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“THROUGH ME TELL THE STORY”:

A NEW HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF BOB DYLAN AS A NOBEL LAUREATE

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Dean of the Graduate School

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“THROUGH ME TELL THE STORY”:  
A NEW HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF BOB DYLAN AS A NOBEL LAUREATE  
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for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

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by

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San Antonio, Texas

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## Abstract

“THROUGH ME TELL THE STORY”:

A NEW HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF BOB DYLAN AS A NOBEL LAUREATE

Abby Mangel

St. Mary's University, 2018

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Bob Dylan's receipt of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016 for “for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition” is perhaps the strongest validation for New Historicism as a method of literary analysis. The individual puzzle pieces of Dylan's postmodern rock poems are themselves little bits of history, but combined within the context of the massive paradigm shifts of the 1960s, they become something new and entirely relevant to the nonstop turmoil of contemporary life in America.

## Chapter 1

### “The Land of the Living”

*The Oxford English Dictionary* defines “New Historicism” as “a form of cultural analysis which examines the ways in which a cultural product (esp. a literary text) interacts with and participates in its historical context, esp. with reference to the power relations operating within the society of its time” (“New Historicism”). This method of literary criticism was developed in English departments during the early 1980s by literary theorists such as Stephen Greenblatt. At this time, Greenblatt, a Shakespearean professor at Harvard University, recognized that literature represented the end product of an entire cultural moment rather than a written record belonging to a single mind. Thus, Greenblatt expanded his method of literary analysis to include the social, political, and historical factors that play a role in producing a work of literature. Indeed, according to Wesley Morris in “Toward a New Historicism,” this new set of practices for understanding literature was a direct “response to the apparent dead end of new critical organic theory” (187). Unlike formalist criticism, which is centered purely on the literary text, Greenblatt’s method of “cultural poetics” reflects the reality that an author’s attitudes and ideologies within a specific text operate across a much broader cultural spectrum. To this end, Greenblatt argues, the historical context of a literary work warrants serious attention in any comprehensive literary analysis.

By situating the artistic text of Bob Dylan’s albums within a more general historical context, Greenblatt’s process of New Historicism allows us to better understand the

cultural and intellectual history that connects Bob Dylan to the longstanding tradition of bardic performers, namely Homer and Virgil. In this vein, by analyzing a selection of tracks that appear on *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963), *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965), *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965), and *Blonde on Blonde* (1966), the reasoning behind Dylan's lifelong acclaim as a songwriter, particularly his Nobel Prize in Literature, becomes clear. Through a variety of literary devices that Dylan both consciously and subconsciously employs in the lyrics of his songs, such as the negative capability of John Keats and the surreal symbolism of Arthur Rimbaud, we identify a running narrative about embracing the trauma of modern life within Dylan's writing. This continuous narrative is steeped profoundly in the historical teleology linking the distant past to the contemporary world of the 1960s, a tumultuous period characterized by wars, assassinations, nuclear threats, and countercultural movements, which is when Dylan first composed what is often cited as his best work. Indeed, the historical backdrop of Dylan's writing, which was itself indebted to a plethora of other sources that exist within a broad cultural continuum, perpetuated many thematic elements that repeatedly surface throughout Dylan's oeuvre; the elusive nature of the truth, the agony of existentialism, and the paradoxical omnipresence of change (or, as the saying goes, "the more things change, the more things stay the same").

Additionally, because of the highly personal nature of Bob Dylan's songs, it is important to contextualize his lyrical compositions in the terms of his biographical history. For instance, critics who possess some knowledge of Dylan's life would know that "Sara" on *Desire* (1976) references Dylan's painful separation from his first wife, Sara Lownds, in the song's search for meaning in the wake of loss. Furthermore, knowledge of this biographical



detail heightens the ironic distance of the song's self-reflexive moments, including the following lines:

I can still hear the sounds of those Methodist bells  
I'd taken the cure and had just gotten through  
Stayin' up for days in the Chelsea Hotel  
Writin' "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" for you (Dylan, "Sara")

Without placing the song "Sara" into the context of Dylan's biography, the listener misses the Dylan's use of intertextuality in the fourth line, which calls attention to another song titled "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" that Dylan had written and recorded for his wife Sara almost a decade earlier. In this self-referential moment, Dylan deliberately reflects back on the status of "Sara" as a song, suggesting that Dylan's poignant images of his children playing on a beach near Montauk ("I can still see them playin' with their pails in the sand" and "I can still see the shells fallin' out of their hands") are merely artificial renderings whose fleeting existence is limited to the transient scope of the song itself (Dylan, "Sara"). Indeed, the emotional presence of Sara and the children ceases once the song's five and a half minutes expire. As such, this performance of heartfelt devotion amounts to a feverish attempt to stave off the ultimate loss, the dissolution of this relationship in Dylan's own memory. Hence, there is a crucial interplay between public and private history in the literary work of Bob Dylan, which artfully blends such sincere articulations of Dylan's thoughts and feelings into the kaleidoscopic fabric of American culture at large.

The Swedish Academy ignited controversy in 2016 after awarding Bob Dylan the Nobel Prize in Literature "for having created new poetic expressions within the great

American song tradition” (Nobel Prize). Dylanphiles celebrated unabashedly, pointing to the cultural collage of poetic influences in Dylan’s lyrics, but the choice sparked many disagreements about the limitations of genre, a debate reminiscent of the furious reactions to Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917) and Piero Manzoni’s *Merda d’artista* (1961). These provocative installations, neither of which was objectively beautiful nor stately, directly affronted the prevailing assumptions about dignity and medium in the art world. If postmodern society, however, could concede a porcelain urinal and cans packed with human excrement as art, there was a theoretical basis for a popular musician embodying the best of world literature. While Theodor Adorno apparently settled the aesthetic debacle of anti-art in his *Aesthetic Theory*—“Even the abolition of art is respectful of art because it takes the truth claim of art seriously” (43)—the vacillation of Bob Dylan’s oeuvre between high and low culture continues to be a source of confusion. In *Bob Dylan*, Keith Negus asserts, “The high-art establishment was skeptical of claims being made for a new poetry that was bridging the old barriers between high and low culture” (98). Similarly, in “Bob Dylan and the Academy,” Lee Marshall explains, “Rock music is often portrayed as anti-intellectual, concerned with the sensual, bodily effects of music rather than with rational thought,” a juxtaposition to the established canon of literature that many scholars perceive as a crass insult (105). Yet, to the chagrin of the guardians of genre, Dylan’s lyrics importantly transcend the boundaries between folk rock, commercial pop, and high art (Negus 98). However, to grasp the full gravity of the Academy’s decision to honor Dylan, the history of the Nobel Prize itself requires some illuminating.

Born in 1833, Swedish industrialist Alfred Nobel reserved the greater bulk of his financial estate to establish the Nobel Prizes in 1895, commencing an institution that

eventually became “a mysterious incarnation of power and authority” (Feldman ix). In Nobel’s last testament, he stated the interest generated by his financial investments would be divided and distributed annually to the minds that most benefited humankind during the course of the previous year. Nobel specified that, out of this total amount, an academic council in Stockholm would award one fifth to “the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work of an idealistic society,” adding that “no consideration whatever shall be given to the nationality of the candidates, but that the most worthy [sic] shall receive the prize, whether he be a Scandinavian or not” (qtd. in Espmark 1). Nobel designed the Academy to value “cultural outbranchings” as something analogous to “the prizewinning work of an Einstein and the rest,” making advancements in literature unilaterally as revered and respected as advancements in science (Feldman xi). Hence, by the means that Nobel stipulated prior to death, he would posthumously award equal glory for achievements in literary creativity, scientific research, and world peace.

As a lifelong inventor, Nobel’s choice to bequeath prizes for scientific advancements upon his death was predictable. However, his specifications for a prize in literature were perplexing, and a peace prize designated by the original manufacturer of dynamite—“a merchant of death”—seriously disturbed many of Nobel’s contemporaries (Feldman 4). Without a doubt, Nobel was a complex individual whose personal eccentricities have evaded historians in some capacity. He never married, and evidence suggests that he never enjoyed close friendships. Additionally, Nobel was a voracious reader, who was fluent in most European languages, and wrote countless poems and plays, which he shared with select acquaintances. Victor Hugo was rumored to have nicknamed Nobel “the millionaire vagabond” while the inventor resided in Paris, Nobel’s intermittent homestead throughout

his lifetime. Indeed, solitary and elusive, he resembled “a Nordic Shelley” with a mysterious demeanor and a razor-sharp acumen for business ventures; from what information is known about his life, he possessed a deeply involved sense of interiority (Feldman 32).

Perhaps it was a fascination with Alfred Nobel’s somewhat unknowable character that captivated society, as the news of the Nobel Prizes immediately inspired a sense of intrigue across Europe. Nobel passed away in 1896 after a massive cerebral hemorrhage, and the first prizes were awarded five years later, a historical event that launched a new ritual of fame and celebrity. Nobel’s enormous sums of money and glamorous name piqued the public’s curiosity, and national competition continued to draw worldwide attention. What had started as a global appeal to harmony roused a number of political rivalries, “as if the prizes were an exalted kind of modern Olympic Games” (Feldman 5). They transformed into cultural milestones, although the lasting perception of the awards themselves became susceptible to historical ruptures. For example, in 1934 the *New York Times* notoriously dedicated an entire page to a darkly ironic headline—“Hitler Nominated for Nobel Prize”—when the anti-fascist Swedish parliament member Erik Gottfrid Christian Brandt sarcastically nominated the genocidal dictator for peace, demonstrating how momentous the Nobel Prizes appeared to the public (Feldman 14). As time passed, the prizes attracted a close international following; and, despite historical reservations regarding the award’s credibility, entire countries reacted enthusiastically when a winner happened to be a compatriot.

