

## Teaching Dylan at Dartmouth College 1972-2010

“My older songs, to say the least, were about nothing. The newer ones are about the same nothing--only as seen inside a bigger thing, perhaps called the nowhere.”

--Bob Dylan, *Playboy* Interview, 1966

We are most unwilling to accept mystery, what cannot be reduced to other and more intelligible forms. Yet that is what we find here: something irreducible, therefore perpetually to be interpreted; not secrets to be found out one by one, but Secrecy.

--Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy*

I would argue that it's an impossibility to understand Dylan in the first place; therefore how could any of us *misunderstand* him? Dylan isn't "Blowing in the Wind," he's the wind itself, you know it's there but you can't see it or touch it. One can only understand its existence in its wake, the effects it has on the environment it occupies; and so Dylan's actions are always interpreted based on our reactions to them, not on what they are in and of themselves.

Dylan, it seems, is a magician who always has us distracted by the wrong hand while he pulls another quarter out of our ear.

--Laura-Jean Gilloux, a singer and former student in a Dartmouth Dylan course

Beginning around 1972, I began teaching a course exclusively on Bob Dylan's lyrics at Dartmouth College. I was able to do that by means of one option in the English Department curriculum. The College required all first-year students to take a seminar and for all departments to offer more than one. The seminar could revolve around any subject chosen by an instructor, but had to include at least four expository essays. This was one way for students to take a subject not offered in official Departmental curricula. For faculty, it provided a way to pursue scholarly interests not strictly related to their field of specialization.

I had long taken Dylan's songs for the equivalent of poetic works. I was and remain convinced that his so-called "songs" jumped the gate of any strictly defined genre, but could sustain the kind of interpretive scrutiny that the best poetry did. Despite his diminished impact on the cultural and musical scene when I first taught the course around 1972--*New Morning* was not exactly on a lyrical par with *John Wesley Harding* or *Blonde on Blonde*--Dartmouth students still recognized Dylan's special talent for breaking new visionary ground in the realm of popular music.

When I first taught the course, we listened to certain famous Dylan songs like "Blowin' in the Wind," "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," "Like a Rolling Stone" and "Desolation Row" and then discussed them in two two-hour periods per week. Discussions ranged from the mundane to higher planes: from "What's Dylan saying in that phrase--I couldn't make out his words" to "What does the 'Einstein' stanza in 'Desolation Row' mean?" Students throughout the Seventies were familiar with many of Dylan's songs, so there was little need--though much temptation on the students' parts--to relate them to what people then knew of his personal life. However, to situate the songs in at least a roughly sketched social-historical context, I used Anthony Scaduto's biography of Dylan until it became unavailable, eventually turning to Robert Shelton's and after that to the Sounes and Heylin

biographies. The most important change in the way I taught the course came in the second or third year when Dylan's "pink" *Writings and Drawings* book appeared. We could then go straight to discussing what the songs meant or were doing.

By the early Eighties, students knew more about Dylan by reputation than from any steady listening to his songs. In the Nineties and thereafter, I asked students to listen to songs, chronologically assigned according to album and period,<sup>1</sup> before class sessions, the better to discuss the lyrics per se. These students also cared less about the social-revolutionary side of Dylan's songs (something, we learn from *Chronicles*, that he himself might have applauded) than their "poetic" yield. In other words, they seemed more willing to "read" his songs than to respond to them in the way that Paul Williams and Betsy Bowden had earlier recommended, and of course that many Dylanologists still do. Such critics regarded Dylan's written lyrics as scripts for "performance" first and their poem-like status second. For instance, in a 1966 essay published in *Crawdaddy* that began his reputation as a notable Dylan critic, Williams argued for visceral apprehensions of Dylan's songs from *Blonde on Blonde*:<sup>2</sup>

