

# Dylan Review, Fall/Winter 2022-23

## Masthead

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## Reviews

**Bob Dylan. *The Philosophy of Modern Song*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2022. 352pp.**

REVIEW BY Jonathan Hodgers, Trinity College, Dublin

Dylan's long-awaited *Philosophy of Modern Song* defies easy categorization. It's sixty-six mini-essays on sixty-six songs. Pictures account for much of the content. Despite the title, it is not always a straightforward work of philosophy. If anything, it's an annotated playlist dotted with philosophical reflections. However, the term playlist doesn't do the book justice given how elaborate (or tangential) the annotations are. It's also unclear how essential some of the songs are to the essays. They're apt to work as jumping-off points for exploring a given subject matter and are not there as simple recommendations.

The book's unusual presentation finds parallels in the content. There's no introduction or conclusion, omitting an explanation of the book's *raison d'être*. In the interview conducted by Jeff Slate for the *Wall Street Journal* on the topic of the book, Dylan doesn't address the book's inspiration or how he picked the songs.<sup>1</sup> While the content can range widely, the essays follow a template of sorts. He will paraphrase the song's plot and character dynamics, offer portraits of singers, describe particular performances, and reflect on musicological details or production qualities. He might also extemporize on the song's themes. Different combinations thereof are regular. He juxtaposes the essays with images. Dylan calls them "running mates to the text."<sup>2</sup> Sometimes, their connection is oblique. Other times, the images reflect the essays' topics (the verbal/visual interplay is delightfully basic at times – actual eagles for the Eagles, for instance). The template helps keep the chapters fresh by balancing consistency within variation (not unlike aspects of the songs he praises). It's not an especially formalist text, which may partly be the point. He heavily emphasizes music's emotive impact. However, songwriting's more technical aspects do occasionally come under the microscope.

The writing itself has a distinct style. The tone is erudite but not alienating. It bears comparison to the *World Gone Wrong* liner notes, but adapts a cleaner, more prosaic approach fit for broader public consumption. At times, it can be blustery or gushing (the Perry Como entry: "[he] could out-sing anybody. His performance is just downright incredible. There is

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Slate, 'Bob Dylan Q&A about "The Philosophy of Modern Song"', *The Official Bob Dylan Site*, 20 December 2022, <https://www.bobdylan.com/news/bob-dylan-interviewed-by-wall-street-journals-jeff-slate/>.

<sup>2</sup> Slate.

nothing small you can say about it. The orchestration alone can knock you off your feet.”<sup>3</sup> It can be prolix and prosaic, as with the “My Generation” entry: “They don’t like you because you pull out all the stops and go for broke. You put your heart and soul into everything and shoot the works.”<sup>4</sup> It’s vernacular, willfully leaning into cliché. He’s apparently having fun with the clichés too; his stitching them together has its own comedy value (“It’s just a hop skip and jump to cloud nine.”)<sup>5</sup> What they lack in inventiveness or precision, they make up for in tone. It’s the way one might pitch a song or singer to a friend – it’s not all terse, calculated soundbites but draws from common stock locutions that convey unpremeditated enthusiasm. Comma splices, tautologies, and repetitions add to the effect. (These techniques seem to work better when spoken aloud, as attested to by the couple of passages Dylan recorded for the audiobook.) He’ll also link clichés and round them off with a more unusual turn of phrase (“You’re tickled pink and walking on air, and there’s no end to space.”)<sup>6</sup> The blend of the familiar and the individual may be the point in some way. This tendency extends to the content. The combination of esoterica and unusual locutions with more conventional, encyclopaedic information gives the writing its richness (or, as he told Jeff Slate, the “pulling old elements together and making something new”).<sup>7</sup>

Despite the essays mostly adhering to a similar structural outline, there are qualitative and quantitative differences between them. Some songs inspire more fleshed-out ideas and insightful commentary than others. It’s curious what songs defeat him. He can’t seem to do much with the two Little Richard songs (“Tutti Frutti” and “Long Tall Sally”) but is clearly taken with “Old Violin” – or specifically, a special live performance enriched by Johnny Paycheck’s presence – which inspires some of the book’s best writing. He highlights both physical gestures and vocal touches that capture the bottled lightning of the performance, conferring upon it a fated quality. Perhaps his commentary succeeds here owing to its audio-visual reference point; his writing magnifies objective features rather than offering subjective impressions. As vivid as Dylan’s more subjective paraphrases can be, his readings sometimes seem off. “Your Cheatin’ Heart” doesn’t work well. Dylan rather perversely sidesteps the obvious romantic dynamic and substitutes it for a less convincing business arrangement. The

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<sup>3</sup> Bob Dylan, *The Philosophy of Modern Song* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2022), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Dylan, 41.

<sup>5</sup> Dylan, 154.

<sup>6</sup> Dylan, 153.

<sup>7</sup> Slate, ‘Bob Dylan Q&A’.

“Come On-A My House” essay aims to give the song a sinister touch, but it’s just not there, at least not in the Rosemary Clooney rendition. Mostly though, his writing offers evocative vignettes that tease out the song’s depths and elucidate the musicians’ contributions in perceptive ways.

Dylan appears to use these songs to declare allegiances with certain genres quite separate from actually liking the representative song he’s chosen to write about. Something about these songs moved him to write about them, but that’s not to say they’re strictly commendable. Sometimes, it’s hard to believe he finds anything of genuine interest (such as with “Come On-A My House” – in keeping with the food references, he calls it a “little trifle.”)<sup>8</sup> However, it’s not so much his sincerity that matters (“I’m no more sincere than you” from *Eat the Document* springs to mind), more whether he sells these songs as having the qualities and values he ascribes to them. People’s tolerance levels will differ here. It’s unlikely anyone ever thought of Marty Robbins’ “El Paso” the way Dylan does, but he certainly presents an interesting case.

Gradations of rock ’n’ roll, blues, country, and Tin Pan Alley material spur most of the essays. Dylan omits much of the traditional material he made his name covering and adapting in the 1960s (“Jesse James” is the only representative). Perhaps unsurprisingly, he doesn’t care for pop (loosely defined). In reference to Johnnie Ray, Dylan says “his feelings were too direct-hotwired from his brain for a mere pop record.”<sup>9</sup> The term “mere” also appears in the “My Prayer” essay.<sup>10</sup> He never makes clear what pop is (certainly, some of the songs he includes were emphatically popular and chart-friendly), yet he’s far from alone in using it as a catch-all term for songs considered inferior. Simon Frith identifies pop as a “residual” category, or “what’s left when all the other forms of popular music are stripped away.” Among other things, “It’s music produced commercially, for profit, as a matter of enterprise not art.”<sup>11</sup> Dylan’s idea of it seems similar.

The way Dylan uses pop exemplifies how he uses contrasts in general to illustrate good-versus-bad performance practices and attitudes. Part of Dylan’s *modus operandi* is to make

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<sup>8</sup> Dylan, *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, 283.

<sup>9</sup> Dylan, 101.

<sup>10</sup> Dylan, 184.

<sup>11</sup> Simon Frith, ‘Pop Music’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, ed. Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street, Cambridge Companions to Music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 94–95.

antagonists of certain musicians and styles against which good songs and musicians must win out. In the “Your Cheatin’ Heart” essay, Joe Satriani (representing instrumental rock) stands in for guitar pyrotechnics without substance or respect for the song. Satriani is a virtuoso player but can of course play tastefully and judiciously. Satriani defended himself (“I think the great Hank Williams and I could have sorted things out and made some great music together”),<sup>12</sup> but these references have less to do with personal slights than venerating and denigrating types of songs and styles through loose metonymy. Satriani’s not alone either; Dylan does the same with Springsteen and the Beatles. Springsteen’s characteristic sound clouds Costello’s “Pump it Up,” for instance, while the Beatles’ faux-naivete and adolescent appeal contrast poorly with “London Calling.” The entire Chess stable (among them, Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, and Howlin’ Wolf) takes a hit next to Little Walter, who “might have been the only one with real substance.”<sup>13</sup> These performers and styles play oppositional parts, indicating predilections that Dylan portrays as lesser next to the songs, styles, and musicians he promotes. Such artists are collateral damage in Dylan’s dispensing praise.

This praise is where we often find the most philosophical material. While they don’t occupy the bulk of the book, there are philosophical precepts insofar as Dylan draws general principles from specific songs. Many qualities that he esteems are aesthetic evergreens. Lewis Rowell provides a summary in the context of Ancient Greek music philosophy: “simple is better than complex, natural is better than artificial, [and] moderation in all things.”<sup>14</sup> The “Without a Song” essay touches on these facets in reference to Perry Como: “He was a Cadillac before the tail fins; a Colt .45, not a Glock; steak and potatoes, not California cuisine ... No artifice, no forcing one syllable to spread itself thin across many notes.” Regarding “Take Me from This Garden of Evil,” Dylan says: “Nothing artificial about this song, nothing manufactured or contrived about it. Nothing cosmetic or plastic here.” He also writes that “Key to the Highway” is “Unadorned, with no histrionics – controlled, nuanced and true.”<sup>15</sup> Given his apparent interest in Greek myth and literature, it’s perhaps telling that Dylan’s criteria have

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<sup>12</sup> David Browne, “‘Jesus, Bob’: How Some Musicians Feel About Being Dissed by Dylan in ‘Philosophy of Modern Song’”, *Rolling Stone*, 16 November 2022, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/bob-dylan-philosophy-of-modern-song-book-backlash-1234630949/>.

<sup>13</sup> Dylan, *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, 7–10, 159–61, 203.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis Eugene Rowell, *Thinking about Music: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Music* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 39.

<sup>15</sup> Dylan, *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, 11, 17, 202.

an overall classical inclination. In the “Doesn’t Hurt Anymore” essay, he offers a tell-tale sign: “He’s no rapper. More like an ancient Greek poet; you know exactly what he’s saying and who he’s saying it to.”<sup>16</sup>

Other entries praise judiciousness, balance, and brevity. In the “Your Cheatin’ Heart” essay, he tells us that “The fiddle and steel guitar phrases are a great part of the melody. Each phrase goes hand in hand with the voice. This ... takes simpatico players and is done with very simple notes of a chord, played with the exact correct intensity... Phrases like this are worth more than all the technical licks in the world.”<sup>17</sup> Alongside this dig at perceived immoderation and showiness, one can detect a distrust of the glossy professional and respect for the street-schooled amateur. Aristotle would recognize Dylan’s attitude. In referring to music’s role in education, he avers that “pupils ... not [be] made to attempt the extraordinary and extravagant feats of execution which have recently been introduced into competitions ... Performances should be carried only to the point at which students begin to be able to appreciate good melodies and rhythms.”<sup>18</sup>

À la Plato, Aristotle’s teacher, Dylan also praises the permanent and lasting. What counts is what’s durable. For “Ball of Confusion,” he writes: “The reality of this song is that it’s just as true now as the day it was recorded.”<sup>19</sup> It also crops up in the “Black Magic Woman” chapter; those too in thrall to musical and literary rules “run the danger of never transcending craft to create anything truly lasting.”<sup>20</sup> He’s more explicit in the *Wall Street Journal* interview: “A great song [is] timeless and ageless.”<sup>21</sup> This mindset even extends to his pastimes. He tells Jeff Slate that boxing is “functional and detached from trends.”<sup>22</sup>

As familiar as some of his judgments are from historical literature on music, he brings a host of newer parameters into his critique. Some are recognizable from popular music aesthetics in the rock era and in part stem from standards he himself helped to set. Broadly, we can see Dylan align with what Keir Keightley would see as Romantic authenticity, gravitating

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<sup>16</sup> Dylan, 198.

<sup>17</sup> Dylan, 165.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Ernest Barker, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 312.

<sup>19</sup> Dylan, *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, 79.

<sup>20</sup> Dylan, 275.

<sup>21</sup> Slate, ‘Bob Dylan Q&A’.

<sup>22</sup> Slate.

towards: “tradition and continuity with the past; roots; sense of community; populism; belief in a core or essential rock sound; folk, blues, country, rock’n’roll styles; gradual stylistic change; sincerity, directness; ‘liveness’; ‘natural’ sounds; [and] hiding musical technology.”<sup>23</sup> Dylan touches on these qualities in his interview with Jeff Slate: “[The songs] were straightforward, and my relationship to them at first was external, then became personal and intense. The songs were simple, easy to understand, and they’d come to you in a direct way.”<sup>24</sup> While his allegiances roughly lie with these Romantic precepts, Dylan does not always fit into them neatly. Individual songs capture his attention based on different criteria (what Keightley would see as modernist authenticity, indicated by a fondness for experimentation and progress). Novelty for its own sake doesn’t impress Dylan, but innovative, trailblazing songs like “Tutti Frutti” and “My Generation” are not overlooked.

Relatedly, mavericks operating within, outside, or against the mainstream garner his sympathy. The criteria are expressed neatly in the “Poison Love” entry when Dylan refers to Johnnie & Jack: “They deserve to be in all the halls of fame, because they are innovators – innovators on the highest level – and don’t jump through hoops for anybody.”<sup>25</sup> In this context, unpretentious journeymen also fare well; as already noted, Dylan writes admiringly of Perry Como, but Bobby Darin too earns his praise. Believability counts for a great deal. We’re told that “When [Como] stood and sang, he owned the song and he shared it and we believed every single word. What more could you want from an artist?”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, believing the singer (over and above adherence to technical norms or conventionally pretty vocals) is part of Dylan’s influence – practically a testament to his own achievements. This leads us to a peculiar quality of the text: its autobiographical quality.

At times, his takes on songs and performers resonate with Dylan’s history. One can see parallels between the people he writes about and Dylan’s own life, as if he were explaining himself through analogous individuals. A reflection on Nuta Kotlyarenko in the “There Stands the Glass” essay offers tantalizing parallels with Dylan. Dylan’s version of Kotlyarenko’s biography practically remixes details from his own: Ukrainian Jewish ancestry; “trying his

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<sup>23</sup> Keir Keightley, ‘Reconsidering Rock’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, ed. Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street, Cambridge Companions to Music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 137.

<sup>24</sup> Slate, ‘Bob Dylan Q&A’.

<sup>25</sup> Dylan, *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, 82.

<sup>26</sup> Dylan, 13.



hand at boxing and acting”; moving from Minnesota to New York; and reinventing oneself.<sup>27</sup> Dylan essentially talks about himself at times; musing on Bobby Darin’s “Beyond the Sea,” he tells us that “Some people create new lives to hide their past. Bobby knew that sometimes the past was nothing more than an illusion and you might just as well keep making stuff up.”<sup>28</sup> Even the name doesn’t need to be changed. He also writes about Johnny Paycheck’s name change in ways that clearly resonate with his own re-branding from Zimmerman to Dylan. In telling us about laudable songwriting, he additionally highlights other writers’ approaches that contextualise his own. In the “Ruby, Are You Mad?” essay, he tells us how “the song morphed and grew ... It was still the same song but the tiny grace notes and elasticity kept it alive, shook the dust from its boots. Of course, some people cried foul and those people should’ve stayed home.” Also, in reference to Dion, he says that “Most recently, he has realized one of his early dreams and become some kind of elder legend, a bluesman from another Delta.”<sup>29</sup> One can read a multitude of Dylan’s own experiences into these comments.

While Dylan broadly cleaves to Romantic authenticity as his yardstick, he is still apt to admire songs for contrasting reasons. He regularly praises the flexible and mutable. He appears to favour what Stephen Davies terms ontologically “thin” pieces. Thinner works facilitate more interpretation. Greater latitude is granted to the performer (within certain stylistic constraints).<sup>30</sup> “Thicker” works (for example, a significant amount of classical music) require greater fidelity to specifics, where new interpretations have much in common with earlier iterations. He appears to gravitate to both songs’ and artists’ adaptability: “Bobby Darin could sound like anybody and sing any style”; “[Little Walter] is an amazingly flexible singer”; and “The malleability of [‘Blue Moon’] frees it from being too associated with any single version and allows it to belong to everyone.”<sup>31</sup> He also touches on this in the *Wall Street Journal* interview: ‘A great song ... can be played with a full orchestra score or by a strolling minstrel ... A great song mutates, makes quantum leaps ... It crosses genres ... and can be played in ... multiple styles.’<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Dylan, 23.

<sup>28</sup> Dylan, 87.

<sup>29</sup> Dylan, 144, 334.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Davies, ‘Rock versus Classical Music’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* vol. 57, no. 2 (1999): 199, <https://doi.org/10.2307/432312>.

<sup>31</sup> Dylan, *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, 87, 201, 229.

<sup>32</sup> Slate, ‘Bob Dylan Q&A’.

He appears to trust less those “thick” songs too in thrall to arrangements. In the “Blue Moon” essay, he avers that “Some songs, like ... ‘When I’m Sixty-Four’ ... are as dependent on their arrangement as the music or lyrics for their identity. Not so ‘Blue Moon.’ ‘Blue Moon’ is a universal song that can appeal to anybody at any time.”<sup>33</sup> While I’m not sure this is meant pejoratively, one still senses a hint of distaste in context.<sup>34</sup> That being said, Dylan will promote the arrangement as the magic ingredient in a song. He tells us that for “It’s All in The Game,” “the arrangement is key.”<sup>35</sup> This is to say he’s not especially prescriptive. Qualities that get in the way in one song are precisely what another song thrives on.

Dylan also occasionally highlights songwriting techniques; for instance, he appreciates paradox. He unearths unspoken undertows that deepen the song’s meaning. As Cleanth Brooks illuminated in *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947), the guise of simplicity or the direct attack (Brooks uses Wordsworth as an example) belies paradoxical situations that give ostensibly straightforward material extra resonance. Dylan astutely draws from The Who’s “My Generation” an anxiety on Townsend’s part that he will soon be the one the younger generation wishes would fade away. That awareness cannot be traced to any specific point in the song or line of the lyrics. Yet, the implicit fear can be intuited through a latent defensiveness. Dylan finds an analogous undertow to “Detroit City.”

Dylan wishes to preserve the capacity for people’s imagination to complete the song rather than have external imagery unduly influence their experience. He considers the background to “I’m A Fool to Want You” to be unhelpful trivia when “It’s what a song makes you feel about your own life that’s important.”<sup>36</sup> In the “Ball of Confusion” essay, he tells us “The song is like an old radio show, where you could just imagine what you’re listening to. And it made for a stronger experience.”<sup>37</sup> In the “Old Violin” essay, he references how the

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<sup>33</sup> Dylan, *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, 229.

<sup>34</sup> The distaste is more apparent when one looks at Dylan’s other references to the Beatles of late, where he has been apt to view them in a jaundiced light. While I’m sure interpretations differ, I can’t help but hear the “I Want to Hold Your Hand” reference in “Murder Most Foul” as Dylan looking askance at the vaguely disingenuous, infantilising title (“Hush lil children, you’ll soon understand / The Beatles are coming they’re gonna hold your hand”). In the “London Calling” essay, he namechecks the song again, portraying the Beatles and their world as quaint and twee next to the real London as captured by the Clash. Once again, what’s faddish is superseded by the real and true.

<sup>35</sup> Dylan, *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, 245.

<sup>36</sup> Dylan, 9.

<sup>37</sup> Dylan, 79.

story behind “Save the Last Dance for Me” provides too many specifics that interfere with how the song resonates with an individual. He criticizes music videos for the same reason (“we are locked into someone else’s messaging of the lyrics.”)<sup>38</sup> He prizes imagination when it comes to songwriting too; in the *Wall Street Journal* piece, he attests that “Creative ability is about pulling old elements together and making something new, and I don’t believe silicon chips and passwords know anything about those elements, or where they are. You have to have a vivid imagination.”<sup>39</sup> Relatedly, one can detect hostility to anything too systematized or scientific. In the “Black Magic Woman” essay, he mentions that “What happens with words and music is more akin to alchemy ... People can keep trying to turn music into a science, but in science one and one will always be two. Music ... tells us time and again that one plus one, in the best circumstances, equals three.”<sup>40</sup> At times, he sounds like another philosopher with a distaste for a scientific approach to music: Jean Jacques Rousseau (from Rousseau’s “On the Principle of Melody”: “Let us ... not think that the empire Music has over our passions is ever explained by proportions and numbers”).<sup>41</sup>

Dylan also has techniques for how he approaches his essays. The more informative sections can give way to speculations on alternative histories. He finds musing on these what-ifs edifying; it’s not at all incongruous with *No Direction Home*’s “I want a dog that’s going to collect and clean my bath!” (2005) or, more recently, his concoctions in “My Own Version of You” from *Rough and Rowdy Ways* (2020). In writing about pop music history, Gilbert Rodman points out that “one of the most difficult tricks in doing historical work is recapturing the sense of uncertainty that existed at some prior moment about what would happen next.”<sup>42</sup> Inevitability applied *ex post facto* has a way of drying up and ossifying the telling of history; instead, the trick is to imbue old facts with a sense of surprise and discovery by taking away that retrospective inevitability and restoring a feeling of uncertainty as to how history might unfold. In this manner, Dylan likes to upend inevitabilities by highlighting alternatives: “You have to wonder, what if Sam had sent Elvis over to Luther’s house instead of to Scotty

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<sup>38</sup> Dylan, 151.

<sup>39</sup> Slate, ‘Bob Dylan Q&A’.

<sup>40</sup> Dylan, *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, 275.

<sup>41</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music*, ed. and trans. John T. Scott, The Collected Writings of Rousseau, vol. 7 (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), 269–70.

<sup>42</sup> Gilbert B. Rodman, ‘Histories’, in *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture*, ed. Bruce Horner and Thomas Swiss (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 44.

Moore's? Scotty and Bill would then have been backing up Johnny Cash, and Luther and Marshall Grant would have been playing with Elvis."<sup>43</sup> More what-ifs include his speculations on Ricky Nelson's lost acting opportunities in the "Poor Little Fool" essay. He also mentions alternative stories within the songs themselves, as with "Pancho and Lefty" ("In another life Pancho would've been in the bullring and Lefty on the Ryman country music stage.")<sup>44</sup>

To close: there's no shortage of work to be done linking *The Philosophy of Modern Song* up with Dylan's previous pronouncements on musical aesthetics, but also the wider firmament of musical philosophy in general (at times, it seems as if Dylan has set up his essays to be purposely anti-Adorno – in praising "Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy," he attests that "it follows no line, and one part can easily be replaced by another part.")<sup>45</sup> And Dylan is engaged in philosophy here, insofar as he's doing what Sharpe views as part of analytical philosophy: "making us reflect upon unconsidered presuppositions; [which] may lead us to reflect on our lives and our values and cause us either to value things differently or perhaps more directly to alter our conduct."<sup>46</sup> Dylan throwing his weight behind these criteria counts, in other words, if, by doing so, he steers songwriters and critics towards them and away from others. From his observations, Dylan infers broader principles, suggests evaluative standards, and posits aesthetic verities. Quite apart from promoting any individual work, the book also venerates the medium of song and its ability to enrich our emotional lives through the deep, personal connections we form with their worldviews and sensibilities.

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<sup>43</sup> Dylan, *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, 17.

<sup>44</sup> Dylan, 59.

<sup>45</sup> Adorno, conversely, criticised this characteristic of popular music, where musical elements could be shifted around without affecting the whole ("Every detail is substitutable; it serves its function only as a cog in a machine"). See Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard D. Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 440.

<sup>46</sup> R. A. Sharpe, *Philosophy of Music: An Introduction* (Chesham: Acumen, 2004), 9.

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**Greil Marcus. *Folk Music: A Dylan Biography in Seven Songs*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022. 288 pp.**

REVIEW BY Christopher Rollason

Greil Marcus's latest book joins his other studies of Bob Dylan: *Invisible Republic* (later renamed *The Old, Weird America*) on the basement tapes; *Like a Rolling Stone* on the song of that name; one-third (on "Ballad of Hollis Brown") of the volume *Three Songs, Three Singers, Three Nations*; and the essay collection *Bob Dylan by Greil Marcus*. This is already quite a haul, and with this newest offering we have a further distillation of its author's lifetime of attentive Dylan listening.

The choice of seven songs consists of six original Dylan compositions and one cover version, "Jim Jones," from *Good As I Been To You*. The other songs are "Blowin' in the Wind" from *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, the title track and "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" from *The Times They Are a-Changin'*, "Desolation Row" from *Highway 61 Revisited*, "Ain't Talkin'" from *Modern Times*, and "Murder Most Foul" from *Rough and Rowdy Ways*.

Marcus devotes a chapter to each song, with some sections offering a comprehensive overview and others confining themselves to specific aspects. Inevitably, some portions have been published before, as duly noted in the acknowledgments. In particular, the material in the "Blowin' in the Wind" chapter on Blind Lemon Jefferson and "See That My Grave is Kept Clean" formed part of a paper delivered at the major Dylan conference held in Tulsa in 2019, subsequently published in Sean Latham's collective volume *The World of Bob Dylan*.

Marcus's aim is to demonstrate what he sees as a major quality of Dylan's songwriting, namely empathy – "the desire and the ability to enter other lives" (5), by means of which "he can take anyone else's life as his own" (7). On that basis, the author offers his sequence of analyses as "an attempt at a biography [of Dylan] made up of songs and public gestures" (7). The term "folk music" in the title might raise eyebrows, as by no means all of Dylan's vast musical output is usually classified in that category. In the "Blowin' in the Wind" chapter Marcus speaks of "the milieu of folk music ... the state of mind of folk music, in a certain sense, truly a state, its own country" (21). Folk music is of course the medium practised in the New York circles frequented by the early Dylan, and the chosen genre of numerous artists evoked by Marcus in various parts of the book. On that time and place, he quotes Suze Rotolo: "Folk music was taking hold of a generation" (37). "Folk music" as a term may not fit too well with other facets of Dylan's career, but that is where it all started. It is from there that Marcus

begins, and the way he narrates the song histories is such as to leave the reader with the sensation that since all of Dylan's work is rooted in a tradition of one kind or another, in a sense, yes, for certain purposes and in certain contexts it can all be seen as folk music.

The first chapter, on "Blowin' in the Wind," is the longest and most detailed. The author recounts how he first heard Dylan's version of the song (as opposed to the ubiquitous Peter, Paul and Mary cover) on a Berkeley FM station in summer 1963 (12, 87). Marcus traces its live debut to Gerde's Folk City in Greenwich Village on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1962, and its first appearance on record to the version released by the New World Singers later that year. He recalls the well-known circumstance that Dylan's melody can be sourced to "No More Auction Block," the Civil War anti-slavery anthem as interpreted by Odetta and later by Dylan himself. With regard to Dylan's use of the song for "Blowin' in the Wind," Marcus opines:

The melody was a social fact, something none of the Gerde's regulars would have missed; there was nothing in hiding. "Blowin' in the Wind" borrowed authority from that melody. (23)

Indeed, in Dylan's version of "No More Auction Block" Marcus finds "one of the deepest performances of his career" (28), as well as an early instance of that notion which underpins the book, namely Bob Dylan's capacity for empathy.

Marcus recalls how "Blowin' in the Wind" saw publication in both *Broadside* and *Sing Out!*, and tells us how the not always sympathetic *Little Sandy Review* (from Dylan's own Minnesota) dispelled its doubts to label "Blowin' in the Wind" as "Dylan's 'This Land Is Your Land'" and declare that "the song should be with us at least as long as the folk revival (and probably a lot longer)" (48). Then came Dylan's own commercial release of the song on *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* in May 1963, following which many "couldn't listen to anything else, because [they] heard something in the Bob Dylan version that wasn't there at all when Peter, Paul and Mary sang the song" (57). Nonetheless, years later in 2015, Dylan expressed his gratitude to the folk trio for turning his song into a hit: "Not the way I would have done it – they straightened it out. ...[but] I don't think it would have happened if it wasn't for them" (57).

Marcus discusses other songs in this long chapter. He offers a close examination of Dylan's first-album version of Blind Lemon Jefferson's "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean" to show how the young upstart revolutionized "folk music," turning conventions inside out. He also includes an interesting discussion of "Bob Dylan's Dream," stating that in this song "it

seemed that Bob Dylan was some sort of fictional character that someone else named Bob Dylan was singing about,” reading it as “a dream in which all sense of dream is gone”: “the song rejected youth and walked away” (58).

There are latter-day reminiscences too. Marcus recalls the performances of the song at the Rolling Thunder Revue concerts, and how Dylan said in 1975:

“Blowin’ in the Wind” holds up. I *felt* that song. Whenever Joan and I do it, it really is like an old folk song to me. It never occurs to me that I’m the person who wrote it. (63)

Marcus also reminds us of how many artists covered the song from early on, all the way from the Staple Singers to the Bee Gees, and how Dylan performed it in 1985 at Live Aid in Philadelphia, and in 1997 in Bologna before Pope John Paul II, who for the occasion transformed himself into a Dylan interpreter – the wind, said the pontiff, is “the breath and voice of the Spirit, a voice that calls and says ‘Come!’” (17). Marcus also recollects how in 2011 he wrote the afternotes for a children’s book of the song, and how it still seemed somehow “unfinished” and “still didn’t sound as it was written by a particular person” (13). He recalls, too, the well-known story of how Dylan’s song inspired Sam Cooke to write “A Change Is Gonna Come.” Finally, Marcus recontextualizes “Blowin’ in the Wind” and its debt to “No More Auction Block” within the contemporary environment: in the chapter’s final citation, Minnesota State Representative Ruth Richardson, present at the site of George Floyd’s grave, quotes those same words from Dylan’s refrain, “blowing in the wind” (81).

This chapter could have been simply a reprise of stories already known to Dylan’s followers via *Chronicles, Volume One* or Suze Rotolo’s *A Freewheelin’ Time*. In fact, the chapter goes well beyond those memoirs, emerging as a selective early Dylan biography with “Blowin’ in the Wind” as leitmotif. At chapter’s end, homing in on the book’s key themes, Marcus admits the song into the hallowed precincts of “folk song” and declares: “‘Blowin’ in the Wind’ lived its own life as if it were a person: it made its own biography” (61). Thus for Marcus, a song may not only support its author’s biography: it can also have a biography of its own.

Chapter two continues the focus on the protest years, foregrounding “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” written in late 1963 and released in 1964 on *The Times They Are a-Changin’*. The song, which Marcus tells us he has been listening to constantly for near on sixty years, was already in circulation in 1965, the year when, the author recalls, he first began writing about music – or more correctly music and politics, for it was his faith that “the



connections between the two were simple, obvious and overwhelming” (85). In the case of “Hattie Carroll,” “the story goes,” says Marcus, that Dylan first learned of the case in the pages of a Maryland newspaper, and – according to Dylan himself in 1985 – wrote the song in New York in a restaurant on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue (99). The discrepancies between song and fact are duly noted. Marcus has nothing but praise, both conceptually and aesthetically, for Dylan’s tale of a lonesome death, “a song that would itself become part of history, and make its own history” (100). He shows how the “unfinished judgement of the chorus” as the song advances generates outrage and fear (101), and praises the dramatic force of Dylan’s writing and the empathy that it manifests: “You were implicated in the drama. You were forced into every role and there was no exit” (93).

Marcus goes on to juxtapose “Hattie Carroll” with a song from 1981 (and a major hit in the U.K.), “O Superman,” sung by New York performance artist Laurie Anderson. Anderson’s song, he stresses, emerged from “a world completely different” from that of “Hattie Carroll,” with the stakes now transformed as the Thatcher/Reagan years advanced (106). Marcus doesn’t really compare the two songs, giving each piece of social criticism its separate analysis, but at chapter’s end he is surely thinking as much of Dylan’s song as of Anderson’s when he says of the latter: “Songs not only mark history, or even make it, but become part of its fabric” (117).

Chapter four (we will leap chapter three till later, keeping Dylan’s rather than Marcus’s chronology) once again focuses on the protest years, specifically “The Times They Are a-Changin,” the title track of the 1964 album where it rubs shoulders with “Hattie Carroll.” Marcus finds this famous song a shade formulaic, claiming it “was so programmatic it could have been written by a committee” (158). He juxtaposes it with a much later song, 2000’s “Things Have Changed,” which he reads less as an exercise in cynicism than as an attempt to enter the minds of others, of those who “used to care” (160). Marcus asks rhetorically whether Dylan’s song from 1964 is today anything more than an “old warhorse,” a superannuated protest song – and answers in the affirmative (162). He concludes the chapter by narrating a case of racial violence: the killing at police hands in 2016 of a young African-American man, Philando Castile, in Saint Paul, as denounced in a 2017 painting by Los Angeles artist Henry Taylor, captioned by the artist with the pregnant legend [as cited by Marcus] “THE TIMES THAY AINT A CHANGIN, FAST ENOUGH!! [sic]”

Following the Dylan chronology, next up is chapter five, entitled “Desolation Row.” It should be stressed that Marcus is here offering *not* a full analysis of this long and complex song – something he has done elsewhere – but, rather, a commentary on its opening. What is at issue

is essentially the first stanza, with its opening line “They’re selling postcards of the hanging,” followed by circus imagery (“the circus is in town”). As others have done, Marcus links the first line of Dylan’s song directly to the episode in Dylan’s birthplace Duluth in 1920 when a white mob lynched three African-American performers in a travelling circus. A lynching, Marcus reminds us, was “entertainment, spectacle, even sport” (174). He explicates the postcard phenomenon thus: “In the first decades of the twentieth century there had been a craze for postcards of lynchings of black Americans,” adding that “a postcard depicting the lynching of three black circus workers ... in Duluth in 1920 ... was among the most popular of all” (169).

