

Bob Dylan's 116th Dream: Reflections on the Lyrics

By Louis A. Renza

It is by no means an irrational fancy that, in a future existence, we shall look upon what we think our present existence, as a dream.

—Edgar Allan Poe

“[Dylan] was a lost soul, a sad guy. With all his profoundness, with all his depth, a pitselah Yid was there.”

—Rabbi Yankel Rapp on meeting with Dylan during his Australian tour, 1992

NOT A FEW CRITICS of Bob Dylan's songs think one ought to discuss them primarily *as* songs, which is to say not as the equivalent of written poems.¹ Even without poststructuralist prompting, the Dylan “text” clearly comprises a constantly interchangeable complex of verbal lyric, musical arrangement, and vocal performance—his in particular. Moreover, not a few signature Dylan songs like “A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall” and “Like a Rolling Stone” bear specific cultural traces that one feels compelled to factor into any interpretation of the lyrics. Greil Marcus, for instance, thinks that the social, political, and musical contexts of Dylan's “Like a Rolling Stone” forward its significance as a threatening because agenda-elusive “Declaration of Independence”: “[The song] was an incident that took place in a recording studio and was then sent out into the world with the intention of leaving the world not quite the same. . . . [It was] like drawing a line to see what would happen” (149, 150–51).

Besides considering their social-political relation to the quasi-revolutionary 1960s, any exegesis of Dylan's lyrics obviously must take account of their effect on the “pop” musical scene of the times. Few critics would dispute how in the milieu of mass-media popular music, he almost single-handedly advanced the criterion of a songwriter's performing his or her own songs. No less notably, “Like a Rolling Stone” stretched the “listening” conventions of radio time for individual songs.² Above all, Dylan raised the intellectual decibel level for rock ‘n’ roll songs by melding their kinesthetic rhythm-and-blues

sounds with the lyrical genre of folk-music and the jazz-like prosody as well as anti-conventional topics of “beat” poetry.

As if these disparate ingredients comprising the Dylan “text” weren’t enough, interpreters of his lyrics must also come to terms with the celebrity figure of “Bob Dylan.” An ever-present, voyeuristic temptation exists to scan his lyrics for what they say about him per se. This reductive biographical perspective often entails forcing them to provide *People Magazine*-like information about his personal life. Fans and not a few otherwise serious critics have scoured his songs to determine his drugs of choice (in “Mr. Tambourine Man,” for example), his love-interest of the moment (“Don’t Think Twice, It’s Alright” or “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands”) or the state of his marital relations (the *Blood on the Tracks* lyrics), as well as his latest religious or political affiliation. When it doesn’t devolve into mere “Bobcat” miscellanea, this ersatz biographical perspective can focus on Dylan as “performing artist.”³ Discographical analysis—how, when, and where he recorded or performed certain songs, and how differently he arranged them each time—further serves to expand both the appearance and meanings of any particular Dylan work. For example, today he might vocally render “It Ain’t Me, Babe” in a plaintive manner, as if sad about his inability to satisfy his audience’s expectations, as opposed to the tone of angry defiance that characterizes how he sang the song on the 1964 album *Another Side of Bob Dylan*.

In short, for interpretive purposes the difficulties in isolating the Dylan “text” make it seem critically indefensible to focus primarily on the verbal aspect of his lyrics. All the foregoing factors and more—such as how certain “social conditions” were in place early on that Dylan exploited and which allowed him to become a “star,”⁴ or how his songs cite or allude to both known and obscure works by various poets and other songwriters—all but demand multi-disciplinary approaches to his body of work. This fact frames any single interpretation of any one lyric as at once arbitrary and incomplete. There patently exist as many ways to understand Dylan’s canon of works as disciplines of thinking. Inviting multiple, critical perspectives,⁵ his songs for that very reason continually slip their semiotic as well as semantic moorings.

If only in the interests of critical economy, one thus has little recourse but to choose which Dylan “text” to interpret. For starters, this means that any would-be interpreter must partially make up the Dylan lyric she wants to interpret, whether or not that turns out to be the version of a song Dylan performed on its first album appearance. Nevertheless, to determine that song’s artistic value, it makes sense to fasten as much as possible on the verbal lyrics per se,

since that feature has definitively marked his songs as special from the very beginning of his career.⁶ Dylan's lyrics—this feature surely defines their singularity—noticeably deviate from conventionally understood topics and modes of expressing them in different musical genres. In that sense alone, his lyrics possess a kind of poetic valence. At the same time, they arguably extend what “poetic” means—and perhaps recover what it once meant—when one reckons with their aural medium and mass-media reach. Indeed, by itself the simple performative immediacy of his lyrics as sung by him surely helps them reach a wider audience and also with greater dramatic impact than most of the written, academic poetry of our time. On the other hand, Dylan's “poetic” credentials don't solely depend on the electronic amplification of his words. For example, Christopher Ricks and other critics have shown how Dylan's lyrics ply rhymes, word-play, and even clichés that bristle with metaphorical double-takes.⁷

