Renza, Louis A. "Reflections on Self-reflections: *Blonde on Blonde*." *Dylan's Autobiography of a Vocation: A Reading of the Lyrics 1965–1967*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 59–90. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501328558.0010>>.

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Reflections on Self-reflections: *Blonde on Blonde*

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

–William Shakespeare, Sonnet 111

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

– Emily Dickinson, #1763

That's me in the spotlight
Losing my religion

– R.E.M.

1 The repetition of *Vox Clamantis in Deserto*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2 Close evaders of the real

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3 Final moments of seduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her Jamaican rum.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4 First-person singular

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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