The cutting-edge achievements that received Nobel Prizes in the literary arts and sciences, however, seemed rather unintelligible to the common ranks of society. The specialized jargon of prizewinners escaped the conventional everyman’s grasp.

Nevertheless, flocks of journalists quickly realized that readers unable to understand the substance behind the awards still appreciated the Nobel Laureates as celebrities. Newspapers around the globe featured the personalities behind the prize, poking into the private lives of Nobel Laureates and publishing their thoughts and opinions related to popular matters outside of their highly specialized fields (Feldman 8-10). As a consequence, society began to perceive new laureates as universal experts: “Scientists are asked to comment on crime or poverty or religion, writers on foreign policy, peace laureates on the arts” (Feldman 20). The media at the turn of the century, thus, permanently altered the popular meaning of the Nobel Prize, prompting a societal tendency to conceptualize genius as celebrity. For instance, the Curies received endless publicity for their research on radioactivity, with the members of the press hailing their labor in dreamlike terms. Indeed, one journalist excessively proclaimed, “Voilà, perpetual motion, the eternal sun, the supreme inexhaustive force have been at last found through the geniuses of Monsieur and Madame Curie, whose Nobel Prize fits them like a glove” (qtd. in Feldman 8). In this spirit, American popular culture still idolizes the personalities of laureates like Albert Einstein today: “From the latest lottery winner to yesterday’s pop star, ephemeral celebrity (Andy Warhol’s ‘everyone is famous for fifteen minutes’) now seems a fact of life” (Feldman 8).

Compelled by such exposure and prestige, many renown authors—notably including the past winner Pablo Neruda in 1971—have campaigned openly for the honor, provoking frequent disagreements about authentic claims to genius within the Nobel Committee (Feldman 64). Comprised of scholars, former laureates, and members of academic societies, this jury receives around two hundred nominations in a single year for

the literature prize, all of which are evaluated extensively by knowledgeable advisors that assist the Academy. As a result, the Academy's criteria changes constantly to reflect this annual outpouring of nominees. Still, the winners chosen to represent the best of world literature seldom satisfy everyone. Countless critics have dismissed the award as a popularity contest at best and an overhyped political event at worst. Case in point, the Academy declined to award Jorge Luis Borges for allegedly refusing to condemn Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet. Beyond the issues obviously related to "political and aesthetic judgments," the standards for "contemporary fairness" and "canonicity" are hardly defined (Jewell 97). Moreover, while a mixture of politics and poetics understandably influences the Academy's choice, Alfred Nobel's demand that prizewinners somehow characterize "an idealistic tendency" remains more or less obligatory (Espmark 1).

Nobel's reputation as "a Utopian idealist, a radical anticleric, and an unmarried man" was lost in the Academy's initial interpretation of the phrase "idealistic tendency" (Jewell 103). The Academy during its earliest decades of operation understood the ambiguous will quite literally, awarding the prize to writers that massively overlooked social maladies such as racism and sexism. The inaugural chair Carl David af Wirsén declared that a prizewinner's writing should exhibit "a lofty and sound idealism" reminiscent of the ancient Greek values of moderation and harmony (qtd. in Jewell 103). Thus, ideal candidates for the prize were predominantly white male Christian Europeans, making authors resembling Lord Tennyson literary paradigms (Jewell 104). Though as time passed, the exact meaning of Nobel's diction allowed for flexibility. Indeed, "the history of the literature prize is in some ways a series of attempts to interpret an imprecisely worded will" (Espmark 3).

Georg Brandes, a Danish friend of Alfred Nobel, attempted to correct this misconception in a letter claiming that Nobel “was an Anarchist: by idealistic he meant that which adopts a polemical or critical attitude to Religion, Royalty, Marriage, Social Order generally” (Epsmark 4). Likewise, Swedish mathematician Mittag-Leffler argued that Nobel intended the word “idealism” to promote a skeptical, satirical attitude toward dominant political institutions (Feldman 68). Although this information was available to the committee members only indirectly, “no doubt there is something in it” (Epsmark 4). According to Swedish historian Knut Ahnlund, “When [Nobel] spoke, therefore, of an ‘idealistic society,’ he undoubtedly gave more scope to rebellion and independent dispositions than his interpreters understood—to the extent that they wanted to understand the matter” (qtd. in Epsmark 4). Such rebellious interpretations of Alfred Nobel’s will seem to align appropriately with the inventor’s dark and eccentric personality: “He could be strangely ironic, as in his plan to set up that lavish mansion where prospective suicides could die amid luxury, rather than drown in the cold, filthy Seine [...] That was strong backing for ‘idealism’ as an ironically subversive force” (Feldman 68).

World War I and II became significant catalysts for change, as the Academy purposefully overlooked authors from warring countries in order to “actively oppose extreme forces of nationalism” (Jewell 104). The Academy began to interpret the phrase “idealistic tendency” more liberally, awarding distinguished authors from different cultures and traditions. The notion that Alfred Nobel created the prizes to “counteract totalitarianism” soon gained popularity; certainly, the Academy started viewing political dissidents and revolutionaries as rightful beneficiaries (Jewell 105). This progressive attitude overtaking the Academy soon impacted the archetypal Nobel Laureate. Diverse

matters related to social justice became a trend, especially among female laureates; for example, Gabriela Minstral with diplomacy and education in Latin America (1945); Nelly Sachs with Jewish genocide in Nazi concentration camps (1966); Nadine Gordimer with South African rebellion (1991); and Toni Morrison with racism against African Americans (1993). To this extent, the Academy has demonstrated a clear interest in developing a new literary canon, one inclusive of underrepresented literary traditions (Jewell 111-112). Eight distinctive writers have received the prize this decade alone, including Bob Dylan.

While confusion exists about the status of Dylan as a poet (and, more largely, the status of lyrics as poetry), Dylan's contribution as a unique artist is unmistakable in its cultural import. But, the question stands: "Is this cultural import truthfully enough to merit Dylan's receipt of a Nobel Prize in Literature?" A repeated nominee for the honor, Dylan certainly has flirted with academia. He notoriously accepted an Honorary Doctorate of Music from Princeton University in 1970, a deliberate snub toward the generation that would brand him the messiah of the anti-establishment. Ever since that event, academic seminars specifically designed to analyze and celebrate Dylan have appeared on course catalogues. Stanford University even sponsored an interdisciplinary conference dedicated to Bob Dylan in 1998 (Marshall 100). Indeed, scholars have pointed toward the depth of Dylan's skillful wordplay to justify his rank as a poet (Marshall 106). If defiance was, indeed, a principal criteria of the Nobel Prize in Literature, critics would need to look no further than "Masters of War" on *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, a seething indictment of the military-industrial complex and "the greatest anti-war song ever written" (Thomas 319). Dylan released the track through Columbia Records only seven months after the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, rendering his message a timely political statement: "In the song,



Dylan fixes his sight on a system [...] Rather than simply decrying the horrors of war, Dylan indicts the beneficiaries of an economic system that makes war profitable. For all its vitriol, it's a much broader and systematic critique than is typically offered in topical songs" (Decurtis 47).

However, many other academic authorities would reply to the question of Dylan's literary status with a conclusive headshake, "no." Contemporary musical theorist Keith Negus holds that Dylan's musicality outshines the distinctly poetic quality that, Negus believes, is projected onto Dylan too casually. Such objections usually possess a central claim resembling, "Dylan might be a good singer-songwriter, but without music his words could not stand on their own, and thus were not poetry or literature" (Thomas 294). Dylan unmistakably controls the message of his songs with the pace and personality of his singing. Unlike the reader of a poem, the listener requires the vocalist to perform some interpretation, complicating the claim that Dylan's songs are *de facto* poems: "Songs gain their emotional and artistic power not merely from the semantic meaning of the lyrics but from a constellation of sound" (Marshall 101). Indeed, "Dylan's most famous 'instrument' [...] is that distinctive, unlovely voice" (Dettmar 6). For instance, Joyce Carol Oates delightfully described the singer as "frankly nasal, as if sandpaper could sing" (qtd. in Dettmar 6). Like a skeptical crowd witnessing a hypnotism, the audience needs to be receptive to Dylan's choice of medium to experience its impact. As such, most dissenters simply are unaffected by Dylan's musical aesthetic and, consequently, unwilling to follow him down the tracks, down the road to ecstasy (Gleason).

