- 15 Scaduto, *Bob Dylan*, p. 256.
- 16 Such rejection, for example, defines the vitriolic thrust of “Most Likely You Go Your Way (And I’ll Go Mine)” on *Blonde on Blonde*.
- 17 Gill also connects this “good news” with “the Christ story,” as does Scaduto. Gill, *Don’t Think Twice*, p. 135; Scaduto, *Bob Dylan*, p. 256. Yet Dylan’s “good news” is ecumenical, in the sense that it indicates a secular transcendence of simplistic responses to the riddle of existence. For a different view, see Mellers: “Clearly he won’t bring any [good news] and they know he won’t; once more, there is no revelation” (*Shade of Pale*, p. 157). But the Dylan speaker does say that the “few words . . . opened up his heart.”
- 18 Hinchey (*Complete Unknown*, p. 242) thinks “the hobo is the singer,” but I would maintain only if one appreciates the separation of present and past selves. Gill denies the connection of Dylan and the hobo (*Don’t Think Twice*, p. 133). Scaduto connects them, but assumes that Dylan here “has recognized that you must stand alone in order to find Self” (*Bob Dylan*, p. 255).
- 19 Heylin, *Revolution*, p. 370.
- 20 Gill sees the song delivering “The album’s most straightforward moral parable,” although he doesn’t regard the hobo figure as Dylan’s alter ego (*Don’t Think Twice*, p. 133).
- 21 The latter phrase might also constitute a pun on how like “Miss Lonely” in “Like a Rolling Stone,” he too resisted facing “nothing.”

- 22 Like Trager (*Keys*, p. 209), Wilfred Mellers and Heylin see the “moralistic coda” as “not Christian, but appeal[ing] only to individual conscience,” eschewing other men’s codes (*Shade of Pale*, p. 157; Heylin, *Revolution*, p. 352).
- 23 *Hard Rain*, p. 180.
- 24 *Performing Artist*, pp. 244–45.
- 25 Williams, *Performing Artist*, p. 245. Gill terms the song a “simple parable” disclosing the “addictive behavior” of Dylan’s seeking success via “Judas” Grossman and the “music business” that he represented. *Don’t Think Twice*, pp. 131, 132. See Shelton, *No Direction Home*, p. 393, and Trager, *Keys*, p. 26.
- 26 Stephen Scobie reads both characters differently: “Frankie Lee would be a very secular Christ: he borrows money, he confesses to ‘foolish pride,’ he is a gambler, he dies raving, and there is no suggestion of salvation or resurrection. Conversely, several of Judas Priest’s actions are Christ-like: he lends money generously, he lives in Paradise, he holds his dying friend in his arms. The reversal is incomplete, however. Frankie Lee is still innocent, and Judas and the house he inhabits are still very sinister.” *Alias Bob Dylan*, p. 176.
- 27 Signifying the hours in a day, “twenty-four” also doubles as a pun for “all of the time,” the illusory perpetual pleasures promised to Frankie/Dylan.
- 28 Tim Riley wonders, “Where does the neighbor boy’s guilt come from, and why is it ‘concealed’? And why does Dylan have this unexplained fourth character, who appears in only one verse, utter the song’s subtext: ‘Nothing is revealed’?” *Hard Rain*, p. 141. But the “boy” is the still, small self left over for Dylan from his preceding agon.
- 29 This and the preceding quotation are from Trager, *Keys*, p. 165. John Hinchey leans toward a less autobiographical view of the song, including any self-reference to Dylan’s vocational situation. He regards the drifter as an “everyman” feeling guilty about he knows not what. He doesn’t think the drifter is “an aspect of the singer,” but that he represents “a fellow man” (*Complete Unknown*, p. 242).
- 30 *Bob Dylan*, p. 254. On the lightning image as a spiritual intervention, also see Shelton, *No Direction Home*, p. 393, and Mellers, *Shade of Pale*, p. 157.
- 31 Cf. Gill who takes the conventional spiritual-autobiographical view of these passages. For example, he claims that the lightning image constitutes an “apostolic intervention”: while others pray, Dylan’s “conversion around the time of the accident” leads him into a “relationship with his god” as a “personal, one-to-one affair, untainted by the interference of the organized churches” (*Don’t Think Twice*, p. 132).
- 32 See Heylin, *Revolution*, pp. 362–63.
- 33 *Hard Rain*, p. 178. Cf. Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger*: “But where both Hill and Guthrie were in day-to-day contact with working people and their organizations, Dylan’s relationship with his audience was comparatively estranged and increasingly problematic for him. This disturbing truth is one of the underlying themes of *John Wesley Harding*” (p. 250).
- 34 *Prophet*, pp. 119, 120. While both Rogovoy and Scaduto suppose that the song raises the issue of spiritual salvation, Paul Williams claims that it resists one’s “throwing any ‘meaning’ matrix over it” (*Performing Artist*, pp. 239, 241).
- 35 Typically the complaint poem concerns a lover/poet figure: “This poet must express his grief (and his humility), explain the reality of his suffering, profess some worthwhile goal (in this case to help other lovers), identify his enemy, complain about Fortune, cite his masters (Chaucer, Boethius), plead for mercy, and so on.” <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/lcintro.htm/>. This genre is also related to that