At minimum, the textual complex and verbal wit that characterize Dylan's entire *oeuvre* forces one to contest reductive judgments about whether or not his lyrics possess “high” poetic value. According to Michael Gray, A. S. Byatt, the critically esteemed novelist and an astute literary critic in her own right, maintained in a 1992 BBC broadcast that compared to canonical poems in English, Dylan's song-lyrics don't merit second readings. As Gray paraphrases her remarks, “the qualitative difference between Keats and Dylan [for her] is that with Keats, she could take you through one of his poems and reveal many layers,” whereas with Dylan's lyrics “she wouldn't know where to begin” doing that (*Encyclopedia*, 371).⁸ Gray plausibly dismisses Byatt's judgment. Even the titles of Dylan's albums, especially when coupled with their songs, can retroactively resonate with multiple layers of poetic significance.⁹

Indeed, even a particular song can relate to its album's title or topical motif in puzzling ways. In such cases, it is as if the song were but one of many other possible variations on a fungible theme. “Went to See the Gypsy” on *New Morning* (1970) provides a good case in point. The persona meets a gypsy in some “dark and crowded room” of a large hotel. The two greet each other as if the gypsy had been expecting to see the narrating Dylan: “he said ‘Well, well, well.’”¹⁰ The two exchange a phatic greeting—“‘How are you?’ he said to me / I said it back to him”—but for some reason that he never explains, the narrator abruptly leaves and goes down to the hotel lobby “To make a small call out.” Apparently intuiting that he has some doubt about his meeting with the gypsy, “A pretty dancing girl” urges him to return to the room, for the gypsy

can move you from the rear,

Drive you from your fear,
Bring you through the mirror,

which, she continues, he had already done “in Las Vegas,” presumably for other persons. Turning his gaze from her, Dylan suddenly looks at what he terms “the river of tears” outside the hotel and notices “lights” from a “distance / With music in my ears.” Only then does he decide to return to the gypsy, who, however, has in the meantime already left the hotel. The song ends with the persona watching the sunrise alone in “that little Minnesota town.” His use of the indicative pronoun (“that”) suggests that the entire episode has taken place all along in this Midwestern backwater.

The song’s elliptical narrative has all the makings of a significant anecdote, but concerning exactly what seems difficult to determine. The listener/reader clearly must fill in—even make up—the narrative particulars in order to interpret the lyric. Gray among other critics thinks they refer to Dylan’s meeting with rock ’n’ roll icon Elvis Presley, who toward the end of his career had famously performed in Las Vegas (*Dylan Encyclopedia*, 371).¹¹ To refine this reading more provocatively, one might say that “Went to See the Gypsy” registers Dylan’s final judgment as to the difference between his kind of rock ’n’ roll performance and Presley’s. That is, in line with their superficial meeting (their phatic greeting), neither one has anything of substance to say to the other.

Yet the song’s narrative arguably has more significance for the Dylan speaker than this somewhat straight biographical reading suggests. One can get at this more by noting how the album’s other songs one way or another confess his, at the time, ambivalence about the fit between his supposedly settled family situation and his lingering artistic ambition. The songs variously intimate his desire to believe in the importance of marital-domestic life (suggested in the album’s inaugural and precariously conditional song “If Not for You”), his inward rejection of artistic fame, not least in the world of academe (in “Day of the Locusts”), and yet also his suffering a kind of metaphysical malaise (“Father of Night”) in his having made these same judgments. So one can plausibly surmise that in the frozen “Winterlude” of his imaginative state (to make use of another *New Morning* song and title), Dylan fantasizes meeting a “gypsy”: someone who might tell him what vocational direction he should follow to recover what his creative work once meant for him.

Given the gypsy’s popular status in the song, indicated by his “crowded” hotel room, one way for Dylan to reinvigorate his career would entail his returning to the entertainment circuit. As the dancing girl attests, this option defines the gypsy’s own means of

a (“Las Vegas”) vocational reprise. Even so, the persona still has a “small” doubt, likely because the gypsy’s “low and dim” room, not to mention his initially incommunicative greeting, reminds Dylan of the entertainment world’s suffocating pressures as opposed to any roomy opportunities for doing creative work. So he goes down to the lobby to phone and check with someone outside that world, perhaps his wife or more likely someone personifying his artistic conscience, about whether or not he should indeed follow the gypsy’s vocational model.