Dylan himself was surprised by headlines announcing his Nobel Prize, reportedly taking two weeks to acknowledge the Academy's decision. Many skeptics, including the

King of Sweden, chose to interpret Dylan's silence as a sign of gross arrogance. However, Dylan eventually accepted the award while touring through Europe in April. True to style, he snuck into the building through a service door, wearing a leather jacket over a hoodie to conceal his identity; indeed, there is a longstanding precedent for Dylan making "award shows seem like existential errands" (Fallica 247). New York punk icon Patti Smith received the prize on his behalf in December during the Nobel Banquet, as Dylan claimed a prior engagement had prevented his attendance. However, he submitted a recorded version of his Nobel Lecture in good faith. Just under half an hour, the lecture is a meandering reflection on the relationship between music and literature, accompanied by an uncredited piano arrangement by Alan Pasqua. "When I first received this Nobel Prize for Literature, I got to wondering exactly how my songs related to literature," said Dylan. "I'm going to try to articulate that to you. And most likely it will go in a roundabout way, but I hope what I say will be worthwhile and purposeful" ("Bob Dylan - Nobel Lecture"). In the ensuing lecture, it became clear that Dylan's many phases are supplemental to something larger than himself:

Our songs are alive in the land of the living [...] The words in Shakespeare's plays were meant to be acted on the stage. Just as lyrics in songs are meant to be sung, not read on a page. And I hope some of you get the chance to listen to these lyrics the way they were intended to be heard: in concert or on record or however people are listening to songs these days. I return once again to Homer, who says, "Sing in me, oh Muse, and through me tell the story."

Here, the back-to-back references to Shakespeare and Homer are especially evocative. As Anthony Decurtis explains, "Dylan, who so often invites references to Shakespeare, one

conclusion is inevitable: the song's the thing" (42). The musical immediacy of Dylan's songwriting conveys a particular *zeitgeist*—"The spirit or genius which marks the thought or feeling of a period or age"—making such comparisons to bygone bards seem rather patent ("Zeitgeist"). As witnessed in Athens during the fifth century BC, Elizabethan England, and the United States after a bloody succession of wars, there is a historical tendency for exceptional writers to emerge from social and political turmoil: "In each of these periods new art forms responded to what was happening, disrupting the old forms and traditions, busting them up, renewing what had gone before, moving into uncharted territory" (Thomas 4). In a 1989 *Rolling Stone* interview with Kurt Loder, Dylan acknowledged that he "tapped into the Zeitgeist" while writing his classic songs of the 1960s. "As I look back on it now, I am surprised that I came up with so many of them," Dylan said. "At the time it seemed like a natural thing to do. Now I can look back and see that I must have written those songs 'in the spirit,' you know? Like 'Desolation Row'—I was just thinkin' about that the other night. There's no logical way that you can arrive at lyrics like that. I don't know how it was done [...] It just came through me" (qtd. in Decurtis 43).

Ezra Pound coined the phrase "tale of the tribe" to define the purpose of long-verse poetry, specifically in reference to the pantheon of classical poets. Pound argues that tales and legends told through the long-poem medium encompass the totality of a culture, given the sheer length and magnitude of a traditional long poem. As such, poets like Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, Whitman, and Eliot take on prophetic roles. They allow entire populations, spanning space and time, a rare insight into the spectral *zeitgeist* of their culture (Bernstein). Similarly, the approximately three hundred songs and forty albums contained in Bob Dylan's archives resemble the classical writings that documented past

episodes of cultural upheaval: “For Dylan, it is the art of the song that matters [...] It is through song that we give depth to the sentiments for which mere speech is at times of crisis insufficient” (Thomas 25). By speaking different elements of the American identity into existence, Dylan profoundly weaves ongoing tales of the tribe. As Homer describes Odysseus descending into Hades, Dylan offers his listeners a familiar Hell, showing “that modern society has been tainted by a basic selfishness and lack of concern for others” through bizarre imagery and apocalyptic symbolism (Monaghan 170). Throughout his discography, Dylan leers toward his disenfranchised audience as he pulls the blinds back on the blatant lies buttressing the facade American exceptionalism: “Against a backdrop of familiar chord progressions and instrumentation, Dylan has relentlessly pursued his critique of the hypocrisy of American ideology, urging us, always, to do more to realize the great dreams upon which this nation was founded” (Dettmar 4).

The lasting power of Dylan’s music over the decades lies in his capacity to “[see] the everyday in American symbols and the symbolic in the everyday, and then [tell] stories about it” (Wilentz 13). In this manner, the postmodern sphere that Dylan inhabits helped bridge the great divide between high and low culture during the early decades of the twentieth century. Dylan straddles deceptively different traditions, marrying the “Dixie” tunes of abolitionist Daniel Decatur Emmet and the defiant glow of rock ‘n’ rollers like the Beatles with the canonical writings of Whitman, Melville, and Poe. Dylan fuses these assorted stimuli together, concocting them into a unique vernacular that expresses universal experiences—which is poetry’s arguable purpose: “Poetry and music are compensations for the pain that comes along with the human condition” (Thomas 31). Again, Dettmar echoes this sentiment in the *Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan*: “Dylan’s

work is literary [...] in the most fundamental of ways: his is a sensitivity, and a sensibility, that turns almost instinctively to the resources of literary language in order to manifest itself" (3). As Thomas and Dettmar both suppose, the rich display of emotions in Dylan's songs "enrich our lives," as Dylan's Nobel medal reads on its backside in Latin.

Although Bob Dylan's breakout as a folk singer occurred at an ideal point in the history of American music—the momentous release of Woody Guthrie's *Bound for Glory* in 1956 empowered the literary rebels of Dylan's generation—he nevertheless crafted his novel persona with calculated wisdom to befit the changing times (Negus 23). David Gates, vocalist of the soft rock group Bread, described Dylan as "the man who did to popular music what Einstein did to physics" (qtd. in Dettmar 1). Bruce Springsteen likewise took note of the continental shift happening in the rock 'n' roll soundscape, adding that "Bob freed your mind the way Elvis freed your body" (qtd. in Riley 30). Indeed, it was no mistake later on when Dylan was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1997 with the steadfast support of Allen Ginsburg (Thomas 292). In the vital words of this first nominating letter, "[Dylan's] words and music have helped restore the vital, time-honored link between poetry and music, and have so permeated the world as to alter its history" (qtd. in Dettmar 9). Moreover, Dylan himself explained to Anthony Scaduto in 1971, "It ain't the melodies that're important man, it's the words," and clarified to Robert Shelton later in 1978, "I consider myself a poet first and a musician second" (qtd. in Ricks 11, 12).

Ultimately, however, the question behind the quantifiable worthiness of Dylan's Nobel Prize is irrelevant. He stands irrevocably among the Nobel Laureates, and retrospective debates regarding the cultural importance of his work will rage forever onward. Lifelong fans convinced of Dylan's herculean artistry will never broker an

agreement with the skeptical arena convinced that Dylan is merely a mortal man suffused within the business of popular entertainment. Both sides are justified; both are correct. Critics could speculate that Alfred Nobel would have approved of Dylan's provocative mannerisms. One could imagine him embedded within the lusty ornamentation of Nobel's hypothetical suicide mansion, casually plucking the melody to "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" on an acoustic guitar. But, the question that matters no longer is about Bob Dylan or the Nobel Prize. It deals, rather, with the tale of the tribe: "[Dylan's stories] are all constructed in America, out of all its bafflements and mysticism, hopes and hurts" (Wilentz 13). The most pertinent—and frightening—question is about *us*.

Who dwells in the land of the living?

## Chapter 2

### *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan (1963)*

In 1964, Bob Dylan famously performed at Philharmonic Hall, a massive auditorium seating over 2,500 guests within the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts complex, on Halloween night. At 23 years old, Dylan amassed a crowd that completely packed the concert hall, including swarms of devotees that viewed the folk singer as a generational savior of authenticity. Dylan resisted such restricting labels, however, choosing instead to underscore subversive themes associated with fragile identities and problematic realities (Fallica 251). “Don’t let that scare you,” he quipped to perplexed viewers, exaggerating each syllable into a long, Beatnik-like drawl. “It’s just Halloween. I’ve got my Bob Dylan mask on. I’m masquerading” (qtd. in Negus 1).

The mystery behind the Bob Dylan mask was Robert Allen Zimmerman from Duluth, Minnesota. Born in 1941, he was raised by supportive parents, Abram and Beatrice Zimmerman, in a financially stable household within a well-acquainted Jewish community. Robert possessed a solitary character as a child, typical of creative thinkers accustomed to being alone while perfecting their craftsmanship (Negus 13). He often presented poems to his mother and father as gifts, suggesting both a budding interest in language and appreciation for his parents. Indeed, Abram and Beatrice facilitated a predictable step toward the boy’s future as Bob Dylan; they had bequeathed him two first names that allowed him to assimilate into the Anglo-American culture. Although he dropped “Allen” after experimenting with “Robert Allen” as a possible stage name, Robert ultimately

transformed himself into the no-nonsense “Bob,” a plain-speaking pseudonym that reflected the first of his many artistic incarnations, the prodigy of folk (Negus 8-12).

As with many other rock ‘n’ roll musicians, Dylan never received formal training. Instead of learning songs through tedious chord notations, he taught himself to listen carefully to music in order to absorb the melodies and rhythms intuitively. He practiced piano rather than guitar during his formative years, a surprising choice for a future folk singer. Dylan also found a hero in Little Richard, a boogie-woogie pianist who embodied his combined love for rock ‘n’ roll and the blues. During high school, he styled himself as “Elston Gunn,” coiffing his unruly curls into a Jerry Lee Lewis-like pompadour and curating a wardrobe to match his rockabilly façade (Negus 19). Nevertheless, Dylan quickly traded in his rock ‘n’ roll piano for an acoustic guitar after encountering Odetta Holmes, an African-American singer-songwriter and civil rights activist, while slumming in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul metropolis. Odetta’s gospel-inspired message must have poignantly affected the teenager, as Dylan promptly embraced the aesthetic of a bohemian folk singer (Negus 19-22). He artfully tailored his look as he had done with Elston Gunn, adopting a particular attitude and inventing a colorful backstory for himself. He was suddenly a runaway, an itinerant traveler, a weary orphan who joined the circus to make ends meet. After dis-enrolling from the University of Minnesota in Madison, he arrived to New York City as a stranger to himself in December 1960. He signed with Columbia Records only ten months later, releasing an eponymous album during March of 1962 (Negus 24).