The way you "understand" Dylan is to listen to him. Listen carefully: listen to one song at a time, perhaps playing it over and over to let it sink in. Try to see what he's seeing; a song like "Visions of Johanna" . . . (or almost any of his more recent songs) is full of pictures, moods, images, persons, places and things. "Inside the museums," he sings, "infinity goes up on trial." It doesn't mean anything; but you know what a museum feels like to you, and you can see the insides of one, the particular way people look at things in a museum, the atmosphere, the sort of things that are found there.<sup>3</sup>

On the whole, my students in the Seventies more or less agreed with this neo-Romantic interpretive relation to Dylan's works--if it can be called interpretive at all. I myself soon began to

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<sup>1</sup> For example, I would include a song like "Golden Loom" along with others on the album *Desire*, given that song's composition during the same period. Students could listen to the CDs as well as critical works on Dylan made available in the Dartmouth College Music Library.

<sup>2</sup> Williams, of course, took this approach to its maximum in his later volumes on Dylan, for example *Bob Dylan: Performing Artist: The Early Years 1960-1973* (Lancaster, PA: Underwood-Miller, 1990). Betsy Bowden's book, *Performed Literature: Words and Music by Bob Dylan*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982) provides a scholarly complement to Williams' discussions of some Dylan songs. Taking aim against "academic" criticism of Dylan's songs that I and others practice, Lee Marshall raises Williams's relation to Dylan's songs into a latter-day, ideological principle. See his "Bob Dylan and the Academy," *The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan*, Kevin J. Detmar, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), esp. p. 101.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Williams, "Understanding Dylan," *Crawdaddy*, 1966; reprinted in *Paste: Signs of the life in Music, Film & Culture* on July 20, 2011 at <http://www.pastemagazine.com/blogs/crawdaddy/2011/07/understanding-dylan.html/>. Accessed March 30, 2013.

resist it. In my opinion, the allergy to making “sense” out of Dylan’s songs didn’t justify the course’s college setting. Indeed, I took Williams’ approach as a kind of replay of what the old New Criticism found wanting in previous kinds of literary criticism of poems and fiction: when not indulging in mere subjective impressionism (e.g., “‘Visions of Johanna’ is a great song” or “It’s a song that just speaks to me”), then scrutinizing his songs for their social, philosophical, or worse, their biographical sources (“It must be about Bob Dylan’s relationship with Joan Baez” or “about an acid trip”). Music critics and reviewers of Dylan’s works more or less practice(d) this kind of critique, needless to say with the “in” knowledge of rock music aficionados.

On the other hand, I didn’t want to do what the New Critics did as an alternative to such criticism, that is, strive toward a putatively “objective” analytic rigor through which the songs would appear as if autonomous objects devoid of any immediate relation to listeners. Instead, I tried to have students treat the songs as acts of self that pertain to us, but that also change constantly depending on our experience at a given time. Take Williams’ example. In my opinion, his claim that the “museums” phrase in “Visions of Johanna” “doesn’t mean anything” plainly missed its point: people now attend public scenes, i.e., like rock-concerts (“museums”), and judge performed songs for anything but their existential value (“Infinity”). Or: “Infinity goes up on trial” precisely in the way issues of existential import get judged only within the semiotic context of *passé* art or else mere spectacle. In one sense, then, “Visions of Johanna” concerns Dylan’s own performance of it before us listening to it *right now*. Put another way, the song positions us to adopt a parallel relation toward Dylan’s song that he does toward “Johanna”: namely the felt absence of a Madonna-like other who figures the potential for an irrepressible vision of our existence-situation--“We sit here stranded, though we’re all doin’ our best to deny it.”

