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Confessions of a Cowboy Angel: *John Wesley Harding*

Before I wrote *John Wesley Harding* I discovered something about those earlier songs I had written. I discovered that when I used words like ‘he’ and ‘it’ and ‘they’ and talking about other people, I was really talking about nobody but me.

– Bob Dylan

To judge others is to view matters from the standpoint of externality rather than inwardness. It is arrogance and impertinence. What others owe to me is none of my business.

– Simon Critchley

Autobiography is an exercise in self-forgiveness.

– Janet Malcolm

1 Dylan making peace with Bob Dylan and others

Most critical interpreters of Dylan’s *John Wesley Harding* have cited the “allegorical overtones” of its songs.¹ If, as I have tried to maintain in the last four chapters, most of his other songs exhibit this characteristic as well, the album *John Wesley Harding* is special for its explicit reliance on this Dylanesque rhetorical reflex. To begin with, cited personages such as John Wesley Harding (a.k.a. John Wesley Hardin), Tom Paine, St. Augustine, and even the three wise kings in the album’s liner notes written by Dylan are not who they are in any conventional, historical or legendary sense. They symbolize something else, in a quite different register of meaning, the only question being which one.

At first glance, the songs clearly possess the air of moral parables like the line from “The Wicked Messenger”: “If ye cannot bring good news, then don’t bring any.” Even then, the moral point most often remains elusive, at times precisely because it flirts with banality. Paul Williams contends that the *John Wesley Harding* songs come across as half-finished artifacts, even “puzzles ready to be solved, but [which] . . . are for the most part unsolvable because the songwriter either has not tried to or has consciously chosen not to resolve the contradictions arising from his spontaneous techniques of generating phrases and images.”² Needless to say, many critics have tried to solve these puzzles. Taking his cue particularly from “I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine,” Tim Riley

argues that the songs outline Dylan's specific declaration of independence from his audience: "this record is . . . the beginning of Dylan's detachment from his audience as a generational hero, as somebody listeners identify with as a spokesperson for their age group."³ But again as I have argued, Dylan had attempted one or another version of this divorce before.⁴

From a different angle, other critics note that *John Wesley Harding* marked Dylan's concerted separation from his contemporary rock 'n' roll métier. By themselves, his low-keyed vocal and acoustic performances on the album arguably constitute a de facto rejection of the psychedelic goings-on in his pop-musical environment at the time. The same effect even surrounds the apparently simple black and white photograph on the album cover. It shows a modestly bearded Bob Dylan, shorn of his *Blonde on Blonde* locks (while wearing the same jacket), alongside several adult figures, each one seemingly at odds with stereotypes of the countercultural generation. Behind them, moreover, the viewer can see a large, dark tree pockmarked with sunlit spots. Both aspects of this visual scene, and what his *Basement Tapes* songs covertly imply, all but dissociate Dylan's artistic identity from the celebrity theatrics of rock 'n' roll peers like the Beatles with their multifaced album cover for *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and a little later in the year the Rolling Stones' holographs on their *Their Satanic Majesties Request*.

Yet such critical efforts to solve the "puzzles" that the *John Wesley Harding* songs pose have to contend with how Dylan, especially as I have argued with his *Basement Tapes* songs, often struggles to determine an ethically parallel if still radically distinct accommodation with the supposed audience of his songs. Williams' judgment that the new songs lead to intractable ambiguities extends even to the just mentioned album's cover. That apparently straightforward photograph and what it likely signifies within the social, political, and musical milieu of the US American mid-1960s might in fact entail a double irony, for one could maintain that faces actually *do* appear in the spaces on that sunlit-speckled tree.⁵ On one hand, then, the photograph suggestively undermines Dylan's relation to musical peers, such as he had already done in the *Basement Tapes* song "Too Much of Nothing." On the other hand, he arguably ends up doing *what* his peers do, that is, goofing on middle-class audiences and/or would-be interpreters, or at least toying with conventional codes of how others might regard him and his latest musical-lyrical work.

Readings of Dylan's album cover, however, obviously provide only a tenuous example of his double-meaning practices, which more convincingly appear in the *John Wesley Harding* songs themselves. If they sketchily criticize Dylan's surrounding social-musical sphere, they also allegorize an ethos that dialectically counters this implicit criticism, a move that itself goes in two semiotic directions. One allegorical thread holds that the songs refer to Bob Dylan's personal and artistic life, even as they veer away from any such bio-objectivist translation. Both the album's inaugural and eponymous song and Dylan's own jacket notes illustrate these two movements. "John Wesley Harding" invites commentators to connect its abbreviated narrative with Bob Dylan's life and work up to that time, including his then contemporary status as a celebrity figure and cultural icon. The song consequently falls into the genre of conventional autobiographical

composition, and hardly any critic of the song misses the opportunity to read it that way. It is Bob Dylan whose "name . . . it did resound" over the national airwaves or "All across the telegraph."

Other critics note that Dylan infuses his self-referential subject with the social-mythological patina of the American Western, in which he casts himself as an outlaw hero. Thus, Andy Gill endorses this generic mix when he lifts the song's protagonist and topos into the more general sphere of Dylan's "writing . . . about the outlaw myth" in "American folklore," especially the outlaw as a Robin Hood figure. Gill argues that the song also stands for "an allegorical reflection upon [Dylan's] own career": his return to composing and performing songs after his 1966 motorcycle accident, and his "helping emancipate the disenfranchised . . . smiting with his pen only those who most deserved it, before evading the attentions of fame and the futile attempts to pin him down to specific stance or message." Tim Riley gets even more specific with this kind of biographical reading. He maintains that the song stands as "a metaphor for [Dylan's] self-conscious relationship with the world of rock," with the outlaw Dylan figure "the music's dry sage, the reputed gunslinger-in-exile who suddenly shows up back in town, downs psychedelia's show-biz camp with understated aplomb, and rides into the sunset with his woman at his side."⁶

Plausible as these biographical readings of "John Wesley Harding" are, they bypass the inward trajectory of Dylan's autobiographical act. In the end, of what relevance is that subject to listeners except for those with an ethically irrelevant curiosity about all things "Bob Dylan"? The same goes for Dylan's attention to his ambiguous moral probity as an artist. Why should one care about him using the occasion of songwriting to pound his chest while declaring his independence from the current "show-biz camp," or to remind us that his songs speak for "the disenfranchised"? Indeed, where in *this* song does he manifest any such "Robin Hood" attributes? What we actually encounter in "John Wesley Harding" is Dylan's withdrawal from *any* biographical-ethical interpretation of it. Conventional autobiographical readings of the song miss taking to heart the consequences of his conspicuous mythologizing of his own public myth. Simply by adding the "g" to John Wesley Hardin's name constitutes an elusive, minimalist signifier that declares his work as fictive through and through. That spontaneously deconstructive act makes all the difference, since it in effect frees Dylan from his songs' dependence on external including ostensibly biographical references. Like its namesake album consisting of songs riddled with characters like Tom Paine and St. Augustine, "John Wesley Harding" quickly complicates other historical allusions as well. Clinton Heylin and Gill outline the "real" (my marks) John Wesley Hardin's life and, as one could best term them, his non-Dylanesque, psychopathological exploits.⁷

But Dylan's perverse doubling with Hardin is anything but innocuous or simply a demo for a Dylan once again unsurprisingly doing the unexpected. If nothing else, it rhetorically dramatizes his separation from his art's performing some pro bono social service. Calling himself "a friend to the poor" in the song surely makes "Harding" resonate with the early "protest" Dylan. Yet if the Harding-Dylan persona acknowledges having taken "a stand" in that social-political sense, what stand, as he states near the end

of the song, does he then claim to take "With his lady by his side"? Why refer to another stand unless it differs from the former? The song's last stanza actually suggests his deliberate complication of *any* social stand: "no charge against him/Could they prove."⁸ Dylan here comes out of one vocational closet only to go into another, more private one, for which in this book I have reserved the term "autobiographical." The song's semiotic register shifts from an externalist autobiographical view of his career to a very different auto-*inscription* that slides away from its empirical-biographical source.

The last section of "John Wesley Harding" intimates Dylan's self-conscious sense of his vocational nonposition as understood in public terms, and yet simultaneously his conviction about moving in a different vocational direction: "He was never known/To make a foolish move." In *what* direction, if not, as my argument has it, toward a concentrated encounter with the real on his own terms? What anyone can say publicly about Dylan's personal and/or artistic life only serves as a pretext for him to determine his ongoing, subjective relation to both his life and work. Far from exemplifying a narcissistic project, moreover, the attractive force of a Dylan song consists in its tracking and approaching its own mind-numbing void, while this same move provides an ethical ground to his otherwise wholly *self*-concerned work. The reference to his being "a friend to the poor" has to do with the poor *in spirit*: anyone who feels alienated in/from her or his existence, and not necessarily just because of egregious social circumstances. As he retroactively interprets his past songs, he sees that they simultaneously transcended social notions of alienation. Dylan judges his work as having "opened many a door" in his social environment ("the countryside"), but in accord with William Blake's well-known vision about opening the "doors of perception" in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell": "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern."⁹

Dylan's having "opened many a door" refers to possibilities of freedom specifically regarding any person's ability to commit him-/herself to coming upon the ego-erasing real. That encounter uncovers the residual "self," as much as possible shed of both reactionary and revolutionary social definitions, so that his vocational quest amounts to a subjective affair even as it has potential objective ramifications for others through the venue of his artistic work. If his past songs criticized certain people like those on "Maggie's farm" who demanded that he practice noncreative work, it was also because *they* did not analogously engage in "honest" spiritual-existential pursuits: "But he was never known/To hurt an honest man." Likewise he takes a "stand" with "his lady" precisely to *forestall* inquisitions into his private life. In this Dylan song as in so many others, "she" stands primarily for his own mus/ing double. In composing his *John Wesley Harding* songs, he likewise reminds himself not to succumb to temptations about his social-artistic status as promoted by musical acolytes and fans. But since these temptations persist, Dylan acknowledges the incompleteness of his "stand": "soon the situation there/Was *all but* straightened out" (my emphasis). At most, he can "lend a helping hand" to others: as if "with a gun in every hand," he deploys his lyrics to re-mind [*sic*] if not direct them to determine their own vocational direction on a spiritual par with his.