Contrary to Dylan’s elaborate mythology, his affiliation with Columbia Records proved to be commercially motivated. John Hammond, a prominent record producer employed by Columbia, approached Dylan with the intention of tapping the company into



the popular folk music genre. Hammond recognized a promising talent that “walked, talked, dressed, and sang like a folkie” in the young songwriter, signing him almost immediately (Bulson 125). Dylan was 20 years old when his eponymous album debuted, which received little acclaim after selling a modest 2,500 copies. Indeed, although *Bob Dylan* as a record showcased Dylan’s acute understanding of folk music—Dylan supposedly committed himself to studying Folkways Records’ *Anthology of American Folk Music* before the initial recording sessions—it displayed somewhat limited originality (Heylin 7-8). “Song to Woody” and “Talkin’ New York” were the only two tracks written by Dylan, whereas all of the other songs were musical homages to Dylan’s many inspirations, including Curtis Jones (“Highway 51”) and Jesse Fuller (“You’re No Good”). Dylan admitted later in 1984, “When I started, I combined other people’s styles unconsciously [...] I wasn’t as good technically as, say, Erik Darling [of the Weavers] or Tom Paley [of the New Lost City Rambles]. So I had to take the songs and make them mine in a different way” (Wolk 8). Producers allegedly had labelled Dylan as “Hammond’s Folly,” but Hammond offered a chance for redemption to his discovery, stipulating another record deal with the option to contract four additional LPs upon its success. Having established a voice during the difficult process of crafting *Bob Dylan*, Dylan triumphed upon releasing his second album in 1963, *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* (Bulson 125).

Unlike his debut, *Freewheelin’* was a lengthy project. It required at least eight different sessions in the recording studio that took place over several months from April 1962 to April 1963. During these sessions, Dylan was “was arriving at Columbia’s studios with masterpieces in his pockets,” which he revised month by month as his songwriting experienced a swift metamorphosis (Bulson 130). According to Alan Light, “The album was

informed by the constant influx of new experiences and ideas affecting Dylan at the time—a burgeoning political awareness, his first trip overseas, [and] the entrance of Albert Grossman as his manager. Above all, though, *Freewheelin'* revealed the impact of his girlfriend Suze Rotolo" (10). Whereas the cover of Dylan's debut featured the singer wearing a sheepskin jacket in a rather formulaic pose—his expression seeming "either full of himself or having fun with the idea"—the *Freewheelin'* art caught him in a seemingly personal moment, ambling "down a slushy street with his hands in his pockets and a girl (then girlfriend Suze Rotolo) on his arm" (Bulson 126-7). Appropriately, Dylan repeated to his friends, "The cover's the most important part of the album" (qtd. in Light 13).

Dylan's relationship with Rotolo evidently swayed the album's emotional dynamic, as the deterioration of this romance emphatically powered the *Freewheelin'* composition process (Bulson 128). Raised by a mother and father belonging to the American Communist Party, Rotolo introduced Dylan to the fundamental ideologies of leftist politics. She invited him to visit the Congress of Racial Equality, which revealed injustices in the world of civil rights to the previously apolitical Dylan, thus inspiring him to write modern protest standards like "The Death of Emmett Till"—a song about the brutal lynching of a 14-year-old African-American boy in 1955. Dylan certainly acknowledged Rotolo's influence and even remarked to an interviewer, "Suze was into this equality-freedom thing long before I was" (qtd. in Gray 90). However, despite the pleasant photograph of the couple blazoned across the *Freewheelin'* cover, Rotolo admitted that women were disregarded as "chicks" in circles of musicians (Rotolo 254). After cohabitating with Dylan for six months in New York City, she started to resent being treated as "a possession of Bob, who was the center of attention," and relocated to Italy (Rotolo 254). She postponed returning several times,

prompting critics to read Dylan's expressions of longing and loss in *Freewheelin'* as mourning his former attachment to Rotolo (Heylin 99-101). For example, Eric Bulson describes "Don't Think Twice" as "an extended monologue, the kind of one-sided conversation you might overhear right before or after a breakup" (128). Bulson likewise understands "Girl from the North Country" as a reconciliation of sorts: "The experience of intimacy and separation has already been converted into wisdom and there's an acknowledgment that loss in the past, like it or not, defines who we are in the ever-fleeting present" (128). In each case, the songwriting demonstrated that "Dylan was learning how to use real and imagined situations, characters, and conversations to explore his emotions and ideas" (Bulson 128).

*Freewheelin'* was the first album where Dylan began to convert life experience into song, and the audiences that flocked to record stores understood Dylan to be "the romantic, down-to-earth dreamer not afraid to get his feet wet" (Bulson 126). Decades after the *Freewheelin'* release, Dylan revisited the particularly curated language behind this folk artist personality:

By listening to all the early folk artists and singing the songs yourself, you pick up the vernacular. You internalize it. You sing it in the ragtime blues, work songs, Georgia sea shanties, Appalachian ballads and cowboy songs. You hear all the finer points, and you learn the details.

You know what it's all about. Takin' the pistol out and puttin' it back in your pocket. Whippin' your way through traffic, talkin' in the dark. You know that Stagger Lee was a bad man and that Frankie was a good girl. You know that Washington is a bourgeois town and you've heard the deep-pitched voice of John the Revelator and

you saw the Titanic sink in a boggy creek. And you're pals with the wild Irish rover and the wild colonial boy. You heard the muffled drums and the fifes that played lowly. You've seen the lusty Lord Donald stick a knife in his wife, and a lot of your comrades have been wrapped in white linen.

I had all the vernacular down. I knew the rhetoric. None of it went over my head – the devices, the techniques, the secrets, the mysteries – and I knew all the deserted roads that it traveled on, too. I could make it all connect and move with the current of the day. When I started writing my own songs, the folk lingo was the only vocabulary that I knew, and I used it. (“Dylan – Nobel Lecture”)

Infused with the specific details of this vernacular, *Freewheelin'* marks the genuine beginning of Dylan's catalogue, establishing a number of creative traditions. In 50 minutes, Dylan adapted and de-familiarized conventional folk forms, such as talkin' blues, epic ballads, and impromptu one-offs, transforming himself into a “self-made freewheeler” that resembled the devoted folkies of the 1960s in addition to the unruly Beat Generation of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg (Bulson 126-7). Indeed, beyond manipulating the timing and rhythm of well-known chord progressions in folk music, Dylan overlaid his lyrics with dense, often surreal images that conveyed themes examining “human and social change, the fragile nature of identity and relationships, the vicissitudes of the human condition, and the problematic nature of reality” (Fallica 251). The experimental quality of Dylan's uneasy and sometimes haunting themes perplexed listeners expecting a generic folksinger, although as Bulson concludes, “[Dylan] was playing folk music on *Freewheelin'*—it just wasn't so easily recognizable” (127).

Certainly, the folk-music tradition importantly informed Dylan's writing, as Dylan meticulously scrutinized the emotional power of musicians like Robert Johnson, a towering figure of the Delta blues. In fact, Dylan would practice the "folk lingo" by transcribing the lyrics to Johnson's songs in order to study their structure and design. In *Chronicles: Volume One*, Dylan reveals that Johnson's secret to writing was "the construction of his old-style lines and the free association [...] the sparkling allegories, big-ass truths wrapped in the hard shell of nonsensical abstraction" (qtd. in Bulson 127). Not by coincidence, the standout tracks of *Freewheelin'*—"Blowin' in the Wind" and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall"—are allegories that Dylan constructed around the scraps of free association during "intense, brief, bursts of inspiration" (Bulson 127). They both demonstrated Dylan's "remarkable range and depth" by challenging listeners to imagine surreal images—"try picturing ten thousand talkers with broken tongues"—and obfuscating meaning through abstraction (Bulson 127-8, 130). Most lucidly in these songs, Dylan kept "big-ass truths" at a distance, choosing instead to evoke spectacles of "ambiguity, despair, loss, and mortality" through a rambling performance of "life's contradictions, ironies, and trade-offs" (Fallica 251).

Although "Blowin' in the Wind" originally sparked Dylan's reputation as a protest singer, Dylan has maintained that he never intended the song to become a political anthem. He stated to Marc Rowland in 1978, "I took ['Blowin' in the Wind'] off a song called 'No More Auction Block'—that's a spiritual and 'Blowin' in the Wind' followings the same feeling" (qtd. in Bouldie). Perhaps because of its source, a spiritual that chronicled the inhumanity of American slavery, the song profoundly affected audiences at the seminal March on Washington in 1963, where Martin Luther King Jr. defined the Civil Rights Movement with his historic "I Have a Dream" speech. However, the popular folk trio Peter,

Paul and Mary performed the song in Washington, whereas Dylan opted to sing two songs from his subsequent album, *The Times They Are A-Changin'* (Thomas 21). Indeed, Dylan performed “Blowin’ in the Wind” only a handful of times during the decade that it became well-known at progressive marches. Rather, Dylan actively resisted the song’s political connotations during this time: “This here ain’t a protest song or anything like that, ‘cause I don’t write protest songs [...] I’m just writing it as something to be said, for somebody, by somebody” (qtd. in Thomas 21).