In this reading, the “pretty dancing girl” more accurately personifies *his own* inner attraction to performing his lyrics and once more trying to realize his artistic potential in public. She representatively articulates what most tempts him about following the gypsy’s lead: to be in the limelight again (and so no longer in “the rear”), to regain his self-confidence to perform (overcoming his “fear”), and, more pointedly, to realize his ideal selfhood, i.e., break through to his “mirror” image or how he really wants to appear before others. Earlier his doubt was “small,” a mere hesitation; it did not entirely banish his inclination to return to the “crowded” public scene. The “pretty” girl in the hotel lobby still had the erotic wherewithal to entice him to adopt the gypsy’s way. After he sees the “river of tears,” however, Dylan comes to doubt that option more decisively. Judged against his past creative determination to write and sing lyrics with existential point—viewing life, say, as a “river of tears”—the gypsy comes to represent a severely limited way out of Dylan’s present creative malaise and anxious sense of self-isolation. Seeing “the river of tears” reminds him precisely of his earlier artistic criterion and so of what he really wants to do: “With music in my ears,” to compose lyrics consonant with the pains that both he and others suffer in the real world. With that newly determined proviso, he then can go back to see the gypsy. His “river” epiphany has made it clear that he can return to the entertainment world only if he can also create personally and ethically relevant work there. Along with the girl, however, the gypsy has disappeared, meaning that the critical moment of Dylan’s temptation again to compose and perform his lyrics in public has itself passed. In line with the motif threading throughout both the album’s title and songs, he now finds himself in a “new morning” (“It was nearly early dawn”) and in the same place (the “little Minnesota town”) where—being, as John Hinchey has remarked, a literal autobiographical allusion¹²—the creative musical-lyrical impulse first took hold of the real Bob Dylan.

“Went to See the Gypsy” leaves unclear whether Dylan achieves an imaginary recovery of a new artistic beginning or instead experiences a vocational recession, a diminished version of himself as artist. One

could make the case either way. On one hand, the song imaginatively rehearses his very origins as an ambitious musical artist who could once imagine composing songs without thinking too much about their mass-public, entertainment value or acceptance. What with his “big hotel” and entourage, the gypsy self-evidently fails this vocational charge, not unlike the way Bob Dylan himself had done during the period immediately before his 1966 accident. Now he thinks to recover this earlier stance. On the other hand, returning homeward resonates with the reason why he first “went to see the gypsy,” as if returning “home” signified mere nostalgia: a failure of artistic nerve and his inability to get beyond his present creative impasse. He finds himself back at square one, as if in Minnesota all over again, at least in relation to the creative standard to which he now holds himself accountable. He construes his present as not having progressed beyond the point of *fantasizing* composing serious, artistic lyrics.

Does “Went to See the Gypsy,” then, reflect a “New Morning” or a “New Mourning”? Here we encounter what we could most accurately term the compounded ambiguity of the typical Dylan lyric. From one angle, we can easily enough register the multi-metaphorical resonances of his lyrics. His “tambourine man,” for example, signifies for him a muse-like inspiration or else quite the contrary: a figure synonymous with abdication of the lyrical impulse. Such ambiguity can turn ethically knotty as well: take his well-known pro-civil rights song “Blowing in the Wind.” The song’s virtually endless questions suggest as much moral stalemate as a victorious, “we shall overcome” moral charge: “How many years *can* a mountain exist / Before it’s washed to the sea?” Like the infinity of obstacles facing humanity’s realizing a utopian human peace, Dylan’s poetic ambiguities trump conventional moral concerns. His poetic impulse instead favors disclosing what he regards as the complexity of the real, which in turn sets the bar for his determining whatever constitutes an ethical decision.

“Went to See the Gypsy” also brings to the fore an autobiographical strain in his lyrics that makes any kind of ethical decision ambiguous. The song’s self-referential turn points to how generally accessible poetic disclosures of the real that might otherwise lead to ethically grounded actions become secondary to Dylan’s own, contingently specific ethical-vocational concerns while composing his song. This situation clearly interferes with its poetic relevance for the audience. Difficult enough to unravel let alone specify, any given Dylan song’s semantic content might always be going further, in effect thus taking that song out of range to the reader’s/listener’s codes of understanding and therefore also of his/her existential apprehension.

Put another way, the autobiographical aspect of the Dylan lyric defines it as, in essence, interpretable only as non-interpretable even

as it paradoxically requests interpretation. A later song in Dylan's canon, "Series of Dreams" (1991), dramatically illustrates this autobiographical paradox. At first glance, the song seems to invite one or two immediate understandings, not the least being that here he seems to construe "dreams" to mean just dreams. As if referring to actual dreams, he conjures a series of scenes that appear to lack any significance, but just appear one after another in a state of constant evanescence from sense and memory. He himself "just" allows them to appear without attempting to draw anything too scientific, i.e., meaningful, from them. Dream interpretation, Freudian or other, is left aside. At best, one might surmise that dreams here metaphorically point to the data of his raw experience toward which he here adopts something akin to the counter-cultural, neo-romantic stance he had sketched for his "lover" in an earlier song, "Gates of Eden" (1965):

At dawn my lover comes to me
 And tells me of her dreams
 With no attempts to shovel the glimpse
 Into the ditch of what each one means

So too, in "Series of Dreams" he would avoid intellectual examination of his experiences for their supposed hidden meanings:

I was thinking of a series of dreams
 Where nothing comes up to the top
 Everything stays down where it's wounded
 And comes to a permanent stop

Literally referring to dreams as such, Dylan's song by analogy warns us to refrain from interpreting *it* as well.