The other bookend to *John Wesley Harding* makes much the same point about personal vocational determination combined with an ethical reconsideration of others. What could be more openly allegorical, cuing reader-listeners to engage the songs in similar fashion, than the album's extended, liner-note narrative entitled "Three Kings"?¹⁰ The kings represent three species of audience, meaning the way Dylan imagines the public might apprehend both his work and him as artist. First we have the fan-listener characterized by poor sensitivity to the question of existence and to the Dylan song that raises it: he has "a broken nose." What with his "broken arm," the second listener fails to really grasp [*sic*] or enact in his/her own life what the Dylan song calls for: vocational change. Last comes the person simply "broke": someone so messed up (e.g., with drugs or other psychological problems) or else, given the pun on "broke," wholly taken by materialist desires, that he can't begin to comprehend the existential tenor of the songs. The three kings also represent three typical attitudes toward Dylan's work as he imagines them. The first listener's relation consists of idolatry. He takes for self-certain wisdom everything Dylan says or what he thinks Dylan says in his songs: "'Faith is the key!' said the first." Punning on the image of "broken arm" of a record player, the second "king" reduces sense to sound. He stands in for the rock-music buff who misses the existence-gambit grounding Dylan's lyrics. The third audience figure focuses on Dylan's work in terms of "Bob Dylan," the authoritative cultural celebrity: "the key is Frank!" This listener can even accept Dylan as someone writing songs mostly to make money, whether to avoid becoming "broke" or else simply to gain fame and power in the public marketplace.

But "Frank" represents the artist Dylan simply trying to be "frank" about if not directly expressing his vision of life. This Dylan appears "late in the evening," or what he judges to be relatively "late" in his career. He writes his *John Wesley Harding* songs keeping in mind the strong stuff of existential frankness ("preparing the meat"), which intention amounts to his confession of his real or bottom-line self: "dishing himself out" to and before others. This is the present Dylan whom the three kings, various aspects of the public, now confront. Unlike before when he openly resisted them, Dylan alias Frank now allows the public their say, and unlike his stance in his most recent officially released album *Blonde on Blonde*, he no longer regards the public as an obstacle to his creative activity. The real "Frank" therefore "opened the door" to others, despite the so-called kings' abject relation to his celebrity status: they "crawled in" to his place. He himself construes his sanctum as comprised of his wife and a figure named "Terry Shute." Some critics have taken "Shute" as a thinly disguised, autobiographical reference to Bob Dylan's business manager at the time, Albert Grossman, with whom he was at odds over financial control of his work. But in allegorical terms, Terry Shute's name connotes an ironic pun on *Terre Haute* (Indiana) meaning "high land" or "high ground." Compared with "haute" or higher standards for his work, this "Shute" figure regards it from a decidedly second-rate, far lower perspective.¹¹

When the kings arrive, Shute's "in the midst of prying open a hairdresser," thus playing on Dylan/Frank's public image for the sake of popular appeal in the most superficial sense. Shute also represents Dylan's *own* (remaining) care about that image, something he can no longer deny. His wife informs him that "They're here," signifying

that he can't avoid the public any longer and must decide what his relation to them will be. Hearing this decision-time bell, Dylan a.k.a. Terry drops his "drawer." This act could of course figuratively refer to his underwear, a trope for what he previously kept hidden and prevented from open expression in the past. With his new album, Dylan feels forced to expose that vision once and for all. On the other hand, "drawer" could instead signify the present *album* as a container-like object filled with visions that up to now have made him famous. In that case, they now appear alien to him, which is why he then rubs "the eye," a trope for "vision" (my marks). Together these images suggest that Dylan regards himself as having recently been more or less in a state of creative abeyance.

More accurately, given his interim *Basement* compositions, he admits to not having done any serious artistic-musical work for public perusal, so that outsiders might very well wonder if he has done any creative work at all. Dylan/Terry understandably wants to know what the kings are like, apparently concerned about their reaction to his present public appeal. Does he still have any? Frank's wife says one of the kings, probably the "broke" one concerned with the issue of fame and fortune, has "got a broken vessel," meaning that Dylan's present work can't make him any more famous than he once was or, alternatively, can't take others any further in visionary terms than what it once did. But more to the point, the broken vessel augurs that from the perspective of his present spiritual-existential stand, all materialist goals are out of the question for Dylan/Frank. Insofar as Terry represents a Dylan still concerned with his reception in the public world no matter his newfound determination not to be, he wants to know how many so-called kings are knocking at his door. Not surprisingly, he guesses "three," of course in accord with the Jesus myth, here insinuating how a side of Dylan remains attracted to the cachet of a public savior.

As a counter to Dylan/Terry, "Vera," Latin for "true," is Frank's wife, the vision of existence to which he is wedded in his work. Dylan/Frank tells the kings to "Get up off my floor," that is, don't worship him as a mythic figure who once supposedly possessed a truth that he could disseminate to others at will. The second king, who construes Dylan as a performer making a major impact on the contemporary rock 'n' roll and cultural scene, thinks that Frank should pursue his "better half," musical talent. But Frank takes even that recommendation "lightly." He notes that the former muse who inspired his rock 'n' roll songs is "in the back of the house, flaming it up with an arrogant man," that is, the former Dylan and any performer committed to rock 'n' roll for the public splash he or she can make. Whatever their avowed intentions, for them the quest for personal truth comes second. Frank eschews that vocational notion; he wants to know "what's on our minds today," the existential here and now, to which "Nobody answered."

Dylan's old performing self might have taken this lack of response as further evidence for his alienation from others. As "Terry Shute," he stages himself criticizing the general public's lack of concern for serious issues, its tendency to "scorn" and "abuse" him as well as the downtrodden, and for not practicing "Forgiveness." That's why Dylan/Terry instinctively blames the kings as a "motley crew," for they represent the public's pressure on him to compose work that "travels outward." At first, he feels

no one can save people who succumb to such values. But the new Dylan/Frank sees through this Dylan-as-Terry fatalism. He recognizes it as a subtle temptation to get him back to performing if for nothing more than material self-interest. "Frank" rejects this option outright ("Get out of here") and uses a comical inflation of biblical idiom to underscore his determination: "Come ye no more!" Shute quickly metamorphoses into a figure more representative of the music industry's attitude than of Dylan's: the subtle publicist Shute/Dylan "left the room willingly," thinking that other artists-cum-celebrities can now replace the new Frank/Dylan.

Shute also leaves Dylan/Frank alone with a more responsible spiritual viewpoint. In fact, the "Frank" aspect of Dylan ends up defending the three "wise" men after all. His altered view of others features them "astonished" as they recognize the elusive yet somehow more important tenor of his new work. The first king, we recall, was already cognizant of Dylan's past spiritual bent, but in a "lopsided" or sensationalist sense: this king's "shoes were too big and his crown was wet," that is, due to soppy claims about Dylan's putatively privileged wisdom. Now, however, he speaks for the other kings and, a verbal *trompe l'oeil*, refers listeners to Dylan's "new record" where "Frank," now openly focused on the real, gets acknowledged as the "key" to what the new songs concern. The key to Dylan's *John Wesley Harding* songs lies in this new spiritual stance: "'That's right,' said Frank, 'I am'" that key. Representative of Dylan's public following, the first king yet asks for guidance to understanding the specifics of Dylan's work in his new album; he wants Frank/Dylan to "open it up" for the three. Frank plays with this locution, revealing himself in a state of intense reflection: "his eyes closed . . . suddenly," opening "them as wide as a tiger." In effect, Frank asks his audience, "how far would you like to go in?" His songs, that is, ask listeners to enact a parallel inwardness by moving beyond inherited social interpolations of selfhood.

But as average listeners, the kings only want to go "just far enough so's we can say that we've been there." In the end, they only want the old, iconoclastic Dylan, of which Frank suggests the *John Wesley Harding* songs partly consist. He gives them what they expect: breaking social norms, "he sprung up, ripped off his shirt and began waving it in the air." But while his ensuing songs might provide his audience with the occasional social aperçu ("A lightbulb" or insight "fell from one of his pockets"), Dylan aims for more. His songs contradict tidbits of social wisdom: "he stamped it out with his foot." Breaking the bulb tells us that his songs strongly ("he moaned") confront the listener with "real" issues that pertain to her or his life. In that way they break the barrier between life and art: he "punched his fist through the plate-glass window." Frank asks the kings if that would satisfy them. The second king thinks it would, but only because he essentially deals with the forceful attraction of Dylan's pop-musical work. The third king doesn't know, since for him the lyrics are secondary to the singer/celebrity they advertise. The two types of audience effectively elide the vocational stakes of Frank/Dylan's songs, and even the first king remains "silent" before Dylan's question, since he can't see how the lyrics transcend an iconoclastic critique of the social status quo.

