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Epilogue

As he grew famous—ah, but what is fame?—
he lost his old obsession with his name,
things seemed to matter less,
including the fame

– John Berryman, *The Dream Songs* #133

With the appearance of his *Nashville Skyline* in 1967, Dylan's vocation became a matter of public debate. Summarized by Andy Gill, negative critical reactions to the album concerned how Dylan's new set of songs seemed to "abandon allusion, allegory and anything approaching deep meaning or mystery in favor of trite blandishments like 'Love is all there is, it makes the world go round.'" ¹ Formerly supportive Dylan commentators also reacted negatively to the political perversity of his composing and performing songs openly associable with "country" audiences, stereotyped at the time for their patriotic, support-the-War set of values. What could be more at odds with the war-protesting, drug-taking countercultural youth for whom Dylan had once supposedly served as a major spokesperson? ² *Nashville Skyline* appeared, after all, during a time when student protests were occurring at fever pitch across the United States and Europe.

So on the surface, Dylan's vocational move invites cynical judgments. Bob Dylan himself gave credence to one more when he later informed Dave von Ronk's wife that the album "was all a shuck for the masses." ³ But of course Bob Dylan's career-long misdirections regarding his songs make for an ambiguous genre of its own. As I maintain in the previous chapters, his "politics" at best comprised ad hoc or tangential allegiances to social agendas that happened to coincide with his existential drive and not vice versa. In many songs covering the *Bringing It All Back Home* to *John Wesley Harding* period, he inscribed disaffection from the perceived demands of all kinds of audiences, mainstream or countercultural. Moreover, an allegorical, existence-oriented vocational concern lurks even in the *Nashville Skyline* shadows. For openers, the album's very title points to Dylan's *provisional* commitment to doing "country" songs. One usually perceives a big city's "skyline" from a remote access highway, which in this case suggests options of entering or passing by "Nashville," a synecdochal site of country music par excellence.

This temporary vocational position signals the dilemma that the songs themselves raise and try to answer with varying degrees of brash insistence and doubt. In "Tonight I'll Be Staying Here with You," for instance, Dylan states that he will stay doing country music—like songs at least for the time being. In the process, he proposes to let other

would-be Dylans ("If there's a poor boy on the street") do songs like those for which he had become famous ("let him have my seat"). From one angle, then, Dylan's *Nashville Skyline* songs ironically allegorize a wish *not* to allegorize their scene of composition. Dylan as it were instructs them to forestall any teleological impulse. Such instruction accounts for his wish, say, to immerse himself in their "colors," as the album's popular hit "Lay, Lady, Lay" puts it. He wants to experience their non-representational feel and its lack of ideological tension.⁴ Yet the same song records his *plea* to his country muse to "Stay, lady, stay, stay with your man *awhile*" (my emphasis), but accompanied by the rhetorical roadblock that the song's listeners can't "hear" the song's allegorization in any immediate sense but only, if at all, its tenuous intimation later. So the Dylan song mitigates the illusion of its objective self-presence both for him and its listeners.

But this dialectical recovery of his song's subjective turn would again leave it isolated from its audience, which as I argued in the case of the more democratic poetics of his *John Wesley Harding* songs he would prefer not to do. Throughout his career, Dylan often oscillates between wanting to compose songs with their "real" goal eminently accessible to others, yet simultaneously needing to allegorize this same vocational desire. If, as he thus almost says in "Lay Lady, Lay," he wants to have his existential "cake and eat it too," Dylan continually finds that he can't immediately communicate his visions of approaching the real without forfeiting his own subjective relation to them. Performing his songs serves to cover that rupture in the moment, but no longer than that. He can only "mask" or fantasize his desire to do so, such as in "Man in the Long Black Coat" on *Oh Mercy* (1989) where *as* that "man," he thinks to abduct his mus/ing self (the woman) from the town's public "dance hall." There people distract themselves from the "real" concern ("But people don't live or die, people just float") much as do Poe's revelers in his tale "The Masque of the Red Death."