Dylan’s song thus effects not some objective truth *about* existence but rather teases us into a more telling subjective relation to it, and by extension to the very same song referring to it. Beginning in the mid-Eighties and especially when I taught Dylan’s lyrics yearly from 1996 through 2010 as an upper-division course at Dartmouth, that “spiritual” angle or lens defined how I asked Dartmouth students to regard his lyrics: on one hand, as a kind of Ker-ouacian record of the Dylan self’s ongoing and changing spiritual autobiographical relation to his life and work; on the other hand, as his continuously laying down--whether consciously intending to or not--the gauntlet of “desolation row” to his listening audience. One can sense a like motif also insinuating itself into the verbal fiber of a much later song like “Mississippi”:

Your days are numbered, so are mine  
Time is pilin’ up, we struggle and we scrape  
We’re all boxed in, nowhere to escape

This approach to Dylan’s work allows one to regard even his so-called evangelical songs--a sticking point for many students when we came to this part of his career--as tropes of something less secure or, more accurately, more anxious than what any particular system of religious belief proffers to a secular audience. Such a stance equally defines “Pay in Blood,” one of Dylan’s later songs from his album *Tempest*:

Well I'm grinding my life out, steady and sure  
Nothing more wretched than what I must endure  
I'm drenched in the light that shines from the sun  
I could stone you to death for the wrongs that you done  
Sooner or later you make a mistake  
I'll put you in a chain that you never will break  
Legs and arms and body and bone  
I pay in blood, but not my own

On one level, the speaker here adopts a sado-righteous attitude toward another person or persons. "He" may very well represent Dylan's imagination--either "straight" or possibly an ironic send up-of a vengeful, Judeo-Christian prophet ("drenched from the sun" a.k.a. Divine Light) threatening a sinner or reprobate with permanent punishment for supposed sinful acts ("the wrongs that you done"). But we don't need to go that religious route to develop a viable reading. As in Dylan's earlier "Maggie's Farm," perhaps the persona's utterances reflect his violent feelings and insight ("the light that shines from the sun") regarding persons of a social establishment that has placed him in a socially abject position. On still another level, ~~however~~, the song allows for an altogether counter-intuitive reading. "Pay in Blood" in this case personifies *its own* relation to others, and specifically to an entertainment-seeking audience: people who "mistake" or get lulled by the musical and/or performance medium into forgetting the existential demand (the figurative equivalent of "Legs and arms and body and bone") with which the Dylan song confronts them--or will whenever they collide with the messy contingencies besetting self. The *Dylan* song doesn't forget that.

This interpretation is, of course, subject to debate, and not only as a pedagogical gambit, although beginning with the ambiguity of what "answer" was "blowin' in the wind," Dylan's songs hardly outlaw this line of interpretation. Nonetheless it is, first, a *reading*, which I think the hybrid nature the Dylan "text," comprised of music and his uniquely vocalized lyrics, permits if not requires, especially when teaching the course at the college level. After all, when discussing a Dylan song, we mostly focus on a recollected echo of Dylan's vocal performance of it, whether in terms of the studio version, or else a bootleg or concert one. Into this post-present recollection, so to speak, a space for reflection on the absent-present lyric inescapably appears. What one does with that reflective space depends on the listener, but surely discussing the lyric as a quasi-poem counts as one important possibility.

Another reason exists for urging students to consider Dylan's songs lyrics that one can "read" somewhat like poems on a page, and not just because he puts all kinds of verbal pressure on the conventional idiom most often employed in various kinds of popular songs. The self-reflexive aspect of Dylan's songs constitutes a repetitive aspect of his entire work. Like "Lay Down Your Weary Tune," for example, "Mr. Tambourine Man" stands for a wish for himself to stop feeling the hectoring demands placed on his lyrics by a public audience that he has also internalized. "Mr. Tambourine Man" resembles Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper" where the poem (in Dylan's case, the lyric) arises from the speaker's *overhearing* a simpler song (tune) sung (played) unself-consciously by an anonymous other. Conversely, *Blonde on Blonde*'s "I Want You" refers to the moribund state--what with those "cracked bells and washed-out horns"--of songs then

dominating the pop-musical world. The Dylan song instead doesn't want ("wasn't born" or created) "to lose *you*," meaning the more serious Dylan kind of song.