At this point, "Vera," Dylan's vision of the "true," enters the room stating that "Shute" is going: Dylan is leaving behind the commercial aspect of his work that he

acknowledges to himself once played a role in his vocational concerns. "She" then asks if the three kings can contribute anything beyond the "Shute" misunderstanding of Dylan's work. Yet when "Nobody answered," a frank Dylan in effect asserts that it doesn't matter how exactly audiences encounter his work. There's no one way anyway, and he believes that his new songs can coax others into eventually assimilating their spiritual import, even if incompletely. The first king therefore gets his nose "fixed": he can *sense* the spiritual-existential drift of Dylan's songs. His "arm . . . healed," the second king now has the potential to *grasp* their existential thrust, if only in a very general way. Just by being drawn to or somehow "made rich" by the songs from Dylan's public reputation, the third king stays in the realm where he might possibly understand them. Dylan's three imaginary audience representatives suddenly feel fulfilled by encountering the "frank" Dylan behind the *John Wesley Harding* album. He lets them think what they want, with each of them "blowing horns" about their respective relations to his work. Even the "pop"-oriented "king" comes away from this encounter without having to surrender that viewpoint: "'I've never been so happy in all my life,' said the one with all the money."

Dylan can now accept it all. He need not hide his reconciliation with his public the way he has done in *The Basement Tapes*. Through his latest muse "Vera," he states that his vocational intention all along was to "moderate" his demands both on his efforts to come upon the real and on the capacity of others to grasp *that* about his work. This was so despite his previous anxious antics ("goosing yourself all over the room") to justify his artistic ways to the public orientations of the three kings. Dylan accepts a modest poetics, one in which he no longer needs to combat his "Shute" self. Nor need he hold others to the absolute standard he maintains for his work. After all, he realizes that he still possesses a competitive edge ("cleaning his ax") regarding both his "pop" musical status and, the better to urge his vision of life on others, his artistic ambition. In other words, he still cares about his public image, dialectically qualified as not an imperative. Thus, Shute "places his hand on [Frank's] shoulder" near the end of the parable and asks him if he "hurt" his hand when he punched the window while trying to break free from such concerns. The replaceable window signifies that a new Dylan will appear in the album's songs, one less anxious in poetic and spiritual ambition. Perhaps unexpectedly, he keeps modest in stating this new poetics, for "I don't believe so" is his response to Shute's question. But this statement also possesses a "tentative" option-clause allowing that he may yet believe in breaking through.

2 Self-judgments

As Dylan's beginning and ending parables outline, *John Wesley Harding* comprises a group of songs in which he variously stages his along with others' failures to live up to a spiritual ideal understood as dedication to getting to the real. But he also tries to forgive both himself and them for this failure, even as he holds to this standard in composing his lyrical work. Neither goal is easy to achieve. For instance, one can sense an almost overwhelming peremptory pressure for him to judge his previous

artistic work in harshly negative terms. This is the case with the song "The Wicked Messenger." Who is the messenger, why is he "wicked," although almost certainly not in the then-colloquial argot of "wicked" as meaning special? Critical readings of the song accordingly vary. Perhaps taking his cue from the messenger's thumbing his nose at others' questions, John Hinchey thinks "Wicked Messenger" concerns Dylan's "crisis of faith in his audience." Oliver Trager, however, views the figure as also a poet who has forfeited his role as a "teller of truth," since he has served up a "message for his own ends."¹² This reading resonates with the song's biblical allusion that Paul Williams cites from Proverbs 13:17: "A wicked messenger falleth into mischief; but a faithful ambassador is health." Yet Williams himself remains uncertain about whether Dylan's final determination to be the deliverer of "good news" is ironic.¹³ Using a different biblical precedent, Seth Rogovoy sees Dylan accepting his part in the sacred prophetic tradition. Dylan here "portrays the plight" not of the poet but "of a prophet whose prophecies are unwanted by those who need to hear them." For Rogovoy, Dylan's messenger specifically conjures up a passage from Ezekiel where "the messenger has returned from a mystical experience" in which he claims to have seen figures whose "soles of their feet . . . glittered with the color of burnished copper" and who appeared 'like fiery coals, burning like torches' (Ezekiel 1:7, 13).¹⁴

These wide-ranging, often incompatible interpretations of "Wicked Messenger" reduce to the question about whether Dylan is claiming or disclaiming prophethood. As we have seen from "Three Kings," however, he regards both himself and his audience, whose attitudes he internalizes vis-à-vis his own work, in multiple terms. This complicates judgments about what the song actually narrates: neither his having quested for true prophethood (Rogovoy) nor, as Anthony Scaduto sees it, having "deceived" others "into believing he was a prophet who had been given the Truth."¹⁵ But Dylan as the self-referenced messenger in the song judges himself as once having succumbed to the role of prophet *as such* and at the bequest of others, which according to his present ethical standards in itself qualifies his former vocational position as "wicked." He had assumed the role of a false "messenger" in his songs simply by having adopted a quasi-prophetic, authoritative stance: "From Eli he did come." More, he directed his criticism against others mostly for their spiritual impoverishment.

Dylan abjures precisely *that* vocational role in "Wicked Messenger." For instance, he reflects on how he "multiplied the smallest matter," often at first motivated by petty grievances, such as biographical readings of "Positively 4th Street" would suggest. His previously defiant stances in those songs and relations with the public, both journalists and various types of listeners, also stemmed from his having taken a righteous moral-existential position. When doing that, he had mimicked the vocation or calling of biblical prophets who believed unequivocally that God authorized their words to others: "When questioned who had sent for him/He answered with his thumb." But in Dylan's case, his artistic position, ultimately grounded in a hard-earned "nothing," hardly endowed him with such authority, so that now he regards those songs as a means essentially to "flatter" himself by rejecting others.¹⁶ From a different angle, "Wicked Messenger" relates how he surrendered and tied his artistic reputation to public performances ("the assembly hall"), restricting his very ability to assess his vocational role.

On the other hand, if only in mind he had already moved away from such performances. He stayed “*behind* the assembly hall” (my emphasis) where “he made his bed,” already retaining a private space and sense of self from which “Often-times he could be seen returning.” Others could sense that he held something back from his performed work. Unable to avoid it yet frustrated with his own public demand on himself, he abruptly stopped performing: “Until one day he just appeared” leaving behind only a “note” to his audience stating that he has had to move on because “The soles of my feet, I swear they’re burning.” That “note” refers us back to the present set of *John Wesley Harding* songs. The pun and image of “soles” signify the “burning” pressure he places on himself to pursue a spiritually honest art on his own non-public terms. This choice results in his envisioning a dwindling audience for his work. But if “the leaves” and leavings “began to fallin,’” Dylan adopts an Old Testament trope to express his wish to escape from what had become the tyrannical, enslaving demands on his artistic métier: “the seas began to part.” His adoption of the Jewish precedent of exile underscores his single-minded spiritual intention regarding his future artistic work. Conversely, he reverts to a Christian trope to express how his new poetics will concern a secular-spiritual version of the “good news,” the words for “gospel,” which he intends to tell others: “If ye cannot bring good news, then don’t bring any.”¹⁷

Casting himself as this *good* messenger, Dylan clearly means to invite a more diverse audience for his work than any ideologically minded countercultural crowd at the time would have valued. But then why does he continue to compose songs expressing this wish in what amounts to an elliptical style demonstrated by the gnomic parable of “Wicked Messenger”? His songs have become ruminations on the existential spirituals that he wants his songs to instantiate. Governing Dylan’s latest acts of composition, this poetics risks isolating him from the very audiences to whom he now wishes to bring his brand of “good news.” But that inscribed wish alone marks his difference from before. In the song “I Am a Lonesome Hobo,” he stages the logical consequences of his former complaints about others, which makes the song a complaint about such complaints. Before, his songs protested others’ “bad faith” (my marks), understood in relation to his own spiritually driven concerns.¹⁸ For example, feeling spiritually homeless or hobo-like became a bellwether of his hold on the existential truth in his *Bringing It All Back Home* album. But in *John Wesley Harding*, the hobo figure represents his artistic self now imaginatively framed as having lost his artistic-cum-spiritual way. Like an inner-directed jeremiad, “I Am a Lonesome Hobo” confesses Dylan’s having delivered “nothing” but *bad* news to others. In metaphorical terms, the song fits Clinton Heylin’s surmise about its resembling eighteenth-century ballads that often staged “the last words of criminals on the gallows . . . recanting their wanton ways and warning others ‘not to do what I have done.’”¹⁹

So the song propagates a simple moral anyone can grasp.²⁰ Criticizing others for their spiritually bereft vision of existence, he imagines himself ending up without anyone (“family or friends”) with whom he would want to share his songs. His work would seem pointless, for he would have nothing and no one to write for: “Where another man’s life might begin/That’s exactly where mine ends.” Dylan had tried to avoid this dead-end vocational state of affairs. As the case of the second king in the

album's parable expressed, he arguably used the popular cachet of rock 'n' roll to entice others ("tried bribery") to take a spiritual slant on their lives, but as he sees it he failed to become either a wholehearted performer or a spiritually dedicated artist. He therefore suffered artistic isolation in both contexts. He "served time for everything" even as he ironically became rich and famous, certainly not an artist "beggin' on the street." On the contrary, he felt "prosperous," seeming to have everything and everyone at his disposal to listen to his songs: "There was nothing I did lack."²¹ His public success as a singer/songwriter/performer ("I had fourteen-karat gold in my mouth" and "silk upon my back") was self-evident to everyone. But he soon realized that getting famous by "blam[ing]" others *in* his songs ("I did not trust my brother") constituted an act of pride that both negated their spiritual value for himself and left him an idiosyncratic "lonesome hobo" in relation to others. Unlike what occurs in his previous songs, Dylan's couched, parabolic confession of "shame" about this past defines this song as a private act of penance in the form of his drawing a simple moral about how anyone ought to live his or her life. The style he employs to deliver this message appropriately takes the form of a traditional precedent: "Kind ladies and kind gentlemen" suggests a humble relation to them, as does his confessing to "petty jealousies" during his climb to fame.