The author states that we have no way of knowing whether the young Dylan knew of the lynching through his family, his father and grandfather who *might* have been there. Be that as it may, Marcus calls it “a cataclysmic event [that] implicated everyone” (170). Marcus further compares its impact (and subsequent silencing) to the aftermath of another near-contemporaneous act of racial violence, the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921, and speculates whether “Desolation Row” somehow bears the marks of the erasure from history of the Duluth episode, with what the official records suppressed returning through the medium of song. He concludes that whether or not Dylan’s family members were present on the fatal day in Duluth, the fact that Dylan as “imaginative artist” has integrated the episode into “Desolation Row” means that “he could have imagined that they were” (175). For Marcus, then, Dylan’s art symbolically reshapes his family history.

Chapter six extends the book’s scope to take in one of the multitude of songs covered by Bob Dylan, namely the Anglo-Australian ballad “Jim Jones.” Much of the chapter, however, is less about Dylan, though he makes his appearances, than about folk music in general and its early-60s US scene in particular. Marcus evokes the “sense of folk music as its own world, as a negation of the ordinary, the predictable, the life one was meant to live” (202). The chapter begins with a conspectus of the Greenwich Village folk scene, in the shape of a kind of annotated guest list of a party held in April 1961 for Cisco Houston in the apartment of folk music patron Camilla Adams. Marcus’s source here is none other than Dylan’s own account of the event in chapter two of *Chronicles*. Along with Dylan, the guests ranged from Harry Belafonte to Pete Seeger, with Marcus dwelling in particular (as Dylan did) on Pete’s brother Mike Seeger and his trio the Lost City Ramblers. Marcus quotes a Dylan overwhelmed by Mike’s impromptu interpretations of folk songs and – as he says in *Chronicles* – deciding: “I’d have to write my own folk songs, ones that Mike didn’t know” (191).

That is what Dylan went on to do – but years later, as Marcus recalls, at a certain point in the 1980s, Dylan began in performance to “sing the old songs again, the songs Mike did know” (193). This development was followed by his return to folksong material on record with *Good As I Been To You* in 1992 and *World Gone Wrong* in 1993. Out of the songs covered by Dylan in this period, Marcus focuses on “Jim Jones.” This ballad, with its theme of transportation, has been dated to the early-to-mid nineteenth century. Starting out from the studio recording on *Good As I Been To You*, the author, commenting in detail on the vocal and instrumental aspects, ranges across Dylan’s thirty-one live performances of the song, all of which took place in 1993 (he thanks the anonymous fan who supplied him with the complete collection of live versions!). Marcus the attentive listener tracks Dylan across the gamut of performances, “trying to find the right way to play it. And then the next right way” (218). In “Jim Jones,” he concludes, Dylan was “staking his claim to the tradition Mike Seeger and others had opened up for him” (221); he was now able to sing the old songs “as if he had written them himself and had been written by them” (223).

We will now turn the pages back to chapter three and its out-of-sequence discussion that jumps to 2006 and “Ain’t Talkin’,” the most ambitious song on *Modern Times*, and praised by Marcus as “one of [Dylan’s] most distinctive songs” (126). He offers a close analysis of Dylan’s tormented narration of a doomed circular quest and a seeker unable to escape from himself. Marcus refers throughout to the *Modern Times* version: the outtake that appeared on *Tell Tale Signs* is not mentioned, though Bettye Lavette’s cover is. Marcus sees the song’s “deliberate and slow,” violin-tinged opening as magisterial, ushering in a world of “resentment and hatred and vengeance and regret, and the wish to bury it all in some cynical peace of mind” (125). He tries to make sense of the song’s chaos by tracing its links to multiple traditions, that of folk song included – and to Dylan’s own more visionary quest in “A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall,” a “great song” (136) also evoked in the chapter. Marcus reminds us that the opening of “Ain’t Talkin’,” “As I walked out...,” is that of a myriad folk songs (not forgetting Dylan’s own “As I Went Out One Morning”). He acknowledges Dylan’s borrowing of lines from Ovid (now an established fact of Dylan criticism, courtesy of Cliff Fell, Robert Polito and Richard Thomas), also taking in the traditional rootedness of the refrain’s words “Ain’t talkin’ / Just walkin,” embodying what he calls “a rhyme embedded in American English” (121). Curiously, though, Marcus does not mention Dylan’s direct debt in his refrain to the Stanley Brothers’ “Highway of Regret.”<sup>1</sup> The author sees in “Ain’t Talkin’” “a song about someone facing his

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<sup>1</sup> Russell, Bob. "Bob Dylan and The Stanley Brothers." *Dylan Review*, vol. 4.1, 2022

own oblivion,” but also “a reflecting back on Bob Dylan’s career” (151), an ironic revisiting of the notion of folk music as the badge of a community that saw itself as special: hence, it may be, the song’s ambivalent line “I practise a faith that’s been long abandoned.”

Marcus’s book concludes, fast-forwarding to February 2020, with his observations on “Murder Most Foul.” This song, which prior to its appearance later that year on *Rough and Rowdy Ways* was released as a single against the backdrop of the pandemic, is notable, first for being Dylan’s longest composition ever and second for its division into two discrete parts, one chronicling the Kennedy assassination and the other created around a litany of (mostly musical) quotations and titles. For Marcus, this song is a major Dylan work that “seems to bear more weight every time” (227): nor is he alone in this, as is clear from the numerous accolades he quotes, from Elvis Costello to *The Wall Street Journal*. He reads its opening as a limit case of Dylan’s capacity for empathy as he enters the dying president’s brain and relives his last moments – and its ending, coiling around its own title with the challenge “Play ‘Murder Most Foul’,” as impelling the listener to reboot the circle and go right through the song again. He does not attempt to interrogate the historicity of Dylan’s take on the assassination, nor does he try to catalogue the rosary of titles and allusions (others have done that), though he does see the song as a logical extension of Dylan’s recent phase of interpreting standards. The last words of the book, implying Dylan’s role as inheritor of a tradition and keeper of the flame, pose a question to the future as Marcus asks: “What will go out of the world with him?” (239).

This book is a welcome enrichment of Greil Marcus’s already remarkable contribution to Dylan studies, and the discussions of individual songs, while varying in length and breadth, are without exception valuable additions to those songs’ critical corpus. The author eloquently demonstrates how his chosen songs manifest Bob Dylan’s capacity for empathy and his ultimate rootedness in the folk tradition. As always, Marcus’s take on Dylan is both sedulously researched and eminently personal, and he once again demonstrates his highly individual capacity for getting inside a song and extracting its signifying potential. With criticism like this, the Dylan community can be assured that whatever the future holds, much, very much, will *remain* in the world thanks to Bob Dylan.

**Freddy Cristobal Dominguez, *Bob Dylan in the Attic: The Artist as Historian*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2022. 192 pp.**

REVIEW BY Scott F. Parker, Montana State University

In his conclusion to *Bob Dylan in the Attic: The Artist as Historian*, Freddy Cristobal Dominguez asks a question that is central to his project: “If – and this is not accepted by all – we ‘traditional’ historians are the makers and perpetuators of myths, if we are, as one recent book puts it, ‘story-tellers, custodians of the past, repositories of collective memory, poetic interpreters of what it is to be human,’ why are Dylan’s songs rendered purely musical or sometimes poetic while the writerly, often stodgy, words of ‘proper’ historians claim legitimacy and superior import?” (137–138). It’s an important question, and one that Dominguez already knows the answer to: they shouldn’t be.

*Bob Dylan in the Attic* establishes Dylan’s bona fides as a historian, leaving its author in something of an awkward position. In ceding historiography to non-professionals, what does the professional leave for himself?

Dominguez begins the book by announcing his “noncultic relationship to [Dylan]” (ix). Dominguez approaches his subject, he assures the reader, as a scholar not as a fan. And yet, the fan in him will not stay in his place. While Dominguez recognizes the virtue of an academic’s critical distance, he admits (in his acknowledgments) that “There were times when I doubted that *Bob Dylan in the Attic* would ever be finished, or worse, when I was taking things too seriously and killing the fun” (xi). Intellectual humility is mandatory among Dylan scholars, fans, and disciples alike, who must always compare themselves to the truly devout – the kind of person who can rattle off every setlist of the Never Ending Tour – but there should be no need to apologize for fun or for fandom, no need to offer an “excuse for [a] book” (4). We devote ourselves (in whatever senses) to what we love, and Dominguez loves Dylan – enough to own all of his albums and many of his bootlegs, enough to have seen him in concert nine times on two continents, enough to have spent years writing a book about him. And yet, come the conclusion, he is still feeling the need to “confess” to being among Dylan’s admirers (135). He is writing, he reminds his readers, as a “professional historian,” which if it weren’t clear from the substance of the book would be abundantly clear from Dominguez’s irrepressible habits of qualifying his statements and introducing meticulous distinctions (*see* “scholar-fans” and “fan-scholars,” (136)). The instincts of an academic are everywhere in the *Attic*.

This in itself is no knock against Dominguez. It is understandable, even admirable, that a scholar would advance cautiously and make claims tentatively. In the punctilious world of scholarship, where any statement may come under scrutiny, it is better to be sober than impassioned, better to be not wrong than recklessly provocative, better for a position to be defensible than memorable. But as responsible as this kind of writing is, it must confront the fact that we pick up *Bob Dylan in the Attic* as we pick up any book – not to download its information but to read it.

And I hope we are (reading the book). Dominguez's treatment of Dylan as historian is fascinating stuff to people who read journals like the *Dylan Review*. And beginning with the second chapter, Dominguez gets out of his own way and starts hitting his stride. He knows it takes him this long, too. The messy first chapter concludes with Dominguez saying 'sorry-not-sorry' for what has preceded: "I hope that the reader has arrived at this resting spot somewhat disoriented, perhaps a little dissatisfied, or, better yet, wanting more" (56). If he really wants his reader to be dissatisfied, he succeeds. The chapter is a hodgepodge of historical sources Dylan may have drawn from punctuated with exquisite Dylanisms such as this gem from a 2012 interview with *Rolling Stone*: "We can't change the present or the future. We can only change the past, and we do it all the time" (16). Much of this material, such as the connections between Dylan and *The Odyssey*, is interesting in its own right even if it fails to amount to more than a string of disparate riffs.

The subsequent two chapters, which treat Dylan as a historian and as a mythmaker, respectively, are the highlights of the book. Here Dominguez achieves his most focused and insightful analysis. Inferring from his (Dylan's) appreciation of *The Wasteland* that Dylan was influenced by Eliot's "ideological underpinnings" (60), Dominguez draws a line from Eliot's "'historical sense,' which he defines as 'a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence'" (61) to Dylan's practice of collaging his songs (not to mention his paintings, books, and speeches) from historical sources that feel contemporary to him and that he makes feel timeless to his audience. While the causal link between Eliot and Dylan is suspicious, from a Dylan-like angle, it hardly matters. "'A songwriter,' [Dylan] says, 'doesn't care about what's truthful. What he cares about is what should've happened, what could've happened. That's its own kind of truth'" (94). In the same way that "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" seems like it was written about the Cuban Missile Crisis, even though it was first performed weeks prior to it, Dominguez is right that Dylan was influenced by Eliot, even if he wasn't.

At the core of *Bob Dylan in the Attic* is Dominguez's engagement with Dylan and myth, which he calls Dylan's strongest historical register. Dylan's music and his life (as he performs

it publicly) are foremost mythical constructions. Dominguez isn't the first to make this argument, but he makes it well. As Dylan himself has increasingly been telling us over the last several years – most emphatically in his new book, *The Philosophy of Modern Song* – and explicitly showing us for at least three decades, dating back to his cover albums *Good as I Been to You* and *World Gone Wrong*, the American songbook is mythological to him, in the sense of being truer than the literal or the historically accurate. Dominguez quotes an unusually succinct and direct Dylan making this point in 1997 to David Gates of *Newsweek*: “I find religiosity and philosophy in music. I don't find it anywhere else. Songs like “Let Me Rest on a Peaceful Mountain” or “I Saw the Light” – that's my religion. I don't adhere to rabbis, preachers, evangelists. . . . I've learned more from the songs than I've learned from any of this kind of entity. The songs are my lexicon. I believe the songs” (88–89).

Dylan's listeners believe his songs, too. One consequence of “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” and “Hurricane” – to name a few songs that bore so deeply into their biographical subjects that they somehow elevate them from individuals to archetypes and that take less obvious poetic license than, say, “Tempest” – is that the historical liberties Dylan takes with them and the mythologies that result have effectively displaced the relevant facts in the cultural consciousness. Dylan is adept at turning what happened into what should have happened. The truth is often stranger than fiction, and, as Dylan demonstrates again and again, the mythological is often truer than the truth.

Yet Dylan's mythologizing is often seen as a problem, with his loudest critics resorting to charges of *fraud*, *fake*, *imposter*, *phony*, and the like. These critics could possibly be right if their literal mindedness didn't lead them to miss the point entirely. Dylan isn't a valuable historian because he's diligent in his evidence gathering. He's a valuable historian because of his ear for the truth. In the philosopher Harry Frankfurt's foundational conception in *On Bullshit*, it is “indifference to how things really are” that constitutes “the essence of bullshit.” The bullshitter will say *anything* that is to his present advantage. But even at his most 1966-caustic, Dylan's irony always gives the suggestion of pointing toward things (*truths*) that can't (or shouldn't) be put into direct language. If, technically, he lies when he invents an early autobiography that has him running away from home and joining carnivals or when he rewrites history to serve a song's needs, he must be understood as Dominguez understands him: “Just like Homer, just like Thucydides (the rhetorician), the modern songster can produce a verisimilar past edging toward veracity itself” (18).

Dominguez is right when he tells us that Dylan's “creative use of a classical textual tradition does not imply ignorance of that tradition; on the contrary, playfulness implies

comfort” (10). But while Dylan’s fluid relationship with the past doesn’t expose him as a bullshitter or as someone for whom a little knowledge has proved to be a dangerous thing, he nevertheless presents a slippery case for a scholar.

What distinguishes Dylan’s rewriting of history for the sake of the present from Big Brother’s, if not something like the goodness in his soul? And what harder thing ever was there to locate in the history of American culture than the essence and soul of Bob Dylan? One problem with the accusations of fraudulence pointed at Dylan is that they assume an essential self that is being deceptively misrepresented for personal gain (fame? money? really? at this point?). But Dominguez joins the likes of Greil Marcus and Todd Haynes in challenging this simple assumption, writing, “what if the so-called masks worn by Dylan are not mere costumes? What if, in fact, these masks can be something more akin to embodiments?” (56). To put this another way, recognizing that Dylan is a performer doesn’t indicate that he isn’t also a good one.

Part of the magic of listening to Dylan’s 1964 concert at Philharmonic Hall (*The Bootleg Series, Volume 6*) is hearing a giddy Dylan tell his audience in the transition between “Gates of Eden” and “If You Gotta Go, Go Now (Or Else You Got to Stay All Night)” that “It’s just Halloween. I have my Bob Dylan mask on. I’m masquerading.” Dylan is widely thought to have been stoned during this performance and two songs later will forget the opening lyrics to “I Don’t Believe You (She Acts Like We Never Have Met).” And maybe if he hadn’t been so stoned and so giddy he wouldn’t have revealed what wasn’t yet obvious to everyone: that whoever he “really” is, he is capable of becoming whoever the song needs him to be without a moment’s notice. Listen again to the lead-up and false start to, and then the flawless execution of, *Bootleg 6*’s “I Don’t Believe You.” Once two fans provide him with the lyrics he needs, Dylan is still laughing when he tries to start singing and sputters out. But the switch to singing the song with utter conviction happens instantaneously. No matter how many times you’ve heard it, it happens anew every time before you can realize it. In the time it takes him to say “now” (as in, “It’s the same song, same song, only we start it *now*.”) he is transformed from one person (the unmasked Dylan) to another (the singer, never unmasked). Don’t look back, indeed. This essence we insist on searching for, how will we know when we find it? As Greil Marcus writes in his new book, *Folk Music: A Bob Dylan Biography in Seven Songs*, “it may be that his true biography is his inhabiting of other lives” (211).

History, like Dylan, assumes the form its moment requires, and it belongs to whoever voices it best. Applying this pragmatic rendering of Dominguez’s to one lesson of Dylan’s



music – that ideas are not distinct from their articulation – we can learn another: that it is better to be good than to be right if what you want is to be heard and maybe remembered.

**Raphael Falco. *No One to Meet: Imitation and Originality in the Songs of Bob Dylan*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2022. xii + 260 pp.<sup>1</sup>**

REVIEW BY Richard F. Thomas, Harvard University

A generation after the sack of Rome in August 410 CE, a Roman by the name of Macrobius, probably a Christian though his writings show no sign of that, wrote a dialogue set a generation before the sack. Entitled *Saturnalia* after the three-day pagan festival that opened on December 17, 382 or 383 CE – eventually morphing into Christmas – it is ostensibly a manual of sorts for the writer’s son, gathering writings from pagan literature that had formed the author’s education. For Macrobius that manual included first and foremost Virgil’s four-centuries-old *Aeneid*, a “sacred poem” for Christian writers though its author was a pagan.

In the fifth book of his dialogue Macrobius collects and juxtaposes what we would now call the Greek, mostly Homeric, intertexts of Virgil’s poem, the lines that critics had accused him of plagiarizing even in the poet’s lifetime – evoking the now well-known response from Virgil: “Why don’t my critics try the same thefts? They will soon realize it’s easier to steal Hercules’ club from him than steal a line from Homer.” In his preface Macrobius, without naming either of his sources, borrows from Seneca, who had quoted Virgil in saying “we ought to imitate the bees, who wander about and pluck from flowers then arrange what they have gathered and distribute it in the cells of the honeycomb and transform into a single taste the different types of nectar, through mixing in the individual quality of their own spirit.”

Virgil’s friend Horace, Rome’s greatest lyric poet, who himself draws from the Greek lyric poet Pindar, had compared himself in Odes 4.2 to the tiny bee who roves about the woods and riverbanks of Tivoli, fashioning his elaborate song. Nothing new under the sun – Ovid said that. Having in *Why Bob Dylan Matters* addressed the issue of Dylan’s borrowings or thefts from classical Greek and Roman poets, I was of course struck by Raphael Falco’s title, *No One to Meet*, and particularly the subtitle, *Imitation and Originality in the Songs of Bob Dylan*. So when a co-editor of the *Dylan Review* asked me to review the book I gladly accepted. Although I am on the Editorial Board, I have not met Professor Falco, who rightly recused himself from the process that now culminates in this review.

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<sup>1</sup> *Dylan Review* Founding Editor, Raphael Falco, author of the book in question, recused himself from any involvement in the procuring and editing of this review. Special thanks to Shelby Nathanson for keen editorial assistance.

It is not easy for academics to write successfully on Dylan, many of whose fans and followers – not without reason when it comes to much academic writing in the humanities – would side with David Crosby’s take on Dylan’s fellow honorees on that Princeton stage during the locust infestation of 1970: “dickheads on autostroke.” I got my share of such sentiment from *The Times* on November 18, 2017 (“Is Bob Dylan inspired by classical poets? James Marriott yawns at nerdy analysis”) and the next day when *The Guardian*’s Sean O’Hagan wrote under the headline “An academic’s attempt to shoehorn Dylan into the pantheon of literary greats misunderstands the singer’s appeal.” Dylan of course quotes Crosby in *Chronicles, Volume One*, and himself sang “The world of research has gone berserk / Too much paperwork” – and that was *before* the cascade of post-Nobel publications, podcasts and blog posts. And yet, he also gave a vivid and informative defense of precisely this intertextual aspect of his art in *Rolling Stone*, just two weeks after the release of *Tempest* in 2012, the album on which through the songs’ Homeric intertextuality he effectively “became Odysseus.” Interviewer Mikal Gilmore had left the trickiest question till the end: “I want to ask about the controversy over your quotations in your songs from the works of other writers.” Among the colorful responses that diverted readers – “wussies and pussies complain about that stuff ... all those evil motherfuckers can rot in hell” – Dylan also gave us a glimpse of his understanding of his place in a long tradition:

It’s an old thing – it’s part of the tradition. It goes way back ... I’m working within my art form. It’s that simple. I work within the rules and limitations of it. There are authoritative figures that can explain that kind of art form better to you than I can.

Falco, professor of Renaissance English literature, is one such figure. He announces the book’s purpose on page 25: “I analyze the growth and development of Dylan’s unparalleled lyrical authority through his practice of imitation, appropriation, and self-imitation.” Among the many things reborn in the Renaissance’s discovery and recreation of classical antiquity were theories of intertextuality: “mimesis,” to use the Greek term; for the Romans, “imitation” and its more competitive cousin “emulation.” It is notable that “influence,” though from a Latin word, did not exist in antiquity. No Greek or Roman would have been able to think or say “Homer influenced Virgil,” “Virgil influenced Dante,” “the *Odyssey* influenced Dylan.” Cicero used the verb in *Laws* 2.38, agreeing with Plato that “nothing so influences<sup>2</sup> impressionable

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<sup>2</sup> literally “flows into” *influere* (my translation)

young minds as the varied sounds of song, whose power for good and evil can scarcely be put into words.” Nothing new again – think of parental views of Elvis for the evil bit. The noun is from a neo-Latin coinage, mostly early-modern and astrological in essence, the “flowing in” of an element from certain alignments or positions of the stars, such as the supposed cause of ‘flu (or influenza).

What Virgil, Dante, and Dylan do with their respective traditions is a complete inversion of “influence,” and Falco begins his first chapter with Swedish Academy Professor Horace Engdahl’s words in his presentation speech of 2016: “all creativity begins in imitation.” In other words there is – more or less until the Romantics – no notion of “originality” in the sense critics of Dylan’s intertextual or transfigurative method of composing have in mind. “Originality” with the meaning “independent of and different from anything that has gone before” (*OED* 3a) is like “influence,” a late-comer to the English language. In college I knew an aspiring poet who refused to read other poets for fear of maiming his “originality.” I wonder what he is doing now – not writing poetry I would guess. Falco, whose mission is in part to introduce Renaissance theories and practice of *imitatio* to a broader audience, puts it this way in his introduction:

Imitatio is the means by which poets like Dylan manifest originality in the word’s literal sense, deriving from a source, or *origo*. But imitatio also allows poets to express originality – in the modern sense of creativity – through new combinations and revisions of past works. The poetic practice of imitation, which extends to the other arts, predates the Romantic perspective on originality and creative imagination.

In other words originality is not that in which the origin lies, but rather that which has an origin. This might feel like a semantic sleight of hand, but it is surely borne out by pre-Romantic realities, in antiquity and the Renaissance.

This approach allows Falco to demonstrate that originality lies in the transformation of the origins into a new creation. On page 6 he looks at the way Dylan, from early on, “recasts forms that are already familiar” – “Masters of War” out of “Nottamun Town,” “A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Come” out of “Lord Randall,” and later “I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine” – melody, meter and all unmistakably coming out of “I Dreamed I saw Joe Hill Last Night.” We hear the shared four first words, which announce the origin, and we hear the last four syllables of each, metrically and prosodically identical but semantically different in fundamental ways. That sets up a narrative that replaces the workingman’s anthem, whose vision and message urge us to go

“on to organize,” with pure art and genius, particularly in the stunning final verse, where the singer played a central role in the death of the Christian martyr: “And I dreamed I was among the ones that put him out to death.”

Lest things seem to be getting too textual, it should be said that Falco, like many of us whose fields are rooted in writing and textuality but who follow the art of Bob Dylan, is fully aware that writing is only the beginning of Dylan’s art, and that its essence exists ultimately in the performance, the particular inflexions and meanings coming across only in each version. That is why in the concerts of recent years he can sing the same songs every night; they are not the same songs. Dylan himself warned on that score and directly corrected the Nobel Committee’s defensive claim that Dylan’s words could be read on the page: “They’re meant to be sung, not read.” Falco “would have liked to insert links to Dylan’s ‘delivery’ at every quotation” (p. 4) but is constrained by technological and legal realities. Yet his book is constantly aware that its subject is a performative artist, though one who does not exist without his words *and* his voice in song. On page 32 Falco aptly quotes Betsy Bowden’s assessment, as true to reality now as it was back when she offered it in 1982, “It was his voice that spoke so directly to and for each individual listener: Dylan’s whining, grating, snarling voice that could drip scorn or comfort, could stretch or snap off words to disregard their literal meaning or to fulfill it.”

At the end of the introduction, Falco sets out the themes of the four chapters. One of the strengths of the book is in the practical criticism, imbued with a deep knowledge of Dylan’s oeuvre that is, for the most part, integrated into his theoretical system, its presence lightly felt. We never lose sight of the fact that this is a book about the art of Bob Dylan. Space does not allow me to go into all of his observations and arguments, which tend not to be linear, but rather flit from topic to topic in an engaging way, and not unlike Horace’s bee.

Chapter 1, “Past the Vernacular,” demonstrates how Dylan’s imitation draws from his vast mnemonic capacity and creative genius to produce new art whose components are visible but unobtrusive. That is the sense in which the Renaissance understood *imitatio* – as did the ancient Greeks and Romans who created the foundation for those Renaissance theories one and two millennia earlier, long before the First Crusade.

Falco distinguishes Dylan’s imitation from the slavish type that comes across as having been copied, not from the artist’s having acquired the vernacular and then going past that vernacular. Here it might be useful to think of Eliot’s much-quoted “Immature poets imitate, mature poets steal.” Falco quotes Dylan speaking to Jonathan Cott in 1978: “I don’t try to imitate Rimbaud in my work. I’m not interested in imitation.” Here Dylan *may* merely mean,

“I’ve lost interest in Rimbaud.” And keep in mind that in the 1974 song it was his “relationships” not his songs that had been “like Verlaine’s and Rimbaud.” “Mr. Tambourine Man” certainly imitated an English translation of the French Symbolist’s “Le Bateau Ivre,” (perhaps Norman Cameron’s version) and I argued in 2017 that “Chimes of Freedom” likewise imitates Rimbaud’s “Poor People in Church.” But that imitation, as I argued, involved barely any use of actual words, and yet “Chimes of Freedom,” the work of an already mature poet, stole from the French poet. Dylan made it his own and in the process replaced the contempt of Rimbaud towards the “timid ones ... the epileptic ones ... the blind ones” with the empathy that is central to “Chimes” for “the searching ones ... the aching ones ... the countless confused, accused, misused ones.” That is how imitation worked in classical antiquity – and all the way through the Renaissance until the Romantics changed our way of thinking. Rimbaud had helped give us “Chimes of Freedom,” and Dylan soon moved on, saying within a couple of years, “I can’t read him now.” But Rimbaud’s specific poems remain visible, and important even if Dylan had moved on.

Here Falco might have given his readers some of the famous letter from Petrarch to Boccaccio, quoted by Kinney in his fundamental *Continental Humanist Poetics*, from which Falco rightly draws throughout. The letter was dated October 28, 1366:

A proper imitator should take care that what he writes resembles the original without reproducing it. The resemblance should not be that of a portrait to the sitter<sup>3</sup> – in that case the closer the likeness is the better – but it should be the resemblance of a son to his father ... As soon as we see the son, he recalls the father to us, although if we should measure every feature, we should find them all different. But there is between them a certain shared element that indicates one is the impression of the other.<sup>4</sup>

The patrilineal metaphor may not please all, and it doesn’t quite fit the fact that the son in Petrarch’s letter plays no role in creating the *imitation*, but looking at it from the end result (the appearance of the son), it works well enough. We see Guthrie in the lyrics, melody, performance, and appearance of Dylan in 1962 and 1963, but the features are changed. We see Rimbaud in Dylan’s mid-60s song, but the features are changed. They are new creations.

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<sup>3</sup> Read: “photograph.”

<sup>4</sup> Last sentence my translation of the Italian.

Chapter 2 (“Savage Innocence: Dylan’s Art of Appropriation”) begins: “In the film *The Savage Innocents*, Anthony Quinn plays Inuk, an Eskimo hunter ... Although no one seems to have cited this film as the source of the song, I have not seen an explanation anywhere as to why the ‘mighty’ Quinn should be an Eskimo.” In fact Oliver Trager on page 505 of *Keys to the Rain: The Definitive Bob Dylan Encyclopedia* – a somewhat hubristic subtitle given the subject – includes a still from the movie, noting that “some Dylan scholars,” left unnamed, cite the film as a source for the song. I mention this not for any “gotcha” purpose, but first of all because it points to a central problem in Dylanology, something of a Wild West in which it is not always easy to find the origins of ideas, and in which many of us have found our own ideas reappearing without acknowledgement. This is in the nature of the field, and it is to be expected that as Dylan continues to be the subject of academic study, things might change. Although it is also the case in the academic world that bibliographic scruples are on the wane.

Falco is a model of how the scholarly face of Dylanology might look. He is scrupulous with his scholarship, with 204 items in his bibliography all to be found in text and notes, fully acknowledging those to whom he is indebted, myself included on the classical material; Andrew Muir on Shakespeare; Scobie, Ricks, Hampton on their particular subjects. And he is balanced and generous in his treatment of others, a welcome feature compared to some writers who seem to feel an exclusive ownership of the art and especially the life of Bob Dylan. Clinton Heylin, to return to *The Savage Innocents*, makes no mention of the film in *Revolution in the Air*, nor does Michael Gray’s Dylan encyclopedia, so Falco’s oversight is natural. Be that as it may, Falco’s argument for the connection is generally convincing, and a good path into the chapter’s continuing exploration of what he means by “originality,” which also involves the degree to which the source is easily recognized or known. When Dylan sang the opening words of “Hard Rain,” many or all in the coffee house folk communities would have immediately heard the opening, “O where have you been, Lord Randall, my son.” They would have recognized the father even as they were thunderstruck by the blue-eyed son who was about to open a universe the father had never contemplated. Hearing the old song in the words and melody of the new song is a vital part of the experience, as Petrarch wrote. Likewise, though now coming back to Earth, my appreciation of “Quinn the Eskimo” is increased by the thought that “It ain’t my cup of meat” could find its origin in the bowl of maggot-infested meat that figures in the film.

But Falco’s reading of the song also got me thinking about the double title, “Quinn the Eskimo (The Mighty Quinn),” in the lyrics book and on [bobdylan.com](http://bobdylan.com). Inuk is mighty enough, but what if Dylan had more than one Anthony Quinn in mind? In the magnificent second

chapter of *Chronicles*, “The Lost Land,” Dylan writes of going to “an art movie house in the Village on 12<sup>th</sup> Street ... I’d seen a couple of Italian Fellini movies there – one called *La Strada*, which means ‘The Street.’” It is hard to imagine Dylan not being absorbed by the figure of Zampanò, the itinerant character played by Quinn for whom Fellini’s wife Giulietta Masina, as the waif Gelsomina, collects offerings as he breaks a chain with only the strength of his chest expansion! Though not so mighty in reality, he certainly comes across as the mighty Quinn to the simple Italians who pay good money to see the act. A bit like the carnival figure Dylan recalls seeing when the circus is in town at Hibbing’s National Guard Armory, as Dylan himself put it: “Gorgeous George. A mighty spirit” (*Chronicles, Volume 1*, p. 44). He returns to the theme on page 187, now in New Orleans, at the end of the 1980s, when he tells of going to see “The Mighty Quinn,” “a mystery, suspense, Jamaican thriller with Denzel Washington as the mighty Xavier Quinn, a detective who solves crimes. Funny, that’s just the way I imagined him when I wrote the song ‘The Mighty Quinn.’ Denzel Washington.” Sure, Bob, whatever you say, but Zampanò as the Mighty Quinn has my vote.