Is this vocational dualism between public and private, between Dylan's desire to communicate his movement toward the real and its absolute subjective condition, a case of irreconcilable differences? He goes back and forth over this issue throughout his career to the point where one can say it constitutes his primary artistic tableau. This theme surfaces, for example, in the late *Modern Times* song "Someday Baby" (2006) where he arguably assesses how others take his dealings with the real ("you take my money," i.e., my creative work) and muddle his relation both to it ("fill[] me up with self-doubt") and his performing, artistic life: "Living this way ain't a natural thing to do/Why was I born to love you?" Yet Dylan also writes songs attempting to reconcile this potential conflict in his vocation. That subject defines the musings, for instance, of "Sweetheart Like You" from the 1983 album *Infidels*, which like many other Dylan songs allows for a conventional reading: a man praising a woman with what might very well instance an excessive dose of idealization. Indeed, the song has attracted charges of blatant "sexism" from feminist critics, especially for the lines:⁵

You know, a woman like you should be at home
That's where you belong,
Watching out for someone who loves you true

But the song also evades such supposedly objective interpretations by insinuating an “infidels” motif altogether outside the courtroom of gender politics. “Sweetheart Like You” is a post-Christian Dylan song in which he inscribes how he no longer feel obligated to make his songs work on this latest version of a Maggie’s farm. Thus, the otherwise context-vague lines “the pressure’s down, the boss ain’t here,/He gone North for awhile” sketch a fictive moment when religionist, ideological, and expected commercial demands no longer “boss” his scene of songwriting. Instead, they have “gone North” or left his creative scene of composition at least “for awhile.”

Might he then go back to writing songs once again in a “freewheelin’” manner? Dylan in fact here questions whether he *can* go back to composing songs the way he once did, and this time without the artistic “vanity [that got] the best of him” in his pre-religionist period. As I have argued, his 1965–67 songs continually warn against the lures of the popular musical marketplace—“a dump like this”—which he subsequently thought he had “left” behind for good. At this moment in his career, he wants songs that he can appreciate for their simple beauty: her “cute hat” and “smile” that’s “so hard to resist.” Something about the sheer aesthetic aspect that Dylan once experienced in composing songs still compels him. On the other hand, he remembers how his former relation to a musical art that “looked like you” once demanded his total attention: “She wanted a whole man, not just a half.” At first, “she” inspired him to write songs that way (“She used to call me sweet daddy when I was only a child”), and he thinks “she” might do the same again as with the present song: “You kind of remind me of her when you laugh.” To compose musical-lyrical art in “this game,” Dylan tells himself, he should regard songwriting as a normal as opposed to an exceptional act. If fans and critics alike keep pressing him to show his artistic originality of old, he has “got to make the queen disappear” or rid himself of thinking that he *should* compose elite poetic-lyrical work.

But ridding himself of the need to prove his creative mettle in public is easier said than done. At first it seems to require a simple act of will (“It’s done with the flick of the wrist”), but Dylan has now arrived at the point where he accepts the limitation of what his art can effect for him in spiritual terms. He regards it as an affair of plain if still poetic expression with minimal pressure “to wrap . . . up” or complicate human experience “in a sailor’s knot” (“This Wheel’s on Fire”) to realize a definitive spiritual yield. This “plain” creative goal (my marks) applies to a “sweetheart like you,” which Dylan emphasizes when stating that “a woman like you should be at home.” Musical-lyrical art deserves artists who not only care for “her,” which their “first kiss” or musical performances might suggest, but also care for “her” alone (“who loves you true”). They ought not to make “her” submit to external agendas that would “abuse” song as a means to an end. Given “her” being “the most beautiful woman,” “she” possesses the wherewithal to go all public; but even if she could do that (“crawl[] across cut glass to make a deal”), Dylan sees her holding off from making that move.

