Renza, Louis A. "Introduction." *Dylan's Autobiography of a Vocation: A Reading of the Lyrics 1965–1967*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. xii–xvii. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501328558.0007>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 11:31 UTC.

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

Introduction

... art is a form of religion without dogma.

– D. H. Lawrence

The voyage into the interior is all that matters,
Whatever your ride.

– Charles Wright

“I am my words.”

– Bob Dylan, 1963

The following book on Bob Dylan’s songs does not directly concern Bob Dylan a.k.a Robert Zimmerman, either the actual person or the musical-cultural celebrity. Nor does it claim to make claims about what Bob Dylan intended in or when composing any one of his songs. Instead, I mostly refer to Bob Dylan’s work and certain biographically relevant events in terms of a figure named “Dylan” (minus quotation marks) who I maintain subtends the songs otherwise authored by the other Bob Dylan. Extending the referential range of Jack Kerouac’s continuous autobiographical writings, *that* Dylan figure allegorically pens an ongoing, palimpsest autobiography, less linear than revolving in both his songs and albums. I discuss all of each album-period’s songs; and I rearrange their sequence not by their appearance on Dylan albums or by strict discographical chronology, but rather the better to show variations on a theme or, specifically, different aspects of Dylan’s subterranean concerns as a musical-lyrical artist. His continuous autobiography, that is, pointedly deals with issues affecting his vocation: he wants his songs—and he inscribes this desire *in* them—to help him and, as a corollary, potentially others to face an environment that consists of the ineluctable catastrophe and opportunity that we otherwise call existence.

In the following chapters, I variously refer to this bottom line as the “existential real,” or simply “the real,” or the “existential.” This “existential” is not reducible to any fixed apprehension of the irrational; it is not “*existentialism*,” not a portable or even quasi-systematic concept that one might plug into this or that experience to account for it. Rather, it more resembles Wallace Stevens’ epiphany of the poetic moment:

They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
We shall return at twilight from the lecture
Pleased that the irrational is rational

Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street,
I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.¹

But where Stevens' "fluent" muse would supposedly deliver him up to the clear fullness of what he elsewhere calls a vital "plain sense of things," Dylan's "Visions of Johanna," to take just one of his analogous muse figures, would bring him in subjective proximity to a contentless and therefore indifferently "revolving" real.

"Blowin' in the wind" from the beginning, the existential for Dylan exists only in a state of becoming within a field of subjective apprehension. For those reasons, it manifests itself in his songs as a virtually endless procession of images and insights at different times throughout his songwriting career. In a 1966 lyric, for example, he can articulate disappointment at how others (alias his audience) fail to discern his work's concerted quest to come upon the real. But in another song, "Dark Eyes" in 1985, he can register how others, whether they know it or not, equally despair from being haunted by the real: "A million faces at my feet but all I see are dark eyes." I use "spiritual" to designate both this view of others and Dylan's lyrical efforts to front the real on subjective terms. All aspects of this vision fund his ongoing spiritual autobiography. His songs show him multitudinously calibrating his experiences of external and internal events against the horizon of his oncoming awareness of the Absurd. The way I see it, the vocational project primarily to situate his work in that context begins full force in the creatively explosive period beginning with his 1965 songs in and around *Bringing It All Back Home*, and reaches a momentary resting point as recorded in the lyrics comprising *John Wesley Harding* (1967).

One can no doubt question this "allegorical" thesis on a number of grounds. In the first place, many Bob Dylan critics, fans and perhaps Bob Dylan himself surely would object to my emphasis on "reading" his lyrics. Songs have all to do with listening to their vocalized musical performance, as opposed to reading "words on the page," to which one usually relegates poems proper. Bob Dylan early on seems to have thought of himself as a poet ("I'm a poet, and I know it./Hope I don't blow it"), but eventually came to prefer assigning his work to that of "a song and dance man." As I have noted elsewhere, however, his lyrics have always excerpted his work for special critical attention.³ If the Dylan "text" patently consists of a hybrid complex of lyric + music + *his* vocal performance, that complex nonetheless fails to account for how his work self-evidently hangs around for an excessive amount of critical attention well beyond the issue of that work's generic status. Hence the nation-wide media notice (2016) given to the Dylan winning of the Nobel Prize for literature as well as his archives to be housed at the University of Tulsa pretty much underwrites an academic field that critics already designated as "Dylan Studies." Hence the continual treatment of his works by social-political critics, exponents of "cultural studies," historians, and musicologists focused on relating his songs to US American musical traditions (e.g., *The Great American Songbook*) and the social wrongs they protested. Hence the many exegeses of Dylan songs by eminent literary critics, biographers, and scholars from various disciplinary fields.