"Simple Twist of Fate" from *Blood on the Tracks* shows another side of the Dylan song's self-reflexive trait. A typical class discussion might have come up with something like the following reading. The song finds the Dylan persona perplexed about how he has arrived at a present state of creative abjection, with the narrative in effect tracking one possible explanation about how he got this way. Just when he began getting serious about life (metaphorically figured by when "the evening sky grew dark"), he also got serious about his work. This vocational moment refers to the music to which he was initially attracted and wanted to compose. Like the woman he met "in the park," i.e., a place where children play, he then wrote songs with a suddenly gained existential perspective, yet (so it appears to him now) also in an innocent or unself-conscious manner. Almost by accident, he "felt a spark tingle to his bones": he experienced a vocational calling to pursue a mode of creativity wedded to the equivalent of a spiritual vision of existence--the kind of song promised in "I Want You." This moment initiated his career and goal, which also distinguished him from his peers. In that sense, his calling burdened him, one might say, with an artistic conscience, which explains why "'Twas" at that moment "he felt alone and wished that he'd gone straight." His career might very well have occurred in a less vexed manner ("straight") had he not incurred this vocational "fate," for example if he had simply composed and performed entertaining or morally edifying songs.

In the second verse, Dylan muses about his initial art-work immediately after grasping the serious implications of his calling. The two "walked along by the old canal." In other words, he first followed a traditional artistic path, e.g., folk music, although he was of two minds ("a little confused") in doing so. His confusion lay, perhaps, in how he wanted to write his own lyrics even as he achieved a certain measure of popular success within a traditionbound genre. Soon after, he became popular, at once performing his songs on stage before a large public, but also feeling alienated from this same success. The experience was akin to waking up in "a strange hotel" temptingly near the public spotlight--"with a neon burnin' bright." The attractions of composing and performing *his* songs had changed his life ("hit him like a freight train") but also led to his losing his previous, relatively innocent mode of doing artistic work. In that sense, everything was uncontrollably "Moving with the simple twist of fate."

At this point in his career, then, the lure of public performance was ever on his mind: "A saxophone someplace far off played." Artistic inspiration became diluted by having to concern himself with mass-public performances and entertainment. Figured as the woman, his art got paraded for its distractive cultural value: "As she was walkin' by the arcade." Soon enough, the realization dawned on him (the "light" to which he woke up) that he had abused his creative potential. So thoroughly had this public world infiltrated his imagination that he couldn't secure a mental space in which to do serious work. He only had "a beat-up shade" or a flimsy defense against invasions of his artistic privacy. Waking up in a "strange" place, he felt alienated from his original vocational aspiration to write/perform music of serious import, which in turn left him lonely. In effect blinded by his success, he then inwardly felt like a beggar for the inspiration "She" once gave him: "She dropped a coin into the cup . . ." Just as with other artists before him, he had become "Another blind man at the gate" of where the muse resides. He can only nostalgically pine for his original

relation to the creative brio that has now “forgot” him. Here inspiration indeed appears as an other: outside him and beyond his capacity to recover by desire alone. Regaining “her” seemed and still seems more a matter of luck (an arbitrary “simple twist of fate”) than a gift (a creatively enabling “simple twist of fate”).

The most he could do then was to recognize this situation for what it was: “He woke up” and “didn’t see her anywhere.” He tried to minimize his loss of inspiration: “He told himself he didn’t care” about its disappearance. Yet neither could he pursue his career as if nothing had happened: he “Felt an emptiness inside to which he just could not relate/ Brought on” by having forfeited his former vocational verve. This loss now poses an artistic quandary. On one hand, he can’t believe in his work’s public value such as for just entertainment, since that would merely reinforce the reason--his celebrity status--behind his present creative malaise. On the other hand, he can’t find a way back to doing songs in terms of his vocational criterion. Moreover, worrying about this state of affairs just wastes more artistic time (“He hears the ticking of the clocks”). His lyric compositions simply don’t appear authentic to him, but just Hamlet-like words, words, words that he repeats in public without any new passion: he “walks along with a parrot that talks.” He tries to recover his inspirational double by cavorting (“walks along”) with real situations in life or social topics (“the waterfront docks where the sailors all come in”) hoping that “she’ll pick him out again,” but since he posits “her” as beyond his control, he can only patiently wonder if the creative spirit will ever return: “[H]ow long must he wait/ [one more time] for a simple twist of fate?”