In a learned section (“Meet Me in the Margin”), Falco goes on to explore the presence of appropriation and how, or whether, it affects our hearing of the song. The answer depends in part on the level of erudition of both Dylan and the listener. Falco is right to distinguish Dylan’s complexity of intertextuality from the polysemous layering of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* or Dante’s *Inferno*, works that come late in their respective traditions. And yet, Dylan’s mnemonic range equals these two when it comes to his absorbing folk and other traditions that have unfairly been considered of a lower register, but which would have been heard by the Gaslight Cafe audiences. He picks up the more recent examples of Dylan’s *imitatio* of Homer, Virgil, and Ovid. With apologies for immodesty I bring up his treatment of my listening in this context:

It would be misleading to say that Richard Thomas, a classical scholar, hears Virgil where we hear Dylan (as at least one reviewer observed). Not only does this do Thomas a disservice, but, more significantly, such statements do a disservice to all forms of erudition. Thomas hears Dylan *and* hears Virgil in Dylan: he chooses to write about Virgil or Ovid because he has expertise in this while most of the rest of us don’t. His writing about Virgil does not obfuscate what the rest of us hear when we listen to Dylan. The function of erudition is not to suppress the text or supplant it but to enhance and augment it.



This is a point worth stressing. I first heard Virgil in Dylan in the second-to-last verse of “Lonesome Day Blues” in mid-September 2001, a few days after 9/11. I bought the album in Tower Records in Cambridge, MA, an hour after the second tower was hit, the irony occurring to me as I did so. I had been listening to Dylan for over thirty years, studying and teaching Virgil for a little less. Hearing Virgil in Dylan was an indescribable feeling, not equaled in its immediacy by hearing Ovid in the songs on *Modern Times*.<sup>5</sup> A close runner-up was hearing Odysseus taunting the Cyclops in the penultimate verse of “Early Roman Kings.”

And so it continues. When I heard “stand over there by the cypress tree, where the Trojan women and children are being sold into slavery,” I knew the words from “My Own Version of You” could *only* come some 1,100 years before the First Crusade, from 19 BCE and the second book of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Others soon decided they had heard the same. Some no doubt went and read the great poem that gives us the gripping narrative of the fall of Troy, Trojan Aeneas’ survivor song, sung in the court of Dido, Queen of Carthage. You don’t need to hear these instances of *imitatio* precisely along the lines that Falco sets out. You don’t need to hear Homer as you read Virgil, but if you try sometime you just might find you get something out of it all. And if it disrupts your firmly established view of what matters to Dylan, and therefore reject the possibility as academic humbug, that’s your problem. And this happens in performance. I was in Austin on March 16, 2022, the week Dylan started singing the new sixth verse of “Crossing the Rubicon” to which Bob Britt’s guitar flurries draw particular attention, like the Sanctus bells in the Catholic church alerting those in attendance to what comes next:

Right or wrong what can I say? What really needs to be said?

I’ll spill your brains out on the ground. You’ll be better off over there with the dead

Seems like 10 maybe 20 years I’ve been gone

I stood between heaven and earth and I crossed the Rubicon.

Line 1 is the voice of Helen, in Book 4 of the *Odyssey*, line 2 that of the Cyclops imagining what he will do to Odysseus (“I’d smash him against the ground, I’d spill his brains”) and line 3 that of Odysseus, wandering for all those years. Dylan apparently wanted his familiar Homeric hero to come back into play. You can decide you don’t want to hear Homer, though why you would want *not* to I wouldn’t know. But you can’t say only I am hearing these specific translations of Fagles’ *Odyssey* when it is quite clear what Dylan – for whatever reason, a

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<sup>5</sup> After Cliff Fell, then the rest of us, had heard Dylan as he was reading Peter Green’s Ovid.

different question – is doing, namely inserting the Homeric lines into a transformed version of “Crossing the Rubicon.”

The third chapter (“Self-Portrait in a Broken Glass: Dylan Imitates Dylan”) turns to what some of us call intratextuality, the ways in which the artist’s own earlier work becomes part of the word hoard, a process whereby the artist “has mined his or her own body of work for as much material to reintroduce, adapt, and weave into songs” (p. 25). I suggested (Thomas 2017:180–187) that the Boston restaurant scene in “Highlands” was such an instance, alluding back to that momentous occasion in the topless place or one of its variants in “Tangled Up in Blue” and updating *via* the reality of the second-wave feminist waitress whom the singer, wishing someone would come and “push back the clock for him,” now fails to pick up. Skeptics will find unimportant the fact that in his first two performances of “Highlands” he sang it right after the 1975 classic. But if you allow yourself to hear the intratext – and now that I have mentioned it, you will not fail to make the connection – the performative pairing has a transcendent effect.

Falco rightly claims that no major artist in the twentieth century is as self-referential as Dylan. But if you go back, by way of Shakespeare, again to before the First Crusade, you will find a model for this in Virgil. In the Golden Age to which the fourth Messianic eclogue (c. 39 BCE) finds an escape, inside the gates of Eden, “every land will produce everything” (*omnis feret omnia tellus*). In Virgil’s great next poem, *Georgics* (29 BCE), which confronts the hard reality in the world of the Iron Age, that earlier Utopian fiction is exploded: “in truth all lands cannot produce everything” (*nec vero terrae ferre omnes omnia possunt*). In these two examples Dylan and Virgil are doing pretty much the same thing, allowing an earlier song or poem to come into play through intratextuality, if only we have ears to hear.

In reality, much of this third chapter is more focused on the relationship between textual and pictorial, between lyrics and drawing, painting and photography. Falco offers a wide-ranging exploration of the relationship between the two in *Writings and Drawings* and the ways the images relate to the facing lyrics. He connects these to the worlds of *Mondo Scripto*, and provides an interesting discussion of the multiple images of “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door” – graphic translations of self-imitation. He briefly treats five of the sixteen images that illuminate the song in the catalog with different implements (garden rake, baseball bat, iron bar, jackhammer, large crucifix), all being used in fruitless knockings on three different types of doors.

He might also have noted that page 317 in the *Mondo Scripto* catalog has sixteen images, arranged four per line, thus producing a perfectly iconic image of the song’s verse-

chorus-verse-chorus structure. There are ten images of a man knocking on a variety of doors, eight of them taking up the second and fourth lines (choruses), the other two at the end of the first and second verses. The entirety of the song's lyrics, in case we don't know them, are written across the sixteen images, allowing simultaneous viewing, reading, and singing of the song. Just when you thought there was nothing much to say about that old favorite, Dylan shows you a new way in. And as Horace said, *ut pictura poesis*, "poetry is like painting."

Returning to this page of *Mondo Scripto* got me thinking about the other six lines of the song, especially the first two: "Mama, take this badge off of me" and "I can't use it anymore." We see the same badge in each image, first upright with nothing else in the frame, then lying abandoned on a city street, with only our imagination about how it got there. You don't have to look too closely to see the words "Maricopa County, Ariz." You might then be entitled to think of that county's sheriff, Joe Arpaio, criticized by Amnesty International and the Anti-Defamation League, sued by the ACLU for racial profiling, convicted of criminal contempt of court in July 2017, and pardoned by Donald Trump the next month while Dylan was producing *Mondo Scripto*. By then Arpaio couldn't use the badge anymore, having been defeated by Democrat Paul Penzone in the same general election that brought Trump in. To all of this Dylan might reply, "Look again, that's a *Deputy* Sheriff badge. Arpaio was *Sheriff*; he's not there."

In the section "Stuck Inside a Painting," Falco gets to song intratextuality, starting out with Stephen Scobie's brilliant treatment of the way "Don't Fall Apart on Me Tonight" from 1983 ("But it's like I'm stuck inside a painting / That's hanging in the Louvre") involves itself in the great "Visions of Johanna" with the Louvre's most famous piece of art ("Inside the museums ... Mona Lisa musta had the highway blues"). Falco then connects the "jelly-faced women" who all sneeze in the same verse of "Visions" – a crucial question: are they old, or just obese ("can't find my knees")? – to Dylan's drunken put-down of his elderly audience at the infamous Tom Paine Awards: "old people when their hair grows out, *they* should go out." That then leads Falco to "My Back Pages," not only its chorus ("I was so much older then"), but to the opening two lines: "Crimson flames tied through my ears / Rollin' high and mighty traps", and the comment that "The 'crimson flames' *presumably* represent the fiery left-wing rhetoric that engulfed Dylan in his 'finger-pointing' period." The strategic adverb [my italics] contains multitudes. It is dangerous to presume too much about the surreal imagery of a song like "My Back Pages" even if we might all agree and hold as a *presumption* that one of its meanings has to do with the singer no longer relying on the old songwriting that appealed to the older folk aficionados of his first two Newport appearances.

This leads to a central aspect of criticism that involves itself in intertextual or intratextual claims and arguments. I have always thought having a bare majority of readers – though ideally three-quarters – consent to your observations and arguments was a prerequisite to successful criticism, not that you can ever know. Falco always has interesting things to say, but in these pages I found myself reluctant to go along, starting with my failure to accept his assertion that “jelly-faced women” meant “old women,” a necessary link in his Tom Paine chain. On page 126 he observes “in terms of self-reference, being ‘stuck inside a painting’ and being ‘stuck inside of Mobile with the Memphis blues’ are comparable.” That seems plausible. Whether that leads to the conclusion that “both songs indict art – painting and the blues – as the agents of physical limitations,” or that with the title “Stuck Inside of Mobile” there is an “ironic pun in that it refers to someone immobilized,” is another matter. The same may be said of a somewhat tendentious next step on page 128. The necessary body parts are telegraphed at the start of the section: “Dylan’s speaker in ‘Don’t Fall Apart on Me Tonight’ is in effect ‘calling out that he’s been framed.’” He’s doing no such thing, but this allows Falco to bring in the line from “I Shall Be Released” and close the circle. “That he’s been framed” allows a connection that will again fall far short, I suspect, of that 50 per cent threshold.

It continues. The last verse of “Don’t Fall Apart on Me Tonight” proposes to the woman “getting beneath the surface waste.” “No more booby traps and bombs / No more decadence and charm / No more affection that’s misplaced, girl.” So far so good. But then, “No more mudcake creatures lying in your arms.” My reaction at this point would be “I don’t know what it means, either, but it sounds good,” as Dylan said of that couplet of John Donne in the Nobel Lecture (though I *do* know what that one means). But Falco is all in: the image “mudcake creatures” “refers to Genesis 2:5-7, where God forms man from the dust of the ground” (King James and New Revised Standard). If you wonder how that works, on the next page we have the answer, that the speaker “renounces mudcake formation and affirms his vow to lie in the girl’s arms, not any more as a mere creature of the clay but as a man newly connected (or converted) to the deity.” Falco is enjoying himself, and there is nothing wrong with that, particularly if that is *really* what the lines mean to him. But wouldn’t Dylan have written “no more mudcake creature” at the very least if he meant his own transformation exclusively? And for me there is no Genesis *imitatio* at work here. I’m just not on board. Terry Gans seems the wiser (*Surviving in a Ruthless World* 72, n. 95): “One of the seemingly inexplicable phrases is ‘mudcake creatures.’ It could refer to a driller, a baker or a sexual practice. Or it could just be three words put together. Your guess is as good as any.” But if you take on such a line, you have to persuade readers that your guess is *better* than any.

The problem with asserting a single, strong meaning in an argument with many links in the chain is that it then has to fit into the song's, or at least the verse's, larger meaning; and the very next line should advise caution: "What about that millionaire with the drumsticks in his pants?" For Falco this too has to be made to fit into a biblical reading of a song that to many seems at home with the unbelieving title of the album (*Infidels*): "Maybe the millionaire's bewilderment is brought on by the rejection of his *earthy* rhythm once the mudcake creatures are no more – once they are saved as Christ's successors with the promise of spiritual generation." If the reader has not bought into the born-again reading of the mudcake creatures, the entirety of the chapter's last seven pages of analysis of a song Dylan never performed will be in vain. I hasten to add that while not going along with the interpretive aspects, I enjoyed these pages, and particularly enjoyed Falco the Renaissance man displaying his scholarly expertise and familiarity with the biblical material as literature – a familiarity lacking in more recent students of literature. In that connection one of the profound aspects of Dylan's lyrical genius across the decades is his literary engagement with the Bible, quite apart from his own faith practice of any decade.

Chapter 4 ("The Wizard's Curse: The American Singer as *Vates*") promises to be "both a culmination and an expansion, closing the circle on my argument that Dylan's status as a vatic poet is unique in contemporary culture." This chapter will be the most demanding for many readers, but it is also in many ways the most successful in its dazzling and generally persuasive connections across the years. *Vates*, as Falco explains, is Latin for "bard" and "prophet" – a word that suggested old-fashioned poets to the young, avant-garde Virgil and Horace, but which became rehabilitated as they used it of themselves in their higher-register moments when asserting their own status as voice of their generation, in the tumultuous world in which they lived. That is, as they were assuming the classical status they would come to hold – as Dylan has been doing in recent years.

The word *vates* is probably a loan word, passing into Latin from the Celtic Gaulish, and as such was cognate with Old Norse *Ódin*, Old English *Wōdan*, Old High German *Wuotan*, the Irish and Welsh terms for "bard" and other terms meaning "leader of the possessed," "king of frenzy" – none of them false prophets. Falco brilliantly connects such figures to Dylan's voice in the opening of "False Prophet": "another ship going out," going back almost 60 years to the song Dylan sang at the March on Washington, "the hour that the ship comes in." And he connects the theme to much else, not least the Book of Daniel and the biblical prophets, as he ranges across Dylan's oeuvre pursuing this topic.

Among the most impressive sections of this chapter is “Visionary Technology,” the treatment of Dylan’s “aesthetic technology,” a “literary phenomenon born of imitation.” Falco develops Timothy Hampton’s work on Dylan’s use of Rimbaud as he returns to later manifestations of that topic, including the Rimbaud collage in the famous “Series of Dreams” video. Though recently remastered and stripped of its highly intertextual images, this video once included a “flash of the famous Rimbaud portrait, whose edges suddenly melt and reform” – a corroboration of Dylan’s disavowal of the French poet’s importance in the years following his patent interest. We don’t know who made that video, whose opening frames have Horace’s line from his closing ode, *non omnis moriar*, “not all of me will die.” I like to think Dylan somehow found the great Roman poet’s prediction that his poetry would outlast the pyramids. But perhaps, as Milton put it, I fondly dream, and it was just some Classics nerd production assistant.

Falco goes on to open up the whole catalog of Dylan’s songbook as he offers a collective vision of songs that might have seemed unconnected without his persuasive writing:

While “Hard Rain” demonstrates an extraordinary command of vatic expression very early on, Dylan’s later songs from “All Along the Watchtower” to “Dirge” to “I and I” to “Mississippi,” “High Water,” “Not Dark Yet,” and “Highlands” exhibit an ongoing and profound commitment to that same mode of writing and performance. Even the knotty, cryptic, accusing verses of such experimental standards as “Gates of Eden” and “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding),” while eschewing the anthemic voice of the pabulum years, resonate with visionary challenges.

Even the cover of “Arthur McBride,” “Percy’s Song,” and especially “Abandoned Love” come into focus for him. No one who has heard Dylan’s Bitter End version of “Abandoned Love” will soon forget that delivery, particularly the final verse with St. John the Evangelist making an appearance, which Falco connects back to the prophetic voices of “Hard Rain,” “Gates of Eden,” “Percy’s Song,” among many others. And it *may* be useful to think about “Abandoned Love” in terms of those other prophetic songs, particularly on that night, when the singer sends out for St. John. But things get a little out of hand: “About ‘to make a change,’ he calls for Saint John the Evangelist, author of Revelation, apparently for a viaticum” [the final Eucharist administered to a dying person]. Falco would not be the first person to mix up John the Evangelist or Apostle, “the one whom Jesus loved,” with the Revelator of the same common name. Apart from this, it is hard not to hear the delighted laughter of the Bitter End crowd when

Dylan got to the end of the verse. It may be time to make a change, but how serious at that point? “But my heart is telling me I love ya but you’re strange.”

Although there is much insight in this final 55-page chapter, as a whole it meanders a little, losing sight of Renaissance “imitatio as originality” that is Falco’s overall theme and the heart of the book. Moreover, it could have profited from some editorial tightening. The word “vatic,” unfamiliar to many but well explained by Falco, occurs 135 times in the chapter, eleven times on page 182: vatic authority (thrice), vatic voice (thrice), vatic imagery, technique, gifts, innovations, song. The very word becomes a distraction. It is unfortunate that this stylistic excess will keep some readers from staying engaged.

More engaging are four pages on “Blind Willie McTell,” wherein Falco examines an important observation by David Yaffe (2011) about this song’s place in what Yaffe calls Dylan’s lifelong “reckoning with [B]lackness.” Yaffe wrote “‘nobody could sing the blues like Blind Willie McTell,’ [Dylan] sang, but nobody sang about not being able to sing those blues like Dylan, which in turn made for compelling blues in its own way.” Falco’s particular expansion of this comes through his own expertise in the area of Renaissance literature. Here as elsewhere, he brings in Arthur Kinney’s valuable introductory chapter to his 1989 book *Continental Humanist Poetics*, which points to the need for “the audience [to] see the residual traces of the original, which has been the initial impulse or model.” Yaffe and Falco together provide an important way into thinking – by way of the images and sounds of “Blind Willie McTell” – about how Dylan comes to terms with the white appropriation of Black blues traditions. They reveal the daring of the song’s project, but also reveal just how successful this particular transfiguration was. Of the many greatest hits that Dylan left off albums, none is a greater song than this. Perhaps Dylan was as yet uncertain how its purpose in connection to this larger social and cultural question might be received.

Next comes a ten-page section (“You Need the Blood on Your Door”) that picks up on the reference to the mezuzah in the opening line of “Blind Willie McTell”: “Seen the arrow on the doorpost.” Falco develops the notion that the symbol of the arrow, suggesting a “sense of hope, of liberation from slavery, of a future guaranteed by covenant,” puts Moses and the prophetic or vatic Mosaic in play, connecting the Egyptian enslavement of the Jews and that of Black people in the American South for whom Moses became so central in word, song, and soul. Here Falco focuses on the gospel period of 1979–80, ranging impressively through the songs and the often lengthy homiletic preambles to which Dylan treated his audiences across those remarkable months. By now we have become accustomed to Falco’s voice: “Yet Dylan never abandons the Mosaic voice as a viable vatic alternative.” Putting these verbal ticks aside,

readers will find Falco impressive in recovering from the voices of those who were in attendance, and especially from the evidence now available on *Trouble No More, The Bootleg Series, Vol. 13 1979-1981*, just how dynamic these performances were. Drawing from Gayle Wald's warning that "approaches that focus on the written text overlook the performativity of gospel," he well notes that release of the performances is a "reminder of how daring Dylan can be in refiguring lyrical and musical forms in performance as well as on the page. His sense of transformative imitation buoys the performances on the live album. We can hear a deep investment of heart in his voice, an earnestness unleavened by Dylan's usual sense of amusement – except for "Man Gave Names to All the Animals," perhaps."

One might note though that the song-changing aposiopesis at the end of the last verse of that song "Saw him disappear by a tree near the lake ..." leaves you to supply the final item which takes you back from Old MacDonald's farm animals – (bear), cow, bull, pig, sheep – to Eden and the "fruit of that forbidden tree" – not so funny after all.

In usefully pondering the imponderable questions of where and how Dylan absorbed the New Testament images and resonances, and particularly how much might have come from Hal Lindsey's 1970 best-selling born-again manifesto *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Falco on page 177 prints an image from the Tulsa Archive. Figure 7 is said to be from "Notes, writings, and unfinished lyrics from *Shot of Love*, c 1981." As Falco writes, "[Dylan] even prepared an alphabetical concordance of New Testament verses corresponding to an idiosyncratic list of virtues, vices, emotions, and character traits." One might question the archival dating for such a crib sheet, for which 1981 seems a little late. And yet by then such a list may show not so much conscientiousness about "doing his Christian Bible school homework" – which primarily took place in early 1979 – as constituting a concordance of themes and corresponding New Testament passages for use in his songwriting.

More than 20 of the crib sheet's 100 references come from that too complex Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew 5–7*), and they constitute rules for Christians to live by, with some hard items. The biographers will be interested that Matthew 15.4 (Jesus quoting the Ten Commandments "God said 'Honor your father and your mother'") appears twice, under "Honor of Parents" and "Mother," but not under "Father" for which there is no entry. And as for "Adultery" there is some understandable cherry-picking: Matthew 5.28 (along with 27 and 32), which is heavy enough: "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." But the sequel is not included: 29 "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away..."



After exploring the connection of this document with the gospel period, Falco concludes this long, varied, and comprehensive chapter first with a short section on the great *Time Out of Mind* outtake, “Red River Shore.” Or rather, he homes in on the striking conclusion in its eighth and final verse where the singer seems to be turning again to Jesus and the proto-resurrection story of Lazarus:

Now I heard of a guy who lived a long time ago  
A man full of sorrow and strife  
That if someone around him died and was dead  
He knew how to bring him on back to life.

Whether the singer wants this “guy” to bring him back into the real world from that which only existed for him and the girl from the Red River Shore, or to bring *her* back into the world of his present day in which she seems to be dead, is not clear. This is a subtle form of *imitatio*, in which the language, “heard of a guy,” and the place in time (“don’t know ... if they do that kind of thing anymore”) distance themselves from any biblical textuality but in which Dylan’s “imitation, digestion, and transformative reproduction of these influences, combined with his own readings – or strong *misreadings* – of biblical language, provide the weave and weft of his vatic technique.” This seems to me a valuable insight, and one that could be applied to the songs, and the mode of *imitatio*, of *Rough and Rowdy Ways* whose intertextuality I have argued returns to a less specifically *textual* practice than the specificity of the Saga-Virgil-Timrod-Ovid-Odyssey borrowings of 2001, 2006, and 2012.

The final section of the chapter “Shipwrecks Everywhere” focuses on “Tempest,” the titular song on the 2012 album. Falco usefully gathers together the various Titanic song strands, from the Carter Family’s version from which Dylan borrows melody, the watchman and the captain – transforming all to his new purpose – to Prospero and Ariel and the Shakespearean shipwreck that never happened. Falco doubts the sincerity of Dylan’s response to Mikal Gilmore that the song is not to be taken as a judgment on modern times: “No, no, I try to stay away from all that stuff. I don’t imply any of it. I’m not interested in it. I’m just interested in showing you what happened.” Dylan in fact seems quite true to the song here. They all went down, “the good, the bad, the rich, the poor / the loveliest and the best.” And “there is no understanding / On the judgment of God’s hand.” That while drafting the song Dylan wrote “G-d,” as he does throughout the song drafts, can hardly be invoked to support the thesis that for Dylan the ship went down “as the result of a Yahwistic judgment.” I agree with Falco, and

against many readers, that the song is magnificent, its melodic monotony contributing to the build-up and conveying the enormity of that day. In that respect it anticipates “Murder Most Foul,” the next epic closer. But the vatic voice seems less audible in “Tempest,” except perhaps in the nobility of the Captain, never mentioned by Falco, redeemed from the insinuation in the Carter Family version (“Cap’n Smith must have been drinking”), who in the Dylan version recalls bygone years as the water rises, reads the Book of Revelation, and fills his cup with tears.

An appendix on “Renaldo and Clara” develops Sam Shepard’s observation of the whole Rolling Thunder enterprise, including the film: “Dylan has invented himself. He’s made himself up from scratch ... Dylan is an invention of his own mind. The point isn’t to figure him out but to take him in.” The film shows Dylan in the process of creating his own self-imitation, one reason why it is still worth viewing it, difficult as that can be.

Dylanologists and hard-core fans will find fault with some details, particularly from the 1960s, where Falco is at times puzzlingly inaccurate on details that could be easily checked. On p. 22 Dylan’s famous, and revealing, words from October 31, 1964 at Philharmonic Hall in New York City (“I have my Bob Dylan mask on. I’m masquerading”) are said to be uttered “at Town Hall in 1962.” And on p. 125 the even more famous “*Judas!* moment” of May 17, 1966 was a little more than “a year away” from release of “My Back Pages” on August 8, 1964. But for most these will be minor distractions. The book ends with a twenty-page discography; it is hard to know why one would consult that rather than the outstanding Wikipedia Bob Dylan discography, which has a great deal more information. The index on the other hand is well done and intelligently compiled.

This has been a rather discursive review. The attractive discursiveness of *No One to Meet* is in part responsible, but so is Dylan. Falco takes the reader across the ever-changing terrain of the greatest and most prolific songwriter, in many ways the greatest artist, of our time. His theme is vast, how a great artist practices imitation, a phenomenon that is wholly positive once liberated from the prejudices of Romanticism, and understood in the terms developed from classical antiquity by the Renaissance as that form of originality that has an origin, is in a tradition. Falco’s book deserves to be read with attention and deserves to take its place among works, past and future, that put Dylan’s art in the context of the larger history of creative genius in all its ragin’ glory.

**Colin McPherson. *Girl From the North Country*. Directed by Colin McPherson, 12 Nov. 2021, Belasco Theatre, New York.**

REVIEW BY James O'Brien

*Girl From the North Country*, written and directed by Colin McPherson, is one of two Broadway productions since 2006 that prominently incorporate Bob Dylan's songs. Critics have attributed both of these productions to the genre, or sub-genre, of jukebox musicals – featuring songs by artists predating the given show's creation, typically recorded by known and famous musical artists – in these cases, Dylan.

The earlier of the two was Twyla Tharp's production of *The Times They Are a-Changin'*, its story set in a circus and focusing on a father-son relationship. Opening in 2006, the musical closed on Broadway after twenty-eight performances and critical reception that questioned its reportedly literal staging of Dylan's lyrics and music. While critical reception to *Girl From the North Country* has been significantly better than reviewers' take on Tharp's work, McPherson's presentation of Dylan's songs is challenging in its own way, and the production warrants attention in light of how it incorporates music and lyrics, and to how audiences experience new versions of known songs within a jukebox musical.

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*Girl From the North Country* is set in a boarding house in Duluth, Minnesota (where Dylan was born in 1941) in the winter of 1934, during the Great Depression. The house's proprietor, Nick Laine, lives in and runs the place while caring for his wife, Elizabeth, who has dementia and is dependent on the town doctor for steady narcotic doses. Laine strives to persuade his son, Gene, a would-be writer, to take work with the railroad and so help support the household. Meanwhile, Nick's business partner and lover, Mrs. Neilsen, also lives in the house, and the two plan for the day her inheritance will allow them to escape together to another town. With them lives Marianne, whom Nick took in as a child, and who is now pregnant, but by whom it is not clear. Laine plans to marry Marianne off to Mr. Perry, an elderly cobbler in town.

These relationships occupy act one. Also entering the mix are a preacher, Mr. Marlowe, and his coincidental traveling companion Scott, a boxer just out of prison for a robbery he denies committing. They arrive on a stormy night. Fights ensue, and arguments include a sloppy punch-up between Gene and Scott. However, when Scott meets Marianne, they kindle a new and hopeful spark. Complicating the development, though, is the character of Mr. Burke,

a washed-up businessman staying in the house with his bitter wife and their son, Elias, a grown man with a child's mind. Burke recognizes Scott from watching him in the ring and pressures him to hire his services as a manager. Meanwhile, Marlowe, the preacher, suspects that Elias has killed a child, and he attempts to extort money from Mr. Burke to keep the information from the police.

These scenes play in the run-up to the night of the second act, the eve of Thanksgiving. It is a night of strife. Lodgers run out of credit, characters disclose old traumas, lose inheritances, plan escapes, attempt robberies, and Elias mysteriously drowns during a walk with his father near the river. As the dust settles, Nick gives his son Gene some money and suggests that he and Elizabeth will soon take their own lives to end their troubles.

Throughout these scenes, characters sing and perform parts of nineteen works from Bob Dylan's catalog. Songs also play from an on-stage radio, or the actors play them on pianos and other instruments as part of the action story during a party or a moment alone in the house. The selections encompass albums Dylan released between 1963 and 2012, with nine of the nineteen drawn from records issued in the 1970s – *New Morning*, *The Basement Tapes*, *Blood on the Tracks*, *Planet Waves*, *Street Legal*, and *Slow Train Coming*.

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When it comes to the jukebox musical, a framework under which audiences and critics can consider *Girl From the North Country*, the roots of the production approach rest in the 1970s and 1980s. Jukebox musicals achieved significant popularity in the late 1990s and early 2000s with the production of *Mamma Mia!* (drawing on songs recorded by the group ABBA).

Before then – at least since the 1940s – musicals typically wove songs into the narrative, advancing the story and revealing new details of the characters, their motivations, and the plot. However, the jukebox musical positions the songs as a primary draw, especially in the cases of well-known songwriters and groups. In examples such as *Mamma Mia!*, there is an original story featuring the songs with a degree of narrative or thematic integration that does not explicitly reference the creators of the songs. In other cases, the jukebox musical presents a tribute to a genre or an era – such as *Rock of Ages*, focusing on rock music of the 1980s – and the concept of the genre or era is central to the audience's experience. And then, sometimes, the focus is on the biography of a given musical artist, such as *Lennon*, and the action of the musical's book presents the story of that artist's life and often traces the creation of the songs performed. Still, other approaches blur the framework, and boundaries soften, as they do when genres and formats overlap. For example, there is something of the jukebox musical in *Springsteen on Broadway*, but in performance (and marketing), it was the artist in

person, performing from a script and playing his own songs. Given time, formats tend to exceed tidy definitions.

Likewise, *Girl From the North Country* takes more than one approach from the jukebox musical's book. For example, at the start of act one, when the ensemble forms a band and performs "Sign On The Window," Dylan's song serves primarily as diegetic music for the scene. It does not convey a narrative or give information about the characters or the setting, save perhaps setting a mood with the help of lyrics that speak of loneliness and crowded quarters. Similarly, when the company opens act two with "You Ain't Going Nowhere" – segueing somewhat unexpectedly into "Jokerman" – the performance is arguably thematically relevant but no more explicitly narrative than "Sign On The Window." Shortly after the singing stops, the doctor dispenses narcotics, and the characters talk about infidelity, suicide, and addiction. While there is some relevance to be noticed in the lyrics of the immediately preceding performances – topics of stasis, the lure of comfort, or perhaps the nature of a "joker man" in one's midst – the incorporation of Dylan's lyrics is not specific or pertinent to the action on stage.

In other cases, the show gives Dylan's songs in ways that suggest a more narratively linked approach. In the first act, Gene and his departing girlfriend Kate lament the end of their relationship. They sing parts of Dylan's song "I Want You." The song's sentiment is in the right place, and the lyrics correlate with what the script has told us about these characters. We can even consider these lines in light of inner desires – the couple is parting, yet their longing for each other remains. Still, *Girl From the North Country* confounds neatly arrived at expectations. In the same scene, as Kate returns a necklace to Gene – a token of their relationship – the action is accompanied by kaleidoscopic lines: "The guilty undertaker sighs / The lonesome organ grinder cries / The silver saxophones say I should refuse you."

The constructions and imagery of Dylan's more freewheeling lyrics tilt toward being at odds with the actors in action, complicating the literal action with the introduction of undertakers and organ grinders and a chorus of silver saxophones. The performance and its forlorn delivery speak to the themes of Gene's and Kate's relationship. Still, it also uncouples those themes from the plainness – and plains-ness – of the setting and characters, the prosaic, penniless plaid and dungarees of a Minnesota heartbreak in 1934.

Another complication is that Dylan's lyrics do not always sync with the given details of the characters and setting. For example, while it's possible to correlate some of the lyrics of "Hurricane" with the character Scott, the fugitive boxer who sings part of it in the second act, the details of Rubin Carter's plight provided in Dylan's lyrics are significantly different from

the story Scott tells in *Girl From the North Country*. As the song goes, its action is set “on a hot New Jersey night” decades later than Scott's story; the action of “Hurricane” is a long way from winter in Minnesota, 1934. Anachronism is the case McPherson gives us. Approaching “Hurricane” in the context of Scott, the character, one way to frame these convergences of lyrics and script is to consider them as layers, as a way of situating and deepening Scott's story. His is one of many similar tales; he isn't the only Black person “in the joint serving somebody else's stretch” (as he says in a line from the script). If so, the gain of layering “Hurricane” into Scott's scene is to elevate the character from one time and place – an everyman of some sort – to one that spans times and places. Under this light, the mentioning of characters in the song Scott sings – Patty Valentine from the upper hall, a man named Bello, and so on – means that the role of this lyric, and perhaps a function of other instances throughout McPherson's production, is to move the musical around mysteriously. Dylan's songs comment in some way on the story, but obliquely and occasionally in a fashion that seems out of time with the action on the stage.

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One factor at work within an audience that goes to see a musical such as *Girl From the North Country* is a desire to see and hear performances of the songs that Bob Dylan wrote. In that context, any jukebox musical performance markets to and attracts its attendees with the same dynamic. At the core of the experience is the lure of the cover version: new renditions and interpretations of the songs.

There are aspects to the experience of the cover song, whether performed for an audience or issued on a recording, that are often part of the audience's expectations. Audiences and listeners commonly expect a cover song by an artist or group to present an interpretation of a well-known version of the work. A significant driver of the cover song's reception lies in the differences – and the similarities – as apprehended in the context of the well-known version that the covering artist is referencing. Given an artist that changes his own recorded songs in sometimes radical ways, on record and in performance (though it would be problematic to refer to these variants as cover versions), much of Dylan's audience is deeply familiar with the underlying concept of differences between versions and the pleasure or displeasure (or indifference) these introduced changes can elicit.