In the end, I suppose referring to his songs as song-poems (Sean Wilentz's term) seems the safest depiction. Bob Dylan has always paid minute attention to his verbal lyrics.⁴ Moreover, when discussing a Dylan song, for the most part we fix on a recollected, relatively immediate echo of its vocalized lyric by him, whether its having occurred on a recording or in a live concert. This recollected "text" produces a space for reflection

on the absent-present lyric. How can one listen to “Where Are You Tonight? (Journey Through Dark Heat)” (1978) and not *almost* simultaneously ponder the meaning of its elusive images and references? The same goes, of course, for “Tangled Up in Blue” (1975). What one does with this post- or a-performative reflection depends on the listener-cum-reader. But surely treating the lyric the way I do in this book, namely as a poem-infused song with spiritual legs and singularly performed by Dylan, counts for one important possibility.

In fact, he himself treats his lyrical work this way. All of his songs, so I would argue, inscribe a similar reflective space within themselves. For example, the two riders approaching society alias the watchtower in his well-known song “All Along the Watchtower” perhaps are doing just that: forever approaching and never arriving with a message for us, in whatever form such a message might take. Don’t we here collide with a question that itself becomes the message? The song’s opening vocational scene raises the stakes of this question beyond those that riddle Keats’ pastoral urn. Whatever the conclusion of their initial dialogue, the two riders’ imminent arrival ambiguously exemplifies Dylan’s resistance to communicative closure. This interpretation becomes reinforced if one maintains with some critics that the song’s end loops back to its beginning: the two riders, really two sides of Dylan when composing the song, are debating his vocational role as they approach the “watchtower.” Should and/or can he at all warn others about the necessity to face the real? “All Along the Watchtower” figuratively represents its own moment of approaching its *listener* in the song’s “now.”

This self-reflexive, allegorized lesion in communication occurs elsewhere in Dylan’s work. Consider the effect of his all but worn-out aphorism from “Love Minus Zero/No Limit” (1965), “there’s no success like failure/And failure’s no success at all.” Doesn’t that saying leave open the option for listeners to internalize an anxious freedom, signified and enacted by the saying’s inconclusive message? The same goes for the “everything is broken” refrain in the *Oh Mercy* song “Everything Is Broken” (1989). If *everything* is broken—this song, too?—what alternative exists? Even Dylan’s performance-practice of endlessly altering his songs’ renditions-cum-semiotic effects effectively recasts those songs so that they too appear in a state of never-ending, unresolved becoming.

Of course, we tend to replace this open-endedness with one or another “objective” meaning. As I discuss in Chapter 5, most listeners, to take one example, accept “All Along the Watchtower” as intimating a prophetic, outward-directed apocalyptic warning to the social establishment, which the Jimi Hendrix cover of the song helped reinforce. I maintain, however, that Dylan’s songs keep gagging this impulse to fill in the blanks. The very title of his now well-known and unfinished song “I’m Not There,” collected among his *Basement Tapes* songs, arguably personifies what his songs in fact *do*. This allegorized self-reflection of the song by a Dylan in the process of composing it at some point stops interpretation in its tracks. A good example of this hermeneutic veto occurs in the second line of the song “Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum” from the 2001 album *Love and Theft*: “They’re throwing knives into a tree.” Simply enough, the line suggests that this activity shows the two ho-hum characters as just passing the time. Upon reflection, however, they also figure obvious send-ups of average middle-class Joes who live life with zero spiritual reflection—like, by implication, most of mankind.