As Kevin Dettmar writes, “Dylan is the most political of our popular artists, and the most popular of our political artists. But he requires us to understand the term ‘politics’ in its largest sense” (4). Likewise, “Blowin’ in the Wind” represents a political plea to the extent that it simply promotes equality, liberty, and humility. The song’s thematic fortitude, the immediate quality that appealed to political progressives, is buttressed by austere lyrics coupled with structural simplicity (Ricks 320). For instance, Dylan organizes the song into three rhyming verses, each containing three questions that encompass two lines and preceding the same ethereal refrain (Thomas 25):

How many roads much a man walk down

Before you call him a **man**?

Yes, ‘n’ how many seas must a white dove sail

Before she sleeps in the **sand**?

Yes, ‘n’ how many times must the cannonballs fly

Before they’re ever **banned**?

The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind

The answer is blowin’ in the wind.

[...]

How many years can a mountain exist

Before it's washed to the **sea**?

Yes, 'n' how many years can some people exist

Before they're allowed to be **free**?

Yes, 'n' how many times can a man turn his head

Pretending he just doesn't **see**?

The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind

The answer is blowin' in the wind.

[...]

How many times must a man look up

Before he can see the **sky**?

Yes, 'n' how many ears must one man have

Before he can hear people **cry**?

Yes, 'n' how many deaths will it take till he knows

That too many people have **died**?

The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind

The answer is blowin' in the wind. (Dylan, "Blowin' in the Wind"; emphasis mine)

Whereas each of the three verses includes five words that are plurals, every word of the refrain is resolutely singular. By continually playing plurals against singulars, Dylan

conveys a certain political loneliness in his claims for courage and solidarity (Ricks 324).

The questions shaping the song are not dubious in themselves, but their answers imply a sense of self-doubt that overwhelms the individual listener ("How many *roads* must a *man*

walk down?”). Moreover, the refrain culminates surprisingly; its answer contains not a what, but a where—“The answer is blowin’ in the wind”—a location or feeling of something imminent (Ricks 322). Indeed, the song is determined to keep asking its searching questions; nevertheless, it remains sensitive to the difference between insisting and nagging. A phrase like, “How many times must [...]” could falter into hardened aggression, but the singer’s voice possesses a certain gentleness. Similarly, when Dylan directs his line of questioning at “you,” his tone acknowledges his listener’s presence without sounding accusatory; Dylan only hints toward the urgent need for reflection (Ricks 327-8).

By contrast, the refrain acts as a caveat although it seems like an assurance. While the lines of the refrain form a declarative sentence, they prompt questions as opposed to answering any: “Is the wind blowing the answer away from us, never to be heard, or blowing it toward us, about to right the injustices of those nine urgent questions?” (Thomas 27). Simply repeating, “The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind,” Dylan seems to insist that human beings will always encounter uncertainty and insecurity (Ricks 320). Hence, there is a vague political conscience that courses through Dylan’s lyrics, but the song’s fundamental message unfolds in a subtle and suggestive manner; “it implants the possible answer in our imaginations, and the rest is up to us” (Thomas 27). As Christopher Ricks supposes in *Dylan’s Visions of Sin*, the answer entails humankind overcoming systematic bigotry, an ethical or philosophical task that surpasses mere politics: “The answer is tolerance. The answer is desegregation” (322). In the end, we confront the answer in the music: the final harmonica, itself a wind instrument (Ricks 323).

Although Dylan resolved to distance himself from political protests after the initial success of “Blowin’ in the Wind,” singers like Joan Baez and Judy Collins would take charge



for him “at marches, in student unions, in student apartments, wherever the antiwar movement was to be found, in the United States [...] and throughout the world” (Thomas 23). As a student protest leader Todd Gitlin said, “Whether he liked it or not, Dylan sang for us [...] We followed his career as if he was singing our songs” (qtd. in Thomas 23).

Struggling to liberate the song from categorization, Dylan omitted “Blowin’ in the Wind” from his live performances for almost a decade. However, he reprised the song temporarily at a charity concert in 1971 and permanently after the cultural fallout of the Watergate scandal in 1974, still choosing to perform the song while on tour. Today, the song continues to fend off hopelessness and disillusionment, albeit in different contexts (Ricks 322).

Indeed, as Thomas explains, “His music, powerful from the beginning, would take on a life of its own” (25). Dylan now has performed the song more than 1,400 times, always to unique effects: “The song is still urgent in its questions, but it can’t, couldn’t ever, be attached to any one historical event or condition” (Thomas 28).

In the way that “Blowin’ in the Wind” is remembered in relation to the Civil Rights Movement, the song “Hard Rain” has been characterized erroneously as Dylan’s response to the Cuban Missile Crisis. In reality, Dylan wrote the song before the actual event as a way of dealing with the fear of nuclear war more obliquely. He wrote “Hard Rain” in the summer of 1962 and first performed it on September 22, in the weeks before the missile crisis, which remains the closest the world came to all-out nuclear war (Thomas 296). Therefore, it suffices to say that Dylan was not rendering the literal fallout of a nuclear war in “Hard Rain,” but rather meditating on the sustained threat of such devastating international violence (Bulson 129). Dylan himself said, “It’s not atomic rain, it’s just a hard rain. It isn’t the fallout rain. I mean some sort of end that’s just gotta happen [...] In the last

verse, when I say, 'the pellets of poison are flooding the waters', that means all the lies that people get told on their radios and in their newspapers" (qtd. in Cott 6-7). Dylan came of age during the Cold War, a time when a nuclear attack on American soil was entirely possible. He even bought a Geiger counter, an instrument used for measuring ionizing radiation, while living in New York (Bulson 128). Certainly, at the time there was a reason to connect the song to the historical event, although "ultimately the language of the song, and the absence of defining and limiting topical, geographical, or chronological elements, make it a song for anytime" (Thomas 296-7).

To this end, Dylan commented on "Hard Rain"—and every song by extension—when he said, "It doesn't really matter where a song comes from. It just matters where it takes you" (Thomas 297). Indeed, "Hard Rain" encompasses the nervous emotional atmosphere of the Cuban Missile Crisis, but it moreover expresses the human experience of anxiety beyond that specific moment in American history. For instance, in the first verse, Dylan employs patterns of rhyme and repetition to convey the universal feeling of being overwhelmed and immobilized by fear:

Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed **son**?

Oh, where have you been, my darling young **one**?

I've stumbled on the side of twelve misty mountains

I've walked and I've crawled on six crooked highways

I've stepped in the middle of seven sad forests

I've been out in front of a dozen dead oceans

I've been ten thousand miles in the mouth of a **graveyard**

And it's a hard, and it's a hard, it's a hard, and it's a **hard**

And it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall. (Dylan, "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall"; emphasis mine)

The rhyme-scheme embedded into this opening verse, and into each identically structured verse, seems almost nonsensical. The song kicks off with a conventionally rhyming couplet ("son" and "one") but immediately changes. Here, the song "proceeds to work upon us—after every opening question—not by rhyme but through an insistent cadence, unstressed final syllable that is the feminine ending" (Ricks 334). In the realm of grammatical gender, a feminine ending refers to a line of verse that concludes with an unstressed syllable. Similarly, in musical theory, feminine endings refer to movements ending in an unstressed note or a weak cadence. Hence, in the way that Dylan finishes these successive lines with unstressed words—"mountains," "highways," "forests," and so on—he finishes his strumming pattern with a quiet, somber D chord. As a consequence, the song lyrically and mechanically withholds the release of the titular phrase like a bomb awaiting detonation. Likewise, in the song's refrain, this oppressive force is built upon Dylan's repetition of the word "hard," which unexpectedly rhymes with "graveyard" and repeatedly delays the other four-letter word, "rain" (Ricks 337).

Patience, therefore, seems to be the saving virtue of "Hard Rain." In compelling his audience to wait for the final explosive line—"a hard rain's a-gonna fall"—Dylan prompts his listeners in the present to consider their pasts and futures alike. The past is summoned by the first four questions—"Oh, where *have* you been?", "Oh, what *did* you see?", "Oh, what *did* you hear?", and "Oh, what *did* you meet?"—but the final verse addresses the future: "And what'll you do now?" Indeed, as Ricks explains, "Fortitude [...] is a relation of the present to both the past and the future" (338). In a meta-historical sense, the literary

origins of this lyrical cross-examination extend far back into the past, as well. For example, each verse of Dylan's song begins with a variant of a line from a seventeenth-century Anglo-Scottish ballad called, "Lord Randal," which was supposedly written about the sixth Earl of Chester, who died in 1232 (Yaffe 18-9). This pastoral ballad serves a double purpose for Dylan, whom transforms the source into a clever allusion. Indeed, the lyrical framework of "Hard Rain" resembles that of "Lord Randal":

"O where ha you been, Lord Randal, my son!

And where ha you been, my handsome young man!"

"I ha been at the greenwood; mother, mak my bed soon,

For I'm wearied wi hunting, and fain wad lie down."

[...]

"An wha met ye there, Lord Randal, my son?

An wha met you there, my handsome young man?"

"O I met wi my true-love; mother, mak my bed soon,

For I'm wearied wi hunting, and fain wad lie down."

[...]

"What d'ye leave to your true-love, Lord Randal my son?

What d'ye leave to your true-love, my handsome young man?