However, the song carries a second reading that has the makings to upset the first. The representative moral at the song's end quickly turns idiosyncratic by leaving the listener with a paradoxical message in which Dylan opines that one should "live by no man's code." Besides holding that each person has his/her own vocational path to follow, "I Am a Lonesome Hobo" advocates not playing the game of social success *at all*, which patently precludes adopting the criteria of others' values to judge himself as well as them.²² Isn't that what he has just criticized himself for having done in the past: gone off on his own? Just when Dylan offers a hermeneutic olive branch to his listeners, he appears to legitimize grounds that would take it back, for while he acknowledges the value of not judging others but only himself for a lackadaisical spiritual awareness, he eschews their judgment *of him* on the same grounds. One should "hold your judgment for yourself," but only because applying that code to others will lead one to the state of isolation that Dylan admits to now experiencing "on this road" of his vocational journey.

"I Am a Lonesome Hobo" ends on a note of moral ambiguity that applies to more than one song on *John Wesley Harding*. Take Dylan's "The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest" with *its* questionably morally nonmoral ending: "Nothing is revealed." The song traffics in a dialectically unnerving ethical position. Tim Riley terms this lengthy song the "centerpiece" of the album, but quickly qualifies this judgment by citing its "knowing odyssey of contradictions, philosophical patter, and open-ended suggestion" within "a mock-linear narrative with a punch line that sends home the comedy of phony truisms." An overexposed rhetorical and even self-certain assertion "keep[s] you guessing at the storyteller's intentions."²³ Other critics take the song as Dylan's thinly disguised autobiographical complaint about the business relations surrounding his art. Paul Williams gives a succinct depiction of what that allegory concerns. The young, eponymous character, Frankie Lee, obviously a pun for "frankly,"

is a screen for "Dylan as the rube who greedily accepts the money offered by his 'best friend,' which 'sets him free in a world of unlimited sex and power, lets him bop till he drops, which he does.'"²⁴ Williams' reading depends on the biographical equation of Judas Priest with Dylan's business manager at the time, Albert Grossman, also alluded to in "Three Kings," who had capitalized excessively on Dylan's musical-lyrical success. One might therefore claim that the "guilty little neighbor boy" appearing at the end is "maybe the side of [Dylan] that knew better but said nothing."²⁵

But these what one might term "vulgar" autobiographical readings tend to gloss over the subterranean autobiographical current of the song where Dylan plays out the possibility that he could have succumbed to the "Judas" temptation. Its biographical context notwithstanding, "The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest" more particularly stages a situation in which his vocational will to compose songs at an existential-cum-spiritual pitch has arrived at a critical impasse. As "the best of friends," Frankie and Judas represent two contradictory sides of Dylan: Frankie corresponds to that part of him wanting to live and disclose life as "frankly" or squarely as one encounters the "nothing" that grounds it; Judas exemplifies Dylan's temptation to make his vision about this situation palatable to others and receive public credit for doing so. But how can he do the second if the first requires a subjective relation that he can only communicate indirectly? In any case, Dylan's incompatible selves make for his failure to live up to his vocational ideal. Even adopting the name "Judas Priest," a euphemism for the "Jesus Christ!" curse, confesses one side of Dylan's former willingness to have compromised the radical aspect of his vision of existence.

More to the point, his "Judas" side wanted to capitalize on performances of his songs stemming from the understandable desire for financial security. "Frankie Lee needed money one day," and performances could provide him with "a footstool" by and from which he could gain a firm purchase on such security. But by definition, a footstool is a small and figuratively impermanent base to rely on. It exposes Dylan's past vocational illusion that gaining financial security and/or fame might have afforded him space and time in which freely to do creative work. Moreover, his quest for security soon segued into an effort to ply a surefire method ("above a plotted plain") that would script his career. Finally his working to gain security turned into an alibi for spiritual laxity. Composing his songs for their public-performative value won him the usual perks of pleasure ("Take your pick"), and at first the "Frankie Lee" Dylan thought he could avoid their costing the loss of spiritual yield. After all, didn't his early songs criticize the social establishment? As Dylan alias Judas told him(self), "My loss will be your gain," and in fact his protest songs did "gain" him more and more capitalist largesse and fame.

"The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest" records Dylan's having wavered over this Mephistophelean pact. Frankie "put his fingers to his chin," but his "Judas" impulse to calculate his vocational moves for fame and fortune soon overwhelmed him: "But with the cold eyes of Judas on him/His head began to spin." He tried to resist the Judas "stare," the lure of pursuing further fame. "It's just my foolish pride" was how Dylan put it to himself while still hoping he might pursue the vocational goal he had begun to embrace in his *Bringing It All Back Home* period. But he couldn't find anywhere where he could feel "alone" or separate doing his art from performing it before a mass

public: "This is no place to hide." Dylan's vacillation didn't last, however, for he felt that he had to capitalize on his fame before the opportunity passed: "you'd better hurry up and choose/Which of those bills you want/Before they all disappear." Dylan/Frankie claimed he was going to "start my pickin' right now," that is, choosing between the external-popular and the internal-spiritual. But simply because he asked where Judas would be while he chose, Dylan knew what he was going to decide all along. His vocational prevarication didn't last vis-à-vis the strong attraction of becoming a major celebrity. More important, Dylan/Judas claimed that he could offer Dylan/Frankie "Eternity," the kind of immortality only fame can confer. Judas' cold bearing represents Dylan's having coldly tried to equate this promise with the worldly equivalent or bad infinity of "Paradise."²⁶ Dylan/Frankie could then only ironically protest, "I don't call" such immortality "anything."

But this stance turned out a papier-mâché defense against the temptation to acquire immortality in the public sphere. His minor resistance to "Judas" took the form of an aggressive, critical stance toward the spiritual failure of others: "Frankie Lee, he sat back down/Feelin' low and mean." He even thought he had eluded Judas' offer, but then "a passing stranger/Burst upon the [musical-artistic] scene," say in the guise of the latest rock star whose success resurrects the attractive dynamism of the popular medium for Dylan. In his recollection, he had by then cut his ties with past paternal influences like Woody Guthrie (his "father . . . deceased"), but like a "gambler" he felt that he had nothing to lose by returning to "Priest" and trying out a new strain of popular musical art akin to the "spiritual" (my marks) claims of many rock performers of the period. So once again and despite his doubts, he responded to the stranger who asked him who he was now that he had cut off ties with his past work, "Oh, yes, [his Judas self] is my friend." Dylan then finally experienced "fright" at having to face up to his Judas self's decision to mix his spiritual questing with the ethos beholden to the mass media or, the same thing, an amplified version of his public self-image.

Complicit with this trade-off, the stranger spoke "quiet as a mouse," that is, in a cliché-ridden fashion that signified Dylan's *own* effort to muffle his vocational compromise. The public-minded stranger informed Dylan/Frankie that Judas was somewhere "down the road/Stranded in a house." Frankie thus had a chance to escape Priest's hieratic clutches, but instead he panicked, "dropped everything and ran" straight back to Judas. Dylan momentarily feared that he would have lost his opportunity for social security and artistic fame if he left the Judas part of himself. Only then did his rationalization that he might be able to balance the spiritual with the material aspects of his vocation fail him completely. Judas' "house" figuratively represents the traditional "house of fame" that Frankie/Dylan didn't recognize as such at first: "What kind of house is this, he said,/Where I have come to roam?" Frankie had deluded himself not least because there was little real room to "roam," both creatively and spiritually, in this confining "house." Calling to mind the tenor of *Bringing It All Back Home*, Dylan/Priest had wrongly taken this pseudo-spiritual substitute as more of a "home" in keeping with his having sold out any semblance of a priestly activity.

The part of Dylan that chose fame and embraced celebrity status caused his Frankie side to experience an ineluctable anxiety: he "trembled" at this offering, a debased

version of Kierkegaard's "fear and trembling," with Dylan's version promising a loss rather than any leap of spiritual faith. Frankie lost "control" of his former vocational impetus: "Over everything which he had made/While the mission bells did toll," or when he had assumed he was adopting a spiritual stance in his songs. He had become blinded by fame ("that big house bright as any sun") and the manifold sexual opportunities associated with rock 'n' roll stardom, the figurative equivalent of a "house" with "four and twenty windows/And a woman's face in every one."²⁷ Yet Dylan's apparent choice of a materialist-oriented life and art included an existential proviso that resulted in an inverted "leap of faith." Frankie went "up the stairs" of public success "With a [my emphases] *soulful*, bounding *leap* [*sic*]," meaning with such a passion that he came to sense the uncanny vacuity of fame and fortune: "He began to make his midnight creep." Dylan here stages having pressed his "Judas Priest" relation to life and work to the point of where he experienced its vocational emptiness head on: the final inability of fame to provide him with spiritual sustenance, "Which is where he died of thirst."

One could claim that this experience exclusively pertains to Dylan "alone" given the exceptional circumstance of his fame, so that the song's recorded scene lacks a morally representative codicil. This is why he imagines others taking his self-involved crisis "out in jest," or as if comically irrelevant to their own lives. In the end, only in the guise of a figurative quasi-child, a "neighbor boy" or still innocent self, can Dylan treat his past situation with compassion: he "carried [his older self] to rest." The "neighbor boy" is *close* to his "Frankie Lee" and "Judas Priest" selves (my emphasis), but at last not identifiable with either. For some critics, the boy represents an unconvincing *deus ex machina* delivering a pithy yet enigmatic or frustratingly ambiguous moral commentary on what has transpired.²⁸ Yet he could also represent Dylan's guilt over having let himself down in terms of his vocational ideal: "he just walked along, alone/With his guilt so well concealed." The ersatz moral of Dylan's fall matters to no one but himself, so that instead of a representative moral lesson, he finds that "*Nothing* is revealed." Nothing about this allegorically recited experience is relevant to others, but *his* experience of it is the point. To be sure, the idea "that one should never be/Where one does not belong" could apply to anyone anywhere at any time, but precisely as a cliché it not only says "nothing" but demonstrates it.