However, in the case of jukebox musicals, cover versions performed on stage often manifest differently. The performances can be diegetic, part of the story and not referencing, acknowledging, celebrating, or being explicitly bound to any knowledge of the songwriter or their catalog directly (while a cover song, by its nature, is almost always bound to its referent).

Conversely, the cover versions in some jukebox musicals do present a celebration or an accounting of an artist's music and career that explicitly references and acknowledges the songwriter of focus. There are also differences in how audiences can experience the cover versions of the songs that a jukebox musical incorporates. Chief among these are the cast albums released for listening without the context of the on-stage actors and sets. Each of these manifestations is significant in terms of the songs and their consideration as cover versions.

For example, in *Girl From the North Country*, the differences between the well-known versions of the songs in question and the versions performed on stage are almost always rooted in the diegesis. The characters sing the songs Dylan wrote in the context of the musical's scripted setting and action. A dance. A lament for a lover. A flight of imagination or release. It is not clear that an audience watching the production receives these performances as cover versions in the traditional sense, as far as the root definition goes: a performance or recording that prioritizes attention to the differences and similarities from a well-known preceding work.

Instead, for the audience in the theater, while a listener may note the differences between the way "I Want You" is performed on stage in *Girl From the North Country* and the version they've heard on *Blonde on Blonde*, within the context of the musical the differences in the arrangement are tied to character, plot and setting. This is an experience distinct from, say, listening to a recording of Jimi Hendrix's cover of "All Along the Watchtower," in which his electrified interpretation is considered against Dylan's subdued performance on *John Wesley Harding*, which is the primary – and perhaps only – context at work.

That said, the experience of the cover version is different yet again when it comes to the cast recording of *Girl From the North Country*. The album released in 2021 does not include dialog or any other audible context for the songs. So, a listener who puts on the album with no knowledge of the characters, plot, or setting of the musical almost certainly approaches these recordings as cover versions free of diegesis. This would be an experience more like listening to Hendrix's version of "All Along the Watchtower." What are the differences in play? What are the similarities? Pleasure, displeasure, or indifference. The same feelings may well arise for the spectator in the theater seat, but the whole of the experience is no longer coupled to the primary context of the cover version and the recorded artist's interpretation; instead, the experience of the differences and similarities is couched in the on-stage action and story.

The cover version, then, and its pleasures (and risks) must be a term and an experience bound to the circumstances of its presentation. *Girl From the North Country* knows this, and the dynamic becomes especially evident during one of two concert-style performances of

Dylan's songs within the production. There is a moment when the character Elizabeth, played by Mare Winningham, sings “Like A Rolling Stone,” which starts as a spare, slow piano-based lamentation and then turns into something closer to the version first released in 1965 on *Highway 61 Revisited*. About a minute and a half into the song, a band enters the arrangement, ramping up to a solo drumbeat, a sudden measure of silence, and then the performance reemerges as an upbeat gospel-rock version of the song buoyed by a chorus that would have sounded at home on Dylan's 1979–80 gospel tour.

When Winningham performed the song on November 12, 2021, at Belasco Theatre in New York, she stood at the stage's apron, bent at the knees, leaning into the music and Dylan's lines. There was something familiar at work in even the blocking and choreography. If a member of the audience in 2021 had happened to see Dylan sing in years recently preceding, especially in the 2010s when he often performed without playing an instrument, letting the band take the parts, wielding only a microphone, occasionally dipping at the knees, then Winningham's knee-bending, song-and-dance moves suggested a point of reference or tribute, or cover, there in the moment at the edge of the stage. Such tribute is also the work of a jukebox musical, and the closest *Girl From the North Country* comes, on stage to giving the cover version in its common context, a significant role to play.

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**“Dylan and the Beats,” June 3-5, 2022, Henry Zarrow Center for Art and Education, Tulsa**

REVIEW BY Robert Reginio, Alfred University

The Zarrow Center for Art and Education is a small space located in the same building as the Bob Dylan Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The Zarrow Center was the intimate location of this year’s conference “Dylan and the Beats,” planned to coincide with the centennial of Jack Kerouac’s birth. It was the perfect space as this conference, unlike the expansive “World of Bob Dylan” conferences, focused specifically on its titular theme. Rarely have I experienced such a warm and convivial coming together of minds and energies as at this conference. It is to the credit of the organizers from the University of Tulsa Institute for Bob Dylan Studies that the excellent range of speakers and panelists were, by and large, experts in Beat literature and not solely dedicated Dylan scholars. Thus, the activity of tracing routes between the literary legacy of the Beats and Dylan’s work energized question-and-answer sessions, and conversations among the scholars and the conference attendees. This meeting should serve as a model for the kind of focused deep-dives of public intellectual inquiry that the Institute for Bob Dylan Studies can facilitate. Ultimately focused on Dylan, such kinds of conferences can draw lines *from* the affiliated Bob Dylan Center *to* the multiple histories and cultures the work comments on and is shaped by. Whether the number of participants can be kept to this ideal minimum for intense and unified cross-disciplinary conversations (which was due, in part, to ongoing Covid-19 restrictions) has yet to be seen.

The keynote addresses, spread across the three days, encompassed wide-scale surveys informed by rich historical research (Douglas Brinkley on Dylan, Guthrie, and Kerouac), presentations offering specific analytical modes to evaluate Dylan’s literary debts to the Beat writers (Rona Cran on Dylan and verbal collage and Timothy Hampton on Beat poetics and its modernist predecessors), and unique reinterpretations of Dylan’s poetics of the road (a blistering poetry reading by Anne Waldman and a revelatory return to Dylan’s 1964 “Kerouacian” road trip by David Hajdu).

Douglas Brinkley’s opening keynote address stressed the inescapable influence of Guthrie, Kerouac, and especially Allen Ginsberg on Dylan’s development as a songwriter-poet. Brinkley peppered his talk with evocative quotes from his own interviews with Dylan – “Woody never let me down,” was Dylan’s assessment of his debt to this road-traveler. Dylan’s response to Brinkley that “Allen’s poetry felt like a big city even as he writes about Wichita

[...] sharp words that seem to sweat when you read them” teased out the differences between Ginsberg’s major vatic style and Dylan’s ever-shifting poetics. As other presenters during the panel sessions would mention, Gregory Corso’s work – especially *Bomb* – was pointed to as an under-referenced work of Beat writing integral to compositions such as “A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall.” Brinkley offered a portrait of Dylan as a thinker and composer who has these predecessors ever in mind, his legendary gift of recall keeping the past of this strand of American literature alive at his fingertips.

Regina Weinreich presented a wide-ranging assessment of Kerouac’s immigrant roots, his subsequent outsider status in American letters and culture more broadly, and the place of sexuality in Beat culture in her keynote “Orgasms Against Empire: Thoughts on Outlaw Culture.” The images in Kerouac’s prose, Weinreich argued, are like “neon light against the solidity of red brick,” complicated literary gestures that in Weinreich’s reckoning meant that, to live in America, Kerouac hid his immigrant otherness and, yet, proceeded to live – and write – honestly. Crucially, the confessions of the Beats were means for redemption both on a personal and a national level. In the light of this Beat genealogy, the putatively staid “Confessional poets,” such as Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop, narrowed the scope of poetry’s cultural work. Redemption of the Beats’ complicated and, admittedly, ambitious sort was not a driving force behind the literary confessions of Lowell and Bishop, which the Beats assumed remained focused on personal epiphanies.

Driven by the recent death of Diane di Prima, Anne Waldman paid tribute to this Beat poet by reflecting on the importance of archives. Aptly, in close proximity to Dylan’s sturdy archival edifice, Waldman mused on the precarity of the archives of the Naropa Institute, intoning “What is your one hundred year project to protect sentience?” as if the tangled bits of memory and desire that make up our sentient minds can settle into legible patterns in an archive. Facing death, though, Waldman insists that we must archive nevertheless. Her poem “Archive Litany” was read with feral Beat force. Lines like “An archive is a strange cosmology,” “Archive listens to the marginal,” and “Archive is nest is house is reverie,” revived the anaphoric poetics of Ginsberg and the political valence of such litanies. Of the past Beats who have died, “solid irreversible entities” they are not. They remain for Waldman the “muscle genius” of their texts, as she proclaimed empathy was the way to avoid “the robots from taking over the archive.” It was bracing to hear a Beat poet incanting invectives against the levelling forces of accumulation that made the evening possible.

A dominant mode of Dylan’s late style – textual and lyrical collage – was seen as operative throughout Dylan’s corpus by Rona Cran in her keynote address on Dylan and the

art of collage. Arguing that collage begins with a cut – a violence, even – Cran explained how the new context into which cultural detritus or literary allusions are placed allows these bits of culture to retain an aura of strangeness. In a song like “Desolation Row,” the impending dissolution of American culture that shades the song exists alongside a constellation of juxtaposed characters who are stripped of our tendency to read these icons and historical figures in hierarchical terms. Thus the work of Pound and Eliot, but also Burroughs, intersects with folk and blues traditions in Dylan’s work. Cran sees *The Basement Tapes* as an experiment in collage and archiving, noting that Beat writers and French symbolists shaped Dylan’s collage practice in the songs leading up to those experiments. In those songs (in the great trilogy of 1960s albums) we find “aphoristic non-sequiturs” (think “Subterranean Homesick Blues”) and “psychedelic composite narratives” (think “Visions of Johanna”). Collage is central for an artist who abounds in influences, but who never seems purely derivative.

In his own keynote address, David Hajdu returned us to Dylan’s 1964 “Kerouacian” cross-country trip, famous for producing songs like “Mr. Tambourine Man” and “Chimes of Freedom.” The goals of this trip were to see America, to break from the Greenwich Village folk scene and its insular music, to promote his latest album, and to gather stories for more writing. Hajdu quoted Victor Maymudes: “Dylan was just happy to be in the car, to write, to listen to the radio, and to get high.” Hajdu explored the pivotal music Dylan would have heard over and over again on AM radio: this was Dylan’s first deep immersion into The Beatles’ music. Hajdu offered up the wonderfully provocative results of a particular musical experiment: listening to the songs that dominated the charts during Dylan’s trip, Hajdu discovered that Dylan took the pop aesthetic of the day and brought it to the compositions for and recording of *Another Side of Bob Dylan*. “These songs sound like demos for a band record,” Hajdu asserted. While the lyrics echo with the influence of Beat poetry, the music was influenced by the popular music of the day. Dylan used harmonic structures of this music to integrate this new pop music with the rhythm and imagery of Beat and Symbolist poetry.

Timothy Hampton’s keynote focused on the ways in which Beat poetics intersected with Dylan’s development as a writer at key points. The tools of his poetics, identified by Hampton as “voice,” “vision,” and “rhythm,” supplied Dylan with a new way of crafting songs. Ginsberg links “voice” (as “Howl” has it, “confessing out the soul”) to “rhythm” (“the rhythm of thought”). This kind of poetry breaks away from traditional meters and bases new poetry on the rhythmic patterns of American speech. Hampton argues that it is only in popular song that voice can become a rhythm instrument. The idea of “vision” for the Beats, or “images,” has nothing to do with metaphor – as in Imagism. Juxtaposition is key for Beat poetry and the

movement from one image to the other inaugurates a kind of *process* rather than stabilizing the verse in a traditional way. Dylan adapted this idea of process to the modality of the popular song. Locating Rimbaud as a key figure in insurrectionary American writing, Hampton argues that, for Dylan, the visionary experience prominent in Rimbaud's writing is the central focus of "My Back Pages," "Subterranean Homesick Blues," and "Stuck Inside of Mobile With the Memphis Blues Again." These songs offer up composite figurations, a piling up of rhymes, and a playing of vocal rhythm against the time of the music in order to amplify the juxtapositional poetics of Dylan's Beat-inspired work in which causality and values are radically transformed.

For the panel on "Writing *On the Road*," Jean-Christophe Cloutier outlined the crucial moment when Kerouac, after writing to Neal Cassidy about the key experiences of Quebecois youth, wrote his first novel in French. This dramatically shows us, Cloutier averred, that, as Kerouac himself put it, "I never had a language of my own." Cloutier argued that Kerouac's experiments on the famous scroll that became *On the Road* were deeply rooted in this duality between linguistic homelessness and a dedication to full expressive honesty in the American idiom. The quest for an American language produced the "revolutionary modern sound" of Kerouac's writing. That the literal quests of *On the Road* were understood by Dylan as a quest he too would undertake – to find a new American language – was the main thrust of this intriguing survey of Kerouac's experiments on and investigations in American English.

For a panel on Beat spirituality and the search for a "vision" or a "visionary poetics," Nina Goss looked closely at the language of prophecy that permeates the work of the Beat writers. For Goss, that language was refashioned in Dylan's songwriting. Identifying a tension in Dylan's work between the singer-prophet and the obligations of the filial identity, Goss noted that the listener of "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" is put in the position of the questioning mother, listening to the unfolding visionary strophes while asking for filial piety in her own urgent demands for sights, sounds, and narratives. Thus the struggle is to compress his childlike yet visionary poetry to the language of the mother, a repository of communal demands for communicable visions. The result is the song's expression of a drama of a split self, the singer torn between his devotion to his mother and his visionary calling. Looking at a song structured in a similar way (as an address to a mother/listener), Goss argued that, in "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)," various eclipses contend with the attempt to wrest meaning from vision. Although the prophet/singer insists to his mother he's "alright," the question of what it means to be true in language troubles the poet. Ultimately, the drama of these songs reflects the

insistence in Beat literature on personal “vision” and its duty to contend with communal, even national, identifications.

In a panel on “The Black Beats,” William Harris spoke about the relationship between Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) and the “New American Poetry,” as Donald Allen’s influential anthology, with Baraka as an advisor, termed it. Although Baraka was quoted as saying that “There’s only one person in New York City I trust: Allen Ginsberg,” he felt the term “Beat” was too limiting. He was shaped by Beat writing, but he also in turn shaped it. Gregory Corso told Baraka, “if you don’t represent the middle class ofay world...you are in trouble.” Yet, when the assumption was made by Beat writers that Baraka was trapped, as a Black writer, because he was called on always to write about “his people,” Baraka retorted, “who are Joyce’s *Dubliners*, then?” This retort signifies the turn towards cultural nationalism and Blackness that began in 1963. Thus, Harris framed Baraka’s 1964 collection, *The Dead Lecturer*, as a conflicted book, much like the contemporaneous *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, in that he questions his relation to the Beat generation. Both the poetry collection and Dylan’s album explore dissolving and emerging affiliations for the writers – a renewed emergent sense of community for Baraka and a deferral of such communal ties for Dylan. Harris insisted that Baraka, even when moving from an avant-garde view to a cultural-national one, always, in his poetry, is talking to his friends, a coterie-poetics found in early Beat writing, which Baraka expanded to include a cultural nationalist perspective.

Maria Damon drew into the ambit of Dylan Studies another African American Beat writer. On a panel titled “Hard Travelin’,” Damon made the convincing case that Bob Kaufman’s “The Ancient Rain” is an American jeremiad in the vein of “A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall.” Inspired by Lorca’s *Poet in New York* (coin of the realm in underground, Beat circles) and the folk scene (Kaufman taught “Rocky Road” to Len Chandler and Dave Von Ronk), Kaufman’s poem evokes the “crackling blueness” of the enforced Electroconvulsive therapy Kaufman underwent and the line “into the crackling blueness they go” from a Lorca poem about Harlem. These contextual and intertextual elements brought Damon to the point that historical work – such as reviving the work of Kaufman – is difficult because of the persecution of political radicals, queer people, and Black people. The “crackling blue” – evoking the blue tones of Dylan’s “Tangled Up In Blue,” itself a meditation on a radical time when “revolution was in the air” – indicates a liminal space where the persecuted live, the “blue zone of fact, memory, and history” as Damon put it. Dylan and Kaufman offer us a mode of “sampling” textual weaves that excavate these liminal zones without demanding clarity from

them. In Damon's reading, the ungovernable "contact zone between fact, memory, and history" is the focus of "Tangled up in Blue" and Kaufman's "The Ancient Rain."

In the estimation of Timothy Gray, Jack Kerouac's *Big Sur* (an admitted literary failure) and Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks* were artistic retrenchments from personal failures that shifted the writers' modes from grand visionary literature to personal reflection. Gray's panel presentation on the Rolling Thunder Revue noted that since *Blood on the Tracks* was, indeed, such a profound breakthrough in Dylan's work, it encouraged Dylan's traveling and performance in the Revue. Thus, for Gray, the tour sought to maintain a balance between the madcap energy of *On the Road* with a kind of nostalgia for early-1960s folk revivalism. This balance – more of an "oscillation" – sustained a kind of shape-shifting endemic to Dylan's career and, most pertinently, the performances on this tour. Noting that the figures in Greil Marcus's *Mystery Train* were at the ends of their rides in 1975, Gray argued Dylan's Rolling Thunder tour was a self-conscious farewell to the 1960s, an era when rock and roll turned into "rock" (its "imperial phase" as Gray put it).

Since "The World of Bob Dylan" conferences, held in a capacious hotel and not the specific, intimate environs of the Zarrow Center, can at times overwhelm with overlapping panels on a myriad of subjects, it is shrewd for the Institute for Bob Dylan Studies to host, in the intervening years, conferences like this. Fans and scholars were able to partake in deep dives which a larger conference might not allow. In contrast, intensely focused conversations, as found in the excellent "Dylan and the Beats" conference, offer a complementary space to work, in a sustained way, on one of the contexts scholars can use to understand the work of Bob Dylan.

## The Dylanista

Back in the old days, when ambition was in the air on MacDougal Street, a song began “Oh my name it is nothin’ / My age it means less.” Nothing prepared us for that opening line, the deeply ironic claim to anonymity by a voice instantly recognizable – a voice unmasking the singer and contradicting his words. Nor were we prepared for the searing skepticism of the song, the lyrics also weighted with ironies. Of the nine verses, seven offered cherry-picked examples from unspeakable predations, ruinous wars, and the most grotesque horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The singer might be young, or he might be ageless, and his posture might be callow, but there was no resisting the gradual crescendo leading toward the inevitable challenge: “The words fill my head / And fall to the floor / If God’s on our side / He’ll stop the next war.”

But that was then and this is now. We beat on with rumors of wars and wars that have been. But when it comes to the erstwhile singer from MacDougal Street, does his name still mean nothing and his age even less? Long after the celebrated MacDougal Street *dénouements*, is Dylan still the erstwhile Outis of MacDougal Street?

In a word: No. Name and age mean increasingly more when we listen to – or read – Dylan. But that is not only because he’s become part of our cultural repertoire, because his life has been uncrumpled in multiple biographies, to the extent that we know where he was on what day in a given year twenty or more years before. My contention is that Dylan himself has gradually let his personal identity seep into his songs, that, like the “Frog” in Dickinson’s poem (“I’m Nobody! Who are you?”), he has increasingly found pleasure in “telling [his] name” to “an admiring Bog.” His new book, *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, released in November 2022, is a case in point. Too many of the reviewers, unfortunately, have used their reviews as a platform to take potshots at Dylan rather than trying to understand the text. One critic complained that the book was “saturated with misogyny,” as if misogyny were a noxious fluvial excretion. A weird metaphor, and too close to *ad hominem* critique. But we can dismiss that sort of review. More interesting by far are the serious reviewers who read the book, as Dylan seems to encourage with the songs he analyzes, as a portrait of the artist *in statu nascendi*. The sense of identity informs and suffuses the book, providing a stepping-stone for readers intent on following the yellow brick road to Dylan’s musical, or magical, origins. The new book turns out to be a kind of prismatic version of Dylan’s *Chronicles, Volume One* (2004), intertwining the young Zimmerman’s playlist with a series of later songs peppered with epigrammatic

reflections from a marvelously informed and cryptically associative cicerone. In *The Philosophy of Modern Song* at least, Dylan's name it *is* something and his age it means more.

This semi-autobiographical voice, however much it impinges, doesn't seem out of place in the book, even if it undermines the intellectual disinterest flaunted by the book's title. But the infusion of identity into Dylan's "philosophy" should come as no surprise. It's my impression that, for better or worse, about twenty-five years ago the songs too began to change in this direction. This change – again, to my mind – manifests itself most clearly in *Time Out of Mind*. The anonymity of the singer/speaker gives way to less blurred identification of the author *as* the singer: to wit, "Not Dark Yet" and especially "Highlands." After decades of rejecting personal identification with the speakers in his songs, Dylan seems deliberately to experiment with a new form of expression – identity-driven, intimate, a new Whitmanian "I." This break with the anonymous past, if I can call it that, has made little impression on us as critics, or even as listeners, except, predictably, in interpretations of "I Contain Multitudes" from *Rough and Rowdy Ways*.

On one hand, Dylan's lyrical experimentation as "Bob Dylan" might not seem new, given the array of early songs with "Bob Dylan" in their titles – not to mention the continuing fascination with Dylan's "mercurial" identity, starting with his own Carnegie Hall Halloween concert joke "I'm wearing my Bob Dylan mask" in the 60s through *Renaldo and Clara*, which features Dylan as Renaldo watching a Bob Dylan show, and finally such identity-bending escapades as *Masked and Anonymous*.

On the other hand, the identity that begins to emerge on *Time Out of Mind* is a far cry from the wacky, unreal "Bob Dylan" of "Bob Dylan's 116<sup>th</sup> Dream" or of spoofs like "Motorpsycho Nightmare." Not even the eponymous westward-bound hero of "Bob Dylan's Dream" provides a believable identity. Still, most listeners probably can name a song in which they hear Bob Dylan identify himself and speak without anonymity – "Ballad in Plain D," for example, or "Sara," a song whose historical reality confutes its status as one of Dylan's most nostalgic lyrics. But the voice of that song, despite the title's naming of a real-life wife, repels intimacy and instinctively guards its lyrical anonymity. It's almost as if Dylan were taking a page from the *Ars amatoria* where Ovid advises:



Si latet, ars prodest: adfert deprensa pudorem,  
Atque adimit merito tempus in omne fidem.<sup>1</sup>

[Art, if hidden, avails: if detected, it brings shame, and deservedly discredits you forever.]

In “Sara” the impression of hidden art “availing” or, less archaically, being useful (“prodest” is most commonly translated as “is useful”) pervades the song’s intimate memories, as if the mask of poetic manipulation will spare the artist shame – not only as an artist, but precisely because as an artist he has revealed his identity as the estranged husband of Sara. In fact, thanks to his hidden art, Bob Dylan’s name it means nothin’, and his age it means less *even when* the singer discloses an irrefutable identity-marker:

I can still hear the sounds of those Methodist bells  
I’d taken the cure and had just gotten through  
Stayin’ up for days in the Chelsea Hotel  
Writin’ “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands” for you

The unexpectedly revealing mention of “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands” leads to a quandary. As intimate as “Sara” purports to be, and as perfect an I.D. as “Sad-Eyed Lady” offers, the lyric distorts historical reality, or hides it in images like “I can hear the sounds of those Methodist bells.” The Methodist bells could have been real, ringing out from the United Methodist Church on West 13<sup>th</sup> Street. But the material reality of the bells, if it existed at all, merges with all those other highly significant bells in Dylan’s songs, from “Chimes of Freedom” to “Farewell Angelina / The bells of the crown” to, unforgettably, from the same album as “Sad-Eyed Lady,” “Shakespeare, he’s in the alley / With his pointed shoes and his bells.” The “Methodist bells” straddle a threshold between reality and abstraction, between Bob Dylan in a room at the Chelsea Hotel and an array of images associated with bells. This array of possible references, like slight abstractions from “the facts,” relieves the pressure on the singer to identify fully with the speaker.

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<sup>1</sup> Ovid, *Ars amatoria*, Book II, lines 313-14, in *Ovid in Six Volumes*, vol. 2, *The Art of Love and Other Poems*, translated by J.H. Mozley, revised by G.P. Goold (Loeb Classical Library; Harvard UP, 1929; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1979), pages 86-87.

The same cannot be said for “Highlands,” Dylan’s most ambitious narrative lyric after “Tangled Up in Blue.” The “I” in that song, carved out of the verses with such photographic clarity, merges into the singer’s “off-album” identity. This comes as quite a surprise. But part of the song’s power, its unparalleled sustaining voice – including the subtle vocal, which is sometimes querulous, sometimes decisive – depend on undoing anonymity in what seems an offhand, observational poetics. In American poetry, there is Whitman wandering through Manhattan and, almost a century later, Frank O’Hara. Dylan would probably have known Whitman, who, in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” (1856):

Look’d on the haze on the hills southward and south-westward,  
Saw the white sails of schooners and sloops, saw the ships at anchor,  
The sailors at work in the rigging or out astride the spars,  
The round masts, the swinging motion of the hulls, the slender serpentine pennants,  
The large and small steamers in motion, the pilots in their pilot-houses.

Dylan claims to have known O’Hara’s work<sup>2</sup>. And the tenor of O’Hara’s observational itinerant poetry, like Whitman’s, seems to anticipate Dylan’s experiments with the form:

The gulls wheeled  
several miles away  
and the bridge, which  
stood on wet-barked  
trees, was broad and  
cold. Rio de Janeiro  
is just another fishing  
village, said George.  
The sun boomed calmly  
in the wind around  
the monument. Texans  
and Australians climbed  
to the top to look  
at Beacon Hill and

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<sup>2</sup> <https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/bob-dylan-allen-ginsberg-friendship/>

the Common. Later we  
walked round the base  
of the hill to the Navy  
Yard, and the black  
and white twigs stuck  
in the sky above the old  
hull. Outside the gate  
some children jumped  
higher and higher off  
the highway embankment.  
Cars honked. Leaves  
On trees shook. And  
above us the elevated  
trolley trundled along.  
The wind waved steadily  
from the sea. Today we  
have seen Bunker Hill  
and the Constitution,  
said George. Tomorrow,  
probably, our country  
will declare war.

“A Walk on a Sunday Afternoon”

O’Hara’s descriptive associations lull the reader like a pleasant itinerary, until he makes a lightning leap from the certainty of quotidian space (“Today we / have seen Bunker Hill”) to the quantum uncertainty of what’s to come (“Tomorrow, / probably, our country / will declare war”). Compare O’Hara’s dictional maneuvers to Dylan’s in “Highlands”:

Every day is the same thing out the door  
Feel further away than ever before  
Some things in life, it gets too late to learn  
Well, I’m lost somewhere  
I must have made a few bad turns

I see people in the park forgetting their troubles and woes  
They're drinking and dancing, wearing bright-colored clothes  
All the young men with their young women looking so good  
Well, I'd trade places with any of them  
In a minute, if I could

I'm crossing the street to get away from a mangy dog  
Talking to myself in a monologue  
I think what I need might be a full-length leather coat  
Somebody just asked me  
If I registered to vote

In one light, "Highlands" can be seen as Dylan's attempt to establish himself as a poet of the quotidian itinerary, a Whitmanian persona inserting himself between the trapper and his squaw ("I trade places with any of them / In a minute if I could"). This posture is a benchmark departure. Dylan long ago confirmed his credentials as a Whitmanian vatic poet, and his embrace of what might be called the "other Whitman" deserves attention. In contrast, O'Hara felt he lacked the vatic talent, and he accepted his inability to write with that kind of authority. In "For Bob Rauschenberg" he asks,

what should I be  
if not alone in pain, apart from  
the heavenly aspirations of  
Spenser and Keats and Ginsberg,  
who have a language that permits  
them truth and beauty, double-coined?

O'Hara might have added Dylan's name after Ginsberg's. But "Highlands" seems to herald a new Dylan – not the anonymous prophetic voice of the anthems, nor the cunningly slippery persona of such songs as "Tangled Up in Blue" or "Jokerman." Instead, "Highlands" introduces listeners to a voice whose name and age matter, both inside the song's narrative, and outside, in the interpretation of that narrative. When faced with the universal, suddenly the "I" seems to have a real-world presence in "Highlands," framed by a new quotidian diction and a very tricky narrative frankness, reminiscent, perhaps, of Whitman's "of Manhattan the son."

This narrative frankness often compels us now to listen to Dylan's songs without critical detachment, identifying the speaker of the lyrics as a celebrated 80-year-old Nobel laureate named Bob Dylan whose life history we know well. The meaning of the newer songs sometimes relies on this identification in a way that "Hard Rain," "Baby Blue," "Mr. Tambourine Man," "Highway 61," "All Along the Watchtower," and so on did not. "Tangled Up in Blue," of course, received the full biographical treatment from critics, but ultimately the sheer brilliance of the lyrics superseded reductive interpretations.

To my ear, however, many songs since "Highlands" have shed the chrysalis of anonymity and agelessness. Take "Murder Most Foul," a song from the latest album, *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, in which the identity of the singer seems to me to be crucial. It's as if Dylan's signature inhabits certain verses, as if he were mounting an exhibition of his own art – not visual art this time, but aural and oral. The song exudes an 80-year-old's pained memories and a laureate's dab hand with metrical and allusive pyrotechnics. At first, the speaker is nameless, an embodiment of an epoch (or the Voice of a Generation):

Hush lil children, you'll soon understand  
The Beatles are coming they're gonna hold your hand  
Slide down the banister, go get your coat  
Ferry 'cross the Mersey and go for the throat  
There's three bums comin' all dressed in rags  
Pick up the pieces and lower the flags  
I'm going to Woodstock, it's the Aquarian Age  
Then I'll go over to Altamont and sit near the stage

Dylan – famously, and despite a tsunami of rumors – did not perform at Woodstock (although he lived there and, in Big Pink, produced the colossally influential *Basement Tapes*). The nameless speaker charts a familiar cultural journey through the 60s, lacing the lines with quotations and suggestive rhymes like "rags/flags" and "Aquarian Age/stage" (the latter a reference to the song "The Age of Aquarius" performed in the Broadway play *Hair*). The verse tumbles from the innocence of "lil' children" who are led by the Pied-Piper Mop Tops out of Liverpool to an uglier, menacing place where "three bums [are] comin' all dressed in rags." It's difficult to identify the three bums with confidence – Father, Son, and Holy Ghost? – but the quick transition to the promise of peace and love and Aquarius at Woodstock followed by

the horrible murder “near the stage” at the Rolling Stones concert in Altamont closes the circle, blasting the innocence of the first lines with a mirror of JFK’s assassination in the final line.

This is Dylan, if not precisely as the Voice of His Generation, then as the generation’s telegraphic chronicler. His identity is missing, except in the movement of the verse, which contains a subtle identifying marker: the narrative travels from the River Mersey to Woodstock and finally to Altamont, California. The narrator is bringing it all back home.

Later in the song, though, the first-person speaker seems to reveal, and even underscore, his identity:

Zapruder’s film, I’ve seen that before  
Seen it thirty three times, maybe more  
It’s vile and deceitful – It’s cruel and it’s mean  
Ugliest thing that you ever have seen  
They killed him once, they killed him twice  
Killed him like a human sacrifice  
The day that they killed him, someone said to me,  
“Son, The age of the anti-Christ has just only begun.”  
Air Force One coming in through the gate  
Johnson sworn in at two thirty-eight  
Let me know when you decide to throw in the towel  
It is what it is and it’s murder most foul

The number thirty-three has mystical Christological overtones, in this instance linking Jesus’s age when he was crucified to “human sacrifice” and “the age of the anti-Christ,” which is presumably a reversal of the Age of Aquarius. But to complement (and complicate) the magical, numerological thinking, the speaker quickly brings the song down to earth: he recalls watching the Zapruder film “maybe more” than thirty-three times, as if forced like Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* to sit through the “Ugliest thing that you ever have seen.” This detail provides a moment of recognition, another identity-marker, because watching the Zapruder film irresistibly calls to mind a particular moment in America and captures a long-forgotten *Zeitgeist*. As a result, the “I’ve seen” of the verse’s opening line seems to embody both the song’s speaker and the singer/songwriter himself, who, like the film, is a relic of the early 60s and a witness to murder most foul.

At times “Murder Most Foul” can sound like a carefully packed portmanteau, while at other times it’s more of a potpourri. It seems fair to ask whether Dylan is vamping erudition in his array of allusions, or whether he genuinely wants the Kennedy assassination to symbolize the whole of American cultural experience as a series of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* portents by the Weird (or Wired) Sisters of *Macbeth*. It’s probably impossible to answer that question. But maybe Dylan anticipated just such an impossibility. Maybe the song’s achievement lies in its highlighting of a particularly American indeterminacy, a liminal space where coherence and symbolic aporia meet.