Still, one cannot help but notice how the dreams he refers to verge on nightmarish moments, leading us to wonder why he insists on writing a song about just a series of dreams. A wound lurks in them that feels permanent and inescapable: "there's no exit in any direction / 'Cept the one that you can't see with your eyes." As the song's refrain has it, he ineluctably experiences such dreams without any mediation: "Dreams where the umbrella is folded / Into the path you are hurled." On one side, he appears to *choose* to suffer them minus any rationalized shield: "Wasn't making any great connection / Wasn't falling for any intricate scheme." At the same time, he wants to escape these trauma-evoking dreams. First of all, he refers to them in "quasi" fashion ("*Like* in a dream"), which itself suspiciously suggests a rhetorical act that would evade their otherwise unmediated impact. Second, he exhibits a prevaricating reflex in the way he obliquely alludes to himself. As dreamer, he acts like an anonymous "*someone*

[who] wakes up and screams” when having these dreams. Not only that but the wish to escape them arguably occurs even in the course of his dreaming them: “In one [dream], I was running, and in another / All I seemed to be doing was climb.”

On second glance, then, “Series of Dreams” doesn’t simply refer to “*just* a series of dreams,” as if Dylan were indifferent or merely curious about them. On the contrary, he clearly uses the word “just” ironically. Whereas dreams are subject to amnesia as soon as we wake up from them, his remain explicitly memorable and stick in his craw. He may wish to purge them—one can maintain that the present lyric enacts that very wish—by insisting that they lack meaning; but in fact, we can infer easily enough that they possess all too much meaning for him, even if he seems helplessly unable to define it. At minimum, “Series of Dreams” accrues a poetic resonance insofar as it can be understood to express anyone’s experience when encountering the abyss in self. After all, as previously noted, he can’t “see” any escape while dreaming them, not even by some lucky chance: “And the cards are no good that you’re holding / Unless they’re from another world.”

Considering the song from a critical-biographical viewpoint, however, a Dylanologist might entertain yet another interpretation of “Series of Dreams” by noting how, in 1991, Dylan still maintained religious-ideological affinities. Despite his then apparent disaffection from his former Christian fundamentalist views, he yet occasionally allows them to infiltrate certain songs at least through the 1989 album *Oh Mercy*.¹³ For example, “Political World” situates people in a milieu of damnation. Salvation can’t ever occur “in a political world, / [Where] Love don’t have any place.” In “Ring Them Bells,” the Dylan speaker asks “St. Peter” to help people wake up from their secular fixations: “Ring them bells St. Peter / . . . with an iron hand / So the people will know.” In short, the world that these putatively post-Christian songs sketch still positions mankind as doomed to despair, alienation—in essence, to “original sin.” However one regards them, one’s worldly experiences come down to a series of Godless dreams: mere fictions wherein, absent any absolute grounding, one can never feel genuinely real. Our only solution to this unreality lies in “another world,” akin to some mythological afterlife, which while living we can never really “see.”

Over his entire career, for that matter, Dylan has valorized the invisible—consider his inaugural “The answer . . . is blowin’ in the wind”—over the material world, most notably in songs like “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” (1963) and “Thunder on the Mountain” (2006), both rife with apocalyptic intimations. Other songs circle around the invisible as the desired but perpetually missing transcendental

justification of his existence. "Visions of Johanna" from *Blonde on Blonde* (1966) stages an erotically present "Louise" who only "makes it all too concise and too clear" to the singer that the "Madonna"-like figure of "Johanna's not here." In "Where Are You Tonight? (Journey Through Pure Heat)" from *Street Legal* (1978), Dylan associates the "invisible self" of another female figure with a "truth . . . too profound and too pure," even for the likes of "Marcel" (Proust) and "St. John" (of the Cross), questers, respectively, after lost time and a self not entirely voided of God.

Aidan Day has thus plausibly argued that Dylan's supposed carnivalesque inventions of self throughout his career—and here one can add: as celebrated in Todd Haynes' quasi-biopic film *I'm Not There* (2007)—are haunted by his belief in the transcendental "Judgment," if not of the New then of Old Testament scripture. Day holds that Dylan definitively returns to the latter biblical code in post-Christian songs like "Caribbean Wind" (1985), with its title again alluding to an invisible force: "The hearing of the ancestors in 'Caribbean Wind' was only another expression of an imagination constituted in an Hebraic conviction of the inevitable and dread-inducing nature of divine judgement" ("Dylan's Judgement," 98–99).¹⁴ Day further asserts that in retrospect, Dylan's apocalyptic rumblings in earlier songs equally simmer with Old Testament visions of final Judgment. Day's thesis about Dylan's vision of an existence without redemption especially applies to the songs on his most recent albums. For example, his expressed alienation from hope for an *Imitatio Guthrie* self once "bound for glory" seems all but complete in the song "Cold Irons Bound" from the 1997 album *Time Out of Mind*, where he states, "I'm twenty miles out of town in cold irons bound."