To a certain extent, this generic ending is indigenous to the "ballad" genre at large. But that, too, works to keep Dylan's vocational scenario away from public inquisitions. It applies to him particularly: to *his* "mistaking Paradise/For that home across the road" by having sought fame and public immortality. In his work, he intimates, he failed to concern himself with his "neighbor." Yet the "moral" of this song also gestures toward a truism that applies to anyone enduring the burden of existence ("carryin somethin"), and so could make of his singular vocational experience an ethically representative one after all. Like most of the songs on *John Wesley Harding*, "The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest" works in both a private and public referential direction at once.

3 Judging past judgments

While one set of songs on *John Wesley Harding* focuses on Dylan's "bringing it all back home" to his unique spiritual calling, another transforms others into spiritually compatible doubles even as both right and wrong relations to them continually stymie his vocational decision. "Drifter's Escape," for example, presents Dylan reflecting on the external or non-*self*-determined event that saved him from surrendering to external determinations of self. As if in a repetitive Kafkaesque dream, the song's protagonist circles around "some unnamed crime, only to escape punishment by some unnamed divine intervention," another *deus ex machina* but different from the interiorized "neighbor boy" in "The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest." Certain aspects of the song's mystery undoubtedly invite plausible biographical connections. Oliver Trager takes the image of lightning striking the courthouse to "symbolize" Dylan's ironically fortuitous motorcycle accident "the year before" the song was composed. Both "Drifter's Escape" and the album as a whole figuratively express "Dylan's backdoor escape from the constraints of popular culture."²⁹ Likewise, Anthony Scaduto sees Dylan staging how others had drafted him as an iconic hero for this or that social cause; thus the lightning strike, as if "an illumination from the Lord," signifies his breaking away from that imprisoning function: "While everyone kneels to pray the drifter escapes, slipping out of the grasp of the idolizers."³⁰

But "the jury," the public that doesn't idolize him or his work, represents the criteria by which Dylan himself would evaluate his creative work. With its own autobiographical history, this internalized public formerly put him on "trial" when he simply first sought to get a hearing and recognition for his work. But that past pressure has now become "ten times worse" insofar as the celebrity that he achieved has estranged him from the inner-directed vocational quest he regarded as his *apologia pro sua opera*. Even those internalized idolizers who as if "knelt to pray" to him like a prophet have forced him to become a "drifter," alienated from himself beyond his already outlier status as a sometime social critic. Dylan thus asks *himself* to "Help me in my weakness," in other words his inability to avoid criteria at odds with his passion to come upon the real on his own terms.³¹ Complicating matters further, in the "courtroom" of his own spiritual-artistic conscience, he experiences the demand to do what he by definition can't: deliver his subjective, vocational truth to the external world. His inability to do that in his brief artistic career ("my time it isn't long") can only result in his internalized public "taking him away," or with him judging himself a failure.

The entire experience has soured him with regard to his vocational quest. If Dylan's past vocational "trip hasn't been a pleasant one," worse is his response to remain passive before external forces that appear beyond his control: "I still do not know/What it was that I've done wrong." He stages a part of himself still vulnerable to internalized external judgments of his work. As the "judge" of his own predicament, he "cast[s] his robes aside," meaning that he can no longer "understand" ("Why must you even try?") nor do anything to stop others from putting him in this situation. Once Dylan looked for relief from the outside as the public "cried for more" of the same old Dylan, his only means of escape being that "bolt of lightning." But the Dylan narrating this fantasy

episode recognizes this very dependence as such along with his complicity in allowing it to occur. In a double-meaning use of the lightning image, *this recognition* struck him like “a bolt of lightning” and isolates the public he internalizes as meaninglessly external to him. Accordingly, it becomes something he needs to move beyond.

“I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine” proposes that the new Dylan won’t spend time in self-recrimination for his former vocational “weakness.” From a decidedly private perspective, the song retraces the same self-referential subject aired in “Drifter’s Escape” even as it at first flirts with external references. The Augustinian song’s tune and central phrase openly allude to an old “protest” labor song, “I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill,” referring to the Wobblies hero who himself was a songwriter; meanwhile the reference to “St. Augustine,” noticeably historically inaccurate and ambiguous,³² tempts commentators to favor the song’s conventional autobiographical aspect. Tim Riley argues that it concerns Dylan’s vexed “relationship with his [then contemporary] audience,” especially due to their “craving for heroes.” Many commentators take the line “go on your way accordingly” for Dylan’s refusal to become a martyr for his audience.³³ For Seth Rogovoy, the St. Augustine figure figures Dylan renouncing his former role as “protest” savior for a generation of “folk” followers: Dylan here tells them to “go on your way” to pursue their own modes of vocation, which appears a kinder, gentler put-down, say, than that in a song like *Blonde on Blonde*’s “Most Likely You Go Your Way (and I’ll Go Mine).”³⁴

At the very least, “I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine” provokes listeners by setting up and violating certain semantic expectations. Both the “Joe Hill” and Augustinian allusions become moot, appearing along the lines of Dylan’s outlaw protagonist “John Wesley Harding.” The references to Augustine also fail to accord not only with him but also with any Christian saint. Which one would ever have worn “a coat of solid gold,” for instance? Nor would the ethics and impulse to proselytize the Christian vision at large likely have allowed the real St. Augustine to abandon others to their fate: “So go on your way accordingly/And know you’re not alone.” For that matter, if each listener follows his or her own path as the Dylan speaker advocates, how would such a person *not* feel “alone”? And what *is* the speaker’s relation to the Augustinian figure? He at once idealizes him (e.g., as in a dream), but just as much for his high social status before others. The “coat of solid gold” signifies his hieratic status and materialist bent. But Dylan not only confers “Augustine” with honorific status, he also confesses his wish, if only in a dream, “to put him out to death.”

The song further raises the question of its own generic identity, for it appears to evoke two or three genres other than the “Joe Hill” social protest. First, we have the “confession” per se, which by itself resonates with the actual St. Augustine given his well-known *Confessions* that many scholars regard as the beginning of Western spiritual autobiography. The song alludes to another religio-literary precedent, the medieval love complaint (“hear my sad complaint”), adverted by Dylan’s reversion to the archaic “ye” mode of address. This genre often references human relations to gods or God and in essence pivots around a spiritual relation to existence. In “complaint” poetry, a protagonist figure often appears in a state of mourning, usually over a beloved person who has died or has left him. A dream incident then frequently occurs in which

the mourner dreams of another figure, an alter ego who epitomizes his loss in such dramatic fashion that it leads to the mourner's self-reformation.³⁵ In "I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine," Dylan's other self appears when he places his hands "against the glass" or mirror in which he perceives his double. This projected self instigates an encounter with itself, but in a way that leads Dylan to realize his self's lack of ground.

If nothing else, the song's generic affiliations of confession and complaint direct us to a spiritually motivated context. Like a "saint," Dylan sees himself as having tried to communicate the spiritual aspect of life to others trapped in a state of alienation—"the utmost misery." He too once acceded to and perhaps even sought the contrary to this spiritual task, namely the fame and fortune that he tracks in "The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest." In "I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine," the "coat of solid gold" image metaphorically refers to his success as a musical-lyrical artist become public celebrity. Dylan proceeds to confess to having tried to unite the two different vocational goals. As in a dream, he realizes that despite his past attraction to "gold" or fame and fortune, his songs somehow called him and others to higher values: "Come out, ye gifted kings and queens." In order to keep others from falling back into the error of idolizing persons or things in the external world, he would have them reject him as some social or religious guru: "No martyr is among ye now." He must reject the image that others want *him* to be, which he admits to having been tempted by and that has left him feeling "So alone." This aloneness now recurs in a different context, for even if others grasp the spiritual tenor of his work, it will necessarily differ from theirs: "So go on your way accordingly."

Hardly framing himself in hieratic garb, then, Dylan assumes the democratic ethos endemic to a past American dream. He revises the frontier myth that at bottom anchors the "Western" genre and myth, that is, performs a spiritual revision of his own once aggressive, outlaw-like status, itself already a conspicuous upgrade over any "John Wesley Hardin." Dylan's confession points to how close he has been to judging himself a vocational failure or sellout: "I dreamed I was amongst the ones/That put him [i.e., my past self] out to death." He admits that he came close to rejecting the "fiery breath" of his earlier artistic-cum-spiritually inspired work. Had he done so, it would have meant the death of any vocational justification for his songwriting, a near miss that resembles the close call he refers to as a "bolt of lightning" in "Drifter's Escape." But in this case, Dylan explicitly no longer assigns his salvation to an external event but rather to his inner discernment. That close call not only "anger[s]" but also humbles him. Having remembered his vocational spirit just in time, he "bowed [his] head and cried" before the possibility of any such self-damning judgment. Even given his social-material success, he realizes that he was and for that matter still is spiritually "Alive."

