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Return to Me: *Bringing It All Back Home*

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

– Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*

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

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

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

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

1 Social critique/Existential spiritual

The sentiment expressed in Kierkegaard’s imaginary vision of Socrates¹ could just as easily apply to the changing tenor of Bob Dylan’s lyrical compositions beginning with the album period of *Another Side of Bob Dylan* and coming to fruition in *Bringing It All Back Home*. Critical discussions surrounding the songs on *Another Side of Bob Dylan* usually focus on how they mark Dylan’s vocational turning point or another side in a career surely notable for more than one. The vocational change here supposedly consists in his exchanging the folk-song’s social-political ethos for a more self-centered focus in his lyric compositions. At the time, this change got simultaneously entwined with his move from solo “folk” guitar accompaniment to an electrified, rock ‘n’ roll orchestration of the songs in *Bringing It All Back Home*.²

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

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

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

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

Yet “Chimes of Freedom” also complicates even this social-political reading, and not least by its baroque rhetoric, a chief example of which appears in the mixed metaphor of the song’s very refrain, “chimes . . . flashing.” The language slows instead of facilitates whatever social protest the song otherwise invites us to take as its intention. The words mimic a storm of *sound* at the expense of verbal meaning: “Through the mad mystic hammering of the wild ripping hail/The sky cracked its poems.” Pathetic fallacies abound, while literary echoes and self-references rain down [*sic*] on the song’s listeners: “Through the wild cathedral evening” (a Kenneth Patchen allusion⁷) “the rain unraveled tales.” Nor can one easily decide whether a particular phrase amounts to a poetic condensation of a thought or a periphrastic concealment of one. Do “the disrobed faceless forms of no position” refer to anyone anywhere whose existential *cri de douleur* goes unnoticed; or does the image reduce to an unnecessarily oblique way of referring to people who lack important social status?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2 Leaving home

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3 On the outside looking inward

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4 Homeless art

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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