At best they make, as the allegorical pun has it, “stabs at the truth”: that is, at “a tree” alluding to the biblical Tree of Knowledge. The issue turns out a vocational one: the two do not know how to live their lives, or what for, but proceed to live blithely as if they did. But can the listener know any more than they? Stalling us from instantly grasping its allegorized sense, the song solicits our desire for and triggers our failure to receive—as it were, our own fall from—knowledge: not only about others like these spiritually obtuse characters, but also about the Dylan song’s conveying this very suggestion.

For me, Dylan’s genius lies in his uncanny ability to double-track his lyrics while composing them: to “think twice” or on two semiotic registers at once, with the second steadfastly focused on the vocational whys and wherefores that strike him during particular acts of writing. From one angle, the fact that his songs linger within a sphere of incompatible double-meanings testifies to their poetic value. Geoffrey H. Hartman calls this kind of textual event a “delay” of the “communication” or meaning-making “compulsion.” An undecided middle space defines what makes a poem, or let us say a Dylan song, poetic as such. That space requests “a labor that aims not to overcome the negative or indeterminate but to stay within it as long as necessary.” Discussing W. B. Yeats’ poem “Leda and the Swan,” Hartman observes that it leaves us with a question—I would here include the question Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower” leaves us with—that “obliges the reader to become active, even to risk something,” namely to “*stand . . . in that question.*” Not rushing to answer such a question can lead us to “take our time and think of the relation of the human mind to what overthrows it.”⁵

From another angle, I argue that Dylan seeks precisely “*what overthrows*” his mind or, more accurately, his sense of a bottomed-out self-identity, and does so by allegorizing his scene of autobiographical composition in and through his songs. As I adopt the term in this book, “allegory” refers to the stubborn otherness (*allos* itself meaning “other”) attached to a Dylan song’s conventionally understandable or objectively determinable meanings. Contrary to a system of signifiers that transparently refer to a fixed set of moral or spiritual signifieds, Dylan’s self-referential allegories never rise to the level of objectively definitive representation. They disappear from view, as it were, at the very point that his poetic-lyrical act goes off as if without a word (“She never said nothing, there was nothing she wrote”) toward the real, for example “with the man/In the long black coat” (“Man in the Long Black Coat”). As I regard them, then, Dylan’s songs orbit around his traceable efforts precisely to justify composing them in the midst of engaging a nothingness that possesses phenomenological force for him then and there.

I focus on *this* type of autobiographical rumination in the following chapters. I also argue that Dylan passes through different phases of aligning his vocation with that vision of spiritual point. His allegorized songs especially of the 1965–67 period disclose him seeking: (1) to engage a freedom of self determined against agenda-ridden thinking and/or socially secure notions of “self”-reference (in Chapter 1 on *Bringing It All Back Home*); (2) to endure an anxious freedom evoked when he accepts the end-game of self as “nothing” or as “a *complete* unknown,” which unleashes a freedom equally determined in relation to how other people reject that vision of it (Chapter 2 on *Highway 61 Revisited*); (3) to expel from consciousness those others “whom” he internalizes as interfering with his realization of that “real” freedom (in

Chapter 3 on *Blonde on Blonde*); (4) to imagine a private artistic space in which to decompress the foregoing agon with audience-others, while retaining the spiritual aim of his vocational labor (Chapter 4 on *The Basement Tapes*); and (5), to accept an ethics of the singular self, yet one compatible with other persons' pursuits of different but no less spiritually oriented goals (Chapter 5 on *John Wesley Harding*).