"I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine" comes down to a song of self-forgiveness. The re-confirmation of his spiritual selfhood accounts for Dylan's creation of the present *John Wesley Harding* songs, and in that sense constitutes an analogue to the historical St. Augustine's conversion responsible for *his Confessions*. But Dylan's self-realization also accounts for his spreading the "good news" to others. This marks the allegorical subject of "As I Went Out One Morning," another Dylan song that has attracted widely disparate interpretations. Andy Gill believes it addresses and criticizes a specific audience reaction to his work, namely "the ingrained, autocratic attitude [Dylan] had

encountered in his dealings with the civil rights movement of a few years earlier." Like John Hinchey, Gill sees the Tom Paine figure in negative terms: he works with the "damsel" to rope the Dylan persona into a libertarian (read: a 1960s revolutionary) cause, which Dylan claims to have rejected. In the literal biographical terms that seldom go away in Dylan criticism, more than one critic even wants to equate "Paine" with Bob Dylan's experience at receiving the Tom Paine Award at the 1963 Emergency Civil Liberties Committee soon after the Kennedy assassination. There he notoriously gave a speech evincing some sympathy toward Lee Harvey Oswald, against which the liberal audience expressed outrage. Relying on both meanings, Gill gives no reason, however, why "Paine" seems to assume a positive role at the end of the song where "it's he who in turn rescues the singer from the damsel and apologizes for her presumption."³⁶

But just as he does in "The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest" and "I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine," Dylan uses an old folk genre to frame an allegory suffused with the issue of spiritual self-liberation. Right from the start, the "fairest damsel" surely represents the lures of American capitalist culture,³⁷ and Dylan stages himself as a young artist having tried to protest freedom for others precisely within this social environment. He actively sought "to breathe the air around Tom Paine's," here a trope for the freedom of self able to explore itself on its own terms, as ideally promised by the American Revolution. However, Dylan (like most Americans) eventually found himself getting caught up in what fame and fortune could offer him, that is, by the "fairest damsel/That ever did walk in chains." "She" represents the materialist success story, an ethos unable to comprehend spiritual-existential pursuits of freedom to which Dylan had inchoately committed himself early in his career. Enchained by the idea of such success, "she" cannot hope to help him realize the potential, self-exploratory freedom represented by Paine's vision for/of the American Revolution.

Dylan stages his younger self's attraction to this ethos ("I offered her my hand"), but the temptations of fame and fortune soon would take him over completely: "She took me by the arm."³⁸ Throughout his work, as I have noted, he has consistently criticized this same ethos, of which he reminds himself when he told her, "Depart from me this moment." But this command smacks of mere lip service, for he says it only "with my voice" and so not with full inner conviction. This personification of American Capitalism has no desire to change "her" ways ("I don't wish to"), regardless of his verbal insistence in the songs he was in the process of composing in his past: "Said I, 'But you have no choice.'" "Her" failure to satisfy people's overall sense of spiritual well-being seems self-evident to him. To rebut this argument, she tries to defend "her" case in a liberal manner, but can do so only with a barely contained grimace: "From the corners of her mouth." As Capitalism's personification in this song, she argues that she can do *some* good if he agrees to her values. He can have his ethical cake and eat it too, as it were, for she will "secretly accept" or allow him to criticize her in public while he gains more fame and fortune to confirm the power of her values. In that way, both he and she will arrive at a place where material pleasure, signified by the trope of the "south," defines their mental and physical environment: "And together we'll fly south."

Seeming to come out of nowhere ("from across the fields"), Tom Paine interrupts the American-Edenic-cum-materialist temptation by chasing away "this lovely girl." The spirit of freedom that Revolutionary "America" signified and which Dylan recollects at the last moment "command[s] her to yield": to give up "her [materialist] grip" on how he would define his relation to his work, world and self. Yet this rejection of prevalent social values differs from how Dylan once had tried to effect the same end in his pre-*John Wesley Harding* songs. This time, Paine/Dylan has her apologize "for what she's done," namely for having debased US America's original ideal.³⁹ This is a song, then, in which he once more reverses the expectations that one might otherwise plausibly draw from its other allegorical intimation of an unfettered critique of American culture or society. The song instead proffers a way to forgive the American turn; at least not to regard it as irredeemably materialist or out for sensationalist gain and little more. But at the same time, this otherwise conservative social judgment comes steadfastly pinned to Dylan's autobiographical project. "As I Went Out One Morning" tells the story of his effort not to waste his creative energies blaming the lures of his US environment and/or his pop-musical métier for turning him away from his inwardly directed vocational quest. The responsibility for his affair with American materialism belongs to him and him alone.

Yet Dylan also feels compelled to resist any aspect of the public world that might define him to himself. A good example of this critical situation appears in "Dear Landlord" where the addressed "landlord" figure personifies an authoritative external pressure to regard his songs solely in a public light, whether for materialist or other egoistic gains. Doubling for Dylan's then business manager who himself doubles for a music industry at large that mostly regards Bob Dylan as a cash cow, even the landlord figure of this song presents a biographical and consequently public temptation.⁴⁰ Other critics take the figure more generally to represent authoritarian, including religionist pressures affecting one's sense of self. Wilfrid Mellers goes so far as to suggest that the landlord figure could represent God, with Dylan "trying to establish a relationship with him that combines respect with an awareness of his own dignity."⁴¹

But whereas the "jury" in "Drifter's Escape" represents others whom he internalizes but who remain external to his work, the landlord figure in "Dear Landlord" stands for any person whom Dylan wishes to reach through his work but hasn't so far.⁴² This is a song in which he openly acknowledges vocational differences: "Now, each of us has his own special gift." With a similar vocationally minded reader in mind, he protests his freedom to create his work without inhibition ("My dreams are beyond control") and to dedicate himself to facing the real ("My burden is heavy") in his own exemplary fashion. One cannot underestimate the social ramifications of this dedication, for as I have noted, Dylan sees his work facilitating a spiritual pursuit that he continually hopes will have value for others: "When that steamboat whistle blows," or when his career is coming to an end, "I'm gonna give you all I got to give," which is to say, his body of songs. As he sees it, that principle defines his primary ethical duty as a musical artist, regardless if his art adheres to the values of this or that regnant community. Even so, "Dear Landlord" insinuates that he still wants others to interpret his work with similar vocational stakes in mind ("I do hope you receive it well"), that is, in terms of their own subjective passion: "Dependin' on the way you feel you live."

But in acknowledging these *possible* readings, Dylan also declares his difference from them at present. Other views of his work do and likely will continue to occur; therefore he must allow for the possibility that his songs will not at all mean for others what they do for him. The second stanza shows him pleading with others at least to understand the analogical sense of his work ("Please heed these words that I speak"), for what *content* can this self-referential turn convey to others? His lyrics remain allusively indirect and state nothing substantial as to a specific vision of life. No Woody Allen character's declaration of life's objective meaninglessness matches the Dylan song's relentless, subjective march toward the meaning/less real. This song thus asks others to take to heart ("heed") the real in terms of which he composes songs as subjective events. Still, insofar as his song holds to its spiritual line, he can construe his own project as something distinct from the daily problems people endure and try to overcome, such as working "too hard" or wanting to realize external goals "too fast and too much." These interfere with one's adhering to a genuine vocational choice. They make it too easy for anyone to "fill his life up/With things he can see but he just cannot touch" because they lack the qualification of subjective choice, the first condition for any movement toward the real.

Dylan realizes the difficulty his request entails, but if he airs the suspicion that most people will resist trying to internalize this vision of existence, he nonetheless appeals to some at least to suspend if not entirely curb that resistance: "Please don't dismiss my case." His personal commitment to a spiritual-existential vision of life entails his absolute determination ("I'm not about to argue") not to change that vision: "I'm not about to move to no other place." His songs will remain *in* "place" as if waiting for others to commit themselves to envision their lives along their own "special" vocational lines. Paradoxically moving forward *in* "place" constitutes the "special" vocational "gift" his songs have to offer "each of us." Dylan gambles that listeners already suspect what his particular vision entails: They "know [it] to be true," if only in a subliminal sense. If he sets the bar high for anyone attempting to understand his work in the way he desires, he yet does not reject them if they fail to follow his direction. He prefers looking for the (spiritual) best in others and expects the same from them: "And if you don't underestimate me/I won't underestimate you."⁴³

Dylan's projected compatibility with others uneasily extends even to those who systematically practice denying the existential. His notion of "pity" in the song "I Pity the Poor Immigrant" brings them closer to this vision of life and self than ever before. At first glance, no doubt, he appears to judge at least some others as too obtuse or lacking in any spiritual awareness to concern himself with. The biblical source for the song's image-motif possibly derives from the rather unforgiving Leviticus 26:20: "Your strength will be spent in vain, because your soil will not yield its crops, nor will the trees of the land yield their fruit."⁴⁴ In Dylan's context, the song specifically refers to others who (will) have nothing at all to do with his expressed desire to view experience in terms of the real. Here he at least seems to exhibit a subdued yet firmly judgmental ("I pity") form of damnation on them, as if Dylan himself were adopting a Godlike, biblical perspective.⁴⁵ On the other hand, Oliver Trager argues for the song's redemptive move, which he thinks accounts for the melancholic tone of Dylan's performance of it,

underlined by his having borrowed its tune from a Scottish ballad and/or from Ewan MacColl's "Come, Me Little Son." From this viewpoint, "I Pity the Poor Immigrant" mitigates the immigrant figure's cataloged harsh deeds, so that the final line, "When his gladness comes to pass," "hints of redemption" for *all* immigrants.⁴⁶

This redemptive move appears more latent than manifest, however, leading other critics to question the song's failure to express a decisive vision at all. Andy Gill finds the song confusingly "balanced between compassion and condemnation," with the immigrant figure coming across as "a displaced visitor in an alien society."⁴⁷ But doesn't this figure simply point to anyone alienated in or from life within any social setting? And this "anyone" surely includes Dylan as well, as his remark to Anthony Scaduto in this chapter's epigraph clearly posits, provided one there substitutes "Until" or "Right before" for "Before."⁴⁸ Scaduto sees Dylan viewing himself as "an outsider, an immigrant, a man who did not really know his inner Self and had no place in the outer world,"⁴⁹ which I have argued accords with his apparent indictment of himself in "I Am a Lonesome Hobo." One can take this viewpoint even further: the autobiographical aspect of "I Pity the Poor Immigrant" essentially redounds to Dylan's finally self-questioned misanthropic judgment of others, including especially anyone who could care less about this very same judgment. Formerly, as in a song like "It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry," he would peremptorily criticize such people and settle for their getting "lost." But in this *John Wesley Harding* song, Dylan ironically redeems them by attributing to them a suppressed despair behind their seemingly ad infinitum efforts to deny it.