- of the “dream vision” where a narrator gains a “knowledge (often about religion or love)” that allows him to transcend his sorrow. <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/dream+vision/>, accessed February 23, 2011. A good example of such poetry is Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Book of the Duchess*.
- 36 *Don’t Think Twice*, p. 128. Trager, *Keys*, agrees with the “Paine” award reference but regards Dylan’s Paine [*sic*] in a more positive light: as still “a symbol for freethinking in reference to the American philosopher’s famous declaration that his own mind was his church.” Paine also would have disagreed with how “his ideas [had become] twisted into dogma” by certain politicians and businessmen (*Keys*, pp. 19, 20). Hinchey maintains that the damsel represents “Miss Liberty” or American “freedom” now figuratively placed “in chains.” The Paine figure represents “the heritage of that religiously independent male will that has always seen itself as the guardian of liberty.” Paine’s apology at the end, then, “is positively Blakean in its grisly hypocrisy.” *Complete Unknown*, pp. 233, 234, 235.
- 37 This is how Wilfrid Mellers sees the figure (*Shade of Pale*, p. 153), although he finds Paine’s liberation of Dylan to be somewhat ineffectual.
- 38 It is probably not amiss to see Dylan’s “damsel” as the prototype for the Guess Who’s 1970 song “American Woman.”
- 39 Critics otherwise take this apology for an admission of weakness on Paine’s part, which backs up the negative reading of his allegorical significance. Cf. Mellers, *Shade of Pale*, p. 153, who suggests that Paine’s apology signifies his inability to continue his revolutionary political program.
- 40 See, for instance, Shelton, *No Direction Home*, p. 394, Heylin, *Revolution*, pp. 373–74, and Gill, *Don’t Think Twice*, p. 132. Such critical viewpoints exhibit the problems assignable to the Genetic Fallacy. The so-called actual occasion that may have initiated writing a poem or lyric does not define the work that ensues.
- 41 *Shade of Pale*, p. 156.
- 42 Paul Williams speculates that the “landlord” could refer to “his manager, his record company, his audience; in the context of” the album as a whole, “we may also hear him singing to his country, to the powers that be, and not just in this town or this nation but in this world, this life” (*Performing Artist*, p. 244).
- 43 Oliver Trager cites Jon Landau’s review in *Crawdaddy* about how this line refers to Dylan’s changed view of others in authority generally. He’s saying, “I will recognize you but you are going to have to deal with me. This is a truly incredible transformation in attitude when seen in contrast with ‘Ballad of a Thin Man’” (quoted in *Keys*, pp. 129–30).
- 44 Damian Balassone, *Dylan and the Bible* at <http://damianbalassone.wordpress.com/2014/05/23/dylan-and-the-bible-1962-67/>.
- 45 While Paul Williams notes that the line “eats but is not satisfied” finds its biblical source in Leviticus 26 (Trager includes Deuteronomy), he finally regards the “I” not as God but Dylan himself “as empathetic (human) observer” of others abjectly lost in pursuit of false values. *Performing Artist*, p. 246; cf. Riley, *Hard Rain*, p. 182.
- 46 Trager, *Keys*, p. 308. Trager nonetheless feels the song leans more to biblical warning than promise of redemption. He reads the song as Dylan’s “way of sending a message from the wilderness of his upstate idyll of how ill the city and, by extension, American society (both defined by and composed of immigrants) seemed to him.”
- 47 Gill, *Don’t Think Twice*, p. 134. Though he interprets the last lines of the song to imply “a hope of grace,” Robert Shelton remains “confounded” by “I Pity the Poor