In terms of my original conjecture – that is, how far Dylan has come from “Oh my name it is nothin’ / My age it means less” – both “Murder Most Foul” and “I Contain Multitudes” are the most obvious recent examples of his anonymity-shedding. These songs seem, at this stage, to bookend “Highlands” and “Not Dark Yet.” But I don’t want to overdetermine my readings or lose all claim to critical tact. Let me conclude instead with a tempting, but hardly definitive, suggestion of an identity marker from “Crossing the Rubicon.” In the first verse Dylan sings, “I got up early so I could greet the Goddess of the Dawn.” In the Greek pantheon, the Goddess of Dawn was Eos (Aurora in the Roman pantheon). Her lover was Tithonus. The legend goes that Eos pleaded with Zeus to give Tithonus eternal life, which he granted. But Zeus did not give him eternal youth. So, while Eos was born anew every morning with the dawn, Tithonus grew older and older for all eternity. Tennyson voices this excruciating paradox perfectly:

Me only cruel immortality  
Consumes: I wither slowly in thine arms,  
Here at the quiet limit of the world,  
A white-hair'd shadow roaming like a dream  
The ever-silent spaces of the East.

“Tithonus”

Does “Crossing the Rubicon” purposely begin with an image suggestive enough to make us think of the 80-year-old Dylan in the arms of an eternally young goddess? The paradox might amuse a singer/songwriter on a never-ending tour, aging from year to year as the performances are newly born at every gig from east to west. So what then are we to conclude from that? That Dylan’s career went from withdrawal to transparency, from hidden identity to a form of confessionalism, from Keats to the New York School? Or maybe something subtly

different – that even the most self-revelatory Dylan lyrics keep a layer of obfuscation between the singer and his audience, that self-disclosure and self-mythologizing go hand in hand, to the extent that even the 80-year-old singer-poet views himself through the lens of Greek myth. As Whitman says, also in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”:

What gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand, and with  
voices I love call me promptly and loudly by my nighest  
name as I approach?

What is Dylan’s “nighest name” today? He might have transitioned from nothing to something or multiple somethings – but that something still isn’t Dylan up close (and not, may the gods preserve us, Bobby Zimmerman).

*-RF*



## **Poems**

### **Some Other Kind of Place**

(Birmingham, Alabama, June 1991)

BY David Bond

1

Once, in late August, I was in the mountains,  
almost six thousand feet. It hailed golf balls  
of hard, pure ice. I knew nature included  
the mind. On that day I believed it.

2

Today, I watched a movie in technicolor,  
ate chocolate milk duds and saw the true  
incongruity of past and present. I saw  
Thurgood Marshall leave his post: the only  
one able to understand his loss. I saw a Black  
father gently monitor the wandering of his five-year  
old son in the pre-film darkness of a movie theater.

3

I have talked about Jesus. I have talked about the rain.  
I have stolen words. Elvis. Memphis. Sophistry.  
All of them ripped off from the ancient Greeks.

4

It is easy to use we, or they, or you, almost anyone  
else. It is horrible to use I: almost as bad as trying  
to finish the latest self-help book, or finding myself  
so close to it, I can't even remember when I last  
put it down.

## Strutting and Fretting

BY Thomas Palaima, University of Texas

*“Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi”*

You were seventeen  
when the explosion went off  
when a plane went down  
when you were transported  
through “Cottonfields”  
into a world you’d never known  
walking in darkness  
and then there was light.

Then you were nineteen  
winter of 1960  
the cruel rain and the wind  
blowing in early.

Lyn Castner gave the okay.  
Flo’s brother, you recall.  
You used his turntable,  
played one by one  
his eighteen  
double-sided  
Woody Guthrie  
78s.

Each time  
the needle dropped  
your head spun  
the land parted  
some heavy anchor plunged

into the waters of the harbor.  
You felt more like yourself  
than ever before.

Now you're eighty-one.  
You've songed and danced  
masked and anonymous.  
You've slept down in the parlor  
as Alias and Jack Frost.

How does it feel?

How does it feel?

You've been to the bottom  
and followed the river,  
saddled a big white goose,  
imagined life as  
one big prison yard,  
stood over a grave,  
and hurled seven  
incinerating curses.

You've left your heart  
in the Highlands  
while drowning in the poison.

You nearly drowned  
in Delacroix.

You've been hunted  
like a crocodile.

You've taken in,

relived,  
peeked on your knees at  
and looked right through  
lies, dreams,  
forgetful hearts  
and some kind of pain.

Over by the cypress tree  
enroute to Parkland hospital  
between the windows of the sea  
you've heard sirens and mermaids  
and hoot owls singing  
above and near  
revival tents, slave markets  
and medical butcher's shops.

Their song has been  
a fitting soundtrack  
for Zapruder's film  
for sixty long years,  
years that someone called,  
you remember,  
the age of the anti-Christ.

Sir Christopher asked you,  
"Read any good books lately?"  
You were re-reading  
*Richard the Third*.

Do you ever wonder  
whether your pasts  
have ever been?

And if they were,

what scenes you were truly  
featured in?

*Is* life a walking shadow?  
If we've been poor players,  
where was our director  
and who wrote our lines?

Who staged our scenes?

And who kept hidden  
all that went unseen?

Did the needle just skip?

And where must you and I have been?

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*My deep thanks to my many UGS 302 students over the years and to Tony Attwood for their many questions and their thoughts towards answers, darkness to pre-dawn light.*

## Articles

### Bob Dylan's date with *The Faerie Queene* (1596)

BY Harriet Archer, University of St Andrews

#### Abstract

While comparisons between Bob Dylan and Shakespeare are commonplace, and Dylan's lyrics have been profitably read alongside Petrarch, Rimbaud, and others in recent work, this article advances the first sustained analysis of potential Spenserian echoes in Dylan's oeuvre. Rereading Dylan and Jacques Levy's southwestern quest ballad "Isis" (*Desire*, 1976) alongside the "Isis Church" episode in *The Faerie Queene* (1596), it argues that attention to the song's resonances with Edmund Spenser's reworking of the Egyptian Isis-Osiris myth sheds light on how both texts engage and subvert the romance mode to theorize historical mimesis and allusion. The texts are understood as parallel articulations of their authors' analogous archaeological poetics, which foreground their shared responses to intertextuality and colonial encounter.

*The poet lives in a daydream that is awake, but above all, his daydream remains in the world, facing worldly things. It gathers the universe together around and in an object. We see it open chests, or condense cosmic wealth in a slender casket. If there are jewels and precious stones in the casket, it is the past, a long past, a past that goes back through generations, that will set the poet romancing ... Here the past, the present and a future are condensed. Thus the casket is memory of what is immemorial.*

– Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*.<sup>1</sup>

*Come here you, Set said in his John Wayne voice.*

– Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (London: Penguin, 1964), 105.

<sup>2</sup> Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (London: Penguin, 2017 [1972]), 166.

## Introduction

The liner notes to Bob Dylan's *Desire* (released January 5, 1976) pose a question, "Where do I begin," and offer the beginnings of an answer: "on the heels of Rimbaud."<sup>3</sup> The record is set up as a metaliterary pursuit, from Dylan's "bathtub in Maine" to "the historical parking lot in sunburned California;" "from Brooklyn to Guam, from Lowell to Durango." The liner notes assert that "Romance is taking over," and its songs are readily characterized as preoccupied with romance of various kinds, from "themes of passion, seduction, and, well, *Desire*" to "the literary form of romance – stories of quests into enchanted worlds and battles against unknowable enemies."<sup>4</sup> It is striking, however, that critical engagements with the album have not so far explored this characterization in relation to specific manifestations of the form, whether classical, medieval, or modern, and instead maintain a general acceptance that its evocation of travel, mysticism and love has to do only in a loose way with literary romance conventions.

For Timothy Hampton, *Desire*'s romance rings hollow: Dylan and his collaborator Jacques Levy offer "a set of exotic adventures," but their quest narratives collapse under the imposition of phony enchantment, "which wants to conjure up magic but constantly calls attention to its own conjuring."<sup>5</sup> Hampton persuasively suggests that "These songs are caught between, on the one hand, a vision in which all cultural memory ... is already a media creation and, on the other hand, a set of tales which longs to deny that fact."<sup>6</sup> However, he goes on to argue that "the album shows the limits of a cultural production that is merely spatial (geography, ethnography) without being truly historical."<sup>7</sup> This essay contends instead that it is *Desire*'s engagements with romance as a mode – with the mode's interests in geography and ethnography – which allow it to comment on what it is to experience and constitute history. Specifically, *Desire*'s second track, "Isis," coauthored by Dylan and Levy, is reconsidered in relation to Edmund Spenser's engagement with that Egyptian goddess in Book 5 Canto 7 of

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<sup>3</sup> Bob Dylan, *Desire* (1976), liner notes, in Bob Dylan, *The Lyrics*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Simon and Schuster, 2004; 2014 edition), 512. All citations of Dylan's lyrics before 2020 are taken from this edition, and page numbers are indicated in the main text.

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Hampton, *Bob Dylan: How the Songs Work* (New York: Zone Books, 2019), 144.

<sup>5</sup> Hampton, *Songs*, 146-147.

<sup>6</sup> Hampton, *Songs*, 152.

<sup>7</sup> Hampton, *Songs*, 152.

his Elizabethan romance-epic in verse, *The Faerie Queene* (1596), a poem which, to borrow Gordon Teskey's assessment, "does not set the past at a theatrical distance but entangles past and present in the signifying procedures of allegory and in the randomizing patterns of narrative romance," such that romance is used "actually to think about history."<sup>8</sup> In a 1991 interview with Paul Zollo for *SongTalk*, Dylan describes "Isis" as,

a story that ... just seemed to take on a life of its own [*laughs*], as another view of history [*laughs*]. Which there are so many views that don't get told. Of history, anyway. That wasn't one of them. Ancient history but history nonetheless ... it seemed like just about any way it wanted to go would have been okay, just as long as it didn't get too close.<sup>9</sup>

With Dylan's play on the layered connotations of "ancient history" in mind, I understand the record as offering a spectrum of mimetic degrees, from the anti-textual "One More Cup of Coffee," fictive "Romance in Durango," irreverently misdirected "Mozambique," and oblique "Oh Sister," to the postmodern "Black Diamond Bay," revisionist "Hurricane" and "Joey," and baldly autobiographical "Sara." These juxtaposed shades of retelling unpick the sociological demands visited on the poet-prophet persona that, by the mid-1970s, Dylan was hard at work to shrug off. But for *Desire*, romance is not a means of sidestepping the responsibilities of the chronicler, of retreating into digression and dissipation, but of engaging a series of contrasting narrative modes which by turns document and occlude its preoccupations. In this sense, the album anticipates Scott Black's account of romance as "formed of the seams of time, of temporal knots, loops, or vortices that register and provoke an experience of transhistorical reading," while foregrounding each song's distinct approach to historicity.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Gordon Teskey, *Spenserian Moments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 330-31. All citations from *The Faerie Queene* are from Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (Harlow: Longman, 2001); book, canto and stanza numbers are indicated in the main text.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Paul Zollo, *SongTalk* (1991), in *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*, ed. Jonathan Cott (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006; 2017 edition), 389-413, at 405-6.

<sup>10</sup> Scott Black, *Without the Novel: Romance and the History of Prose Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019), 1.



Where Dylan's "absolutely modern" electric period was influenced by Rimbaud and Baudelaire's visionary poetics, and *Blood on the Tracks* (1975) moves backwards from Rimbaud to Petrarch to repudiate the visionary in favor of love lyric, for Hampton, *Desire* returns to Rimbaud "not as the rebel poet of the senses ... but as adventurer."<sup>11</sup> The album presents a collage of itinerant, transnational, and transtemporal vignettes, inflected as Hampton notes with ironic disenchantment and an awareness of formal limitation. By contrast with Hampton's interpretation, though, this essay reads *Desire*'s play with themes of containment and limitation as a productive reflection on its cognate concerns: genre and adaptation. It suggests that Dylan and Levy's hallucinatory imaginary finds kinship, in the turn to "short novel[s] in verse," with Spenser's own ironic early modern adaptations of medieval and classical romance, and posits a valuable discursive relationship between Dylan and Spenser as artists who both theorize mythopoeic nation-forming and both inaugurated new ages of lyric possibility in their respective cultures.<sup>12</sup> Like T. S. Eliot's Joyce in "'Ulysses,' Order, and Myth," both "manipulat[e] a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity," by adopting what Eliot, in relation to Joyce's 1922 adaptation of the *Odyssey*, dubs "the mythical method."<sup>13</sup> But, rather than following twentieth-century Black artists' subsequent, comparable treatment of the Isis-Osiris myth, in novels such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) which align the legend with Black musical culture, Dylan and Levy's romance ballad engages with this method on markedly Spenserian terrain.

Dylan and Levy's "Isis," and Spenser's account of his questing knight Britomart's experiences at "Isis Church," marry romance's traffic with displacement, dislocation and untimeliness to explicit scenes of excavation and ethnographic encounter in order to reflect on the intersection of space and place, history and storytelling.<sup>14</sup> These parallel reiterations of the myth, which at once critique and revel in romance tropes, speak to an affinity of structural imagination, rearticulating the received narrative through a punning lexicon of spatial and

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<sup>11</sup> Timothy Hampton, "Absolutely Modern: Dylan, Rimbaud, and Visionary Song," *Representations* 132 (2015): 1-29; Hampton, *Songs*, 145.

<sup>12</sup> Allen Ginsberg, "Songs of Redemption" (1975), <https://allenginsberg.org/2016/08/allenginsberg-on-bob-dylans-desire-2/>, last accessed 18/10/21.

<sup>13</sup> T. S. Eliot, "'Ulysses,' Order, and Myth," in Frank Kermode (ed.), *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 177; 178.

<sup>14</sup> See Teskey, *Moments*, 331; Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One* (London: Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2004), 40.

social relationships. Archetypal relational structures – journey, gender, revelation, and resurrection – are picked up and remade in starkly architectural-environmental terms, to make sense of the narrative through position, direction, aspect and containment.<sup>15</sup> In both adaptations of the Isis myth, a hero's journey through a perilous, imaginary landscape combines focused searching with digressive wandering, and a series of mercurial encounters which pose risk and challenge, and ultimately lead to self-knowledge, providential victory and prodigal return – so far, so faithful to the trope of the romance quest anatomized by theorists like Vladimir Propp, Northrop Frye or, in oppositional vein, Frederic Jameson.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, both Britomart's quest for her prophesied husband Artegall, and the heroic adventures which populate *Desire* have been read in terms of archetypes. For Janet Gezari, "Isis" "is about occupying opposing positions or seeking opposite objectives."<sup>17</sup> Likewise Aidan Day, in the most sustained analysis of the song to date, suggests that as

An image of the union of lover with loved one, of masculine with feminine, of self with soul, it is an image of the suspension of difference between outer and inner, between object and subject. An image of the redemption of self-alienation, it is an image of the assimilation of impurity and incompleteness to ideal form, of complex to archetype.<sup>18</sup>

Looking back on his earlier creative practice, Dylan himself invokes the value of archetypes in his account of anglophone folk music in the provocatively-titled quasi-autobiography *Chronicles, Volume One*, recalling that "I felt right at home in this mythical

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<sup>15</sup> See also Dore J. Levy, "Female Reigns: *The Faerie Queene* and the Journey to the West," *Comparative Literature*, 39, no. 3 (1987): 218–36; D. A. Carpenter, "Restless Epitaphs: Revenance and Dramatic Tension in Bob Dylan's Early Narratives," in *Polyvocal Bob Dylan: Music, Performance, Literature*, ed. Nduka Otiono and Josh Toth (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 37.

<sup>16</sup> Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 98-100. See also Jeff Dolven, *Scenes of Instruction in Renaissance Romance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), especially Ch. 2; Andrew King, *The Faerie Queene and Middle English Romance: The Matter of Just Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Janet Gezari, "Bob Dylan and the Tone Behind the Language," *Southwest Review*, 86, no. 4 (2001): 480–99, at 489.

<sup>18</sup> Aidan Day, *Jokerman: Reading the Lyrics of Bob Dylan* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 42.

realm made up not with individuals so much as archetypes, vividly drawn archetypes of humanity.”<sup>19</sup>

Readings of Dylan and Levy’s “Isis” which have prioritized its symbolism have often done so as part of the late twentieth century scholarly project to ratify Dylan’s status as legitimate literary voice, of which there is now no serious doubt. By writing “Isis” back into the realm of the mythic and archetypal, though, such readings have neglected the song’s own adaptation of the original myth in dialogue with the genre of the western, and its lineage in John Lomax’s collected *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (first published 1910), as well as its contribution to *Desire*’s prismatic vision of historical mimesis. In Allen Ginsberg’s liner essay “Songs of Redemption,” “One More Cup of Coffee,” tellingly, is identified as “sort of an archetypal song,” whereas Ginsberg notes of “Isis” and “Hurricane,” “I’m in sympathy with them in historical terms.”<sup>20</sup> Closer to the mark, then, is Denning’s observation that “Dylan’s road film [*Renaldo and Clara*] ended up half *roman à clef* ... and half archetypal fiction,” an assessment echoed in Black’s account of romance itself as “an irresolvably double genre” mediating between fiction and empiricism.<sup>21</sup> “Isis” both embodies this antithesis and contributes to its expression on *Desire* at large. Spenser’s “Isis Church” episode has been shown to operate in much the same way as part of Book 5’s allegory of Justice, containing both its own topical resonance and a critique of the book’s ostensibly transparent mythic historiography, through its deconstructive reworking of the Isis myth rather than its own aspiration to the mythic.<sup>22</sup> Just as the emphasis on archetypes has been surpassed in Spenser studies, Dylan and Levy’s “Isis” also repays the kind of critical attention which allows Spenser’s dealings with romance to be understood as making specific arguments about the writing of history through their sidelong interrogation of romance conventions, rather than as a pure iteration of the form.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Dylan, *Chronicles*, 236.

<sup>20</sup> Allen Ginsberg, cited in Michael Denning, “Bob Dylan and Rolling Thunder,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan*, ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 28-41, 38.

<sup>21</sup> Denning, “Rolling Thunder,” 40; Black, *Without the Novel*, 8-9.

<sup>22</sup> Katherine Eggert, *Showing Like a Queen: Female Authority and Literary Experiment in Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 49.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Harry Berger, “‘Kidnapped Romance’: Discourse in *The Faerie Queene*,” in *Unfolded Tales: Essays on Renaissance Romance*, ed. George M. Logan and Gordon Teskey (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 208-256, at 235-236.

Symbols are key to both works' approaches to adaptation, but not always as they have been critically apprehended. Hampton dismisses Ginsberg's "O Generation keep on working!" in *Desire*'s liner notes as a "nostalgic call to arms:" "Ginsberg was a bit out of touch or behind the times" since, by now, "Dylan had already bundled up the 1960s generation and moved on."<sup>24</sup> By refocusing understanding of "Isis" through the lens of an early modern engagement with the ancient Egyptian myth, however, it is possible to read the resonance of the symbol not as a retrogressive appeal to Dylan's late-1960s Symbolist imaginary, but of a piece with "a new age, a new Dylan again redeemed ... it's the real Seventies."<sup>25</sup> In 1975, Beat poet Diane di Prima added a preface to J. W. Hamilton Jones's translation of John Dee's Elizabethan *Monas Hieroglyphica*, which drew attention to the text's pictographic "thinking in symbols." Like Ginsberg, di Prima used this prefatory platform to mount a rallying cry to her contemporaries, demanding that, "We must seek once again to read the direction of the Invisible in its material forms, so as to rescue and redeem the Earth"; "hopefully," through a process which di Prima calls "creative memory," "the full meaning of this work will re-surface for us."<sup>26</sup> Both the "Isis Church" episode and "Isis" use the tropological landscape of romance to enable acts of "creative memory," sewing their symbols into a visionary narrative which foregrounds the place of mystical interpretation in the reconstruction of the self, through their oblique relationships to their mythic basis.

Whether or not we conclude that Spenser's poem, the emphasis on early modern mysticism in its mid-century critical reception, or his works' unexpected traces amongst the American avant-garde, became a part of Dylan and Levy's esoteric cultural raw material, reading them side by side illuminates the works' comparable treatment of their shared sources.<sup>27</sup> Judith H. Anderson proposed that Spenser derives from Chaucer his ability "to imbibe" a source's "spirit without being stagnated by its letter," and Britomart's dreamed encounter with the goddess Isis in Book 5 of *The Faerie Queene* offers a particularly

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<sup>24</sup> Timothy Hampton, "Tangled Generation: Dylan, Kerouac, Petrarch, and the Poetics of Escape," *Critical Inquiry*, 39, no. 4 (2013): 703–31, at 730.

<sup>25</sup> Ginsberg, "Redemption."

<sup>26</sup> Diane di Prima, preface, in John Dee, *Monas Hieroglyphica*, ed. J. W. Hamilton Jones (1975), [4].

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Blossom Feinstein, "The Faerie Queene and Cosmogonies of the Near East," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 29, no. 4 (1968): 531–50; Giulio J. Pertile, "Ashbery's Pastoral Art," *The Yale Review*, <https://yalereview.yale.edu/ashberys-pastoral-art>, last accessed 1 March 2018.

compelling example of this tendency.<sup>28</sup> Dylan and Levy's "Isis" bears reinterpretation along similar lines.<sup>29</sup> Dylan's art has been shown to "succeed in looking, Janus-faced, towards a very wide audience on the one hand, while simultaneously inviting a more *recherché*, specifically literary gaze on the other," and in recent years, scholars have read Dylan's lyrics in relation to canonical antecedents including John Milton, Edgar Allen Poe, Joseph Conrad, Jack Kerouac, Petrarch, Rimbaud, and Wallace Stevens; studies of allusions to Walt Whitman and Shakespeare, as well as self-reflexive references to Dylan's own oeuvre, in *Rough and Rowdy Ways* (2020), are surely forthcoming.<sup>30</sup> So it is remarkable that Spenser has not featured in such "source studies," given the strong Spenserian echoes across Dylan's lyrics. Most explicitly, the eponymous, but forever absent, heroine of Spenser's Elizabethan romance-epic potentially coexists alongside the more readily inferred Shakespearean referents on *Tempest* (2012).<sup>31</sup> "It's soon after midnight," Dylan sings, "and I got a date with the fairy queen" (916). Dylan's lyrics are peppered with queens: Mary, Anne, and Jane, gypsy queens, and the card-deck queens of the gambler and the fortune teller, who perhaps make up "All the old queens from all my past lives" in "I Contain Multitudes."<sup>32</sup> The "fairy queen" of "Soon After Midnight" might be Shakespeare's Titania or the fairy Queen Mab, but possibly also Spenser's Gloriana, a colloquial homosexual allusion, or even the poem itself. The song begins in Petrarchan fashion, evoking, too, the Elizabethan sonnet sequences of Spenser, Sidney and Shakespeare, whose

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<sup>28</sup> Judith H. Anderson, "'Myn Auctour': Spenser's Enabling Fiction and Eumnestes' 'immortal shrine,'" in *Unfolded Tale*, ed. Logan and Teskey, 16-31, at 31. Alice Miskimin, "Britomart's Crocodile and the Legends of Chastity," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 77, no. 1 (1978): 17-36, at 32-33. See also A. C. Hamilton, "Spenser's Treatment of Myth," *English Literary History* 26, no. 3 (1959): 335-54, at 335

<sup>29</sup> See Andrew Muir, *Bob Dylan and William Shakespeare: The True Performing of It* (Red Planet Books, 2019), 229; also Rona Cran, *Collage in Twentieth-Century Art, Literature, and Culture* (Farnham: Routledge, 2014), 188; Seth Rogovoy, *Bob Dylan: Prophet, Mystic, Poet* (New York: Scribner, 2009), 6; Christopher Rollason, "'Tell-Tale Signs' - Edgar Allan Poe and Bob Dylan: Towards a Model of Intertextuality," *Atlantis* 31, no. 2 (2009): 41-56.

<sup>30</sup> Aidan Day, "Satan Whispers: Bob Dylan and Paradise Lost," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2010): 260-80, at 279; Rollason, "Intertextuality;" Allan H. Simmons, "'Read Books, Repeat Quotations': A Note on Possible Conradian Influences on Bob Dylan's 'Black Diamond Bay,'" *The Conradian* 20, no. 1/2 (1995): 103-8, Jim Salvucci, "Bob Dylan and Wallace Stevens in Conversation," *Dylan Review*, no. 3 (2021); Raphael Falco, *No One to Meet: Imitation and Originality in the Songs of Bob Dylan* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2022).

<sup>31</sup> See Muir, *Dylan and Shakespeare*, especially 279-352.

<sup>32</sup> Bob Dylan, "I Contain Multitudes," *Rough and Rowdy Ways* (Columbia Records, 2020).

interest in their female subject is so often secondary to metatextual reflections on their own production: “I’m searching for phrases / To sing your praises” (916).<sup>33</sup> They also, however, recall the opening stanza of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, whose speaker proposes now to “sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds; / Whose *prayses* [have] slept in silence long” [emphasis added]. Such lexical resonances invite further parallels to be drawn.

Dylan’s mid-1960s lyrics presage the interest “Isis” develops in doubled identities, and historiographical limitations, in startlingly Spenserian terms. “Ballad in Plain D” writes its domestic tension into a romance landscape of fallen queens and kings, battlegrounds, and mysterious allegory, while its doubling of sister and parasite sister picks up the *Faerie Queene*’s fear of simulacra. Like Spenser’s witch Duessa, Una’s malevolent counterpart in Book 1, the False Florimel of Book 3, a deviant replica of the original, or the text itself which allows Elizabeth I “in mirrours more then one her selfe to see,” the woman who closely resembles Carla Rotolo “reflect[s]” “countless visions of the other,” her sister Suze (156). Louise in “Visions of Johanna” is a benign analogue, who “seems like the mirror,” but like Spenser’s prismatic reflections of Elizabeth I she “makes it all too precise and too clear that Johanna’s not here,” highlighting the song’s absent center (242). The “foggy ruins of time” (184) in “Mr Tambourine Man” cannot help but recall Spenser’s dream vision, *The Ruines of Time* (1591), where an idling narrator follows a muse-like apparition who, “sorrowfullie wailing,” mourns her lost city and Rome’s lost imperial standing (“Where my high steeples whilom usde to stand... There now is but an heap of lyme and sand”), working with the model of Joachim du Bellay’s *Antiquitez de Rome* (1558).<sup>34</sup> She anticipates both thematically and lexically the song’s “empire ... returned into sand” which “Left me blindly here to stand,” although Dylan’s speaker cautions, “if you hear vague traces of skipping reels of rhyme ... I wouldn’t pay it any mind” (184), advocating inattention in place of Lady Verlame’s plea for remembrance. As “Tangled Up In Blue” suggests, by the 1970s at least Dylan was aware of the canonical continental writing – “poems ... written by an Italian poet from the thirteenth century” (480) – which Spenser also knew well.<sup>35</sup> Hampton notes that “when questioned later

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<sup>33</sup> See Hampton, “Tangled Generation,” at 724.

<sup>34</sup> Edmund Spenser, “The Ruines of Time,” in *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, ed. William A. Oram et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 225-261, at 233, 238.

<sup>35</sup> See also Ayesha Ramachandran, “Spenser’s Petrarch,” *Spenser Studies* 30 (2020): 205-214.

in an interview about the ‘Italian poet’ Dylan slyly answered, ‘Plutarch. Is that his name?’<sup>36</sup> Conventionally read as an example of Dylan’s puckish wit and anti-autobiographical evasiveness, the elision of Plutarch and Petrarch is also reminiscent of Spenser’s own framework of analogues, his tendency to provocative errors of allusion, and Britomart’s encounter with the goddess Isis in particular.<sup>37</sup> My aim here is not to make the case that Dylan and Levy had *The Faerie Queene* in mind when composing their own version of the Isis myth, but rather to posit that the suggestive similarities between the texts speak to a shared response to romance’s historiographical potentialities.

### I. “there’s a body I’m trying to find”

The ancient Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris, perhaps dating to the Old Kingdom period (conventionally c. 2686–2181 BCE), is notably recorded in the classical tradition in Plutarch’s *Moralia* (first century CE) and the *Bibliotheca Historica* of Diodorus Siculus (first century BCE); Isis also appears as a pivotal figure in Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass* (second century CE), translated into English in 1566 as part of the Elizabethan revival of ancient prose romance.<sup>38</sup> In Plutarch’s version of the myth, Osiris has led an esteemed life as king of Egypt, “reducing the whole earth to civility, by ... effectually remonstrances & sweet persuasion couched in songs, and with all manner of Musicke: whereupon the Greeks were of opinion, that he and Bacchus were both one” according to Philemon Holland’s early seventeenth-century translation.<sup>39</sup> He is tricked by Typhon (also known as Seth or Set) into climbing into a burial casket at a banquet; Typhon has it nailed and soldered shut, and hurls it into the Nile.<sup>40</sup> Isis “immediatly cut off one of the tresses of her haire ... [and] wandred up and downe in great perplexity” searching for Osiris’s body, eventually finding it inside the coffer, only for it to be

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<sup>36</sup> “Italian Poet,” *Expecting Rain*, [expectingrain.com/dok/who/who.html](http://expectingrain.com/dok/who/who.html), cited in Hampton, “Tangled Generation,” at 716.

<sup>37</sup> The slippage also potentially hints etymologically at the shifting import of the source material from foundation stone to cash cow.

<sup>38</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. Philemon Holland (London: Arnold Hatfield, 1603), 1292-1295.

<sup>39</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia*, 1292. See Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), 187.

<sup>40</sup> See Stella P. Revard, “Isis in Spenser and Apuleius,” in *Tales Within Tales: Apuleius Through Time*, ed. Constance S. Wright and Julia Bolton Holloway (New York: AMS Press, 2000), 107-122, at 109.

cut into fourteen pieces and scattered by Typhon. Later, in some versions, the pieces are gathered and reconstituted to resurrect Osiris as god of death. Osiris's loss and return are tied symbolically to the Nile's ebb and flood, and to the turning of the seasons.<sup>41</sup> Isis, Osiris and Typhon are all the children of the earth-god Seb and the sky-goddess Nut, their equivalents Cronos and Rhea according to Diodorus Siculus, or Mercury and Rhea in Plutarch; some accounts suggest that Isis and Osiris's romantic relationship begins in the womb.<sup>42</sup> Isis approximates Demeter/Ceres, as a goddess of corn, spring and healing, as well as bearing parallels with deities like, among others, the Cretan cult goddess Britomartis.<sup>43</sup>

Since Isis is identified with the moon, the sowing of seeds and the consecration of temples, as well as the recovery of Osiris's coffer, enclosed spaces recur in her iconography: the *Moralia* notes that "if we enter into that sacred place and holy religion of this goddess ... we shall attain to the understanding of all things," while the priests of Isis are those "that cary in their minde, and keepe enclosed as within a box or casket, the holy doctrine of the gods."<sup>44</sup> As a result of Isis's success as a monarch, according to Diodorus, "it was ordained that the queen should have greater power and honour than the king and that among private persons the wife should enjoy authority over her husband" (*Bib. Hist.* 1.27), an ordination brought to bear on the problematic nexus around Elizabeth I's royal authority and resolute celibacy in relation to Britomart's present martial dominance and future marital subordination in Spenser's epic.<sup>45</sup> The "horned moon-goddess Isis," and her equivalents Hathor and Astarte, are pivotal to Robert Graves's account of the divine feminine principle in *The White Goddess*, a text which, in *Chronicles*, Dylan describes having read.<sup>46</sup> Graves does not retell the myth of Isis and Osiris directly, but delineates its permutations and parallels amongst British/Celtic legend, notably the echoes of Osiris's rebirth as Harpocrates or Horus (Isis and Osiris's child in the classical versions) to take his revenge on Set. The Welsh *Llew Llaw Gyffes* (*Llew Llaw* as Graves has

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<sup>41</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia*, 1293. See also Diodorus Siculus, *Bib. Hist.* 1.22.

<sup>42</sup> James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, ed. Robert Fraser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 362.

<sup>43</sup> See Robert Viking O'Brien, "Astarte in the Temple of Venus: An Allegory of Idolatry," *Studies in Philology* 96, no. 2 (1999): 144–58, at 146–47.

<sup>44</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia*, 1288. Cf. Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, 182: "He fished her temple good. She showed him all her rooms."

<sup>45</sup> See Eggert, *Showing*, 40–41.