For example, some people invest in familial or tightly communal beliefs to evade the individuated collision with the existential. But such beliefs inevitably break down and then leave one "wish[ing] he would've stayed home" and/or maintained that illusion. Some people elevate themselves at the expense of others, the equivalent of one's "do[ing] evil," since one then alienates oneself from them in a radical way. One then becomes "left so alone," isolated not by a subjectively embraced choice, in principle still compatible with others, but by one's deliberately inviting an externally imposed ostracism. Another person tries to "cheat" others or "lies with evr'y breath" about what existence *really* entails; or even tries to preempt despair by means of a faux despair: "Who passionately hates his life/And likewise, fears his death." Idealists, too, require others to support their beliefs in something, say religionist and/or ideological scripts with their "heaven . . . like Ironsides" because they actually defend against "nothing." For "Ironsides" connotes a quasi-spiritual rigidity, besides alluding to the famous US ship emblematic of a former rallying cry of American patriotism.⁵⁰ In Dylan's view, no one can avoid the existence game. Persons who either work hard at their jobs or follow leaders unthinkingly in military exploits ("Who tramples through the mud") end up lost, just as does the person who tries not to take life seriously at all ("fills his mouth with laughing"). Even to those for whom "gladness" does "come[] to pass,"⁵¹ it at best provides temporary relief from existential facticity, at worst makes them vulnerable to ambushes by unexpected intimations of the real.

All anti-existential "visions [of life] in the final end/Must shatter like the glass." This position echoes the Kierkegaardian argument that everyone experiences "an anxiety about an unknown something . . . he does not dare to try to know, an anxiety about

some possibility in existence or an anxiety about himself" that "he cannot explain." Kierkegaard further claims that *this* anxiety, contrary to being "depressing . . . instead is elevating, inasmuch as it views every human being under the destiny of the highest claim upon him, to be spirit."⁵² Because Dylan can ascribe this view to himself, he can do so with others; and this disclosure necessarily takes us back to his previous all but existentially draconian judgments of others, which he can now see derived from a species of spiritual pride. A de facto "immigrant," he like they can succumb to existential alienation: a reactionary despair resulting from futile attempts to evade the real. But precisely on the basis of the universal singularity of despair, Dylan can equate himself with others, even with the person "who hears" the Dylan song "but does not see" what it (or he or she) can do. He can convert this despair into something akin to what I am terming existential "spirit." "I Pity the Poor Immigrant" expresses not a self-righteous or patronizing pity for others, nor one's wallowing in self-pity as usually understood, but rather the potentiality of *self*-pity for anyone.

This spiritually grounded democratic framing of both his relation to others and theirs to him through his songs leaves him free to compose them minus his former anxiety about their public reception. Strangely enough, this resolution leads directly to the inward-turning scene of vocational resolution represented in one of Dylan's most popular songs, "All Along the Watchtower." Of course, one can't avoid the social-critical references largely responsible for this song's public appeal. With the "watchtower" a figure for the social establishment, the two riders approaching it surely mean to upset the status quo. They signify a "menace" to things-as-usual, as Michael Gray depicts it. In that sense, the song aptly echoes apocalyptic prophecy, specifically Isaiah 21 about the fall of Babylon. Among others, Seth Rogovoy notes how Dylan had been studying the Torah and Talmud during the *John Wesley Harding* period. Rogovoy proceeds to argue that Dylan recasts the Isaiah passage as a midrash, so to speak, to express the "impending doom" of the modern social equivalent of "Babylon":

- 23-21:4. My heart panted, fearfulness affrighted me: the night of my pleasure hath he turned into fear unto me.
- 23-21:5. Prepare the table, watch in the watchtower, eat, drink: arise, ye princes, and anoint the shield.
- 23-21:6. For thus hath the Lord said unto me, Go, set a watchman, let him declare what he seeth.
- 23-21:7. And he saw a chariot with a couple of horsemen, a chariot of asses, and a chariot of camels; and he hearkened diligently with much heed:
- 23-21:8. And he cried, A lion: My lord, I stand continually upon the watchtower in the daytime, and I am set in my ward whole nights:
- 23-21:9. And, behold, here cometh a chariot of men, with a couple of horsemen. And he answered and said, Babylon is fallen, is fallen; and all the graven images of her gods he hath broken unto the ground.⁵³ (Isa. 21: 4-9)

Amidst contemporary student protests and a sharply divided country over the Vietnam War, Jimi Hendrix's audio and video performance of "All Along the

Watchtower" then and now has lent support to the view of the song's social-apocalyptic significance. Tim Riley buys entirely Hendrix's performative slant on the song. Given his minority racial identity, Hendrix's "take on Dylan's song" becomes "the more clinching, the more difficult to sit through comfortably. . . . There's no mistaking for why the wind howls . . . for Dylan it howls in place of talking falsely; for Hendrix it howls for what his guitar can't say."⁵⁴ Riley implies that the apocalyptic sentiment belongs to the social scene of the 1960s, a point that Mike Marqusee underscores when comparing the song to early Dylan "protest" songs like "When the Ship Comes In," "Chimes of Freedom," and "Farewell Angelina." But for Marqusee, too, "here, history is no longer vindication or revelation or unbearable chaos; it's a universal and inescapable judgment." He adds that the song's opening dialogue between the joker and thief render them "disembodied voices from an interior discussion" appropriately related "to an outside world of chaos, injustice, and violence."⁵⁵

Something ineradicably personal nevertheless clings to the dialogue of the joker and thief that possibly turns the song away from determinate social commentary. One can at least query how deep its biblical references go. Is "All Along the Watchtower" more concerned with religious matters per se than with social-political ones? Oliver Trager states that the song echoes not just Isaiah's prophecy but Jesus' putative words in the New Testament's Book of Revelation: "I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee" (3:3). Other critics like Scaduto take these religious allusions as central rather than ancillary to the song's overall meaning. For him, the entire scene conveys the idea that "chaos is on the way," setting up a situation in which the Lord's "Coming" will upset the earthly appercept, to say the least. Or perhaps Dylan's two riders approaching the watchtower at the end signify his "facing a personal Armageddon," so that in Christian-religious terms he "must die now, in order to live."⁵⁶ Or perhaps the joker and thief's dialogue occurs between a "lapsed Jew and his Redeemer," an interpretation supported by certain scholars who maintain that the album's title accords with the Jewish mode of not expressing God's name in public: Jahweh a.k.a. JHWH a.k.a. JWH.⁵⁷

What these different "religious" views have in common is how the joker and thief upset their conventional social roles, what with the joker as anxious and the thief as the secret agent of worldly wisdom. This reversal calls attention to Dylan's poetic act, which in turn sets us back to the song's self-referential import. As some critics have argued, the two figures outline Dylan's specific relation to his career and particularly his "conflict within himself or perhaps his uneasy relation with the demands and obligations that his fame brought on him."⁵⁸ So we come back to a bio-referential reading of this scene as far more "interior" than one might initially suppose. In basic terms, "All Along the Watchtower" represents what Aidan Day terms Dylan's "self-dialogue,"⁵⁹ which we as the song's listeners in effect overhear. We need not go the biographical route to read the joker as referring to Dylan's wish to do his musical-lyrical art without restraint. He feels trapped precisely by how others reduce it to various social or religious utilitarian functions, and in the process interfere with its inner-tending movement. The "thief," on the other hand, has the last word and refers to the Dylan who all along steals from his experience and other artistic precedents to make an art with spiritual point.

Dylan as artist-thief also has a more realistic view of what he can expect from his works' listeners. A different, more innocent joker-artist might purvey a simpler truth, such as that one should make or listen to music for sheer pleasure. But Dylan finally judges this function to be an unrealistic goal. In contrast but also to his dismay, "businessmen drink my wine," that is, treat or *taste* his songs as commodities, and tempt *him* to think of them that way too. The same goes for critics who foster an intellectual, non-subjective, relation to his work. As we have just seen, they tend to lead him to consider its social or religious "meaning." Fame and critical attention, positive or negative, also misdirect Dylan's own would-be relation to his work. Quite distinct, then, from the monumental Jesus figure of Revelation or even a version of the "good" thief at the crucifixion, Dylan's "thief" serves as his artistic conscience and insists that it shouldn't matter how others take his songs. Instead, and as Dylan has tried to tell himself in previous songs before *John Wesley Harding*, he admonishes the joker not to "get excited" by what they think or say about it: "But you and I, we've been through that, and this is not our fate."

The "fate" that Dylan refers to, which arguably began in earnest with his *Bringing It All Back Home* songs, consists of the urgent determination to face the real with minimum public distractions and/or values, mainstream or not. Thus, he declares anew his vocational vow to express ("talk") this vision of life through his songs: "So let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late." The lateness signifies Dylan's having frittered away opportunities to focus his full artistic attention on his existence-defined vocational goal. Since the "watchtower" represents the public sphere that to him oversees and would control everything that threatens its collective self-image, it constitutes the source of his vocational malaise. Neither a biblical promise *nor* warning, "the watchtower" represents the lasting hierarchical makeup of societies, each with their various spectrums of "Princes" to "barefoot servants too." On the whole, no nonhierarchical societies exist, not even in countercultural communes, for sooner or later, social organizations spawn distinctions between leaders and followers, social-democratic shibboleths notwithstanding.