- Immigrant,” seeing it as a “love-hate debate between [Dylan’s] own . . . good side and the acquisitive, opportunist, insatiable element” (*No Direction Home*, p. 594).
- 48 Quoted in Scaduto, *Bob Dylan*, p. 249.
- 49 *Bob Dylan*, p. 255. Hinchey more pointedly regards the song as a “self-projection,” so that in the final line Dylan expresses an effort “to purge himself of his self-regard” (*Complete Unknown*, p. 246).
- 50 Here again we see an example of the double irony Dylan deploys throughout the *John Wesley Harding* songs. In one moment he shies away from expressing countercultural sentiments; in another, as here, he does just that in presupposing an anti-war position.
- 51 Hinchey cites Ricks (*Visions of Sin*) on the final line’s biblical pun, “comes to pass,” as something that transpires and “ceases to be.” This pun “accents” the “vanity” of “gladness” coming to pass, “so that his ill-founded happiness does not merely ‘shatter like the glass’ but constitutes its own shattering” (*Complete Unknown*, p. 246). Also cf. Henri Bergson on Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*: “There is no indignation and no trace of anger—only deep pity for men who fail to see wherein happiness lies [i.e., in ‘philosophy’ that ‘has risen above competition’] and who therefore do themselves great harm.” *The Philosophy of Poetry: The Genius of Lucretius*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: The Wisdom Library, 1959), p. 49.
- 52 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 22.
- 53 Michael Gray, *Song and Dance Man III*, p. 159; Rogovoy, *Prophet*, p. 122. Gill, too, senses the secular-apocalyptic allusion in the song (*Don’t Think Twice*, p. 131).
- 54 Riley further notes that what “Hendrix really did was set a new standard for Dylan covers, and transform what you took away from Dylan’s original” (*Hard Rain*, p. 179).
- 55 *Wicked Messenger*, p. 254. Also see Heylin, *Revolution*, p. 266.
- 56 Scaduto, *Bob Dylan*, pp. 254, 255.
- 57 See Heylin, *Revolution*, p. 366; Trager, *Keys*, p. 342.
- 58 Trager, *Keys*, p. 9; see Gill, *Don’t Think Twice*, p. 130, who also links the businessman image to Dylan’s manager at the time, Albert Grossman.
- 59 Day, *Jokerman*, p. 132.
- 60 Trager makes this Eliot connection in *Keys*, p. 9. The line from Stevens’ “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” appears in the “It Must Change” section, line 250 (ii.11), where it refers to those, presidents and servants alike, incapable of recognizing the absolutely new that occurs in and through poetic change. So the Dylan’s song would break free from the very precedents it conjures up in attempting to trace an absolutely new poetic vision.
- 61 Heylin also thinks Hendrix’s version of “All Along the Watchtower” constitutes a misreading of Dylan’s more “worldly wise” version on *John Wesley Harding* (*Revolution*, p. 366).
- 62 See Christopher Ricks, for instance, *Dylan’s Visions of Sin*, p. 359. Heylin points out that Dylan himself suggested the circularity of the song, where the last line(s) could be the first. *Revolution*, p. 365.
- 63 Trager, *Keys*, p. 9; Day, *Jokerman*, p. 133.
- 64 Scaduto, *Bob Dylan*, p. 256; Shelton, *No Direction Home*, p. 394; Gill, *Don’t Think Twice*, p. 135. Also see Trager, *Keys*, p. 160; Riley, *Hard Rain*, p. 184.



- 65 The song's undercurrent of sexual *jouissance* adds to the song's private reference, that is, to a woman's private parts in the images of "cove," her "comin'" to him, and so on. The "bundle of joy" of course also accords with Gill's surmise about a "newborn" baby. But just as Dylan uses playing songs with The Band in *The Basement Tapes* to muse on his own vocational concerns, so he often trumps externally definable occasions to go more internal than might be considered socially seemly.

## Epilogue

- 1 Andy Gill, *Don't Think Twice*, p. 137.
- 2 Among other critics, Oliver Trager notes this apparent deviation, *Keys*, p. 447.
- 3 Quoted in Scaduto, *Bob Dylan*, p. 260.
- 4 Lavinia Greenlaw characterizes the effect in the *Nashville Skyline* songs as one of "deferred feeling and deflected meaning." "Big Brass Bed: Bob Dylan and Delay," "Do You Mr. Jones?": *Bob Dylan with the Poets and Professors*, ed. Neil Corcoran, p. 76.
- 5 Bob Dylan hardly rebutted this take of the song. Heylin cites him as stating, "I could easily have changed that line . . . but I think the concept still woulda been the same. You see a fine-looking woman walking down the street, you start going, 'Well, what are you doing on the street? You're so fine, what do you need all this for?'" (Heylin, *Revolution*, p. 261). Cf. Trager, *Keys*: "Dylan caught some flak for sexism with" this song, which "can be interpreted as delivered by a condescending, if not creepy, pick-up artist on the make" (p. 595). Tim Riley has no patience with the song's alleged sexism, terming the song the "least worthy of defending" insofar as it "exacerbates the sexist streak held over since *Street Legal*" (*Hard Rain*, p. 272). But Donald Brown allows that Dylan's "vocal" performance of these patently "paternalist" lines "suggests he is winking at the song's stance." *Bob Dylan: American Troubadour* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), p. 166.
- 6 <http://damianbalassone.wordpress.com/2014/05/27/dylan-and-the-bible-1980-81/>.
- 7 In "Teaching Dylan at Dartmouth College 1972-2010," collected in *Professing Dylan*, ed. by Frances Hunter (Memphis: Phillips Memphis), I discuss "Simple Twist of Fate" from *Blood on the Tracks* in this context. Unfortunately, this essay was printed with numerous typographical errors. A correct copy appears at <http://sites.dartmouth.edu/larenza/>.
- 8 This would not be the first time Dylan entertains the incompatibility of his poetic-artistic versus spiritual inclinations. With a somewhat different sense of "spiritual" in mind, Michael Gilmour spots it, for example, in the *Street-Legal* song "Where Are You Tonight? (Journey Through Dark Heat)," Gilmour, *The Gospel*, pp. 77-78.

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