"I leave her hell and fire; mother, mak my bed soon,

For I'm sick at heart, and I fain wad lie down." ("Lord Randal")

In both songs, each verse begins with an inaugurative question and concludes with a fixed refrain. However, Dylan chooses to depart from the original song, the deathbed confession of a young man who is poisoned by his "true-love" (Ricks 330-1). While the singer

addresses a character named Lord Randal in the original (“Oh where ha you been, Lord Randal, my son?/ And where ha you been, my handsome young man?”), Dylan substitutes “my blue-eyed son” for “Lord Randal,” allowing the latter song to address “the strikingly blue-eyed Bob Dylan himself” (Thomas 297). Indeed, the lyrics express a “sort of call-and-response” between Dylan as a singer and addressee, in which he safeguards himself against a world gone awry: “And I’ll tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it/ And reflect it from the mountain so all souls can see it” (Thomas 297). In this way, the song unifies the future, past, and present—especially Dylan’s present: “The song’s line ‘Heard the song of a poet who died in the gutter’ may well have come from the reality of Dylan’s life in the Village in those days, as he sang in cafes for hamburgers and spare change and slept on couches” (Thomas 296). As David Yaffe claims, “The premise of Lord Randal is perennial: soldiers will always be sent off to war, the young will always face the prospect of death, and there will be balladeers to sing about it. Every generation sees the world end in its own way” (19).

A second ostensible influence on “Hard Rain” is the poetry of Arthur Rimbaud. In Suze Rotolo’s memoir of her days in Greenwich Village, Rotolo describes a conversation with Dylan following their eventual separation in 1963: “He had traveling tales to tell, opinions to express, more songs to sing, and I had found other artists, poets, and music to add to my roster of enthusiasms to share. I was reading poetry by Rimbaud and it piqued his interest” (qtd. in Thomas 150). Dylan himself corroborates Rotolo’s memory of this specific encounter in *Chronicles: Volume One*. He writes, “Someplace along the line Suze had also introduced me to the poetry of French Symbolist Arthur Rimbaud” (228). Generally speaking, the French Symbolist poets, including Arthur Rimbaud, focused on describing

“the effects of things rather than the things themselves,” much like Dylan does in “Hard Rain” (Thomas 150). As Thomas proceeds to explain, “It was the joy of immersion in chaotic language, in contradictory and nonlinear thought, images of sound and light, that Rimbaud seems to have shown him. There was nothing like it in the English language” (150). As seen in “Blowin’ in the Wind,” the shocking and surreal images of “Hard Rain”—such as the arbitrarily numerated “twelve misty mountains,” “six crooked highways,” “seven sad forests,” and so forth—stir about an oblique vision of fortitude; indeed, the speaker in the song travails across a lethal landscape not only as the only human being, but as the only sentient being to be seen (Ricks 333). Dylan has famously said that in “Hard Rain,” every line could have been the first line of a song; nevertheless, as Ricks writes, “The first verse establishes the impulse of the song, a willingness if need be [...] to take the path of most resistance” (333).

On *Freewheelin’*, Dylan established the themes that would distinguish his writings, recordings, and interviews throughout his career. Specifically, the subjects that Dylan addresses in “Blowin’ in the Wind” and “Hard Rain” are evocative of “the Dylan spectacle,” the complex triangle of Dylan’s music, voices, and “unpropitiatory words” that importantly shaped the cultural landscape of the twentieth century (Fallica 251, Ricks 11). Perhaps most visibly in these two songs, Dylan was learning to be “Dylan”: “the poet, the philosopher, protester, lover, and most of all musician discovering his powers as a singer and songwriter” (Bulson 129). While endowing a political movement with an inspirational vocabulary, Dylan refused to buckle under the pressure of becoming a partisan mouthpiece. Even in the public eye, he managed to remain enigmatic; indeed, “getting to know Dylan can be tricky [...] at his most down-to-earth moments, he can be ironic,

detached, evasive, and cagey” (Bulson 126). As Rimbaud had constructed a poetic identity, Dylan likewise separated himself from the exhorted “I” in a song; Dylan writes in *Chronicles: Volume One* that “I came across one of his letters called ‘Je est un autre,’ which translates into ‘I is someone else.’ [...] It made perfect sense” (qtd. in Thomas 151-2).

While Dylan integrates distant worlds from the past into his songs through myriad cultural allusions, the subtle affects of *Freewheelin’* reveal a profound understanding of the American subconscious. For the huge swell of people born after World War II, Dylan’s melodic broodings would become the cultural fulcrum of the nation’s most dominant psyche. Like other great writers possessing instinct and intuition, Dylan was simultaneously shaping and being shaped by the world around him: “Dylan has always had a way with words. He does not simply have his way with them, since a true comprehender of words is no more their master than he or she is their servant” (Ricks 11). As Dylan said, “The songs are there. They exist all by themselves just waiting for someone to write them down. I just put them down on paper. If I didn’t do it, somebody else would” (qtd. in Harvey 122).

### Chapter 3

#### *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965)

“Some people say that I am a poet,” Bob Dylan teases in a prose-poem on the back cover of *Bringing It All Back Home*, needling the disgruntled listeners that longed for his days as an acoustic troubadour (qtd. in Hermes 20).

While Dylan’s first albums belong to the folk idiom—the ambitious scale of Dylan’s songwriting on *The Times They Are A-Changin’* (1964) and *Another Side of Bob Dylan* (1964) quickly surpassed the finger-pointing devices that sold *Freewheelin’* to the political protesters of the Boomer Generation—his following albums would redefine the frontier of popular music through the invention of folk rock. Dylan clearly resisted being pigeonholed, and he vehemently refused to play a limited role in recreating the folk tradition when he could orchestrate something else never before seen (Shumway 111). Whereas Dylan had adopted the denim fashions of Midwestern folk singers in 1963, he was being photographed in motorcycle boots and skintight leather pants by 1965 (Tamarin 133). In just fifteen months, from March 22, 1965 to May 16, 1966, Dylan would record and release three new albums—*Bringing It All Back Home* (1965), *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965), and *Blonde on Blonde* (1966)—that would establish and perfect this entirely new genre (Thomas 22-23).

The first album of this triad amounted to an artistic watershed. In the words of Jean Tamarin, “It took rock and pop, not to mention folk and blues, to a plane of ideas, to the level of art, in which the lyrics were as important as the music—if not more” (131). Synthesizing a highbrow mixture of Yeats, Baudelaire, and Ginsberg with the boundary-



pushing elements of rock 'n' roll, Dylan enabled an entire catalogue of contemporary musicians to follow his lead—up-and-coming artists including Paul Simon, Leonard Cohen, Neil Young, and Joni Mitchell (Tamarin 131). Dylan's pioneering species of rock poetry even left a mark on American writers like former U.S. poet laureate Billy Collins and Joyce Carol Oates, whom penned the highly anthologized short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" after listening to the closing track of *Bringing It All Back Home*, "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue." As Thomas S. Johnson writes, "Now, knowing where his music went, we can begin to look back and try to understand what were the underlying motives for that excursion" (135).

Dylan's decision to "plug in his guitar" and "go electric" gracefully coupled with his obscure, introspective lyrics in surprising ways. As Dylan himself puts it, "What I did to break away, was to take simply folk changes and put new imagery and attitude to them, use catchphrases and metaphor combined with a new set of ordinances that evolved into something different that had not been heard before" (qtd. in Hermes 20). Fashioning himself into a rock icon—the first kind of "dark, mercurial god"—Dylan reworked the essential themes that appeared on *Freewheelin'* into "a more complicated meld of sex, ideas, and surrealism" with tracks like the Chuck Berry-inspired "Subterranean Homesick Blues," the proverbial "Mr. Tambourine Man," and the knowing "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" (Tamarin 132). In each song, Dylan's anger is epic, existential, and sincerely felt; his tortured journey through love's minefields as a white, middle-class, Jewish intellectual acquired a stronger force of gravity in the rich ire and sexuality of rhythm and blues. Here was the furious questioning of "race music"—which radio stations had emasculated more digestible bubblegum pop for the masses—but on a completely different level. The March

release of *Bringing It All Back Home* in 1965, only a few months before a crowd of outraged fans hailed Dylan as “Judas” at the Newport Folk Festival, was a cultural as much of a musical event; with this album, Dylan was “like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz going from black-and-white Kansas to Technicolor Oz” (Tamarin 132).

The opening track, “Subterranean Homesick Blues,” became Dylan’s first single to chart in the U.S. Indeed, the song was landmark on multiple planes. One of the first songs recorded for *Bringing It All Back Home* in Columbia’s Manhattan studio, the number was “less sung than recited, about lures, snares, chaos, not following leaders, cooking up illegal drugs, and keeping an eye out for the cops” (Wilentz 103). Recombining elements of various practices into new forms, it was a rock song unlike any others popular in 1965 (Shumway 114). Beyond pushing the limits of what a single song could do and say, the track scored the cinematic trailer of D. A. Pennebaker’s documentary, *Don’t Look Back*, creating the modern “music video.” Dylan’s manager Albert Grossman approached Pennebaker about filming Dylan’s tour in England, and the resulting film bore all the features of *cinéma-vérité*—“unrehearsed, candid footage, filmed with small, unobtrusive cameras” (Wilentz 156). The appearance of authenticity was important to Dylan, as it was for the modernist poets and novelists that Dylan read, and Dylan’s highly curated performance in *Don’t Look Back* suggests that he wanted to convey a certain image to reporters (Shumway 117-8). In the clip featuring “Subterranean Homesick Blues,” Dylan stands in the middle of a dirty central London alleyway near the Savoy Hotel, flipping cue cards that read specific lyrics and phrases as the song plays. Dappled with intentional misspellings and puns, the cards themselves were scrawled messily by Allen Ginsberg, Dylan’s longtime collaborator Bob Neuwirth, and the Scottish-born singer-songwriter

Donovan Leitch (who taught John Lennon the finger-picking guitar style that Lennon employed in “Julia” and “Dear Prudence”).