<sup>46</sup> Graves, *White Goddess*, 98, 267; Dylan, *Chronicles*, 45.



it) likewise emerges re-born from a chest, after the death of his former persona, named, as it happens, Dylan.<sup>47</sup>

Co-written with Levy, like much of *Desire*, “Isis” riffs on the myth in terms too broad to attribute to an individual source, but with its key building blocks integrated and transposed.<sup>48</sup> The distance between the song’s lyrics and the form of the myth, though, aside from a single reference to the pyramids and the name of its female antagonist (and any resonances we might heed between Isis’s wandering, Dionysian musician husband and the troubadour persona of Dylan’s Rolling Thunder Revue performances), has restricted the critical exploration of its relationship to textual precedents. Indeed, Hampton proposes that “the literary subtext would seem to be Jack London – himself a writer of romance tales in prose – as we meet a hero who leaves the woman he loves in search of adventure in the North.”<sup>49</sup> Without discounting London, it is possible to recenter the story of Isis by considering Spenser’s means of integrating it into his own narrative, as explored below. It is difficult to pinpoint a single convincing reason why Dylan and Levy turned specifically to Egypt in the mid-1970s, although Cleopatra, self-styled new Isis, would have been a prevalent figure in popular culture thanks to the foregoing decade’s spate of classical blockbusters.<sup>50</sup> Hurston’s novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), has been shown to adapt the Isis myth in a way which might be presented as comparable to Dylan and Levy’s practice, and was enjoying renewed critical attention in the mid 1970s, although it does not share further similarities with the song.<sup>51</sup> It may be a stretch to suggest that the song’s composition was informed by the 1975-76 TV series, *The Secrets of Isis*, where the discovery of a magical amulet during an archaeological fieldtrip imbues chemistry teacher Miss Andrea Thomas with crime-fighting superpowers, and transplants the goddess to suburban Los

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<sup>47</sup> Graves, *White Goddess*, 312. In the Mabinogion tale “Math fab Mathonwy,” Dylan ail Don and Lleu are twin brothers.

<sup>48</sup> On Levy’s co-authorship see Day, *Jokerman*, 176.

<sup>49</sup> Hampton, *Songs*, 152.

<sup>50</sup> Interviews with Dylan also illustrate his preoccupation with the Egyptian contralto Umm Kulthum, of whose death in February 1975 he seems to have been keenly aware: see for example, interview with Ron Rosenbaum, *Playboy* (March 1978) *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*, ed. Jonathan Cott (New York, 2006; 2017 edition), 214-250, 228.

<sup>51</sup> See Tina Barr, ““Queen of the Niggerati” and the Nile: The Isis-Osiris Myth in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 25, no. 3/4 (2002): 101-113. *Their Eyes* would be reprinted in 1978, following a dedicated Hurston seminar at the 1975 meeting of the Modern Language Association; see Hazel V. Carby, “The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston,” in *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*, ed. Michael Awkward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 71-93.

Angeles, although as Ginsberg's esoteric gloss stresses, after Whitman's "barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world" in "Song of Myself," the work "now lets loose his long-vowel yowls & yawps over smalltowns' antennaed rooftops, To Isis," perhaps integrating but also transcending contemporary pop cultural reference points.<sup>52</sup>

While a nexus of analogues does coalesce in 1975, it would seem as though Isis's iconography had been on Dylan's mind since at least 1974, as the "she" of "Shelter from the Storm" shares many of Isis's conventional characteristics: for example, "With silver bracelets on her wrists and flowers in her hair," she offers shelter to a protagonist who has been "Hunted like a crocodile, ravaged in the corn," two of Isis's accustomed accouterments (494). Dylan explains to the interviewer Zollo that the name "Isis" was simply "familiar. Most people would think they knew it from somewhere," and "according to Levy, the Egyptian iconography was mere cover" for the "hills of Wyoming."<sup>53</sup> Unacknowledged here and in existing criticism, too, though, is a potential debt to Reed's African-American westerns. In the poems "The Jackal-Headed Cowboy" and "I am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra" (*Conjure*, 1972), for example, Reed elides Egyptian myth with a Black reworking of North American settler-colonist narrative and literary canon. These reflect, as I will suggest below that Spenser, Dylan and Levy also do, on "America, the mirage of a / naked prospector, with sand / in the throat."<sup>54</sup>

In Dylan and Levy's song, both Isis and her husband the narrator leave, one way or another, after their marriage:

I married Isis on the fifth day of May  
But I could not hold on to her for very long  
So I cut off my hair and I rode straight away  
To that wild unknown country where I could not go wrong. (516)

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<sup>52</sup> Day, *Jokerman*, 42-48; Ginsberg, "Redemption;" cf. Richard F. Thomas, *Why Bob Dylan Matters* (London: Harper Collins, 2017), 102.

<sup>53</sup> *Essential Interviews*, ed. Cott, 406; John McCombe, "Bob Dylan's 'Westerns:' Border Crossings and the Flight from 'the Domestic'," in *Polyvocal Bob Dylan: Music, Performance, Literature*, ed. Nduka Otiono and Josh Toth (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 121-140, at 135.

<sup>54</sup> Ishmael Reed, "The Feral Pioneers," in *New and Collected Poems* (New York: Atheneum, 1989), 13-14 at 13.

He reaches a town where a stranger invites him to join an unspecified expedition; the narrator imagines a search for treasure, but learns that his companion intends to exhume a corpse from “the pyramids all embedded in ice.” As such, the narrator who had been aligned with Osiris by virtue of his status as Isis’s husband takes on Isis’s role in his search for a body, similarly cutting off his hair at the beginning of his journey, in what Day suggests is “a ritualistic act of head-shaving ... that implies at once a loss of creative energy and a purification.”<sup>55</sup> But it also carries suggestive echoes of the female lover, Nancy, in the traditional Scots ballad “The Banks of the Nile” (in turn redolent of the cross-dressed Britomart) who proposes disguising herself as a soldier so as to accompany her beloved on his Napoleonic campaign:

Oh, but I’ll cut off my yellow hair,  
and I’ll go along with you.  
I’ll dress myself in uniform,  
and I’ll see Egypt too.<sup>56</sup>

While fighting their way into the pyramid overnight during a storm, the stranger dies. Alone, the narrator “broke into the tomb, but the casket was empty” of both jewels and human remains, so he casts his companion’s corpse into the hole instead, perhaps taking on Typhon/Set’s part in Osiris’s interment. He then rides back to find Isis, and effect the remarriage which hovers beyond the song’s end. Both Dylan and Levy’s, and Spenser’s, dealings with Isis dramatize such ontological uncertainty and delay, in an unwonted Egyptian context.<sup>57</sup>

The listener is shown five aspects of Isis: the elusive bride of the first verse; the partial creature of the singer’s memory (“I still can remember the way that she smiled” / “I still can’t remember all the best things she said”); the goddess-like apparition “there in the meadow where the creek used to rise”; something of an unprepossessing interlocutor in the penultimate verse (“Where ya been?;” “You gonna stay?”); and audience to the final verse’s apostrophe: “oh Isis,

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<sup>55</sup> Day, *Jokerman*, 38.

<sup>56</sup> The song was performed by Ewan McColl and Peggy Seeger on *Classic Scots Ballads* (1956), and Sandy Denny on *Fotheringay* (1970). A version appears in *Bothy Songs and Ballads*, ed. John Ord (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers Ltd, 1930), 298.

<sup>57</sup> See Teskey, *Moments*, 439; 442. Suggestively, Teskey wonders of the Faery Queen, “Perhaps she is an African queen and painted up in whiteface” (441), as Dylan was for many of his Rolling Thunder Revue performances. See also Day, *Jokerman*, 43.

you mystical child.” This shifting focalization and the cycling through of reported, free indirect, and direct speech results in a visionary iridescence, highlighted in Ginsberg’s gloss, “Moon Lady Language Creator Birth Goddess. Mother of Ra. Saraswati & Kali-Matoo. Hecate. Ea. Astarte. Sophia & Aphrodite. Divine. Mother,” and recalling Apuleius’s Isis who describes herself as “naturall mother of all things, mistresse and governesse of worlds, chiefe of powers divine, Queene of heaven.”<sup>58</sup> While we do not hear more about Isis’s appearance, this shimmering multiplicity captures Plutarch’s claim that “the habilliments of Isis be of different tinctures and colours: for her whole power consisteth and is employed in matter which receiveth all formes, and becommeth all maner of things, to wit, light, darknesse, day, night, fire, water, life, death, beginning and end.”<sup>59</sup>

“Isis” sees its speaker undertake a quest cognate with the goddess’s, but crucially finds a casket empty rather than occupied. Critical treatment of the song has read the narrative, compellingly, as a search for the self, in terms also redolent of *Street Legal*’s “Where Are You Tonight? (Journey Through Dark Heat),” and its fight “with my twin, that enemy within” (557), making sense of the Osiris persona’s discovery of “his own” casket, although this resolution is not made explicit in such interpretations.<sup>60</sup> Casting the speaker and his companion necessarily as two sides of the same coin, or brothers Osiris and Typhon/Set, though, occludes the significance of Isis and Osiris’s mystical twinning, and Isis’s own “double nature, male and female.”<sup>61</sup> The undercurrents of transvestism and brother-sister incest which resonate with *Desire*’s “fusion of sister and wife, brother and husband, in ‘O Sister’,” and across the aesthetic of the Rolling Thunder Revue tour, where Joan Baez dressed up and performed onstage as Dylan, align further with Spenser’s cross-dressed knight of chastity, Britomart.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ginsberg, “Redemption;” Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, quoted in J. David Macey, ““Fowle Idolatree” and Fair: Apuleius and the Idol of Isis Church,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 36, no. 4 (1999): 279–93, at 282; Graves, *White Goddess*, 67-68.

<sup>59</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia*, 1318.

<sup>60</sup> Hampton, *Songs*, 153-54; Day, *Jokerman*, 41.

<sup>61</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia*, 1304. See also Day, *Jokerman*, 41.

<sup>62</sup> Denning, “Rolling Thunder,” 39. See also Macey, “Fowle Idolatree,” at 281.

## II. “you mystical child”

In Spenser’s poem, we first encounter Britomart when she is shown a vision in Merlin’s mirror of her destined husband, the knight Artegall. Like Osiris, Artegall has been tricked, this time by the Amazon Radigund, and has been imprisoned and forced to serve in Radigund’s castle, dressed in women’s clothing. Britomart, consumed by an erotic depression, rides out to search for him, dressed as, and frequently mistaken for, a male knight. She is approached on her journey by a stranger, Dolon, who offers her lodging; where Dylan and Levy’s “man in the corner approached me for a match,” with intimations of romantic pairing, mistaken identity and pugilism, Dolon also “weend, that this his present guest / Was *Artegall*” (5.6.34), remaking Artegall’s “match” with Spenser’s persistently fiery Britomart on a new semantic level.<sup>63</sup> By chance, she escapes Dolon’s attempt to trap her in his castle’s oubliette under a concealed hole in her bedchamber (5.6.27), and manages to throw him, in turn, into a river (5.6.40), having sought him and his sons through a sequence of empty rooms (5.6.35).<sup>64</sup> Later she arrives at Isis Church – whose presence in the mythical British landscape, and conspicuously Catholic character, go as unexplained as Dylan and Levy’s frozen pyramids – where, exhausted, she sleeps and dreams of a surreal interaction with the temple’s gods, in the midst of “an hideous tempest” (5.7.14), where she takes on the appearance of the goddess herself, and is threatened, then inseminated, by Isis’s crocodile, to conceive a lion child (5.7.16). Her dream is interpreted by one of Isis’s priests as symbolic of her successful, procreative marriage to Artegall, whom she subsequently rescues from Radigund and restores to his former status. This restoration, though, precipitates Artegall’s departure “Vppon his first aduventure, which him forth did call” (5.7.43). As a result, “hoping that the change of aire and place / Would change her paine, and sorrow somewhat ease,” the canto closes as “She parted thence, her anguish to appease” (5.7.45), ending much as the Dylan-Levy song begins, with “a recurrent pattern of separation and return,” elaborated by Scarlet Rivera’s vertiginous violin accompaniment.<sup>65</sup> Interpretation is theorized as the plot unfolds, in markedly distinct terms from the workmanlike

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<sup>63</sup> See Artegall and Britomart’s contest, 4.6.18.

<sup>64</sup> See James E. Phillips, “Renaissance Concepts of Justice and Structure in *The Faerie Queene*, Book V,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (1970): 103-120, at 113.

<sup>65</sup> Day, *Jokerman*, 45; see also 68.

topicality of Book 5's wider allegory, as Britomart is drawn into the "inuent[ed]" (5.7.2) world of Egyptian myth.<sup>66</sup>

Spenser's Isis is an elusive figure present only in Britomart's vision at Isis Church, when her dedicated statue, "framed all of siluer fine" (5.7.6), seems to come to life.<sup>67</sup> For Bart van Es, "Isis Church is an exemplary site for the action of allegory ... In a manner characteristic of the whole of *The Faerie Queene*, fictions and histories intertwine to the point where they become almost inseparable."<sup>68</sup> Spenser does not dwell on the wider context of Isis's legend, beyond noting that "*Isis* doth the Moone portend; / Like as *Osyris* signifies the Sunne" (5.7.4). But as Audrey Shaw Bledsoe first argued in an unpublished 1975 dissertation, Isis's significance in Spenser's poem is more than that of an orientalist set piece, and the myth of Isis and Osiris plays out more substantially in the story of Britomart's quest to find Artegall across Books 3 to 5.<sup>69</sup> The myth's shape is retraced not in the literal appearance of Isis, but through the two separate sequences which play on themes of loss and restoration, and intermediary chance meetings. Britomart is perhaps named after Britomartis, the Cretan goddess held to be equivalent to the ancient Greek Artemis, Roman Diana, and Isis herself, as well as carrying connotations of a martial Briton, and echoes of Ariosto's Bradamante.<sup>70</sup> In addition to embodying the goddess as part of her dream, and mirroring her statue's affective legibility (5.7.17), Britomart is "paralleled with Isis by the purpose of her journey" and, like Isis who epitomizes the union of masculine and feminine, "is both lover and beloved" according to the construction of Spenser's chivalric world.<sup>71</sup> Building on Bledsoe's analysis, I would suggest that both Dolon's oubliette and the church itself function as figures for Osiris's casket, where

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<sup>66</sup> See Miskimin, "Crocodile," at 19. See also René Graziani, "Elizabeth at Isis Church," *PMLA* 79, no. 4 (1964): 376–89.

<sup>67</sup> See Jill Delsigne, "Reading Catholic Art in Edmund Spenser's Temple of Isis," *Studies in Philology* 109, no. 3 (2012): 199–224, at 214.

<sup>68</sup> Bart van Es, *Spenser's Forms of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 125; see also Carol A. Stillman, "Isis, Osiris," in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A. C. Hamilton et al. (Toronto, 1990), 407; A. C. Hamilton, "Spenser's Treatment of Myth," *English Literary History* 26, no. 3 (1959): 335–54, at 352.

<sup>69</sup> Audrey Shaw Bledsoe, "Spenser's Use of the Myth of Isis in *The Faerie Queene*" (PhD diss., Emory University, 1975). See also Revard, "Isis in Spenser," 118.

<sup>70</sup> See Solinus, ix.8; Judith H. Anderson, "Britomart," in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A. C. Hamilton et al. (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1990), 113–115, at 113; Miskimin, "Crocodile," at 21–22 and passim. See also Clifford Davidson, "Isis Church," in *Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. Hamilton et al., 407–8.

<sup>71</sup> Bledsoe, "Isis," 50; 54.

Britomart risks being lost and found respectively, such that she, like Dylan's narrator, synthesizes Isis and Osiris's roles.<sup>72</sup>

Lexical and thematic reverberations proliferate between the texts' handling of personal transformations, brought about in the course of quests initiated by estrangement from a – once and future – romantic partner. Britomart, "By change of place seeking to ease her paine" (5.6.15), "streight her selfe did dight, and armor don; / And mounting to her steede bad *Talus* guide her on" (5.6.17), while Dylan and Levy's protagonist follows suit, cutting his hair, washing his clothes and leaving on horseback "straight away." The song's "place of darkness and light" mirrors Spenser's depiction of Britomart "Now seeking darkenesse, and now seeking light" (5.6.14) in the physio-psychological torment of jealousy, fearing that Artegall has been unfaithful with Radigund (as Isis suspects Osiris of infidelity with their sister Nephthys). Just as the song has Isis (or perhaps the narrator) "blinded by sleep," Britomart "Of sencelesse sleepe did deeply drowned lie," "After that long daies toile and weary plight" (5.7.12), such that Spenser's stanza and Dylan and Levy's verse combine the revocation of sensory perception with their respective visions; an old trope, juxtaposing the loss of sight with vision of another sort. When Britomart finds Artegall, dressed by Radigund in women's clothes, she asks in more homespun terms, "What May-game hath misfortune made of you?" when, likened to Homer's Penelope, she sees "her Lord" "Come home to her in piteous wretchednesse, / After long trauell of full twenty yeares, / That she knew not his fauours likelynesse" (5.7.39). The Dylan-Levy speaker, too, Odysseus-like, appears changed at the moment of their reunion, and Isis's series of questions and combative statements in the penultimate verse ("Where you been?"; "You look different;" "You been gone") recalls Britomart's questions of Artegall: "Where is that dreadfull manly looke?" "Could ought on earth so wondrous change haue wrought, / As to haue robde you of that manly hew?" (5.7.40). Spenser is at pains to emphasize how their gender roles switch back the longer Britomart spends in Artegall's company, and, as Artegall is able to throw off his female clothing, "she reverses his reversal."<sup>73</sup> The song's narrator's dominance over Isis is also reestablished in their final exchange, when her final question, "You gonna stay?," gives him the last word.

Romance's characteristic juxtaposition of narrative digression with intensity, or outrage, is brought to the fore by the two works' parallel climatic diversity. Hanging over Dylan and Levy's adventure narrative is the "drizzlin' rain" which concludes the last verse.

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<sup>72</sup> Britomart also notably spends time in her father's closet, at 3.2.22.

<sup>73</sup> Levy, "Female Reigns," at 225.

Discordant in the song's quasi-Egyptian setting, this meteorological oddity either adds to the off-beat glamor of Isis's wedding day, emphasized in performance by Dylan's paradoxically euphoric delivery, or repositions the song in its final words as an act of recall located in a new, atmospherically distinct moment.<sup>74</sup> Its particular quality in Dylan's song, though, echoes the climate of Spenser's Cantos 6 and 7, also beset with drizzle: "shady dampe had dimd the heauens reach" (5.6.21), and "the day with dampe was ouercast" (5.7.8). Bledsoe notes that rainfall additionally heralds Britomart's martial success and rescue of Artegall at the end of Book 4, augmenting her association with the fertility goddess, and, we might add, the seasonal desiccation of desert landscapes:

Like as in sommers day when raging heat  
Doth burne the earth, and boyled riuers drie,  
.....  
A watry cloud doth ouercast the skie,  
And poureth forth a sudden shoure of raine,  
That all the wretched world recomforteth againe.

So did the warlike *Britomart* restore  
The prize, to knights of Maydenhead that day. (4.4.47-48)<sup>75</sup>

By contrast, the canto's climax is accompanied by the "hideous tempest" and "stormy stowre," just as snow and howling wind encircle the song's central expedition (redolent of the Forty-Niners and their antecedents beset by snow *en route* to California).<sup>76</sup> For Britomart, the temple of Isis is ignited in her dream by the holy fire of its altar, going up in "outrageous flames" (5.7.14); for Dylan and Levy's narrator it is the snow which is "outrageous." These oppositional extremes, ice and fire, frame the protagonists' encounters with their Egyptian monuments, the connotations of excess and externality in tension with the enclosing dimensions of temple and icy carapace. Dylan's excess is external and played for laughs, while Spenser's is internal and all the more troubling for its multiple evocations of enclosed space.

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<sup>74</sup> See also Denning, "Rolling Thunder," 30-31.

<sup>75</sup> Bledsoe, "Isis," 66.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Mark Sutton, "'Roadmaps for the Soul': History and Cartography in Bob Dylan's Early Songs," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 28, no. 1 (2009): 17-33, at 32-3.



Such containment is a pivotal trope in both sequences, as well as key to the “romancing” Gaston Bachelard notes as a function of enclosure in this essay’s epigraph. “Isis” frames the quest story between its two marriages, one past and one anticipated, and two references to the same wedding day, one in the first and one in the final verse, such that its account of the opening of the empty casket is itself enclosed formally. Britomart’s dream vision is embedded within the canto, book, and poem, but also within the structure of the temple, and imagines the conception of her child, the smallest in a sequence of narratological matryoshka dolls. Spenser’s use of “enwombed” to indicate Britomart’s insemination, after the crocodile itself had “deuouere[d] both flames and tempest” and “gan to threaten her likewise to eat” (5.7.15), sharpens the sense of layered containment through its aural proximity to the more conventional “entombed,” while Britomart’s account of the vision in turn renders the temple’s priest “*fild* with heauenly fury” (5.7.20, emphasis added). This in contrast to Britomart herself, who decides, looking at Isis’s temple, “that she thereon could neuer gaze her fill” (5.7.5), an aside in the stanza’s hexametric final line which restates her subjunctive role as dynastic vessel.<sup>77</sup>

Both texts, then, adumbrate nested fantasies of contents, and both protagonists find themselves dismayed the following morning, awaking from those fantasies. Britomart is troubled by her “uncouth” vision, and Dylan and Levy’s narrator by misguided credulousness: the song punningly echoes Britomart’s dream of consummation, when the narrator claims he “thought [he]’d been had.” Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space* invites readers to reframe their understanding of containment in language which sheds light on both structures: “Philosophers, when confronted with outside and inside, think in terms of being and non-being. But what a spiral man’s being represents! and what a number of invertible dynamisms there are in this spiral!”<sup>78</sup> Taken as a relational spiral, rather than opposition, the texts’ spatialities further support the holographic identities of their characters, and the varied material of their composition.<sup>79</sup>

### III. “I came in from the east with the sun in my eyes”

Among his “panoramic” collaborations with Levy, “Isis” is one of Dylan’s “westerns,” “a distinct musical genre” within Dylan’s oeuvre, prompted by his involvement with Sam

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<sup>77</sup> See Delsigne, “Catholic Art.”

<sup>78</sup> Bachelard, *Space*, 228-29.

<sup>79</sup> See also Bachelard, *Space*, 231.

Peckinpah's film *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973), and his collaboration with the playwright Sam Shepard during the 1970s Rolling Thunder Revue tour.<sup>80</sup> Like Spenserian romance, the western amalgamates narrative and landscape, exploiting the relationship between myth and territory, to situate the song's happenings at once in a dreamlike utopia, and amid the historical specificity of the nineteenth-century west and Dylan's own failing marriage to his then wife, Sara.<sup>81</sup> For Katherine Weiss, Shepard and Dylan share an interest in making "familiar sites – historical landmarks that make up the myth of America – mysterious and mythic," nowhere so clearly as in Dylan and Shepard's co-written "Brownsville Girl" (*Knocked Out Loaded*, 1986), which weaves together an account of a half-remembered western movie with the narrator's own romantic adventures in the American southwest.<sup>82</sup>

But the parallel texts' adaptive practice more decisively recalls Christopher Hjort and Roger McGuinn's accounts of Jacques Levy's composition of *Gene Tryp*, a reworking of Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (1867) which "transposed the setting to the American Wild West of the 1850s."<sup>83</sup> Hjort foregrounds the multiplicity of the original in his retelling, citing Ibsen's "wildly changing backdrop: the Norwegian mountain wilds; the coast of Morocco; the Sahara Desert," and Peer's assorted identities: "a fortune hunter, a bridegroom, a seducer, a troll prince, an outlaw, a businessman, a prophet, a Bedouin chief, a historian, and an old man."<sup>84</sup> McGuinn, similarly, highlights this eclecticism in interviews about the project, telling John Carpenter of *The Los Angeles Free Press*, for example,

It's set in the 1800s in the Southwest. It's about this Bob Dylan-type cat who steals this bride away from this marriage, goes off into the hills, drops her, and finally falls in love with this other girl ... He becomes an Elmer Gantry-type preacher, runs for president, goes through all these different scenes.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> *Essential Interviews*, ed. Cott, 405; McCombe, "Westerns," 122.

<sup>81</sup> See, for example, van Es, *Forms of History*, 59-77.

<sup>82</sup> Katherine Weiss, "'Blowin' in the Wind': Bob Dylan, Sam Shepard and the Question of American Identity," in *Polyvocal Bob Dylan: Music, Performance, Literature*, ed. Nduka Otiono and Josh Toth (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 101-120, at 105.

<sup>83</sup> Christopher Hjort, *So You Want to be a Rock 'n' Roll Star: The Byrds Day-by-Day 1965-1973* (London: Jawbone Press, 2008), 200.

<sup>84</sup> Hjort, *Byrds*, 200.

<sup>85</sup> Roger McGuinn cited in Hjort, *Byrds*, 200.

Levy and Dylan's interests in accumulative multiplicity and the southwest setting coalesce in "Isis," which subjects the legend to a comparable process. As in Spenser's poem, the myth's components are fragmented and reconfigured, fusing its Egyptian architecture with the monumental geology of the western, and the sociology of the gold rush frontier with biblical cycles of burial and resurrection.

Dylan and Levy's surreal superimposition of Egyptian mythology onto the mythopoeic landscape of the west, perhaps following Reed in ballad form, readily maps onto Britomart's encounter with the goddess in the foundational romance-epic of ancient Britain.<sup>86</sup> Both texts play out in a setting that is alien to the protagonist, yet native to its audience, in as much as the environment of the western or romance is aesthetically and generically familiar yet situationally unknown. In this way, both conform to Bakhtin's "chronotope" of the road, which "passes through familiar territory," even as the "sociohistorical heterogeneity of one's own country...is revealed and depicted," as befits the national myth-making that both poets pioneered.<sup>87</sup> I want to suggest that this has more to do with the play of narrative frameworks in which *Desire* as a whole is so invested, than with the allure of romantic topography alone: drawing on Bachelard's proposition in the *Poetics of Space* that "we think we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being's stability.... In its countless alveoli space contains compressed time," we may find compressed in Spenser, Dylan and Levy's spaces their play with styles of retelling, where Bachelard's "alveoli," cavities or pockets in biological structures like the lungs, again captures the centrality of containment and enclosure to the workings of each of their journeys.<sup>88</sup>

Mark Sutton describes Dylan's early songs as operating within an "unstable ... epic landscape," and claims that Dylan "is emphatically a rider," transforming the landscape as he moves through it.<sup>89</sup> In "Isis" the narrator, transformed himself, is literally a rider: of ponies, not motorcycles, boxcars or semi cabs, although Ginsberg elides these tropes when his liner essay

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<sup>86</sup> See Tamsin Badcoe, *Edmund Spenser and the Romance of Space* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 148.

<sup>87</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas, 1981), 245. See also Eduard Vlasov, "The World According to Bakhtin: On the Description of Space and Spatial Forms in Mikhail Bakhtin's Works," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 37, no. 1/2 (1995): 37-58, at 55.

<sup>88</sup> Bachelard, *Space*, 30.

<sup>89</sup> Sutton, "Roadmaps," 19; 24. See also Sally Bayley, *Home on the Horizon: America's Search for Space from Emily Dickinson to Bob Dylan* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 18.

claims that “Old bards & Minstrels rhymed their years’ news on pilgrimage road – Visitations town to town singing Kings’ shepherds’ cowboys’ & lawyers’ secrets.”<sup>90</sup> Ginsberg’s list, and its evocation of *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1387), in which kings’, shepherds’ and lawyers’ stories told aloud during a pilgrimage provide the vehicle for Chaucer’s capacious poetics and metatextual critique of narrative modes (not least the ironic pseudo-romance tale of Sir Thopas with its elusive elf-queen), in turn underlines Levy’s use of the romance mode to transpose eclectic but specific historical fragments, embedded in *Desire*’s sequence of assorted narratological experiments. Like Sir Thopas, and Spenser’s questing knights at their most hapless, Dylan and Levy’s narrator parodies his antecedents in epic and romance as the song takes aim at topographical allegory literalized in “the dividing line ... through the center of town,” while potentially invoking the serious shadow of historical segregation.

Sutton locates the origins of Dylan’s 1960s highways in Whitman and Emerson, and the nation-building of the Puritan settler colonists, but “Isis” has its roots more securely in the cattle trading and gold mining frontiers of the cowboy ballads.<sup>91</sup> Those songs tell stories of life on the trail, frequently punctuated by dramatic weather events, tensions between static domesticity and rootless masculine individualism, lonely graves, and failed prospecting.<sup>92</sup> It seems clear that Dylan and Levy draw on this tradition here and elsewhere, but what is particularly striking is the writing of chivalric romance into the characterization of these songs and their protagonists by the Lomaxes’ editorial commentary, and even in some of the songs themselves: the hero of “The Cowboy and his Love” is a “knight of the saddle leather,” while John Lomax draws comparisons between the cowboy and King Arthur, calling the former “truly a knight of the twentieth century.”<sup>93</sup> Throughout, the mythic Englishness of the ballads

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<sup>90</sup> Ginsberg, “Redemption.”

<sup>91</sup> Sutton, “Roadmaps,” 20. See also Frank Kermode and Stephen Spenser, “The metaphor at the end of the funnel,” in *The Dylan Companion: A Collection of Essential Writing About Bob Dylan*, ed. Elizabeth Thomson and David Gutman (New York, 1990), 155-162, at 159-60.

<sup>92</sup> See McCombe, “Westerns,” 136. See, for example, “The Stampede,” in *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads, Revised and Enlarged*, ed. John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax (New York, 1934), 100-101; “The Trail to Mexico,” 55; “Cowboy Jack,” 230; “Lone Star Trail,” 22; “The Dreary Black Hills,” 374; “The Fools of Forty-Nine,” 382. Cf. Paul Hodson, “Bob Dylan’s Stories About Men,” in *The Dylan Companion: A Collection of Essential Writing About Bob Dylan*, ed. Elizabeth Thomson and David Gutman (New York, 1990), 183-189, at 184.

<sup>93</sup> Anon., “The Cowboy and his Love,” in *Cowboy Songs*, 313; John A. Lomax, “Collector’s Note,” in *Cowboy Songs*, xxix.

themselves is emphasized.<sup>94</sup> The notoriously extractive Lomax notes that the cowboy songs “brought the gallantry, the grace, and the song heritage of their English ancestors”; and taking a more ostentatiously white-imperialist line, “Out in the wild, far-away places of the big and still unpeopled West ... yet survives the Anglo-Saxon ballad spirit.”<sup>95</sup> In these terms, the evident debts of “Isis” to the cowboy ballads in fact shore up its generic affinity with Spenser’s romance-epic, and allow the song’s own assimilation of colonial assault as literary allusion to be thrown into sharper relief.

Arguably carried along in the same inexorable current of the *translatio imperii* from the ancient Mediterranean empires to Renaissance England to colonial Ireland and the American frontier, Spenser and Dylan-Levy’s spaces can therefore be read as both generative symbolic landscapes which mythologize their nations’ histories, and very real coordinates on the same map of Anglo expansionism, which subsume their cultures’ colonial violence against Native Americans into confrontations with north African iconography. Richard Brown notes insightfully that “Dylan’s ‘roadmaps for the soul’ ... enter a critical dialogue with the post-modern world and its phenomena of mediatedness by spectacle and simulacrum.”<sup>96</sup> However, the dazzle of postmodern arbitrariness distracts from the specific valency of the southwest’s material history, with which “Isis” obliquely engages, when Brown argues that “Isis”’s locations “have the character of a Gothic or medievalised Tolkienian landscape of fantasy.”<sup>97</sup> The archetypes brilliantly anatomized in Day’s analysis of the song, which sees “the much-prized attributes of the heroic ego ... stripped to expose an aggressive, imaginatively barren and ultimately life-denying acquisitiveness,” may be said to speak directly to the clash between the frontier’s mythos and reality, effecting a historiographical, not a mythographical, intervention.<sup>98</sup> In Spenser’s *Isis Church*, too, the impact of the scene’s allusive collage is to bury the real plunder of the colonized west, whether Ireland or America, by combining European romance tropes with the appropriated otherness of the east, split off from its own

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<sup>94</sup> John A. Lomax, “The Editor Again,” in *Cowboy Songs*, xv; xxviii.

<sup>95</sup> John A. Lomax, “Collector’s Note,” in *Cowboy Songs*, xviii; xxv.

<sup>96</sup> Richard Brown, “Highway 61 and Other American States of Mind,” in *Do You, Mr Jones? Bob Dylan with the Poets and Professors*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Vintage, 2002, 2017 edn.), 195-97.

<sup>97</sup> Brown, “States of Mind,” 213.