Still, this last sentiment also suggests the persistent co-presence of yet "another side of Bob Dylan." The song's iron-clad persona here signals an inconsolable and perhaps an a-theological detachment from *any* existent community ("town"), whether its credo be formally Old Testament or New. Indeed, his creative penchant for indecisive situations surely complicates our making any decisive judgment about his bottom-line allegiance not just to Old or New Testament final judgments about the human scene, but also to what Greil Marcus terms an "old, weird America," to which he claims that Dylan's constant "love and theft" of American folksong materials clearly testify. Right from the beginning of his career, many of his lyrics in fact thematically turn on the very issue of vocational indecision. For example, "Restless Farewell" (1964) hesitantly promises that he has arrived at a decisive ("my feet are now fast") view of life. He will move on from an older "past" vision to a different one, no doubt to be reflected in the kinds of songs he intends henceforth to compose.

Yet this valedictory decisiveness remains conspicuously undefined. His bidding “farewell” to the past and to “be down the line” points only to some indefinite future where a new but as yet unspecified vocational direction may transpire.

The last song on *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, “Restless Farewell,” forecasts the tenor of songs that will appear on Dylan’s next two albums, *Another Side of Bob Dylan* and *Bringing It All Back Home*. In both collections, withdrawal from social-political commitments itself assumes for him the status of a self-liberating ethos, particularly in relation to the self-certain ideological chants of both early 1960s American mainstream culture and its counter-cultural alternatives. In “My Back Pages” (1964), he associates the revolutionary longings of 1960s protestors with the “crimson flames” of—in other words, the burning demand for—decisive judgmental stances against established political authority. The Dylan lyric instead promises to practice disaffection from all such decision-provoking positions. As he says in “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)” (1965), “To understand you know too soon / There is no sense in trying.”

Being “twenty miles out of town” or in a state “not dark yet” in *Time Out of Mind* likewise holds off from final judgment about the human scene generally and about Dylan’s particular existential situation in it. That tension, to move toward but not judge events as final, defines the space of the late Dylan lyric as much as it did his earlier ones.¹⁵ In these later lyrics, finality assumes the aura of a religiously inflected apocalypse. Something of this religious-like indecision informs the futility that marks the Dylan speaker’s “dreams” in “Series of Dreams” where he finds himself unable to believe in this world as an end in itself, a belief that, for example, characterized his secularized, negative-theological stance in the aphoristic assertion of “Like a Rolling Stone”: “When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose.” Such negation becomes much more severe in Dylan’s later work, for now he continually frets over eschatological dreams not just concerning secular selfhood but also the idealistic dreams endemic to either Christian conviction or a Jewish-redux vision.¹⁶

This defines Dylan’s position, I would argue, when composing “Series of Dreams,” where he concedes that he has already tried to commit himself to one or another absolutist credo: “I’d already gone the distance.” Not only does he find himself unable to believe that such credos can define the real for him, he also no longer desires or feels the need for them to do that:¹⁷

Wasn’t looking for any special assistance
 Not going to any great extremes
 I’d already gone the distance

Just thinking of a series of dreams

In short, he can no longer believe in the possibility of a happy or non-alienated life here or in some salvific afterlife. Both poles now resemble dreams to him. In past lyrics, now and then he hallucinated both as if true, and so could easily do so again, insofar as lyrical compositions like dreams at bottom comprise wishes. Nevertheless, in having imaginatively exercised both possible truths, he now sees that he has experienced a series of them without any one of them having made an absolutely decisive difference. The same applies to his present inability to believe in either version of the really real. In short, everything appears to him as but parts comprising only—*just*—a series of dreams.

Besides inching toward the harsh skepticism evident in his *Time Out of Mind* songs,¹⁸ Dylan's quixotic vision in "Series of Dreams" includes his own particular lyrical works such as this very song itself. Indeed, one could claim that the song is a kind of autobiographical meta-song in which he is reflecting on the evanescent value of his previous body of work. One can easily enough connect the song's dream-motifs to any number of past Dylan lyrics.¹⁹ "One Too Many Mornings" (1964), for instance, refers to a wound of love that endures in a permanent stalemate: "You're right from your side, / I am right from mine." Similarly, the well-known protest song "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" uncannily reappears in the dream where "I witnessed a crime." To be sure, such connections unavoidably remain mere speculation. Yet in all phases of his career, Dylan's songs frequently traffic in this particular kind of autobiographical reflection. Take the opening lines of the *Empire Burlesque* song, "When the Night Comes Falling from the Sky":

Look out across the fields, see me returning,
Smoke is in your eye, you draw a smile.
From the fireplace where my letters to you are burning,
You've had time to think about it for a while.