In one sense, “she” reminds him of the traditional literary muse: “news of you has come down the line” even “before ya came in the door” or he started composing songs. Dylan resorts to a biblical passage, “In my Father’s house are many mansions” (Jn 14:2),⁶ not to insist on his song’s orthodox spiritual significance, but rather to frame it as part of a tradition with “many mansions” or genres endowed with poetic potential. In short, he invokes this tradition to endow honorific status on *his* kind of plain song,

whereas the average popular song that appears in the marketplace “dump” makes no such poetic claims. For anyone to succeed or “make it” in the present musical-artistic climate, one has “to have done some evil deed,” for instance by having competed for fame and fortune at the expense of others. Or else one has to have accumulated a mass of adoring fans (to “own a harem when you come in the door”) and kept endlessly performing same-seeming songs for them (“play your harp until your lips bleed”). Dylan’s song also occurs in that “dump” and yet makes “beautiful” claims. Plain as it might appear, “Sweetheart Like You” as one listens to it includes a subtle symbolic language on a par with honored literary works. Hence, his art need not question its value (“Snap out of it, baby”), and artists of both popular music *and* high-toned literary art have good reason to be “jealous of *you*” (my emphasis).

Dylan’s notion of song has nothing to do with the fame defined by marketplace or academic values. In effect, he deems himself disloyal (an “infidel”) to upholders of either position, which accounts for his troping Samuel Johnson’s famous phrase about “patriotism” as “the last refuge to which a scoundrel clings.” Blind loyalty or fandom fails to meet Dylan’s criterion for appreciating the plain value of and existential drive behind his artistic work. This viewpoint allows him to reinterpret songs by other artists in the same way, for Dylan finally regards his criterion as having originated from musical-lyrical antecedents who did their work with no literary *or* large public marketplace pressures surrounding them. Dylan confesses to having borrowed “a lot” from these influences, for which he has been ironically made to appear a “king” in the popular musical-lyrical sphere. In this song, he attempts to demystify that status, for if he could ever wholly abandon or at least lower his desire to demonstrate his creative originality (“There’s only one step down from here, baby”), he then would find himself living and working in “the land of permanent bliss.”

To be sure, this goal hinges on a big “if.” Some of his songs allegorize his despair over missing out on the thrill of creative originality.⁷ But as I tried to argue in the case of Dylan’s *John Wesley Harding* songs, this aspect of his poetic-cum-spiritual vocation remains important to him only insofar as he can limit its idealization. In part accounting for his later creative surge especially during the mid-1990s, his reliance on established musical-lyrical precedents continues this poetic blueprint of the plain song that yet orbits around the real. Songs that reference past musical figures, whether a Blind Willie McTell, Charlie Patton, or John Lennon, have a way of ending up references to Dylan’s own existential investment in song. In these late lyrics, one can discern him still attentive to his vocational situation from a virtual infinity of perspectives. In “Not Dark Yet” (1997), for instance, he wonders about the value of poetic lyrics inspired by his own mus/ing self—

She wrote me a letter and she wrote it so kind
She put down in writing what was in her mind

—when juxtaposed against the coming void of self:

I just don’t see why I should even care
It’s not dark yet, but it’s getting there⁸

Conversely, in “Duquesne Whistle” (2013), co-composed with Robert Hunter, Dylan watches himself being appreciatively watched by the people attending his concerts—

You’re smiling through the fence at me
Just like you always smiled before

—and asserts his determination to go forward with performing his songs all the way to the end and free from concern about their (mis)readings:

Listen to that Duquesne whistle blowing
Blowing like it’s gonna sweep my world away
I’m gonna stop in Carbondale and keep on going
That Duquesne train gonna ride me night and day

When the latter-day Dylan covers Frank Sinatra covers of Tin Pan Alley tunes, Dylan equally appropriates them within his subjective sensibility, although not always with a whistle-stop optimism. In performing Irving Berlin’s “What’ll I Do?,” for example, Dylan’s long-standing vocational tableau again snaps into focus, this time less happily: what will he do when he can no longer compose songs (the “you”) the way he once did? For then those past songs will resemble photographs of past occurrences, frozen in their tracks as if for a different kind of album. But that surmise again testifies to the vocational issue that I have argued marks Dylan’s lyrical work (and care for others’ songs) from early in his career even through his last-placed cover on the album *TriPLICATE*: the aptly titled Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II song “Why Was I Born?”