Dylan ends “Simple Twist of Fate” by providing an inadequate reason (from his point of view) for his disaffection from serious songwriting. “People tell” him not to subject his work to existentially burdened criteria: not to “feel [his work] too much within.” He can’t take such advice since, as this very song demonstrates, he has internalized that vocational standard for his artistic double (“she was my twin”). “Her” influence over him persists whenever he does artistic work, but so does his lost relation to “her” inspiration to which he once felt wedded: “I lost the ring.” In short, he’s become too experienced (“born too late”) to repeat or recover any innocent artistic past--“She was born in spring.” He has become aware of what he had “too late” to ever realize it fully, his only alibi, which he only half believes, being that his lost vocational chance happened by chance or was not due to his own fault; hence was simply a matter of destiny: “Blame it on a simple twist of fate.”

Like “Blind Willie McTell,” “Simple Twist of Fate” succeeds as a Dylan song about Dylan’s failure to live up to the kind of song he otherwise wants the present song to have been. This depiction isn’t some poststructuralist fandango. Rather it’s meant to present students with how the recursive trajectory of a Dylan song leads them to encounter the equivalent of a textual no-man’s-land wherein the usual sense of “meaning” becomes suspended. That’s why I mentioned but kept at a distance other otherwise salient critical approaches when teaching the course.

Even with regard to “meaning,” the Dylan song appears a manylayered thing, all as if he *does* think twice when composing his song-lyrics. One can therefore adopt many different ways to discuss them. Given today’s academic preference for “cultural studies” and Dylan’s own musicological savvy, for example, why not focus on how his songs fit into, deviate from, and/or contribute to the folk, rock ‘n’ roll and/or blues tradition(s) in American musical history? A related and often adopted

topical perspective consists of interpreting his work vis-à-vis the “protest” and “rock” contexts of the countercultural Sixties, and so alongside the social-political influences of the time as well as related songs by contemporary peers like the Beatles and Rolling Stones, among others. More “literary” types of critical surveillance can supplement these sociological ones or else stand on their own. What’s the relation between Dylan’s “Desolation Row,” say, and T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land”? Why not trace discernible apocalyptic motifs throughout Dylan’s canon? or track literary influences like the “Beats” or borrowings (acknowledged or not) from the likes of Ovid to Henry Timrod, not to mention, as excavated by certain critics already, Jack London and many other writers?<sup>4</sup>

Such formulations, however, while no doubt valid for scholarly kinds of investigation that justify an academic-bureaucratic niche already designated “Dylan Studies,” self-evidently work to produce a *knowledge* about an assumed objective “Dylan” complex--person, historical-cultural figure, and/or a corpus of songs that one can reduce to thematic strands and ideological affiliations--instead of using the pedagogical occasion to foster a relation of self to the Dylan song. Such approaches don’t work to build any “tight connection to [the] heart” of Dylan’s songs for undergraduate students long removed from them in terms of generational concerns and new options for constructing their own technological song-anthologies. More important, that “heart” remains impossible to define for the reason that, combined with the hybrid status of the Dylan “text,” his songs, as I have maintained, more often than not curve back on themselves as if they’re there *and* not there at the same time. Yet this very anomalous consequence of listening to and then interpreting them positions the Dylan song squarely in the camp of how Paul Valéry once defined poetry: as “the prolonged hesitation between sound and sense.”<sup>5</sup>