Throughout my discussions, I maintain that Dylan's autobiography of his vocation masks an inescapably subjective relation to his songs that requests the same from us. In that sense, I more or less adopt the position of the French phenomenologist Georges Poulet. As depicted by Hazard Adams, Poulet provocatively asserts that the critic writes "a criticism that is itself literature in an attempt to convey his consciousness of his author's consciousness. His [the critic's] work, in turn, will be more than its own objectivity when it also finds a reader and joins itself to that reader's consciousness."⁶ In this book, however, I complicate Poulet's position in two ways. First, I accept the Freudian qualification that written and putatively objective versions of our experiences necessarily come down to the writer's motivated wish.⁷ Second, I accept Jacques Derrida's widely understood argument to the effect that any endeavor to occupy an author's textually evoked subjectivity necessarily falls victim to the myth of self-presence. Even the self I think I am in relation to others is out of sync with the "unknown" something about myself that at any moment can flood that socially recognizable "self"-reflection. More in retrospect, I can equally acknowledge a "something there is about [me]," to paraphrase a line from a Dylan song,⁸ that provides the raw, anonymous material for my variously definable selves. "I am an other," Rimbaud famously uttered, a phrase that Dylan alludes to in his album notes to *Bringing It All Back Home*. But one can add that most often, I am also not such an other to another. The Martin Buber "Thou," say, constantly entails a problematic goal, since it most often assumes the proportions of a miraculous occurrence.⁹

Yet when all is said and done, the Dylan *in* his songs resists turning into a Buberian "It." He means to be sure that "there was no man around/Who could track or chain him down" ("John Wesley Harding"). All of Bob Dylan's associable group-orientations, for example his religionist affiliations, sooner or later become up for grabs in his *Dylan* songs.¹⁰ To be sure, as performer of them, he allows for the illusion of our taking his subjectivity objectively. Listeners of Bob Dylan's songs surely experience the temptation, encouraged by their musical-vocal presentation, to apprehend the singer as if he were all but totally present to and in them. Even then, however, the lyrics keep inviting post-immediate reflection. There, as it were at that crossroads of interpreting his songs, one can certainly opt for one or another plausibly "objective" reading, for instance concerning their sociological relevance especially in the 1960s' Western rock 'n' roll milieu or US culture at large.¹¹

Instead, in this book I take the other road and try to discuss the Dylan disappearing into his songs at the point of the question they leave behind after scripting a vocational scene. One then and there encounters a blank "Dylan," the other *become* other by his now unexpected but lyrically enacted residual absence. We are left with an image of subjectivity the equivalent of the "nothing" that I argue Dylan finds it crucial to engage to justify composing his work. In effect, he ideally would become "masked

and anonymous,” or a mystery not just to us but also himself. The “existential” project I assign to Dylan thus has him working to come upon not the pleasures of self-indulgence, but rather of a contentless or emptied *self*: “When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose/You’re invisible now, you got no secrets to conceal” (“Like a Rolling Stone”). One finally has no secrets because they all come down to one’s own “nothing,” but only as one registers that subjectively.

Of course, this subjectivist critical take smacks of critical fiction, since who can or could ever verify it? But first, the subjectivity to which I refer is dialectically qualified. Regarding the interpretation of creative texts, it concedes first dibs to the impulse to explain things objectively, for purposes of sharing that reading with others. Only then would criticism redirect the so-called objective, textual evidence back to the author and/or reader’s subjective field of apprehension. Second, one can claim, I think, that so-called “objective” critiques of Bob Dylan’s works anyway amount to tropes for subjective responses. I regard the act of criticism as the plausible explication of a desired possible thought in relation to a text. Our privileging scientific criteria notwithstanding, we each want that text to say what we want it to say (positively or negatively), based on the evidence it supplies that we think will seem plausible to peers. But if plausibility depends on, as I think it does, relative “interpretive communities,” to use Stanley Fish’s helpful critical term (itself dependent on an interpretive community to seem plausible), what happens to “objective” critique?

So yes, in this work I discuss an entirely surmised “Dylan.” But first, *is it that?*¹² And in any case who’s hurt by it, especially if the reader finds it interesting, and possibly more than that? I suppose I could rely on old chestnuts to justify my interpretive flings into the Dylan dark. Nathaniel Hawthorne conveniently provided one: “Nobody, I think, ought to read poetry, or look at pictures or statues, who cannot find a great deal more in them than the poet or artist has actually expressed. Their highest merit is suggestiveness.”¹³ And Adam Phillips reminds us that Freud, regarding both literary works and the “self,” called for the interpretive practice of “overinterpretation,” since “all genuine creative writings are the product of more than a single impulse in the poet’s mind.”¹⁴ Overinterpreting Bob Dylan’s songs or not, I do believe that the Dylan I recreate in the following book at least exists tangled up among them.