Renza, Louis A. "Rebel without a Cause II: *Highway 61 Revisited*." *Dylan's Autobiography of a Vocation: A Reading of the Lyrics 1965–1967*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 31–58. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501328558.0009>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 08:21 UTC.

Copyright © Louis A. Renza 2017. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Rebel without a Cause II: *Highway 61 Revisited*

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

– Mark Twain

Our vocation is to be nothing.

– Fernando Pessoa

A world without hope but no despair.

– Henry Miller

1 Spectacles of desolation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2 To be *alone* with you

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3 “Nothing” else

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

As a counter to the suspicion that no matter how hard he tries, no one really seems to receive the spiritual tenor of his songs, Dylan's “baby” in “It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry” stands for an ideal, intimate audience figure capable of grasping the visionary position behind his compositions. He thereby declares that if he fails (“if I die”) in his quest to maintain his work's higher goal (“on top of the hill”), his “baby will.” Even as “baby” represents this intimate listener, she also personifies the song he finds himself in the process of composing, so that if he tends to fall short of his vocational standard, his songs will at least record his effort to enact it. Dylan's notion of the “good” life means what his imagination (in the traditional trope of the “moon”) can realize at its best, “the moon look[ing] good” and “Shining through the trees.” His imaginative high overcomes (shines through) all intervening obstacles (“the trees”) and self-doubts, which otherwise might cancel his visionary reach altogether. Similarly, “the brakeman” “Flagging down the ‘Double E’” (a large locomotive¹⁸) would halt the Dylan speaker's frustration at the barriers to communicating his vision, which he continually encounters and must strive to overcome. Whenever his imagination feels free (“the moon look[ing] good”), he believes he can heighten daily reality (“the sun look[ing] good/Goin' down over the sea” of life) and communicate with an other (“my gal”) as if in a one-to-one, intimate relation. Moreover, her “comin' after *me*” (my emphasis) indicates that this inspiring person and personification simultaneously brings him back to the issue of *self*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4 The private art of desolation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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