Such a reading worked well for me in teaching Dylan’s lyrics at Dartmouth. In the end, I think it adds to rather than detracts from their enduring value. You show how a Dylan song *comes* to appear precisely as an anomaly or, to adopt Sartrean terms for the moment, a For-itself, a surplus of freedom, that no one can assume ahead of time as always already in place. His songs move toward yet resist not only conceptual arrest but also all manner of ideological reductions including religious ones. None of them, as one of his songs suggests, can track or chain it down. Yet neither does that

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<sup>4</sup> For these kinds of approaches, see the important, well-known works by Sean Wilentz and Greil Marcus. Scott Warmth has been mostly responsible for tracking Dylan’s “plagiarisms” of Timrod, London and others. Christopher Ricks most notably has explicated the prosodic and verbal intricacies of Dylan’s songs. Richard Thomas has made the strong case for Dylan’s classical sources. See Alex Beam, “Dylanology 101,” *The Boston Globe*, at [http://www.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2009/03/20/dylanology\\_101/](http://www.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2009/03/20/dylanology_101/): “Harvard classics professor Richard Thomas sent me his fascinating article “The Streets of Rome: The Classical Dylan,” which documents Dylan’s reliance on Virgil and on Ovid’s “Tristia” and “Black Sea Letters” (!) in his songs . . . . Thomas argues that Dylan . . . is a modern rhapsode . . . ‘a poet on the cusp of oral and literary cultures.’” Accessed April 28, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Valéry’s statement quoted by Robert Pogue Harrison, “The Magic of Leopardi,” *NYRB* (February 10, 2011), p. 36.

anomaly smack of some happy liberation. As Aidan Day has remarked about “Like a Rolling Stone,” “the vacuum of the mystery tramp’s eyes” in that song “may be seen to define less an exhilarating freedom than a disturbing void of being.”<sup>6</sup> Day goes on to loop his latter-day view of Dylan’s late songs onto a return to “the inflexible” God “of the Hebrew Bible,” in that way accounting for their dire apocalyptic tenor.

Yet one need not go that far. Geoffrey H. Hartman’s less restrictive Hebraic depiction of Kafka’s and Biblical stories seems more in accord with my sense of the Dylan song’s “mystery tramp’s eyes” confronting the reader: “There is always a hidden point of infinite light or darkness. It is impossible to tell if the enigma is all there is, with the unrevealed truth absent, not just hidden, or whether the artist is actually delimiting a sense of absolute exile.” Holding off Christian typological-cum-messianic--or narrative--completions of Old Testament (Torah) stories, Hartman inclines toward midrashes that patiently attend to “the fault lines of a text, the evidence of narrative sedimentation [via variant rabbinical interpretations] that has not entirely settled, and the tension that results from producing one authoritative account and respecting traditions characterized by a certain heterogeneity.”<sup>7</sup> The Dylan song, too, stalls narrative completion--one has only to consider the juxtaposed, highly condensed, staccato-like dicta, conveyed both on page and in Dylan’s vocal delivery, of “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall,” or the episodic bits that he leaves unconnected in “Series of Dreams.”<sup>8</sup> This non-narrative procedure defines how his song-art appears to listeners where one verse often doesn’t flow directly into the next. What chronology, for instance, runs through “Tangled Up in Blue” or “Someday Baby”? Yet for one to arrive at the point where his songs leave sense and end up as if just sound-bites or vice-versa--where, as I have claimed, they hang before us at once there and not there, or where something is happening but none of us know what it is--is to risk taking a retrogressive, modernist-critical stance. To claim, in other words, that Dylan pens a latter-day “song of songs” surely comes close to some formalist fantasy (as many critics today would likely judge it) about art for art’s sake. That would park Dylan’s oeuvre near the precincts of a poet like the Wallace Stevens who often wrote poems about poems such as *The Man with the Blue Guitar* and “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.”