Where is the Dylan speaker returning from in this 1985 lyric if not the Christian-religious segment of his career? He even acknowledges that we ("you") are likely "burning," his "letters," i.e., discounting his Christian lyrics as meriting inclusion in his canon.²⁰

One can draw, I think, two points from such self-referential musings. First, "Series of Dreams" invites a series of Dylan's own as well as our interpretations of his songs, with none of them ever decisively the "right" one. The song's very premise consists in the de facto annulment of his (any) intended meaning, or more accurately, in the failure of his as well as our ability to discern it. The "dreams"

obliquely include multiple referential possibilities: not only to literal dreams or mental experiences replete with existential trapdoors, but also to his past experiences, including his lyrical reconfigurations of them, all now regarded from a formidable, temporal distance. The song's "dreams," in short, allude to Dylan's other *songs* as "dreams." And it is here, second, that we encounter the Dylan text's truly intractable ambiguity. Songs like "Went to See the Gypsy" and "Series of Dreams" typify the Dylan lyric in how they disappear behind a haze of special or doubly reflected, autobiographical references. On one level, they concern his private life, which at best we can reconstruct from an external position but only in general and/or probabilistic terms, by definition at odds with his. On a second level, he uses these same autobiographical materials as tropes to define his relation to the very songs he is composing or performing.

In short, "Series of Dreams" illustrates Dylan's use of lyrical composition as an examination of vocational conscience that turns back on the lyric in question. Up to a point, the song thus reveals his relation to his work as a kind of ongoing, autobiographical scripting of his creative self. In doing that, it also blocks any audience's immediate, aesthetic relation to that work. As he scripts them in this song, his "dreams" entail a series of experiences momentarily captured and doubled in his songs, yet becoming, or destined to become, less and less definitive to him, and less and less accessible to us listeners. Like evanescent memories, such "dreams" are doomed to become continually dispersed. Put another way, Dylan's dream-song's temporal transformation of his past, artistic life retrospectively frames his lyrical works as having become significant for their lost significance. The very iterability of a Dylan lyric on which "Series of Dreams" itself ponders allows it to survive in the present as a kind of private yet also elusive memo of what it meant for him in an already amorphous, former scene of composition. His past songs alias dreams lead to a semiotic dead-end, capable of meaning this and that, temporally and fleetingly dependent on whatever point in one's life one encounters or formerly encountered them. Dylan's song lyrics thus leave one having to guess as well as futilely grasp at their meanings, as if one were always one remove from the song's specific semantic concerns.

A. S. Byatt was therefore right in not knowing where to begin discussing or deciphering a Dylan lyric. She was wrong to suppose that this exegetical block symptomatically reflects a deficit as to its interpretable layers. On the contrary, just as with the songs discussed in this essay, most of Dylan's lyrics parlay multiple registers of meaning, which their moving-target, multi-genre textual composition only serves to intensify but not essentially define. As I intimated earlier, to

interpret Dylan's works, the reader/listener must continually choose which text to read and the meaning with which to endow it. To make that unavoidable choice, however, is already to misread the sentiment expressed in a song like "Series of Dreams": neither those "dreams" nor his words about them mean "anything specific." By definition, in other words, the Dylan lyric evades final, specific interpretations, even as it no less specifically requests them. If that sounds like a truism about poetic effect generally, one also needs to keep in mind how his typical lyric simultaneously undercuts that effect, too. That is, it requires second reflections by us listeners/readers, and so in dis-relation with the immediacy, or at best the fugitive reflexivity, allowed by their musical-vocal medium.

One can further speculate about the extent to which such covert evasiveness constitutes the Dylan lyric's motivating and self-defining goal. A certain skittish commitment to any single ideological, musical-generic, and/or even poetic position, never mind to the many personal relationships refracted by his songs, clearly seems to enable his art from his early phase through the withholding motif expressed in the "ain't talkin'" refrain of a late lyric in *Modern Times*. But this penchant for unpredictability has less to do with an idiosyncratic temperament than with Dylan's self-imposed ethical mandate continually to interrogate his vocational self-identity. Even his noted reliance on fortuitous prosody (e.g., the rhymes in songs like "Everything Is Broken" and "Dignity"), or his borrowing of phrases and images from the Bible, literary works, and other songs and sources, arguably dramatizes a similarly motivated, vocational promiscuity.