Just as important, the "watchtower" equally impinges on the listener's relation to "All Along the Watchtower." The song's secular impulse, its deconstruction of high-toned social or biblical-apocalyptic ambition, is manifest even in how certain images echo High-Modernist precedents like T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in Dylan's "all the women came and went" and, contrary to its more honorific source in the Isaiah passage, perhaps Wallace Stevens' use of the plural "barefoot servants" in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction."⁶⁰ The watchtower also represents the place from which people *watch* each other and not just him, a practice doomed to miss the interior movement grounding his songs' rhetorical reliance on "self-dialogue." In other words, everything "Dylan" takes place as if within the song's own inner recesses. "All Along the Watchtower" therefore conceals even as it indirectly intimates what goes on in Dylan's composing a song like "All Along the Watchtower." The thief's retort to the joker/Dylan's complaint expresses his resolution not to care about how others affect his work; "not [to] talk falsely now" *to himself*; not to waste words blaming others, as he did, for example, in his *Blonde on Blonde* songs. But the two sides of Dylan approaching

the “watchtower” further show that he need not keep completely private, or not share his songs with others at all.

Ending his interior monologue with this resolution, Dylan as joker and thief “approaching” the (social) watchtower does not stand for some imminent protest, social or religious, prophesying a soon-to-occur apocalyptic coup or catastrophe. Nor do the words “a wildcat did growl” and “the wind began to howl” announce radical change about to be unleashed on the world through the help of songs like his, not to mention the Hendrix rendition of the song or even its resonant allusion to Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” in mind.⁶¹ Dylan here holds off imminent external apocalypse, social or religionist, and does so in spite of the cachet that any such meaning was bound to garner from ideological cliques of the 1960s, or simply from critics and fans applauding its enigmatic conclusion. By this time in his career, Dylan recognizes that he has no control over his songs’ reception, least of all how others might exteriorize their significance, but which for him represent a wholly interior vocational move.

“All Along the Watchtower,” then, is only superficially a song of retribution. Within its allegorical chambers, it counts as one more “forgiveness” song in the *John Wesley Harding* album. It confesses that Dylan remains uncertain about being able to judge let alone criticize those of us “watching” or reading the song. While Dylan alias the joker and thief indirectly addresses us via the words and musical arrangement of his song, at the same time he literally remains in the state of being always *about* to communicate his vision to us. Some critics and even Bob Dylan have suggested that the ending of “All Along the Watchtower” keeps cycling back to its beginning, as if in some continuous loop.⁶² For that reason, Trager argues that the song ends mysteriously, and Aidan Day that it leaves the listener feeling that “apocalyptic powers of transformation may not be placeable within neat categories of either good or ill.”⁶³ Yet this ambiguity about the beginning and end of Dylan’s famous song leads to a more exacting judgment: it invites only to forestall apocalyptic thinking. Just as the album cover of *John Wesley Harding* possibly trumps even as it traces the period’s countercultural conventions, “All Along the Watchtower” does much the same with the period’s revolutionary zeitgeist, and with the ever-reborn messianic revolutions bound to recur in the future.

4 The renewed vocation

Like “I Pity the Poor Immigrant,” “All Along the Watchtower” essentially asserts that one cannot resolve the riddle of one’s own existence *as it appears to oneself*. Nonetheless, the song does point to how each individual can adopt a stance in relation to this fact. Like “This Wheel’s on Fire” from *The Basement Tapes*, the “Watchtower” song adverts its social-apocalyptic tenor even as it promotes a scene of inward *self*-change. One can go so far as to claim that in its interior workings, the song revolts precisely from the contemporary charge of social revolution, whatever form that putative goal might have taken. From external viewpoints as Dylan perceives them, his final charge will appear modest vis-à-vis those calling for sensationalist, social changes. No less important, this

song in relation to the others on *John Wesley Harding* itself exemplifies a move inward, that is, toward private spaces and away from public venues, just as occurs in songs like "As I Went Out One Morning" and "I Am a Lonesome Hobo."

No surprise, then, that the sequential aspect of the album carries us listeners toward "Down Along the Cove," a private space where lovers meet, and to the even more private room in "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight." In the album's final songs, communion with a single other becomes specific and takes place casually, or without any conspicuous, frustrated concern that this other "doesn't get it" (my marks). Neither song calls for much critical explication. Up to a point, they in fact allegorically resist explication. On one hand, Anthony Scaduto and others want to extract a moral message from the two songs: that "Down Along the Cove" has a deceptively simple appearance, for in it Dylan "says: 'Yes, we understand'—only within love can man deal with a depth of reality that is akin to faith." Robert Shelton claims the two songs convey the "good news" of how "Love" realizes Dylan's (and our) "search for salvation or answers." On the other hand, Andy Gill finds the two not only presaging Dylan's next move into "country music," but also having "no import whatsoever beyond offering Bob an opportunity to express his guileless, open affection for" the wife he loves and perhaps "two newborn children in his actual life."⁶⁴

But "Down Along the Cove" stages a situation in which Dylan's love connection occurs in a space out of public sight, therefore not apt to be noticed. His "true love," moreover, doubly refers to an intimate other and to his mus/ing self: whoever or whatever inspires him to compose his songs in the moment. While the song has a plausible external reference to Dylan's literal retreat from crowds, the "cove" more radically figures a space that allows him to connect with and/or do his work his own way. "Cove" evokes a restricted space; in an artistic sense, a small, lyrically sized verbal canvas for his art. So does terming his agency of inspiration a "*little bundle of joy*."⁶⁵ The tropes and images he deploys in this song (e.g., "true love," "little bundle of joy," walking "hand in hand") and in "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight" confirm his vocational turn toward a lesser and notably non-apocalyptic relation to his artistic subject. Indeed, in the latter song Dylan self-consciously withdraws pressure from his act of composition by turning it into effortless rhetorical acts such as his child-like rhyming of words like "moon" and "spoon." At the very least, they show him willing to rely on conventional songwriting argot to express his allegorized visions of life instead of resorting to his former, lyrically periphrastic efforts to express them.

Dylan's acceptance of this vocational change amounts to a check on his previous pop-musical and artistic (including poetic) ambitions. It also points to the "good news" of salvation by accepting personal and imaginative modes of relaxation, a practice he here enacts for himself and, as he thinks, for others, at least in poetic principle. This explains the way he greets his tutelary double in "Down Along the Cove": "It sure is good to see you comin' today." Unlike the elusive inspirational figure in "Visions of Johanna," for example, the songs on *John Wesley Harding* rely on an everyday, here-and-now imaginary figure who/that in effect says to him: "I'm so glad you're my boy!" The intimate bond between *them* walking "hand in hand/Down along the cove" occurs apart from "Ev'rybody watchin' us go by." The public can observe them in

passing by, and infer their love for each other primarily on the evidence of the resulting song. The same injunction for a non-urgent relation to his lyrical work appears in the opening lines of "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight": "Close your eyes, close the door." With its invitation to relax, the line recalls the significance of Quinn's allowing others to "doze" in "Quinn the Eskimo," as I discussed in the preceding chapter. In both cases, Dylan enjoins others to forgo anxiety ("You don't have to worry any more"); but here that injunction particularly applies to how his songs might cause the listener anxiety due to their elusive lyrics. The refrain invites his audience to make their own meanings from his songs and not worry about looking for or missing some covert "objective" or coded significance that he privately intended in composing them. It's as if he were saying to listeners: "As with the present song, take from my works whatever gives you pleasure or, if you want, illumination."

For that reason, Dylan reverts to conventional (here country-western) song-images or tropes like "moon," "shine like a spoon," the mockingbird, and even the desire to "bring that bottle over here." The latter phrase addresses the social anxiety that potential, contemporary mainstream audiences possessed regarding countercultural drug-preferences with which Dylan was still associated. In effect, he here all but asserts that one need not turn on, tune in, drop out with psychedelic drugs (alone); instead drinking booze, no heavy, social-critical symbolic gesture, suffices for one to enjoy both life and his work: in short, a state of mind just a tick beyond social norms. With that qualification, his songs will deal with noncontroversial issues, shutting out or at least muting those that even resemble a complicated quest for the "light" of truth in the metaphorical dark of existence: "Shut the light, shut the shade." One need not "be afraid" of his songs' existential tenor. His work will avoid complaining critiques of society and/or of others that his past songs appeared to indulge. He will no longer adopt the mocking or critical attitude found in earlier songs such as "Like a Rolling Stone": "that mockingbird's gonna sail away/We're gonna forget it." Instead, like a "baby" totally vulnerable to its parents, he will offer himself up to his audience with no social or existential strings attached: "I'll be your baby tonight."

And yet complications *do* always remain in Dylan's songs. Lightening up his lyrics so that others might enjoy them isn't altogether easy for him to do. To play fast and loose with lyrical clichés like "that big, fat moon is gonna shine like a spoon" requires his and any supporting audience's willing compliance: "But we're gonna let it" and not "regret it." More, the relaxed, non-anxious attitude Dylan now calls for ("Kick your shoes off, do not fear") pivots on the lurking presumption of its temporary status. Although he promises a long-term respite with no need "to worry anymore," the specificity of "I'll be your baby *tonight*" suggests an insulated, intimate relation between self and other that will occur far from any "assembly hall" or, in other words, in relative privacy, and yet that won't last. The Dylan song requests and is still predicated on an albeit transitory one-to-one relation for its proper apprehension, that is, right before he's "not there." As a later Dylan might have stated it in 1967, "I know it looks like I'm moving, but I'm standing still" ("Not Dark Yet").