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<sup>6</sup> See Aidan Day, “Dylan’s Judgement,” a paper he first delivered at a Dylan conference I directed at Dartmouth in 2006: see <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~2006dylancon/>. Day later published the paper as an essay in *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 39.3 (September, 2010). pp. 260-280. Day focuses particularly on a close reading of “Caribbean Wind” to make his point. Taking a more general perspective, Seth Rogovoy tries to read “Caribbean Wind” and other Dylan’s songs against the background of Dylan’s Jewish upbringing, especially his familiarity with the Torah and how it inflects most of his songs. See *Bob Dylan: Prophet, Mystic, Poet* (New York: Scribner, 2009), p. 221.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Third Pillar: Essays in Judaic Studies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), pp. 13, 25.

<sup>8</sup> I discuss this last song in my essay, “Bob Dylan’s 116<sup>th</sup> Dream: Reflections on the Lyrics,” *Auto/Biography (a/b)* 23:2 (Winter 2008): 226-44.



Dylan in fact once termed Stevens “a great poet” but allowed for a greater kind: “a great singer.”<sup>9</sup> Yet Dylan is closer to Stevens than perhaps he knew. Stevens himself hardly found art for art’s sake a credo he unequivocally endorsed. His poetics led him to write poems about poems under a Whitmanian dispensation: to hone a vocational activity that all of us practice one way or another, if in different venues of living. The Stevens meta-poem, that is, shows how our own would-be poems--our works, our mythologies, the ideals we live by--come down to “ideas of order” over against a world dominated by “black” (to use two titles from his poems) or a chaos beyond our reckoning. The Stevens poem “springs” from the fact

that we live in a place  
That is not our own, and, much more, not ourselves  
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days  
 (“Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”)

So, too, one might argue, Dylan’s self-reflexive songs gamble on an existence-relevant kickback. If we grasp them that way, they lead us to “the last outback at the world’s end,” beyond which they “ain’t talkin’.” That, maybe, goes Stevens one better. While we can always read the Dylan song straight--“Simple Twist of Fate” as a nostalgic one-night love encounter, for example, or “Series of Dreams” as about a series of dreams instead of Dylan’s recollected wonder at his series of songs--one sector of it suspends the will to know it, even for the Dylan persona. Provided one *interprets* it that way, the Dylan song becomes an emblematic instance not of an “idea of order” but of an idea that numbs the need for order: a meaningfully meaningless state that points back to the song “and, much more . . . ourselves.” So we come back to how “When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose,” with the Dylan song itself having “no secrets to conceal” because in the last resort it signifies to us all what Hartman would term “enigma” and Frank Kermode “Secrecy.”

Was this too intricate or fanciful a way to teach Dylan’s lyrics? I myself was surprised how easily students took to the “meta” perspective on Dylan’s body of work. I think I can say that for the three-to-four hundred students who enrolled in the Dylan course at Dartmouth over the years, many of them unexpectedly discovered a new appreciation for Dylan and his work after having adopted this perspective. Later I once taught the course again to a group of graduate students with similar reactions. Just as important, I believe that the kind of reading I asked them all to practice added to rather than detracted from what has always led many listeners to think: that Dylan’s songs will endure as artistic artifacts well beyond their parochial, pop-cultural occurrence in his and our lifetime.

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<sup>9</sup> “A great poet, like Wallace Stevens, doesn’t necessarily make a great singer. But a great singer always--like Billie Holiday--makes a great poet.” Quoted in Paul Williams, *Bob Dylan, Performing Artist: The Early Years*, p. 238. Writing about “Not Dark Yet,” Neil Corcoran connects it in passing with Stevens’ later poems. “Death’s Honesty,” “*Do You, Mr. Jones?*”: *Bob Dylan with the Poets and Professors* (London: Pimlico, 2003), p. 171. It might be interesting to treat Dylan’s albums as songs comprising variations on a topic along the lines, say, of Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.”

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