Back in 1965, Dylan’s audiences were unable to look up the words to the lightning fast song online; rather, they had to listen to the rapid delivery of his words carefully, digesting the rich imagery of each line in immediate succession (Tamarin 133). Dylan’s pace is almost indecipherable and produces a stream-of-consciousness effect in the minds of listeners, prompting their subconscious to associate the lyrical fragments. For example, the seemingly disjointed lines that open the song function to create a vivid scene:

Johnny's in the basement

Mixin' up the medicine

I'm on the pavement

Thinkin' about the government (Dylan, “Subterranean Homesick Blues”)

Johnny in the basement is, of course, distilling codeine, a drug reference that remains contemporary in light of the ongoing U.S. opioid crisis (Gill 68-9). Yet, in 1965 Dylan’s allusion to recreational drugs would have evoked the turmoil of the Vietnam War, which eviscerated the already existing conflict between young people and the government (the “straights” and “squares”). Sitting on the pavement, Dylan’s lyrical incarnation is articulating the scathing spirit of the age, a youthful body being exploited for an older generation’s war—“the zeitgeist in the verbal whirlwind,” according to rock journalist Andy Gill (68-9). All the while, Dylan stares at the camera unflinchingly as he tosses the cards. Indeed, if language is the first weapon drawn during war, Dylan’s sardonic expression suggests that he is no longer a simple troubadour for hire. Almost contemptuously, he lets the placards fall aside like garbage, now aware of the fact that he is

wielding the power (Yaffe 20). “Keep a clean nose/ Watch the plain clothes,” Dylan warns us. “You don’t need a weatherman/ To know which way the wind blows” (“Subterranean Homesick Blues”).

The album takes an acoustic turn with “Mr. Tambourine Man.” Here the song is passionately sung, not like the rushed, half-hearted version that Dylan performed at Newport, where he serenaded the folkies with a menacing envoi (Tamarin 135, Wilentz 104). A cover of the song popularized by the Byrds placed emphasis on the chorus, leading to the widespread assumption that it was written about drugs. Indeed, the common interpretation of “Mr. Tambourine Man” is a drug high, with the Tambourine Man being the dealer and his song being a quest for the visions that he will give the poet through the drugs (Johnson). The drug metaphor is significant, but the deeper subject matter of the song is quite overt: “The power of art and the artist to take one away from the quotidian and self” (Shumway 112, 114). With talk of “a trip upon your magic swirlin’ swip” and “disappearin’ through the smoke rings of my mind,” the song paints the image of a colorful bacchanal in which everything exists in a heady, disorienting state of liminality (Dylan, “Mr. Tambourine Man”). Indeed, Dylan famously introduced the Beatles to pot in a New York hotel room only a year before the song’s composition, a period when drug experimentation would have brought Dylan closer to many of his rock ‘n’ roll peers (Hermes 22). Certainly, drugs of all sorts were seductive escapes from the unpleasant reality of the cultural upheavals that were inflicted upon teenagers during the 1960s. Dylan’s meaning is more nuanced, however, as he leaves room for multiple interpretations of exactly who the Tambourine Man is. Some music critics have suggested that Dylan is referring to himself in the vein of the Pied Piper of Hamelin or Euripides’ Dionysus, a rock ‘n’ roll god out to

convert the noble women of Thebes into bloodthirsty Maenads. The entire song uses imperative verb tenses, the speaker asking the Tambourine Man to play his song and demanding “take me on a trip.” After this supplication of sorts, he is ready to fall under the Tambourine Man’s spell by the second verse (Johnson).

Dylan’s vivid and dreamlike images jumble the senses, but he is reveling in the midst of this world beyond his control. Much like the speaker chasing after the Tambourine Man’s ethereal wisdom, Dylan latched onto his poetic influences—“Rimbaud’s where it’s at,” Dylan said in 1964, “That’s the kind of stuff that means something. That’s the kind of writing I’m gonna do” (qtd. in Thomas 154). Fittingly, the psychedelic lyrics of “Mr. Tambourine Man” trace back to Rimbaud’s “The Drunken Boat” (“Le Bateau Ivre”), a hundred-line poem written in French alexandrine that is distinguished by its revolutionary use of imagery and symbolism (Thomas 153-4):

And afterwards down through the poem of the sea,  
 A milky foam infused with stars, frantic I dive  
 Down through green heavens where, descending pensively,  
 Sometimes the pallid remnants of the drowned arrive.  
 Where suddenly the bluish tracts dissolve, desire  
 And rhythmic languors stir beneath the day’s full glow.  
 Stronger than alcohol and vaster than your lyres,  
 The bitter humours of fermenting passion flow. (qtd. in Thomas 153-4)

Rimbaud, almost a full century earlier, experimented with drugs and extreme physical deprivation to produce what he called a “completed deregularization of the senses”; Dylan similarly used drugs, and his surrealistic images likewise produce an estranged world,

although his visionary insights dissolve ordinary consciousness in a more contemporary context (Wells 39). Indeed, the dynamic final stanza of “Mr. Tambourine Man” is perhaps the best evidence of Rimbaud’s imprint on Dylan’s mind:

Then take me disappearin’ through the smoke rings of my mind  
 Down the foggy ruins of time, far past the frozen leaves  
 The haunted, frightened trees, out to the windy beach  
 Far from the twisted reach of crazy sorrow  
 Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand waving free  
 Silhouetted by the sea, circled by the circus sands  
 [...]
 With all memory and fate driven deep beneath the waves  
 Let me forget about today until tomorrow. (Dylan, “Mr. Tambourine Man”)

While Dylan is able to recreate the phantasmagorical visions of his poetic inspiration, the speaker of “Mr. Tambourine Man” has no such luck. Dylan’s plaintive tone reflects the reality that the speaker never sees his wish fulfilled: “He never joins the Tambourine Man, nor does he ever hear the song fully; he only imitates it in a way that tells the Tambourine Man to ignore, his imitation being aimless, he only a chaser of shadows” (Johnson).

“Evening’s empire” has turned to sand, and Dylan’s speaker is stranded alone on an empty street that is “too dead for dreaming” (Dylan, “Mr. Tambourine Man”). This empire is within the realm of dreams, and the speaker awaits the dawn; although the Tambourine Man cannot help the speaker either because he exists in an entirely different world, the speaker resolves to “forget about today until tomorrow”—a statement that is a declaration of hope rather than a cynical retreat (Tamarin 135). Calling out to the Tambourine Man, the

speaker seems to understand that “Evening’s empire” is at the brink of change; the world of dreaming might be dead, but a new domain is waiting to be born at sunrise—and “in the jingle jangle morning I’ll come followin’ you” (Dylan, “Mr. Tambourine Man”).

In “Mr. Tambourine Man,” Dylan demonstrated to folk purists, particularly the older ones aligned with the antiwar movement, precisely how complex and poetic his language could be. Dylan was not outright abandoning the acoustic guitar, but he clearly was developing a new style that diehard folkies were not prepared for (Thomas 22). Something else was afoot, and Dylan’s willingness to shelve the “Dust Bowl” ballads that made him famous was a signal that “Dylan no longer needs us, his audience, in the same way he has up till now” (Tamarin 136). The closing track on *Bringing It Back Home*, “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue,” echoes this message. In 1965, Dylan performed the track for a small audience during the string of concerts that D. A. Pannebaker captured for *Don’t Look Back* that included John Lennon and Donovan:

Donovan, five year’s Dylan’s junior, is part of a group gathered in Dylan’s hotel room. At one point, Donovan starts playing guitar and launches into his song “To Sing for You.” “That’s a good song, man,” says Dylan before Donovan even finishes, then grabs his guitar and in response delivers a version of “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue,” singing, “You must leave now, take what you need, you think will last [...] Donovan listens nervously smoking a cigarette, and he seems to get the point, particularly apparent as Dylan looks directly at him and sings the closing line as if it were written for Donovan, a verdict on the folk traditions that Dylan’s music is rendering obsolete: “And it’s all over now, Baby Blue.” (Thomas 148)

In one of Dylan's most affecting farewell songs, there is "no time for nostalgia: the seasick sailors are rowing home, our lover has just walked out the door" (Tamarin 136). Despite the somber melody and the heartbreaking quality of the guitar chords, Dylan's anger and aggression is potent. Cloaked in a gentle strumming pattern and other assorted folk trappings, the rage buttressing "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" is pure rock. Indeed, a reviewer for *Q Magazine* described the song as, "The most toxic of strummed kiss-offs, with not a snowball's chance in hell of reconciliation" (Gill 77). Likewise, American psychologist and psychedelic drug advocate Timothy Leary heard a certain kind of maliciousness in the song: "The one song 'It's All Over Now, Baby Blue' probably caused more biological and philosophical suicides than any poem in Western history. This is a tribute, not to the dismal poet, but to electronic amplification" (*National Review*). This is not the bittersweet parting of "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright." Regardless of whoever inspired Dylan to write "Baby Blue"—the possibilities range from ex-girlfriend and collaborator Joan Baez to Greenwich Village singer-songwriter David Blue, Dylan's folk music audience, and ostensibly Dylan himself (Shelton 277)—the vagabond rapping at the door was here, and he was growing impatient. On *Bringing It All Back Home*, Dylan entered another universe and ushered us into its mysteries, whether we liked it or not.