<sup>98</sup> Sutton, “Roadmaps,” 22; Day, *Jokerman*, 41.

originary significance.<sup>99</sup> These stories' assemblages of literary and material spoils expose how the "adventure" fundamental to romance reproduces the accumulation of capital.<sup>100</sup>

Imperial acquisition transposed onto an ancient context renders its treasure-gathering archaeological, a move which foregrounds the slippage across the colonial and curatorial, while occluding the history of enslavement, human trafficking and Black objectification which this nexus of tropes works to center in Reed's hands.<sup>101</sup> "Isis" reveals the queasy overlap between archaeology and grave robbing tacitly posited here, just as *Chronicles* would later voraciously recount the contents of Ray Gooch and Chloe Kiel's apartment: "There were other things laying around that would catch your eye – chalk sketches of Ferraris and Ducatis, books about Amazon women, Pharaonic Egypt, photo books of circus acrobats, lovers, graveyards."<sup>102</sup> The narrator of "Isis" lists the eye-catching loot he imagines ahead of him ("I was thinking about turquoise, I was thinking about gold / I was thinking about diamonds and the world's biggest necklace"), like Spenser's Britomart, who "ioyed to behold / Her selfe, adorn'd with gems and iewels manifold" in her dream, both reveling in the imagined acquisitive pay-off latent in their wandering.<sup>103</sup> The song's turquoise, gold and diamonds elide southwestern and Meso-American territories and layer Egyptian myth with echoes of the gold rush, the European invasion of the Americas and the Spanish Entrada into New Mexico, while Spenser's Isis establishes its own tensions between ancient, recent and current material cultures. The Protestant hero Britomart observes imagery and artifacts inappropriate to post-Reformation devotional practice in the idol's temple (5.7.9-10), and in doing so identifies Catholicism with the "fayned," "Old Ægyptian" religion (5.7.2), as well as figuring the cultural dislocation of colonial encounter.<sup>104</sup> Spenser's writing itself has been understood in terms of the poetics of

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<sup>99</sup> Walter S. H. Lim, "Figuring Justice: Imperial Ideology and the Discourse of Colonialism in Book V of *The Faerie Queene* and *A View of the Present State of Ireland*," *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 19, no. 1 (1995): 45–70, at 67. See also Badcoe, *Romance of Space*, 4; 152.

<sup>100</sup> See Black, *Without the Novel*, 10-11.

<sup>101</sup> See Amiri Baraka [LeRoi Jones], *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Harper Collins, 1963; 2002 edition), 16.

<sup>102</sup> See Nicholas Roe, "Playing Time," in *Do You, Mr Jones? Bob Dylan with the Poets and Professors*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Vintage, 2002, 2017 edn.), 81-104, at 86; Dylan, *Chronicles*, 41.

<sup>103</sup> See Day, *Jokerman*, 47.

<sup>104</sup> See D. Douglas Waters, "Spenser and the "Mas" at the Temple of Isis," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 19, no. 1 (1979): 43-53; Delsigne, "Catholic Art." Cf. Reed, *Mumbo*

ruins, or of the archivist, and a similar aesthetics of allusion may be employed to describe the claim in *Chronicles* that “There was no noise in Ray’s place ... only a graveyard silence and I’d always return to the books...dig through them like an archaeologist.”<sup>105</sup> In addition to modeling the assimilation of colonial plunder to an archaeological poetics, though, Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* and the Dylan-Levy “Isis” plunder not only antiquity’s textual artefacts, but also its models of adaptation and generic play.<sup>106</sup> If we understand the excavated artefact as a metaphor for the mechanism of literary allusion, the empty casket in “Isis” comes to read like a metaliterary joke, of a very Spenserian kind.

#### IV. “things will be different the next time we wed”

On December 4, 1975, Dylan opened his performance of “Isis” at Montreal with the words, “this is a song about marriage.” The claim is a piece of *serio ludere*, wryly acknowledging the audience’s appetite for confessional, and its own ironic inadequacy. This final section will consider the centrality of marriage to both Isis narratives, and how their authors’ negotiations of romance tropes put pressure on the ways in which a text may be “about” its subject. Like Dylan and Levy’s song about marriage, Spenser’s reworking of the Isis-Osiris myth also sets out “to symbolize the right relationship between man and wife,” and Spenser, Dylan and Levy compound the goddess Isis’s iconographic freight with layers of esoteric reinforcement, revivifying the number symbolism familiar from romance emblems like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*’s pentangle with recently published (or re-published) mystical lore.<sup>107</sup> Day expands on the numerological import “of the fifth day of the fifth month of the Gregorian calendar”:

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*Jumbo*, 194: “1 of the brothers told us 1 night that even the Catholic Mass was based upon a Black Egyptian celebration.”

<sup>105</sup> Dylan, *Chronicles*, 39-40. See Harry Berger, *Resisting Allegory: Interpretative Delirium in Spenser’s Faerie Queene*, ed. David Lee Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 18.

<sup>106</sup> See A. E. B. Coldiron, “How Spenser Excavates Du Bellay’s “Antiquitez;” Or, The Role of the Poet, Lyric Historiography, and the English Sonnet,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 101, no. 1 (2002): 41–67, at 43.

<sup>107</sup> J. H. Walter, “Further Notes on the Alterations to the *Faerie Queene*,” *Modern Language Review* 38, no. 1 (1943): 1-10, at 4 n. 3.

associated with the universal figure of the Great Goddess ... five is also the mystic number of the *hieros gamos*, the archetypal Sacred Marriage of Heaven and Earth, the fruitful union of opposites, of sun and moon, of male and female principles.<sup>108</sup>

As such, the date contains “an *image* of a state of completed desire, of wholeness, of unified personality ... though such a motif ... far from controls the range of signification in the lyric.”<sup>109</sup> The song’s allusive vocabulary encompasses the unification of personalities but also of bodies, through marriage and sex as well as onomastically and anatomically. In the mid-1970s, for example, Dylan draws attention to the incestuous dynamics of romantic partnerships, claiming “I still believe she was my twin” in “Simple Twist of Fate” (482), and noting that Sara Dylan “has the same last name as Bob Dylan, but we may not be related.”<sup>110</sup> *The Faerie Queene* stresses the familial bond between the sun and moon, twins “sprong ... in womb of *Chrysogone*” (3.11.9), and Artegall and Britomart’s comparable pairing. Spenser may well have had John Dee’s *Monas Hieroglyphica* in mind in his conception of Britomart’s mystical merging with Isis, and its foreshadowing of her marital union with Artegall, since he places Britomart’s visionary transformation in the canto’s Stanza 13, echoing the union of the soul with the moon as expressed in Dee’s thirteenth theorem.<sup>111</sup> We can only speculate as to whether Dylan and Levy had sight of the 1975 edition of Dee which bore di Prima’s preface, perhaps *via* her Naropa University colleague Ginsberg, but it is also the thirteenth verse of their song which contains the narrator’s apostrophe to Isis, “you mystical child / What drives me to you is what drives me insane.” Here, the antanaclastic repetition of “drives” captures the song’s circularity, reflecting the “out-and-back” structure of the romance quest, its foundation in seasonal cycles, and the etymological basis of the lover’s lunacy in the cyclical phases of the moon.

However, while representing a union of masculine and feminine, Isis is also associated with bifurcated femininities; as Dave Marsh has it in his 1976 review of *Desire* for *Rolling*

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<sup>108</sup> Day, *Jokerman*, 37. See also McCombe, “Westerns,” 134, on the significance of *Cinco de Mayo*.

<sup>109</sup> Day, *Jokerman*, 38. See also McCombe, “Westerns,” 137.

<sup>110</sup> *Essential Interviews*, ed. Cott, 193.

<sup>111</sup> Delsigne, “Catholic Art,” 219. See also Kent R. Lehnhof, “Incest and Empire in the ‘Faerie Queene’,” *English Literary History* 73, no. 1 (2006): 215–43, at 228.



Stone, "'Isis' is on one of its several levels a sendup of the whole bitch/angel routine."<sup>112</sup> The goddess Isis mirrors Nephthys, the sibling with whom she suspects Osiris has been unfaithful, just as Britomart and Radigund are, in Katherine Eggert's words, "scarcely distinguishable ... Britomart's task is, evidently, to subdue herself."<sup>113</sup> Britomart also acts as a counterpoint to Book 5's Mercilla, another cipher for Elizabeth I and the center of the book's most transparent allegory of justice, shadowing Elizabeth's dealings with her own Scottish counterpart, Mary Stuart, in the baldest of terms, where Isis's numinous allegory of equity is stripped away in favor of the personified "Iustice," who "charged [Duessa] with breach of laws" (5.9.44). While these layered pairings evince the formative freight of Isis's double signification across the structure of Book 5, the stylistic, methodological opposition between Spenser's treatment of Britomart as against Mercilla has laid the poem open to accusations of aesthetic collapse. I would like to situate Eggert's response to these claims, that "we should see Book 5's historical allegory ... as an experiment whose failure is allowed to stand for all failures to impose univocal meanings upon complicated poems" alongside Marsh's observation that *Desire* "only falters, in fact, when it attempts to write or rewrite real history," in order to consider the relationship between "Isis" and the record's final track, "Sara."<sup>114</sup>

Hampton calls "Isis" "the mythic counterbalance to 'Sara,'" highlighting the former's opposition to the stark, poignantly quotidian detail of the latter, another song about marital separation.<sup>115</sup> However, this is to downplay the mysticism of "Sara" itself, and its participation in the tension between history and romance sketched out across the album at large. Where Isis is a "mystical child," Sara is "mystical wife," "radiant jewel," and "Scorpio Sphynx" (530), emphatically reintegrating "Isis"'s esoteric tenor in an explicitly autobiographical setting; "glamorous nymph with an arrow and bow" adds the iconography of Artemis/Diana, or an Amazon warrior, in parallel to Britomart's double in the Amazon Radigund. So, "Sara" cannot be said to renounce romance or the mythic; rather it turns these devices to the service of true, instead of fictive, history. However, the song seems willfully to pit autobiographical detail against metrical decorum, as in the overcrowded meter of,

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<sup>112</sup> Marsh, "Desire," *Rolling Stone*, March 11 (1976), <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/desire-255500/>, last accessed 18/10/21.

<sup>113</sup> Eggert, *Showing*, 41. See also Teskey, *Moments*, 436.

<sup>114</sup> See Eggert, *Showing*, 49; Marsh, "Desire;" see also Brown, "States of Mind," 193.

<sup>115</sup> Hampton, *Songs*, 152; see also Richard Brown, "States of Mind," 213. Cf. Day, *Jokerman*, 48.

Sleepin' in the woods by a fire in the night  
Drinkin' white rum in a Portugal bar  
Them playin' leapfrog and hearin' about Snow White  
You in the marketplace in Savanna-la-Mar.

Real life cannot, it seems to insist, be committed to lyric; romance strains against the formal limitations of the song, and its circumstances. It is in this respect, I would argue, that “Sara” counterbalances “Isis,” presenting a failed biography whose romantic motifs are persistently out of sync with the song’s resolute rhythm, where the historical romance (and metrical organization) of “Isis” succeeds. In the same way, the adherence in “Sara” to postcard detail and emotional transparency confounds its legibility. The juxtaposition of “wherever we travel we’re never apart” with “don’t ever leave me / don’t ever go” in “Sara” does not restate but rather fumbles the point made by “Isis” about the mystical twinning of marital partners, and while Sara gives the speaker “a map and a key to your door,” the hermeneutic clarity for which these questing tools seem to stand remains, paradoxically, out of reach for the song’s audience, by contrast with the rich, multiple symbolism of “Isis”’s esoterica.

“Sara” must also be a song about marriage, but here the discourse of romance shuts down rather than opening up its mimetic potential, and instead marshals aesthetic failure to stand in for the limits of representation and reading. Just as Spenser’s Britomart and Isis provide a more potent interrogation of equity in their elision of history, mysticism and legend, “Isis” and “Sara,” heard together, point up the affective impact of history’s imaginative reworking through the adaptive technologies of what romance has come to mean.

Unlike the “embedded quotation” found in Dylan’s later work, “Isis” does not allude conclusively to Spenser.<sup>116</sup> However, if we hear “Isis” as a visionary reworking of the story that Spenser also retells, the song comes close to the spirit in which Spenser’s text responds to the Isis myth, bringing together Dee, Apuleius and Plutarch in a visionary miasma which is nonetheless structurally precise. Reading either quest as an escapist experiment obscures the precision of their operation within romance’s acknowledged usefulness as a tool for meta-historiographical insight, and the texts’ parallel articulations of their authors’ analogous archaeological poetics. In their recourse to romance, Spenser, Dylan and Levy’s Isis episodes bear out Bachelard’s injunction that in order to address a narrative’s historicity, “Each one of

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<sup>116</sup> Rollason, “Intertextuality,” 51.

us, then, should speak of his roads, his crossroads, his roadside benches; each one of us should make a surveyor's map of his lost fields and meadows."<sup>117</sup> In its *non sequitur*, "I said, 'Where are we goin'?' He said we'd be back by the fourth," the song encapsulates this essentially romantic entanglement of space and time.

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<sup>117</sup> Bachelard, *Space*, 33.

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## Whispers on Contraband: The Chorus of Bob Dylan's "Blind Willie McTell"

BY Nicholas Bornholt

*"Some of these bootleggers, they make pretty good stuff"*

– Bob Dylan

To write of music is to be lost for words. Songcraft can seem more an afflatus for the poetic than a site for critical reflection. To transcribe Mozart or Bach, one could bridge the critical void by turning to the centuries-old system of western musical notation, through which music can *literally* be 'written'. An erudite enough eye can somehow *hear* Pachelbel's "Canon in D" by reading symbols on a page. It is almost impossible to do this with Blind Willie McTell's "I Got The [To] Cross The River Jordan."

In any attempt to write of great blues artists like McTell, it is inevitable that their musical corpora are brought in all their square beauty to the round hole of musical (and/or literary) criticism. The indefinability that one encounters when trying to transcribe certain songs and styles is succinctly defined in Amiri Baraka's *Black Music* (2010), when he writes: "A printed musical example of an Armstrong solo, or of a Thelonious Monk solo, tells us almost nothing except the futility of formal musicology when dealing with jazz."<sup>1</sup> This is something one can attest to when looking at manufactured sheet music, or vocal transcriptions of McTell's "River Jordan" (there are no original renderings by the artist), or even Bob Dylan's "Blind Willie McTell." Such songs are simultaneously simple (technically) and indefinably robust (aesthetically). This disjunction renders something critically beneficial, an ambiguous space within which to shape narrative and manufacture one's own meaning.

The aptly named Bob Dylan album *Infidels* (1983) shares its year of release with *Blues in the Dark*, a fully compiled, posthumous album by the elusive bluesman Blind Willie McTell. *Infidels* heralds the end of Dylan's 'Christian Trilogy,' a period somehow unfaithful to the status of his wider oeuvre, and isolated in its style of narrative simplicity. Whilst the albums may be highly listenable – they largely lack the sophistication that marks Dylan's other works

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<sup>1</sup> Baraka, I. A. *Black Music*. Akashik Books, 2010.



as literary – their central tenets largely form around the acceptance of Christ, or God, or both. Conversely the tracks of *Infidels* begin to rekindle a familiarity, revisiting Dylan the story-teller and literary mind.

On the page, the lyrics of *Infidels* have a quality and depth of intertextuality absent from Dylan’s writing in the preceding years, but the lyrical invigoration is at times poorly matched by the album’s musical production and inorganic percussion. Dylan has said before that his music should be compared to other contemporary works and not to his own catalog<sup>2</sup> – even so, *Infidels* is less remarkable than Dylan’s more celebrated albums, except, perhaps, for one song that did not make the final cut.

Seen the arrow on the doorpost  
Saying, this land is condemned  
All the way from New Orleans  
To Jerusalem

“Blind Willie McTell” captures a masque of Bob Dylan largely unworn in the latter part of the 1970s and early 1980s. The song is ethereal and timeless, and yet it is lost in time. It is a folk ballad, a blues cry, it hints at gospel but lacks sermonic divinity. The poetic ambiguity in the lyrics is carried by a vocal authenticity that does not characterize Dylan’s voice on *Infidels*. There is also a righteousness, absent in the ‘Christian Trilogy’; a clarity and a power not heard for many years. Where the tracks of *Infidels* can detract and distract from the lyrical nuances, “Blind Willie McTell”’s musical character (Dylan’s piano and Mark Knopfler’s lone guitar) highlight the beauty of the wordplay, and the pain of the implied subject matter.

Through its lyrical and musical ambiguity, “Blind Willie McTell” asks much of the listener. It is a demand made only sporadically in Dylan’s work of the late 70s and early 80s, yet the song languished in silence and obscurity until 1991 – a whisper on contraband cassettes and vinyl. Dylan claims the song was never finished, though we might wonder if he alone can decide that. This paper explores the depth of this exceptional bootleg and links it back to the ‘tripartite’ fusion of his literary works – music, voice, *and* lyrics – to glimpse the methodical process of historical and literary pastiche Dylan utilizes to construct his most illuminating

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<sup>2</sup> ‘The Genius and Modern Times of Bob Dylan’ *RS* (2006)

narrative worlds. It will highlight a conceptual upending of history and time made possible by the song's portrayals of duality, misrepresentation and misdirection. It will be proposed that this thematic upheaval leads the listener to question assumed absolutes like cultural identity, hierarchy, fiction and fact. Dylan's protean narration uses intertext and the listener's perceived historical sense to create a slippage between the reality of a sensual environment and subjectivity, creating a frailty in the 'inviolable divide'<sup>3</sup> between listener and subject. Consequently, the ambient world of the listener and the literary world of the song become inexorably blurred.

The structure of the song embodies a similar complexity: though loosely based on the traditional score of a blues standard called "St James Infirmary Blues," it does not adopt with any precision a twelve-bar blues structure. The slippage of Mark Knopfler's Em into a flat fifth seems a beautiful improvisation by a talented guitarist, rather than an intentional blues paean, yet it perfectly matches the lyrics. Similarly, the final narrator "gazing out the window of the St James Hotel" is the unlikely element that weaves together the song's lyrical polarity, where the seemingly aporetic and absolute elements of the narrative timeline blur together.

Through "Blind Willie McTell", this article exposes a social historicity that engenders 'otherness', as manifested in the racial presuppositions omnipresent in Dylan's tribute, and in the blues as a musical form. The song's biographical nature (the white singer exploring the Black subject) signposts how questions of authenticity can be deferred to a body – not just Blind Willie McTell's work, but McTell himself – allowing Dylan to operate in a fabricated world of evocative subject-matter necessary for a legitimate blues aesthetic. This corporeal borrowing, or ventriloquizing, interrogates how 'Blackness' is perpetuated as a myth within the blues that conjures artistic validity, at the cost of further disenfranchising the bodily reality already marginalized outside the artform. Who is more well-known: Blind Willie McTell or "Blind Willie McTell?" Here, the fluid narration takes on another critical role, providing a metaphorical personification for shifting perception, and approaching the duality of race in art and life through not just a different persona, but through something that bell hooks deems critical to decolonizing Black images: a different paradigm, an "outlaw rebel vision"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Oatley, K. "A Taxonomy of the Emotions of Literary Response and a Theory of Identification in Fictional Narrative." *POETICS -THE HAGUE*. vol.1, no.2, 1995, pp. 53-74.

<sup>4</sup> hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Routledge, 2015.

## Gotta Serve Somebody

The 1984 bootleg(s) of “Blind Willie McTell” alternate between “body” and “one” in the chorus, “nobody” and “no one” can “sing the blues like Blind Willie McTell”. The beauty of this original rendering is the play created between the two terms (alone and in tandem) – the polarity of “one” as a singular anonymous individual, and “body” as a cumulative group of people or work. Alternately, there is “body” as the singular corporeal vessel and “one” as the self-aware, rational and objective mind of the individual – the polarity of identity and anonymity.

The sociologist Erving Goffman asserts that the body is a site of knowing<sup>5</sup>, a thing to be observed, and to be utilized as a subjective tool for immersion and ethnographic understanding. But where participation becomes textualized there is a marked shift in the meaning of body – again, from the individual to the whole. For the theme of “Blind Willie McTell” this constitutes a shift from an individual, to an idea of what that individual represents; a collection, or a corpus, an arbiter with fragile individual connotations. As Dylan sings about McTell (and more importantly as he sings about the song’s broader subject matter), he exposes the fragility of textual (musical) homage, the empirical nature of song-as-text, and the difficulty of anthologizing that which cannot be posthumous - whether it be the blues of McTell (the corpus that outlives the body (“hear the undertaker’s bell”)), or the darker concerns in the body of the song itself.

Through the homonymic interplay of body, “Blind Willie McTell”’s lyrics conjure distance and ambiguity, while revealing a deep knowledge of the blues’ history at work in the broader subject(s) that populate its vistas. By incorporating a kind of ‘narrative buffer’, Dylan shows an understanding of the world he is creating while submitting to his own fragility; as a voice echoing from an alien world – “And we all want what’s his”. The certainty of Dylan’s chorus places him among the mythologizers and biographers, separating him from the broader subject (the blues) and his specific *subject* (Blind Willie McTell). Dylan highlights the undermined nature of his authorial authenticity inside the song by distancing himself from any message other than the song’s central tenet, allowing the listener to create their own story-world. This decentralizing of the narrator highlights how blues music is foremost a character

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<sup>5</sup> Goffman, E. “On Fieldwork”, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, vol.18, no.2, 1989, pp.123–132.

piece focused on, and authenticated by, the narrator's physical body, but that body is legitimized by the preconceptions and expectations of the listener. Joel Rudinow's enquiry in "Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?" (1994) posits the question that we need: "who can legitimately claim to understand the blues?" Moreover, who can speak authoritatively about their interpretation?<sup>6</sup> In other words: who knows *who* can sing the blues, and whether they sing them as well as Blind Willie McTell?

The body synonymous with blues mythology is central to this investigation, its incarnation serving as the stabilizing thematic in a musical form otherwise imbued with plasticity. Emerging from the original blues character singing on the corner of W.C. Handy's "Beale Street Blues", the body that sings the blues tends not to be autobiographical – the Beale Street blues singer and Handy could not be more disparate. Rather, the 'bluesman' tends to be an anonymous figure, a downtrodden savant hollering truth to any who will listen. This bodily myth was popularized by the critical investigations of northern whites with minimal exposure to the blues *in utero*, forming the basis for Marybeth Hamilton's exposed myth of "impassioned voices echoing with pain and privation, emanating from a flat, water-logged, primitive landscape seemingly untouched by the modern world."<sup>7</sup> The reality of the blues could not be more contradictory; the successful musician W.C. Handy popularized and monetized the form in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Known as "The Father of the Blues," he was a formally qualified, well-educated, affluent businessman whose training allowed his compositions to *imitate* the musical structure he recognized in blues' styling, his understanding of the blues *as a body*.

Handy remarks in his autobiography that his blues was based on "primitive" music popular in the work and street songs of southern Blacks; as he puts it, "a distinct departure, but as it turned out, it touched the spot." He considered his now recognizable musical style as pioneering, transcribing "flat thirds and sevenths (now called blue notes)" into the score where the "prevailing key was major." (96) His transcription was singular and eccentric, a pastiche of various established and widely performed blues songs. Using "primitive" to describe such a nuanced synthesis of source-material betrays Handy's institution based musical education. Indeed, it aligns him with the views of Heinrich Schenker, a theorist and musicologist widely

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<sup>6</sup> Rudinow, J. 'Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol.52 no.1,1994, pp. 127-139.

<sup>7</sup> Hamilton, M. *In Search Of The Blues: Black Voices, White Visions*. Random House, 2007.

popular in Handy's era. Schenker argued for Western-classical music's polyphonic crescendo as the pinnacle of musical evolution far beyond the "primeval music of the negroes"<sup>8</sup>.

The title attributed to Handy is, then, overstated. He might better be seen as the "collator of the blues," popularizing the form for a new market and introducing it to a new cultural group. While Handy did not create the form, he *did* father the body central to its thematic – the critical history of the blues beginning with the appearance of his uncredited muse. A spectral stranger came to him dressed in rags, showing the "sadness of the ages," in a burlesque dreamscape – a sound rousing Handy from his sleep at a train station in Tutwiler, Mississippi, with a voice from another world making "life suddenly [take him] by the shoulder" and awaken him (74). This is the beginning of the archetypal 'bluesman' and the persistent mythos of unlearned anonymity. Moreover, the body attached to Handy's stranger is unmistakably Black.

At the risk of sounding platitudinous, the link between race and the blues is undeniable – the *sense* of it being 'Black music' is a point with much gravitas, difficult to dispute while simultaneously hard to fully delineate. The borrowing of this 'Black music' has meant a polarizing miscegenation of the Black culture attached to its foundational myth, a 'ventriloquizing' by others brought on by both longing and disdain (Hamilton 48), and a fraught relationship of give and take – but mostly of take. Eric Lott's book *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1995) shows how the historical appropriation of Black culture is used to applaud and jeer in equal measure. While there is an element of contempt in the heinously racist costumes and makeups of minstrelsy, the performances held an appeal far beyond parody. Shows were lucrative because people wanted to hear the music, but they desired a specific body to perform it.

The burnt-cork makeup of the "charcoal gypsy maidens" was an attempt at authenticity – a misguided attempt – but one deemed necessary by crowd and performer alike. In his exploration of the cultural politics of obligation, academic Nick Heffernan<sup>9</sup> compares two distinct views on this 'borrowing' of culture, juxtaposing the brevity of Frederick Douglass's opinion that performers of blackface were "filthy scum" who robbed Blacks by selling the fruits of their culture to other whites, with W.E.B. Dubois's view in *The Souls of Black Folk* that

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<sup>8</sup> Handy, W.C. *Father Of The Blues: An Autobiography*. DaCapo Press. 1991.

<sup>9</sup> Heffernan, N. "As Usual, I'll Have to Take an IOU": W. E. B. Du Bois, the Gift of Black Music and the Cultural Politics of Obligation', *Journal of American Studies*, vol.4, 2018, pp. 1095-1121.

Black music is “the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.”<sup>10</sup> The “gift,” as Dubois explains it, proved irresistible to appropriators, and while the minstrel shows lacked an authenticity of race, Dubois considered a Black body in the performance to be only a secondary concern if broad popularization helped to further *equality* for that body outside the form.

The reality of the ‘art’ of the minstrel shows is situated somewhere between these two views – the “bootlegged whiskey” where Dylan’s work dwells. It is near impossible to sing the blues, even as brilliantly as Dylan does, without flirting with the appropriation of another cultural marker and another body; it is also hard to sing about that body without profuse abstraction of the simplistic blues myth of primality and anonymity. In the world of artistic borrowing (or appropriation), the zeitgeist may be at ease with Mick Jagger stealing the dance moves of Little Richard - and the lyrical intonations of Muddy Waters – but there is no avoiding an eventual sense of fraudulent taboo in such ‘post-minstrelsy’. It is unlikely that the same breadth of artistic license would be allowed if The Rolling Stones decided to play “Ain’t It Hard to be a Right Black N\*\*\*\*\*,” a standard that Allan Lomax suggests Willie McTell sing as a “complaining song” in his recordings for the Library of Congress. Mick Jagger does not literally *embody* the target of that word’s cruel and racist vitriol, so he could not justifiably invoke it to weave a song narrative, regardless of such motivating factors as homage or adoration.

The issue of race is a social and political one, but it is also linguistic: adjectives as predicates – “one place predicate” vs. “two-place relations” as Sagoff<sup>11</sup> puts it (169) – simplify linguistically that which is more complex as a lived experience. To say that white artists sing the blues as powerfully, or *feel* as Black artists do, is not a justification. The blues acts as an aesthetic predicate, in the form of a broader attributive (*Black* music). To be blue, to sing of the blues, to use blue chords are all things that can be done outside of the blues, but if the tradition requires an internal and fundamental appreciation of *being* Black in America to be authentic, then the ability to ‘sing the blues’ authentically is not universal. Andrew McCarron states it succinctly in *Light Come Shining: The Transformations of Bob Dylan*<sup>12</sup>: “[T]he cultural

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<sup>10</sup> Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Benediction Classics, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Sagoff, M. ‘The Aesthetic Status of Forgeries’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol.35 num.2, 1976, pp. 169-181.

<sup>12</sup> McCarron, A. *Light Come Shining: The Transformations of Bob Dylan*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

traditions of African Americans were and are the most influential and consistent sources behind Dylan's musical creations." (180) But singing about the blues that influenced you is not necessarily singing the blues as it is 'authentically' understood.

Such racial polarity makes the issue an autobiographical one, something fraught in an everyday sense, but heightened in modern academia, even with a largely fictionalized persona like 'Bob Dylan' that fits neatly with Barthes' and continental post-philosophy's decommissioning of authorial sovereignty. Like the minstrel 'tent shows', it is again a specific 'body' that critics want in blues mythology, a certain biographical and physical body – not the body that left this song abandoned on the floor of The Power Station recording studio. In "Blind Willie McTell," Dylan inverts these conceptions: the white body of 'Bob Dylan' is absent and mythologized, while the mythological Black body of the blues singer is replaced by the biographical reality of a specific, lower-middle-class, educated and industrious man named McTell. The speaker *who speaks*, singing the song's narration, is an anonymous persona, "an American who could speak for everyone; [who] did not belong to any one state, locale or ethnicity; [who] had lived with all manner of Americans and sung with an authentic American voice." The song is at no point narrated by Robert Zimmerman-cum-Bob Dylan, by white or Black, but by multiple renderings of a democratic-American poet, an ideal "outside of time and space"<sup>13</sup> and outside of embodiment.

This is critical to a truthful homage of both a Black bluesman, and to singing the blues: a non-literate (not to be confused with non-literary) art form. Houston A. Baker<sup>14</sup> posits that expressive artistic genres: "blues, jazz, work songs, and verbal forms such as folk tales" comprise a collective that represents identity. In the case of African Americans, that identity is a 'sensualization' of the suffering and societal degradation inherent with Blackness, making embodiment a marker of authenticity. Dylan's tribute assumes a form that a broader body can empathize with, but 'no one' body can fully understand. It is a persona that is necessary until such a time as an "egalitarian ideal has been achieved in American life and art" that will move the blues into the realm of "self-conscious art" (Baker 4), rather than being renowned for

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<sup>13</sup> Sutton, M. "'Roadmaps for the Soul' History and Cartography in Bob Dylan's Early Songs', *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, vol.28, num.1, 2009, pp. 17-33.

<sup>14</sup> Baker Jr, H.A. 'Generational Shifts and the Recent Criticism of Afro-American Literature', *Black American Literature Forum*, vol.15, num.1, 1981, pp. 3

*otherness*. Outside of such egalitarianism, Dylan must leave subjective opinion to a narratorial personification: to an unidentified, bodily *other*.

### **The Times They Are a-Changin’**

Artistic authenticity is attached to identities that can be malleable (fictive or *factual*) but are ultimately biographical in nature and centered on an individual or group. Take, for example, a critical investigation into the newly discovered work of a great painter. Comparing the stylings, brush strokes, or themes of the work is not just a matter of aesthetics; it is about authenticity. Unknowingly viewing a good forgery of Nicolas Poussin’s *Les Bergers d’Arcadie* stirs the same aesthetic reaction as his original – conjuring the inescapability and imminence of death – but that does not make it comparable to the work of Poussin. Rather, the learned depths of an art expert’s examination of style seeks to authenticate that a work is by the artist’s own hand. This perspective on authenticity seems flawed because it conflates legitimacy with propriety, where the ‘who’ of the originator is more important than the ‘what’ of their affect, but it is ultimately underwritten by the invaluable nature of originality.

The ‘brush strokes’ of authenticity in songs are somewhat different. “[T]he literature of musical aesthetics [focuses] largely on the relationship of performances and ‘the work’ – or, because the work is conceived of as a composition, between performances and what the composer intended.” (Rudinow 129) So, the ‘work’ as Rudinow explains it, is an ambition by the artist to transfer their artistic vision from ether to artefact, traditionally via notation and contemporarily as a recording. Theodor W. Adorno ponders such original exemplars in *Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction* (2006)<sup>15</sup> saying that the “dignity of the musical text lies in its non-intentionality,” something that is highlighted when comparing live performances of “Blind Willie McTell” with the power of the *Infidels* bootleg. Adorno continues by saying that unlike visual art (that which “is”), or verbal text (that which “signifies”), music is a “third element [...] derived as a memorial trace of the ephemeral sound, not as a fixing of its lasting meaning.” (4) The bootleg of BWM is the definition of ephemerality, representative of a lost burst of time motivated and moved by unknown catalysts that lead to authentic originality. But Dylan has spent the better part of the last thirty years reimagining his ‘authentic’ works with often unrecognizable renditions. Live performances of

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<sup>15</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Towards a Theory of Musical Production*. Cambridge, Polity Press, 2006.



“Blind Willie McTell” are no exception. While others have done their best to recreate the original bootleg, works of a Bob Dylan cover-band (or even The Band) lack the biographical traits needed to be considered authentic. “Nobody can sing...” a version of “Blind Willie McTell” – no matter how well crafted – as authentically as Bob Dylan. But, simultaneously, Bob Dylan might never do another version of “Blind Willie McTell” that is as ephemeral as his original recordings.