All of this raises a series of questions that go beyond commonly understood ethical issues, such as concerning Dylan's plagiarism of blues songs and artists. To be sure, one can argue that his relentless keeping of his work's meaning under arrest for as long as possible exemplifies a bad-faith, aesthetic mystification of the musical-verbal icon. Yet Dylan's predilection for lyrical enigma could just as easily serve as a kind of defense of privacy in an age of mass-media violations of self; or if not exactly that, then perhaps it signals his instinctive ideological effort to protect his work from the rampant commodity fetishism of his social-musical environment. "In this age of fiberglass," he states in the 1973 song "Dirge," "I'm searching for a gem," meaning whatever kind of artistic product that transcends marketplace exchange-value. One might even hold that Dylan's drive toward enigma means to counter what he intimates in "Series of Dreams" has become a much "too . . . scientific" world. Just as in "Political World" where he fingers a rabidly politicized social environment, in the song "Nettie Moore" from *Modern Times* he lays low

a “world of research . . . gone berserk,” no doubt in part anticipating interpretive analyses like the present one.

On the other hand, the trajectory of Dylan’s entire *oeuvre* may lie in an entirely different bracket of thought, the primary critical target of which comes down to any social environment intent on blocking the one desire consistently manifested in songs from “Like a Rolling Stone” through “Ain’t Talkin’”: to discern the primordial strangeness of life as such. In that sense, Dylan’s persistent bending of otherwise straight song-lyrics into stubbornly elusive, autobiographical references signifies an act of unique insight into the real. This simple but difficult vision refers precisely to the shock of his encountering absences of existential meaning in life—not, then, ever judging existence as meaningless once and for all. Such absences at once define and negate the goal that he feels constantly compelled to uncover through his never-ending series of lyric compositions and performances.

Unlike the many blues and folk precedents that he openly emulates as well as borrows from,²¹ Dylan doesn’t simply cite the void shadowing his experiences; in and through his lyrics, he strives to expose in order to engage it again and again, and paradoxically as if against his own will. “Ain’t it hard to stumble,” he asks in “Outlaw Blues” (1965), “And land in some funny lagoon?” “Every moment of existence,” as he writes in the 2001 song “Sugar Baby” from *Love and Theft*, “seems like some dirty trick / . . . Any minute of the day the bubble could burst.” If anything, this bubble-like scene points to what his aborted song “I’m Not There” was risking to broach: that in places where one thinks meaning ought to reside, e.g., with “her,” a personified matrix of would-be meaning, Dylan finds himself missing, in “shadows,” “not there, / I’m gone,” in some incredible loneliness of being.

Something like that absence can apply to us when encountering his lyrics. The Dylan song provokes the frisson of its meanings always in the process of disappearing, just like another woman figure “with the man / In the long black coat” in an eponymous *Oh Mercy* song. The strangeness of the existent, the uncanny aspect of human experiences focused on one by one in separate moments or verses experienced seriatim, but above all Dylan’s “locked in tight” (“Things Have Changed,” 1999), autobiographical relation to his work, end up defining what *we* look for and surprisingly still remain baffled by with his lyrical bijoux. For that matter, given his strange encounters with the real, so does he:

Noontime, and I’m still pushin’ myself along the road, the
darkest part,

Into the narrow lanes, I can't stumble or stay put
 Someone else is speakin' with my mouth, but I'm listening
 only to my heart.

I've made shoes for everyone, even you, while I still go
 barefoot. ("I and I," 1983)

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Notes

1. For the latest churning of these critical waters, see Leith and Ansari. Persons familiar with Dylan's *oeuvre* will recognize that the title of this essay plays on the title of "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream" from *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965).

2. Dylan also helped establish the precedent in the record industry for the double-record album for rock 'n' roll songs. See Wilentz.

3. Williams most notably has discussed Dylan's works along these performative lines in his multi-volume work covering Dylan's entire career (vi–xvii). Also see note 6 below.

4. This is Marshall's recent approach to the Dylan *oeuvre*. For instance, Marshall argues that Dylan's (or any so-called celebrity star's) "charisma" essentially consists of a "social effect": "a range of social conditions must be in place that enable an individual's talents and personality to become recognised as skilful and charismatic" (4).

5. The title of a recent collection of essays on Dylan's works demonstrates yet another critical venue: *Bob Dylan and Philosophy*. Other books on Dylan have emphasized the Christian and/or Judaic aspects of his lyrical musings.

6. With his "cultural studies" approach, Marshall like many other Dylan critics takes exception to focusing on the verbal lyric per se as central to a Dylan's song's significance: "it makes no sense to consider a popular music 'text' [like Dylan's] as having any existence outside of its performance. You cannot take the singer out of the song" (31). This depiction seems all the more case with the Dylan song given that we most often experience it through his vocal imprimatur, whether in its studio or live-performance version(s). Nonetheless, one can still scrutinize *that* performed text for its rhetorical nuances and whatnot. Moreover, the polymorphous aspect of the Dylan text makes it no less arbitrary to insist on the primacy of its social-contextual determination than to isolate that text for "lit-crit" analyses.

7. See especially Ricks' essay on Dylan's use of clichés in *The Force of Poetry* (356–68) and the discussion of Dylan's use of rhyme in *Dylan's Visions of Sin* (30–48).

