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Fire Down Below: *The Basement Tapes*

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

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

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

– John Ashbery, *Three Poems*

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

– Bob Dylan, *Chronicles I*

1 Lyrical nonsense/Vocational sense

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2 Hiding in plain sight

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So deep down he has been “just teasin’” about wanting to come back to “her.” Dylan even expresses the urge to get out of the “rock” scene altogether in “Get Your Rocks Off!,” yet another song loaded with sexual double entendres. The possible allusion to biblical stoning³⁵ perhaps frames the song as a redaction of “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35,” but the phrase “get your rocks off” mostly plays on the colloquial expression for sexual orgasm and metaphorically includes the hope to discharge previously suppressed psychic energy. Dylan repeats the phrase in the chorus except for the final line that both personalizes and ambiguates matters. There, “Get your rocks off-a me! Get ‘em off!” can mean not only “Come [sic] and take your pleasure from me” but also “Go away and leave me alone.” At first the song hints at a homoerotic scene, what with two old maids in bed and the two men, one of them the speaker, “layin’ down” together. Soon enough, however, the explicit allusion to “Blueberry Hill” and image of a bus “crusin’ down the highway” conjure the rock ‘n’ roll demand for touring.³⁶ The song thus plays off a *vocational* double entendre. Even accepting the sexual register, the

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

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

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

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

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

3 Beyond autobiographical discontents

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He prefers a different kind of public, which he inscribes in the lyrically disheveled song entitled "Don't Ya Tell Henry." Here he uses an aw-shucks barnyard and a drunkard's imagery along with perverse sexual intimations⁵⁴ to point out people's repression of visionary pursuits in favor of living according to common-sense values. In this instance, Henry stands for one's existential conscience, an at-bottom intuition of the absurd *real*, which accounts for the song's polymorphous sexual allusions. "Don't Ya Tell Henry" intimates that as opposed to some internalized objective super-ego, a wholly subjective criterion can make one's average, secular life appear incomplete. Dylan here again slingshots what seems low-class slang into an existential semiotic register of meaning, which helps explain the otherwise nonsensical, cryptic phrase "Apple's got your fly" recurring throughout the lyric. There the second-person pronoun refers to others and himself simultaneously. The phrase constitutes a sub rosa reference to how the forbidden fruit (the apple) has taken possession (has "got" hold) of and contaminated our appetites, with sex ("has got your fly") their prime metonym.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4 The privacy of the Dylan Lyric

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Because the bird is here and you might want to enter it, but, of course, the door
Might be closed, but I
Just would like to tell you one time
If I don't see you again, that the thing is, that the sign on the cross is the thing
you might need the most⁶⁹

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

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

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

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