The additional layering in this idea of musical authenticity takes on a deeper meaning in a racial sense. Still largely biographical in nature, the consideration of exemplar recordings imbued with elements of Adorno’s “memorial trace” makes the work of deciphering authenticity still more fraught. The idea of the blues as a ‘Black music’ requiring a Black body to perform it meets with some well researched critical resistance: but rarely progresses beyond classifying exclusivity as a form of cultural parsimony, reverse-racism, or “ethnocentrism.”<sup>16</sup> Categorizing the musical reworkings of white performers (based on recordings of Black bluesmen) as biographically inauthentic is not unfair; any suggestion that it is plays more into the denotative definitional reality of idioms like ‘reverse-racism’ than it does critical gusto. A Black man from the Mississippi delta could never contribute to the works of the Dutch Golden Age. No matter how vivid his baroque-styled renderings, he would simply lack the appropriate biographical *palmarés* to be considered viable in the field. So why is the blues less culturally sacrosanct?

Casting aside the necessity of Blackness in the blues without considering its impact on biographical authenticity is entirely unfair – a creole of convenience for those who may be considered inauthentic. “Blind Willie McTell” is built on the reality that racial categorization is not just based on social preconceptions, but that it has a foundation in government-regulated institutional exploitation, imprisonment, and social disenfranchisement (‘hear the ghosts of slavery ships’). To discard racial propriety stymies the impact of such a history and foregoes the biographical component of authenticity. “Blind Willie McTell” exposes the listener’s own inherent part in a racial hegemony where whites (male) in America have been excluded from nothing politically, socially or economically, whilst Blacks have been excluded from all these spheres. The idea of an ‘exclusive’ Black music is disruptive of such a power structure, hence the oft-unapologetic stylistic appropriation. Unlike Poussin’s painting, where

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<sup>16</sup> Tagg, P. ‘Open Letter: ’Black Music’, “Afro-American Music” and “European Music”’, *Popular Music*, vol.8, num.3, 1989, pp. 285-298.

biographical authenticity is a marker of value, the blues has largely done away with the importance of ‘who’ and replaced it with myth. This has meant that the ‘forgeries’ are heralded as legitimate for their aesthetic appeal, while the Black hand of the original artist has been conveniently forgotten.

The narrative confusion and inherent vagueness in “Blind Willie McTell” highlights the historical role of race in the blues. It exposes a biased historical *sense* in the reader/listener that exemplifies how a biography of Blackness permeates the song’s lyrics and the broader musical form. The narrator’s tense(s) mean that the place in time is confused by the very structure of the song; the lack of immediacy means that the ontological conceptions forego any kind of Derridean “empirical absolutism.”<sup>17</sup> The manufactured vistas are traces of what they represent. By moving from memory to immediacy, from “Seen the arrow,” “traveled through,” “heard that hoot owl singing” (past tense); to “See them big plantations burning,” “There’s a chain gang on the highway” and “I’m gazing out the window / Of the St. James Hotel” (present tense) an uncertainty is created. To listen to the song is to be confronted with empirical immediacy that is not reflected in the syntactical reality.

“I” does not experience any of the direct sensual cues in the song, except for hearing the spectral moans of memory represented by the “tribes” – another time-slippage. As such, “I” does not participate in any kind of empirical understanding: “I” gazes from a window and travels through East Texas, but the listener is the only part of the narrative with immediacy at (correspondingly) the most harrowing textual, and the most intense sensual moments:

**See** them big plantations burning  
**Hear** the cracking of the whips  
**Smell** that sweet magnolia blooming  
**See** the ghosts of slavery ships  
I can hear them tribes a-moaning  
**Hear** that undertaker’s bell

The listener is unlikely to have first-hand experience of these specific sensory perceptions, but as experiential metaphors they allow the reader to utilize their own embodied experiences to make a confused scene seem cogent and visceral. By seeing, hearing, and

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<sup>17</sup> Derrida, J. *Of Grammatology*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

smelling three scenes that are highly palpable (the brightness of a flame, the smell of a pungent flower, and the flinch-invoking sound of a whip-crack!) the writing creates a rhythm of neural cognizance, invoking a crescendo of coherent sensory *reality* in the reader's mind - a *sense* of what the scene portrays.

Writing about the neural theory of metaphor, Simon Zagorski-Thomas<sup>18</sup> argues that “every act of interpretation of perceptual stimulus involves the creation of relationships between our previous bodily experience and the activity we are witnessing.” (274) Music thus depends on *feeling*, which is why sense and emotion are the primary linguistic tools for describing it: songs are sad, or blue, they have downbeat or upbeat tempos. Zagorski-Thomas considers this perception via embodied behavior as the cognitive foundation for intertext, for understanding things through association rather than experience. This means that aural emotiveness shifts from the realm of an individual listener's actual *lived* experience (the *one*) to a broader understanding of the human experience; from a solitary gaze to an immersive, shared sensual-understanding (the *body*).

Post-modern ethnography holds that “understanding” must be achieved through interaction rather than observation: that only through eliminating the “eye” can one eliminate the concept of subject (*noun*) as subject (*verb*): the imperial “I.”<sup>19</sup> Dylan does not endorse or denounce a racialized conception of the blues; instead he exposes listeners (through sense) to their own inherent *sense* of that racial undertone. As they sit among the moaning tribes, it is not the Israelites they picture (even with a Jewish voice singing), it is a certain body of people that can flatten history, bring past to present, move now to then – no *one* can sing the blues like Blind Willie McTell.

Historical and temporal plasticity conjured by Blackness is rightly hard to grasp, let alone philosophize. There is no “aha!” moment in the subtle analepsis of Dylan's shifting of space-time. Rather it seems like an aural act of what Endel Tulving calls “chronesthesia,”<sup>20</sup> temporal time travel through a subjective mind, a memory trace that invokes the vista created and populated by the narrator *and* the listener. From an intermedia perspective this falls in line

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<sup>18</sup> Zagorski-Thomas, S. ‘Timbre as Text: The Cognitive Roots of Intertextuality’ *The Pop Palimpsest*, University of Michigan Press, 2018, pp. 273-290.

<sup>19</sup> Conquergood, D. ‘Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics’, *Communication Monographs*, vol.58, num.2, 1991, pp. 179-195.

<sup>20</sup> Tulving, E. “Chronesthesia: Conscious Awareness of Subjective Time” *Principles of Frontal Lobe Function*, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 311-325.

with Gerard Genette and Raphael Baroni's "undramatized analepsis," or "fading effects"<sup>21</sup> used in films and graphic novels to destabilize narrative time and create a mimetic shift for the watcher or reader. It connotes "a progressive immersion into the storyworld" where the narrative structure divides between telling and showing, allowing events to narrate their own timeline. (321) This rationalizes the complexity of the time, place and subject of Dylan's work. It transforms the listener from a passive witness, to a silent observer, a participant in the unfolding horror – something Nietzsche<sup>22</sup> called the reader's "historical sense." A knowledge of history inside an individual, the "I remember" that inevitably distracts any subjectivity with the "chains" of the past. (7)

The dialectical and conversational astuteness that Baroni focuses on is the same process that allows a reader to understand what is meant when James Baldwin<sup>23</sup> writes "Dear James: I have begun this letter five times and torn it up five times" (13). In "Blind Willie McTell" that recognition deciphers a triangular conversation between narrator (a), narrator (b), and the listener themselves, where the mind-reading required to assume we are not reading a torn-up letter in Baldwin's work is the same that paints "Blind Willie McTell"'s vista – the mind of the conversation's silent party. The imagination of the listener/reader that drives such an understanding is shaped by the social construct that surrounds and permeates them – what Aldon Morris<sup>24</sup> refers to as "systems of human domination" are uncovered in this song, where one group controls another group through "ideological hegemonies" enforced by pervasive societal narratives (20). bell hooks's notion of "decolonization" posits that confronting that social hegemony ("linguistic, discursive, or ideological") begins with the recognition of its very existence (15): "there [*is*] a chain gang on the highway', not 'there was...'"

Language creates the narrative of inferiority, or otherness, shaping perceptions that fortify all forms of mass oppression. By setting a vague scene and allowing the mind of the listener to illustrate the vista, "Blind Willie McTell" exposes the narrative associations that inhere in the song through the listener, populating the "ghosts of slavery ships" and showing

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<sup>21</sup> Baroni, R. 'Dramatized Analepsis and Fadings in Verbal Narratives', *Narrative*, vol.24, num.3, 2016, pp. 311–329.

<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche, F. *The Use and Abuse of History*, Cosimo, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> Baldwin, J. *The Fire Next Time*. Penguin, 1990.

<sup>24</sup> Morris, Aldon D. *The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology*. University of California Press, 2015.

how literal emancipation is illusory unless the narrative of Blackness is changed – what might be termed a “literary emancipation.” The song would not be the same if the chorus was “I know no one can sing the blues like Cisco Houston”, “Woody Guthrie,” or “Bob Dylan.” Telling unique and personal stories (singing songs) is the first step to any kind of broader, less sanctimonious freedom. Here, however, that premise is inverted, the song revealing the shackles of a historically distant but temporally near cultural association.

### **Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again**

Inversion has a great deal more exactness to it than misdirection, with the definitional difference being the binary required to ‘invert’ two distinct points, things, or views. The structure and subject matter Dylan invokes in “Blind Willie McTell” can serve as a tool to abstract the fragility of the blues’ racial mythology, and to invert the inherent otherness of that myth’s Black-body. The song’s narrative style brings into question the absoluteness of geographic certainties like direction and location to expose how a readerly subjectivity guides all understanding. East and west become metaphoric literary tools that can deftly narrow the divide between fiction and *fact*, revealing the adjudicating necessity of the eye (or ear) of the beholder.

This thematic begins immediately with the confusion of the song’s ordering: the narrative’s poetic starting point and syntactical beginning are disparate; the lyrical content and verse structure both misdirect. The song begins (structurally) at an arrow-laden doorpost, a portal into another place marked by a sign that is semiotically non-specific (what the arrow points to) and semantically obtuse: “This land is condemned” (what land?) In linear time, this opening tableau has passed; it is too late to stave off the condemnation. “Seen the arrow” subtly indicates analepsis, the immediate inexactness of reminiscence and the historical sense of the wronging. There is a temptation to excuse “seen” as a stylistic attempt at ‘blues authenticity’, but that notion is tempered by the lack of elisions and contractions in “Blind Willie McTell”’s broader grammatic parsing. Moreover, the poetic neatness with which “Seen the arrow on the doorpost” juxtaposes the final verse’s immediacy: “I’m gazing out the window.” These two scenes create narrative space inside a physical space, highlighting two polarities simultaneously: inside/outside and then/now.

The perceived physicality of “Blind Willie McTell” does not hinder or confine the expansive traveling of the narrator(s). They find their way through portals in the physical space via doors and windows. Nor does it confine the listener who traverses these physical gaps as

thresholds of “narrative magic”<sup>25</sup> mapping an auditory journey through the space-time of the song’s trochaic footfalls. The story is a recollection of escaping a conception through a portal, where the analepsis of “seen” is a prolepsis in structural-narrative time. Contrarily, if the journey ends at the window (as it does structurally) then approaching from the doorpost means moving through a building or house, a metaphoric home that the story unfolds through. Dylan may be invoking the biblical ideas of freedom and bondage in Lincoln’s ‘house divided’ – the metaphoric, ever-teetering, house of America. The listener finds themselves in limbo in the space of the story, Adorno’s “*Randgebaiten*,” or Phillip Tagg’s “borderlands,”<sup>26</sup> where absolutes prove hard to neatly categorize (297). Somewhere between New Orleans and Jerusalem, the hoodoo and the holy; somewhere between Black and white, freedom and bondage; an American-grotesque story-world blurring the authentic and the ersatz.

Misdirection and inversion continue in the song’s physical mapping. Traveling from New Orleans to Jerusalem, one does not encounter East Texas without taking a rather long way ‘round, but that is where the listener is guided. Michael Gray<sup>27</sup> links “East Texas” to a cowboy lament in ballad form called “The Streets of Laredo.” The version he cites (requiring a deep knowledge of Allan Lomax’s vast folk catalog) is lyrically unique, because the narrator directly mentions that he is from south-east Texas. (55) A more celebrated version of ‘Laredo,’ on *More Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* (1960) by Marty Robbins, is relevant to Gray’s broader theory both for its popularity and its invocation of Robbins’ (earlier and more succinct) album *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* (1959), where the story-world of “Laredo” hosts the composition, “El Paso.”

Named for a town to the west of Laredo, “El Paso” is similarly linked to the idea of ‘borderlands’ in American story (and geographical fact). The stylings and sounds of “El Paso” render so completely and succinctly the mythos of the American West that it is almost an auditory mural. This anthemic character is an important parallel to the opening lines: “Out in the West Texas town of El Paso,” and its motivating story of a young cowboy struck down by love, jealousy, and vice; another of the many martyrs in a ballad tradition known as “The

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<sup>25</sup> Johnson, A. ““The doors would be taken off their hinges””: Space, Place and Architectural Absence in Virginia Woolf”, *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature*, vol.97, num.4, 2016, pp. 412–419.

<sup>26</sup> Tagg, P. ‘Open Letter: ‘Black Music’, “Afro-American Music” and “European Music”’, *Popular Music*, vol.8, num.3, 1989, pp. 285-298

<sup>27</sup> Gray, M. *Bob Dylan Encyclopedia*. Continuum International, 2006.

Unfortunate Rake.” Because Dylan knows Robbins’ “El Paso” (he performs an instrumental cover of it live at Las Cruces, New Mexico, in 1989) and has previously journeyed to the geographic area of El Paso in song: “I’m going down to West Texas/ Behind the Louisiana line,”<sup>28</sup> there is potential for the juxtaposition of direction in “Blind Willie McTell” to be seen as a tribute to the American plurality and polarity of “El Paso” and the cowboy ballads that inspired it (mirroring its multiracial/multicultural heritage). Concurrently “Laredo” invokes “Blind Willie McTell”’s intertextual connection to the “Rake” cycle through the blues standard “St. James Infirmary Blues” which itself alludes to Blind Willie McTell’s own “Dying Crapshooter’s Blues.” This source confusion presents the blues as a form that emerged organically through musical pastiche, one engineered by troubadours exceptionally well-versed in oral tradition and history, rather than a form that materialized spontaneously at a Mississippi train station.

In “Blind Willie McTell,” Dylan overturns conceptions of reality by interrogating (and shattering) polarity, presenting an elegant collision point where myth and fact synthesize – with internal subjectivity separating one from the other – showing us a final ‘borderland’. William James<sup>29</sup> succinctly assessed the necessity of personality in the process of liberating validity and ideas from the “floating” thoughts of story, saying “the only states of consciousness that we naturally deal with are found in personal consciousnesses, minds, selves, concrete particular I’s and you’s.” (226) But between these two things (the east of internalized consciousness and the west of what floats outside) is another ‘borderland’ that changes subjectivity from one group to another, dividing textual ideas of superiority and subjugation where the subjective body meets the outside world. This inside/outside binary is *segregated* by something that must be overcome by the listener – the border between world and body that shifts internal perspective because of external politics: the skin.

Nicola Diamond<sup>30</sup> summarizes the partitioned, frontier quality of skin in her psychoanalytical work, calling it “an exteriorized surface in intimate relation with others (and with the wider social environment) and to the ‘interior’ of the body, which is also profoundly

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<sup>28</sup> Dylan, B. ‘Live At The Gaslight 1962’ 2005 Sony BMG

<sup>29</sup> James, W. *The Principals of Psychology*. New York, Cosimo, 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Diamond, N. *Between Skins: The Body in Psychoanalysis - Contemporary Developments*, John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

affected by social interaction and environmental relations.” (4) Walter Benjamin<sup>31</sup> theorized the importance of “taking from experience” to give the audience a place to inhabit. What Dylan does in “Blind Willie McTell” is create a space where the raced nature of the song becomes as illusory as the song’s other ‘facts’. In storytelling there are always traces of the real that lead to acceptance of any premise, like the novelist (the focus of Benjamin’s assertion), the poet or musician must thread together their texts from all manner of other sources or experiences (whether stories or real-life) to heighten their ability to show the “profound perplexity of the living.” (87) “Blind Willie McTell” does this by presenting a hollow body whose journey is animated by the historically-shaped, ambient world of the listener.

### **Go away from my window**

The structure and musical styling of “Blind Willie McTell” provides the listener with a space to pour themselves into. The rhetorical circularity and thematic ambiguity align the song’s thematic with the ‘window’ through which the final narrator is gazing. What one really sees through a window is a vista overlaid by the slightest shadow: a reflection of the observer. This optical confusion goes unnoticed unless the eye’s focus is drawn to the immediate rather than the distant. “Blind Willie McTell” flattens history, showing that past and present are concomitant in the window overlaying the song-world.

Dylan’s storytelling can easily be sullied by preoccupations with legitimacy, authenticity, propriety, and ‘truth’. What Dylan is dealing with in “Blind Willie McTell” are traces – not truths. There are no absolutes in the song, only narrative building blocks ready to be made coherent by an audience and a mind. Hard facts like direction, and ingrained mythologies like racial polarity are simultaneously inverted so that in questioning the ‘truths’ populating the song’s narrative, the listener is exposed to the ‘truths’ *they* bring from their ambient worlds. It is the listener’s interpretation that exposes how real-world assumptions become elements of a wider narrative whole. They guide the interpretation of the spoken-word performance. “Nobody” or “no body” is for the listener to decide. Through the repetitive naming of Blind Willie McTell, the song upends the blues myth of anonymity semantically, while inverting it metaphorically, creating a hollow body for the listener to inhabit: an avatar through which to ventriloquize, feel and authentically understand the complexity of the blues.

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<sup>31</sup> Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller." *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt, Schocken, 1969, pp. 83-109.



## Interview

*The Dylan Review spoke to producer and engineer Mark Howard about his book of photographs Recording Icons / Creative Spaces and his work with Dylan on Time Out of Mind and Oh Mercy. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

**Dylan Review: When did you start taking photos? And why did you start photographing recording studios?**

Mark Howard: I started taking photos to document things in the studio, like what guitars people were playing, what instruments were used for other songs, and then it turned into a big file of all these amazing photos of the houses that I recorded in. I always take photos of the interiors of the houses as a kind of documenting. Over the years I had so much of it. I started filing through picking my favorite ones and it kind of turned into a playlist of photos on my computer to show people where I was working. And then I was working in New Orleans at a studio and the owner said “you’ve got to put a book out!” so I said “okay, I’ll start assembling,” and we put this book of photos out.

It’s taken with various cameras. It’s done with what’s called time-lapse photography. I would put my camera on the console and it would take a photo every 30 seconds. So I would have hundreds of photos, still photos, and I would go through and pick the best one. I was capturing people in their natural habitat – It sounds like animals. If you hold a camera up to an artist in a studio they suddenly act differently. So I kind of caught them without them knowing.

**DR: Is it like choosing from twenty takes of a song, when you've got to pick one photo from a hundred different shots?**

MH: Exactly. Some of it was hard to edit because I loved so many of them. I captured so many great images. The photos of Neil Young are just fantastic. You would never be able to get that kind of shot with a photographer in a studio filming. So it was a cool way to document.

**DR: Do you have a favorite photo?**

MH: I would say it's either one of Joni Mitchell sitting smoking cigarettes while I was recording her, or one of Robert Plant where he is working on lyrics.

**DR: And what about Dylan? He certainly doesn't like being photographed. It must be fascinating to get a candid take.**

MH: On the *Oh Mercy* record, I had a Polaroid [camera] and Dylan said "don't take any photos, taking photos is stopping time." But I sneaked a couple out. I would have to take Polaroids of the console in those days to document where my settings were. So, I'd just do it on these Polaroids as it was an old desk with no recall in those days. So I was able to capture Dylan there with his hoodie on.

**DR: *Oh Mercy* was recorded in New Orleans. How did you come to record in New Orleans?**

MH: It happened because I was working on a record [in New Orleans] with the Neville Brothers who had recorded two of Bob Dylan's songs, and Bono from U2 had been talking to Dylan and he said, "you should check out this guy Daniel Lanois, he might be good to make a record with."

So while we were making the Neville Brothers' *Yellow Moon* record, Dylan was playing the Audubon Zoo here [in New Orleans] and we got an invitation to go. After the show, Dylan invited us onto his bus and he asked us, "what are you guys doing here in New Orleans?" We told him we were making a record with the Neville Brothers and they cut two of his songs. He said, "what's that sound like?" So we said, "well why don't you come to the studio tomorrow and have a listen?" He came into the studio and heard the version of Aaron Neville's "With God On Our Side" and that sold him on it. It's like it was the most beautiful version he'd ever heard, you know, Aaron singing. So that got us the invitation to make the record there.

We were planning on leaving New Orleans and I went to New Mexico to find a location to make his record. I found Georgia O'Keeffe's home in Santa Fe and it was beautiful; a big old

adobe house. It was amazing. Great big rooms, high ceilings, it's perfect for recording. And so I came back to New Orleans, and I told Daniel, "I've found the perfect location." He hops on the phone with Dylan and tells him that we've got a killer location to record in – Santa Fe, it's Georgia O'Keeffe's house – and Bob says, "what Santa Fe? I can't go to Santa Fe. The altitude's too high. You can't sing that high." So Lanois said, "alright, we'll make it here in New Orleans, below sea level, and it'll be good for singing." So we ended up staying.

**DR: How did New Orleans influence the record? Would it have been different if you'd made it in some hi-fi studio in New York?**

MH: Totally. And it had a lot to do with the players we had drop in. Rockin' Doopsie, he came in and played on it, and we had Cyrille Neville playing Congas. Rhythmically it really was impacted by the New Orleans sound and rhythms. Definitely.

**DR: How much does the room, studio, or a particular city, influence a recording session?**

MH: As you see in my book, it's interesting locations that inspire people. I think it's got a lot to do with people being comfortable in their surroundings.

**DR: Where did the sound of *Oh Mercy* come from? Did Dylan or Lanois have a specific idea in mind, or was it a natural mix of these New Orleans influences?**

MH: Once we got into the studio, we started with some beautiful instruments that would influence how the record would sound. We didn't even have a band in the beginning. It was just Dylan, a Roland 808 drum machine, and Dan. "Most of the Time" and a couple of other ones just came out of the box that way. They were really more up close and personal. I've always preferred the sound of *Oh Mercy* to *Time Out of Mind*. I think that they're both cool records, but *Oh Mercy* is still in my heart the most.

**DR: Dylan's famously unconventional in the studio. Was he a challenge to record?**

MH: In the beginning, on *Oh Mercy*, it was a difficult situation because we didn't know Bob and Bob didn't know us. He was just trying to figure out how it was going to work. We recorded in the dining room of this house, in which the kitchen and dining room were all open in one

room. We had the dining room set up with the control room and we ended up making the whole record there. He wouldn't wear headphones, so we had to set up like a live situation, where he had a floor monitor in front of him and his voice would come out of that, and I would go and set up a mic while he was sitting. I would put the microphone in front of Dylan and he would turn sideways, so I'd put it over there and he'd turn the other way. I would sit on the floor and just follow him around with the mic like a film guy would do.

So it was kind of strange. For the first two weeks, he wouldn't even acknowledge that I was in the room or say my name. And then – I'm a motorcycle enthusiast so I had a couple of Harley-Davidsons in the courtyard – one day, he walks up to me and goes, “hey Mark, can you get me one of those bikes?” I said, “yeah, sure.” And so he says, “well, I'll work out the money for you and you can find me a cool bike.” I had a friend in Florida who sold some beautiful vintage Harley-Davidsons. So I ended up getting him this really beautiful 1966 Harley-Davidson Electra Glide. It showed up on Monday when we're starting again, so he came in early to see the bike and I showed him how to start it and stuff like that. I took him for a ride around New Orleans, up along the levee and then down to the plantation homes. He was happy that I got him this bike and we just talked about motorcycles mostly. So it was kind of a cool situation between me and him in that world.

**DR: How important do you think that is to record-making, not the technical aspects, but just making someone feel comfortable?**

MH: Yeah, I think that and gaining somebody's trust. If you don't have their trust and they don't trust you, it's very difficult. But if you say “let's try this” and it's a winner and it works amazingly, they will say “well maybe these guys know something.” And so we kind of won his trust over in like the second week, I think it was. Before that, it's not that he wasn't liking it, but I think he didn't really realize how it was going to work. He had written in his book [*Chronicles*], which I didn't know about, that taking the motorcycle rides made him realize, “oh, I understand where these guys are going, it's kind of cool.” I think that helps, you know, just having a motorcycle ride to clear your mind. When you're stuck in the studio all day, sometimes it's like having blinders on, you can't see. So I think that opened up his thoughts on how it was being made.

**DR: Is Dylan interested in the technical aspects of engineering? Does he care what microphone you're using? Is he involved in the mix? Or does he just care about the feel?**

MH: No... well, in a way.

When we started *Time Out of Mind*, I was mixing some live shows for him and one of the shows had him playing harmonica on it. He said, “can you make the harmonica sound electric?” I said “yeah” So, I took the harmonica and ran it through a distortion pedal into a little amp and re-miced it, so it had this grit on it. But right after the harmonica part finished his voice was coming out of there. He goes “wow, that's amazing! It sounds great!” He loved these old blues records, like little Walter and all these amazing blues records that came out in the fifties and stuff, and he goes, “why can't my records sound like that?” I said it can, we’ve just got to use old microphones and old techniques. I think that's why *Time Out of Mind* has that kind of sound – a big open kind of concept – In a way.

So he loved this vocal amp and we used it all over *Time Out of Mind*. There would be two faders on the console. One would be this natural voice and the other one would be what I call the amp vocal. And he'd always sit beside me and say “where are we at with the ratio for the vocals?” and I'd say “we're like sixty-forty; sixty clean and forty dirt.” He goes “make ‘em fifty-fifty!”, so I'd make it fifty-fifty. His voice had this special kind of sound on it, right? A you-don't-get-this-every-day kind of thing. He loved it.

**DR: The influences Dylan cites for *Time Out of Mind* are old blues records, but Daniel Lanois is, to me, a modern producer. Was it hard balancing those two things, making it sound like an old record but also making it sound like a modern rock album?**

MH: I was just trying to make it sound as unique as possible. I wasn't following any real forms other than using, like I said, older instruments and old mics and stuff like that. But I think it definitely did shape the sound of the records for sure, just having that in mind. But once you get in there certain tracks take over and become something else. Once you're there with everybody in the room, it might take a left turn because it sounds completely different.

And with Dylan, we had like fourteen people in the room playing the same thing. And Dylan changes the key in every song just to see where his voice lands, if it just sounds better in a

certain key. For a musician to change the key on the spur of the moment, it's like learning a whole new song. So the band would come in to listen to the playback. People would be playing wrong notes and Dan just said "look, if you're not gonna play the right note, don't play at all." He was very insistent with that! So it was kind of a difficult situation. It sounded pretty scary sometimes, but then other songs like "Love Sick", this was in Miami, they were tracking and I put this cool little flange thing on his voice and a couple of other effects on guitars. So when the band came in I had this sound going on. So I printed that mix for "Love Sick" right out of Miami and I never bettered it, that's the playback mix from that song. I got a certain sound that I tried to recreate and I couldn't recreate it, so we ended up using that mix.

**DR: When did you get the phone call to work on *Time Out of Mind*? How did you end up recording in Miami?**

MH: We got a call from his manager about mixing [a live recording from] this House of Blues place he played during the Olympics, I guess in '96 when the Olympics was in Atlanta. So we came out of mixing that into the making of *Time Out of Mind* at a studio called the Teatro, which was a studio of mine. I had taken a 1940s Mexican porno cinema and turned it into a studio. I had taken all the seats out and put a big deck in the middle and used the rest of the seats at the back for guitar stands. So we had quite a scene going in the Teatro and that's where I mixed those shows from Atlanta.

When we started *Time Out of Mind*, Dylan was infatuated with this kid called Beck and he wanted the record to be like a Beck record. And so that's where the loops and all that stuff started to come in. We started off just kind of like raw, with Dylan playing piano, and then we brought in this drummer from New York called Tony Mangurian, and he produced a lot of New York bands. One of them was this band called Luscious Jackson, they're like this hip-hop girl group. So he's a hip-hop drummer and was playing these hip-hop grooves against what Bob Dylan was playing on the piano. A more gospel thing. It was like the hair on my arms went up like, "wow this is special." So it started that way and then Dylan says, "look I can't work here, it's just too close to home, let's go to Miami to make a record there." That's how we ended up going to Miami.

**DR: Do you think recording in Miami changed the way that record was made? Or how it sounded? I've heard it speculated that Dylan moved the session to Florida to take Daniel Lanois out of his comfort zone.**

MH: Yeah, I really hated that studio. The room was really big and spitty and was like plaster. It was for making videos, really. It had a video wall in there. We had an awesome sound at the Teatro and I brought the same Neve consoles, the same microphones, all the same gear – and some motorcycles – and it just didn't sound as good. I was embarrassed, really, about the sound of the record because of that. But after we left Miami, we ended up regrouping back at the Teatro and re-recording a bunch of stuff and so I think the Teatro may have helped it in the end, you know.

**DR: There's a lot of Nashville session musicians on that record - Jim Dickinson, Brian Blade, Bob Britt, Augie Meyers. Dylan isn't a session guy. As you mentioned earlier, he often changes the key or the lyrics at will. Do you think that dynamic contributed to the record?**

MH: Yes. The key changes are pretty vital, you know, especially if your voice sounds better in a certain key. But like I said earlier, with what we call the 'Nashville people', they weren't used to that kind of thing. They were top session players. We had Brian Blade, who played on that record along with Jim Keltner, side by side, which was a cool sound. If you listen to it closely with headphones, one drum set is on one side and the other drum set is on the other side, which makes for a cool rhythmic quality.

**DR: How much of *Time Out of Mind* was recorded live in the room? Was there much overdubbing?**

MH: Well, there wasn't that much overdubbing, really. He changed a couple of lines here and there. But I think a lot of the sound of the room was going into the vocal mic, so that's kind of why it sounds like that. You wouldn't get that in the normal studio because you would have been in an isolation booth and dead, but playing with the band you perform better. I always base everything on performances. I'll work the sound thing out later, but let's get the performance down perfectly first. So always as you're recording, you're changing the

arrangement and all at the same time. You'll do a take then, in between verses, if there's just too much filler we can cut that back. It's always an ongoing kind of change.

**DR: Did you know *Time Out of Mind* was going to be a classic when you were making it?**

MH: Not at all. No, no. I don't think that about any records. Because I'm the engineer but, you know, I'm also on the mixer too. So I'm always thinking about what I need in the mix or what we need here, a melody or something. So I never think about whether it's gonna be hit or not. But a song like "Not Dark Yet," just lyrically you listen to it. You think "wow, this is something special here." When you have a song that's lyrically amazing, you know you can do something.

**DR: Do the lyrics affect the way you mix a song?**

MH: Yeah. I always tried to mix vocals to be really present and then surround around them. So it's more depth of field. I could reach into the mix and the hi-hat could be in the very back and some guitars would be very upfront and the voice is commanding, you know. These days I think everything is mixed, compressed, and pushed all in your face and it's not very dynamic. So I try to keep it as a landscape, in a way.

**DR: Dylan produced his own records after *Time Out of Mind*. Do you think you taught him anything?**

MH: We just made it look so easy that he could do it! That's what I figure.

*Recording Icons / Creative Spaces: The Creative World of Mark Howard* is published by ECW Press. It is available now.



## Contributors

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**James O'Brien** is a writer and filmmaker. He holds a PhD in editorial studies and his dissertation focuses on Bob Dylan's unpublished writings. Oxford University Press and others have issued his writings about Dylan's work. OUP published his annotated bibliography of works about the director John Cassavetes.

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**Robert Reginio** teaches modern literature in the Division of English at Alfred University. He currently serves as the Hagar Professor of the Humanities at the University. This spring he will be working in the Bob Dylan Archive researching the composition of the songs that would make their way onto the album *John Wesley Harding*.

**Christopher Rollason** is author of numerous articles and papers on Bob Dylan, and of the book *Read Books, Repeat Quotations: the Literary Bob Dylan* (2021). He has presented papers at major Dylan conferences, including Caen, France (2005) and Tulsa (2019). Recently, he was plenary speaker at a conference on Dylan and popular culture, University of Jaén, Spain.

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## **Books Received**

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Clinton Heylin, *The Double Life of Bob Dylan Volume 2: 1966-201: 'Far Away From Myself'*. London: Bodley Head, 2023.

John Lewis, *Whirly Gig: Inside Bob Dylan's Time Out of Mind Sessions*. Cambridge, Maryland: Dorchester Power and Light, 2022.

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