8. Also see the more recent (2008) elitist denigration of Dylan's work by Greer, an otherwise astute literary and art critic.

9. When one considers the songs on his most recent album *Modern Times* (2006), for instance, the album's title becomes problematic. In no particular order, it alludes to the time-period we live in; to Charlie Chaplin's cinematic satire of "modern times"; and so, perhaps, also to Dylan's lyrical contretemps with the twentieth- and twenty-first-century world. Beyond that, the title exposes the very myth of the "modern." After all, the songs in *Modern Times*, not to mention its cover (taken from "Taxi, New York at Night" by Ted Croner, 1947), demonstrably exemplify the drag of past precedents affecting Dylan's present acts of composition.

10. With the exception of citations from *Modern Times*, all quoted references to Dylan's lyrics are from *Bob Dylan's Lyrics 1962–2001*.

11. Also see Gray (*Song & Dance Man III* 105). Heylin accepts this occurrence as fact (319). Trager also surmises that the song is about Dylan's meeting with Presley (670–71). Presley indeed once covered Dylan's early song, "Tomorrow Is a Long Time." It remains possible, however, that Dylan's meeting with Presley may have been an entirely imaginary event, or perhaps occurred in the sense that Dylan simply attended one of Presley's shows incognito.

12. Hinchey notes this same autobiographical allusion in his essay "New Morning and Beyond." He also reads the album's songs as rehearsing Dylan's ambivalent feelings about his domestic-pastoral life at the time, as well as his wish to return to a public, artistic life. However, Hinchey not only generally regards "Went to See the Gypsy" as a "minor song" "whose meaning seems to escape its singer," but also interprets the gypsy and dancing girl as figures representing positive vocational options that Dylan fails to follow, albeit with the "Minnesota" allusion pointing to his anticipation of an artistic "rebirth" that Hinchey thinks Dylan's next album, *Planet Waves*, shows him fulfilling (13–14).

13. Conversely, it is fairly well-known that around the time of "Series of Dreams," Dylan showed a renewed interest in his Jewish background, in particular with the Chabad-Lubavitch form of Judaism. See my comments below paraphrasing Day's argument in "Dylan's Judgment."

14. Day's essay is a revised version of a paper first delivered at "A Series of Interpretations of Bob Dylan's Lyrical Works: An Academic Conference at Dartmouth College," Hanover, New Hampshire, on August 11–13, 2006. Besides "Caribbean Wind," Day also discusses "I and I" and "Ain't Talking" along these same Old Testament lines, as well as revises his view of Dylan's song "Jokerman" contra his earlier thesis in his still important critical work *Jokerman* (1988).

15. In "Highlands" on *Time Out of Mind*, another (self-predictive?) album-ending song, Dylan doubly underscores his inability to decide what he wants before his famous contretemps with the waitress in the Boston restaurant: "I got no idea what I want / Well, maybe I do but I'm just really not sure."

16. Some critics make this last claim for Dylan's return to Judaism based on evidence of the *Shot of Love* song "Lenny Bruce" (1981) and "Neighborhood Bully" from *Infidels* (1983). See Cheyette.

17. Cheyette astutely notes that the two men at the railroad station in "I and I" (1983) "waiting for spring to come, smoking down the line," represent Dylan's divided self, the converted (Christian) and unconverted (Jewish), unified by an "insouciance at the potential end of the world" (250). I read the two figures as more particularly personifying would-be Christian and Jewish apocalyptic solutions to the fundamental human condition. Dylan finds himself now separated from both expectancies, as I think the lines quoted at the end of the present essay suggest.

18. In "Not Dark Yet," for instance, Dylan professes that he can't "even hear a murmur of a prayer" (*Lyrics* 566).

19. Dylan also often utters urgent entreaties to his audience or himself to wake up from a spirit-less as-if-sleepwalking existence, whether in "Like a Rolling Stone" (1965) or more explicitly in "When You Gonna Wake Up?" (1979): "You got some big dreams, baby, but in order to dream you gotta still be asleep." Not merely "The Times They Are A-Changin'" but also a song like "All Along the Watchtower" (1968) expresses how "the hour is getting late," just as "the time and the tempo fly" in "Series of Dreams." "My Back Pages" (1964), where he rejects easy distinctions between "Good and bad" or "Lies that life is black and white," anticipates his refusal to make his dreams reflect an "intricate scheme" so that they "might pass inspection" before one or another audience.

20. Note also how just when we might agree with him on this anticipatory judgment, he proceeds to dampen our dismissals of that career-phase by insinuating that "to think about it for a while" might lead us to reassess them.

21. Dylan suggests how his songs attempt resurrections of a fading generation of singers and songs in his own song from *Modern Times*, "Rollin' and Tumblin'," itself partially derived from a similarly titled Muddy Waters song: "The night's filled with shadows, the years are filled with early doom / I've been conjuring up all these long dead souls from their crumblin' tombs."

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