## Chapter 4

### *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965)

Dylan's second album of 1965, *Highway 61 Revisited*, cumulated into a historical break for the musician; it was the first time in which none of Dylan's tracks featured only him singing with an acoustic guitar. In this way, the album solidified Dylan's transformation from a political folksinger into an alienated rock musician that was critical of society but harbored no political agenda. The production of the album followed Dylan's short tour through England, a series of eight shows that were all acoustic, which were teased and chopped into *Don't Look Back*. At this time, Dylan was weary and exhausted from the sudden speed of life in general and the mounting demands of his fans—in Todd Haynes' 2007 film *I'm Not There*, a giggling Dylan shouts at a crucifix, "Do your earlier stuff!", comically rendering Dylan's perception of the problem at hand (Decurtis 44).

Indeed, everything was moving fast for Dylan; "although he had brought Joan Baez along on the U.K. tour, he was already living at New York's Chelsea Hotel with Sara Lownds, who he would marry in a private (and in fact secret) ceremony in November 1965" (Levy 24). Moreover, Dylan's newfound fame amplified the availability of drugs within his social circle, and an intense period of amphetamine usage fueled Dylan's attempt at writing a book. This book evolved into *Tarantula*, a perplexing word collage that most critics regarded as babbling nonsense. However, "For all of its wasted words [*Tarantula*] had some remarkable passages of avant-garde hilarity and serious grace" (Wilentz 296). Dylan described the work as "a long piece of vomit," but from the best passages of Dylan's notes

for the book came “Like a Rolling Stone,” a single that would later be named “the greatest song of all time” (Polito 138):

Once upon a time you dressed so fine  
 You threw the bums a dime in your prime, didn't you?  
 People'd call, say, “Beware doll, you're bound to fall”  
 You thought they were all kiddin' you  
 You used to laugh about  
 Everybody that was hangin' out  
 Now you don't talk so loud  
 Now you don't seem so proud  
 About having to be scrounging for your next meal  
 [...]  
 You've gone to the finest school all right, Miss Lonely  
 But you know you only used to get juiced in it  
 And nobody has ever taught you how to live on the street  
 And now you find out you're gonna have to get used to it  
 You said you'd never compromise  
 With the mystery tramp, but now you realize  
 He's not selling any alibis  
 As you stare into the vacuum of his eyes  
 And ask him do you want to make a deal?

A lyrical condensation of *Tarantula* in many ways, “Like a Rolling Stone” is praised for the emotional force of its repeated refrain—“How does it feel?”—and its powerful expressions

of alienation. The song itself emerged from a studio session with Michael Bloomfield, a guitarist from the Paul Butterfield Band that Dylan met in Woodstock, during which Dylan rearranged the muddled verses left over from *Tarantula*. Certainly, “If Dylan’s acoustic guitar served as the jumping-off point for the music on *Bringing It All Back Home*, here it’s Bloomfield’s electric, which references the blues but reaches out to country twang and rockabilly snap” (Levy 26). The single was released in late July, and initial copies sent to radio stations split the six-minute song between two sides of a 45, although listeners often demanded DJs to play the song through its entirety (Levy 26). “Like a Rolling Stone” topped as a number two hit on *Billboard* over the summer, and following a successful number of concerts in Austin and Dallas, the furious booing that Dylan had encountered in Newport had receded, at least temporarily. Dylan’s new sound went over better with audiences down south, where rock and roll was born. Dylan even received a rather unexpected applause when performing at Carnegie Hall (Wilentz 109).

In an interview with Martin Bronstein, Dylan explained the revolutionary process of composing “Like a Rolling Stone.” Dylan explained, “I’d literally quit singing and playing, and I found myself writing this song, this story [...] and out of it I took ‘Like a Rolling Stone’ and made it as a single. I’d never written anything like that before, and it suddenly came to me that this is what I should do. Nobody had ever done that before [...] Because it was a whole new category. I mean, nobody’s ever really written songs before, really” (qtd. in Polito 140). Indeed, the “whole new category” that Dylan initiated with “Like a Rolling Stone” was a synthesis of multiple stories, personal, collective, and political, that dramatized the nation’s history while at once speaking to Dylan’s own past (Polito 141). This pastiche was wholly American, a “crazy quilt of folk process blasting into Dada collage”

(Polito 138). The pillars of the Western world—an amalgam of characters from Greek mythology, Roman history, and Shakespeare’s plays—collide with the grotesqueries of P. T. Barnum’s circuses (“Aw, you never turned around to see the frowns/ On the jugglers and the clowns”) and the lowbrow stock of pulp fiction writers like Raymond Chandler (“People’d call, say, ‘Beware doll, you’re bound to fall’”). Dylan interjects these outlandish meetings with lively and uninhibited jive patter (“You shouldn’t let other people get your kicks”) as well as T. S. Eliot’s mysticism (“As you stare into the vacuum of his eyes”). Dylan even takes the chord structure of the melody itself from a song titled “La Bamba” by Ritchie Valens, the forefather of the Chicano rock movement, and the opening words from virtually every fairy tale ever told: “Once upon a time” (Wilentz 313). Meshing together these myriad facets of American culture in cryptic ways, the song forces us to take a critical look at ourselves; why are we associating with this “mystery tramp”? What would compel us to purchase an alibi from him? To borrow verbiage from the title of Joyce Carol Oates’ 1966 short story, “Where are we going? Where have we been?”

The enduring popularity of “Like a Rolling Stone” might owe something to its ecstatic expressions of *Schadenfreude*, a term that refers to the “malicious enjoyment of the misfortune of others” (“*Schadenfreude*”). Indeed, the ensemble rises and falls on waves of bitterness as the guitar gloats and the speaker taunts, “How does it feel?” to the song’s addressee, the proverbial Miss Lonely (Shumway 116). Dylan leers toward his disenfranchised audience—“Now you don’t talk so loud”—as he pulls the curtain back on the blatant lies behind the glowing facade American exceptionalism. This amphetamine-powered diatribe appeared to Timothy Leary as something spiteful: “Read, if you dare, the lyrics to ‘Like a Rolling Stone’ and cringe at the deliberate trampling on hope and self-

confidence. Barbiturate Barbarism. ‘How does it feel?’ It feels like that Old Testament Masochism Bob” (*National Review*, 1976). Dylan himself acknowledged the song’s antagonistic tendencies in an interview with Ralph J. Gleason in 1967. When Gleason asked, “In a lot of your songs you are hard on people [...] Do you do this because you want to change their lives, or do you want to point out to them the error of their ways?”, Dylan responded with perfect terseness: “I want to needle them” (qtd. in Ricks 179).

Rock music historians suspect that American actress and fashion model Edie Sedgwick inspired the “Miss Lonely” persona, as Sedgwick had developed romantic feelings for Dylan after she departed Andy Warhol’s Factory and relocated to the Chelsea Hotel. (At the time, Dylan was married to Sara Lownds, which later proved to be an unpleasant surprise for Sedgwick.) However, other writers such as Michael Gray argue that Sedgwick’s tumultuous relationship with Dylan was irrelevant to the composition of “Like a Rolling Stone” (603-4). Nevertheless, Miss Lonely’s pride is anatomized in the song, and listeners might as well imagine the rollicking piano keys scoring the downfall of a Warhol superstar. A cosmopolitan “It Girl” of the 1960s, Sedgwick would have known the paradoxical loneliness of living inside New York City’s limelight better than anyone, perhaps even Dylan himself. Indeed, if Miss Lonely ever walked the high-profile streets of Manhattan in person, loneliness was surely the prideful ingénue’s Homeric epithet. Dylan’s language conveys her as such; “lonely” is appropriately one of the loneliest words in the English language, with the only rhyme for “lonely” being “only”—“You’ve gone to the finest schools all right, Miss Lonely/ But you know you only used to get juiced in it”—a spritely chain of sounds that transforms the song’s rage into a savage farce of celebrity (Ricks 38, 178).

Indeed, Dylan suggests a link between tragedy and comedy in *Tarantula's* rambling dance of death—"Tragedy, the broken pride, shallow & no deeper than comedy"—which certainly reflects Dylan's so-called needling of Miss Lonely in "Like a Rolling Stone" (*Tarantula*, Dylan 52). However, the voice of the song is not exactly laughing at Miss Lonely; instead, he is earnest in expressing the mixed feelings of his reception to her realization of life's bleakness. In Dylan's universe, Miss Lonely might have found herself at a loss, but her new understanding of this fact is a sort of gain: "Perhaps pure loss is as rare as any other purity" (Ricks 185). As music critic Paul Nelson explains in his review of *Highway 61 Revisited*, "Dylan's social adversaries have twisted ["Like a Rolling Stone"] to mean something very devious and selfish, but that is not the case at all. Dylan is simply kicking away the props to get to the real core of the matter: Know yourself. If may hurt at first, but you'll never get anywhere if you don't" (*Sing Out!*, 1966). Again, as Ricks puts it, "True, [Miss Lonely] lost a great deal of what had constituted her being, this princess. But did she gain nothing?" (183).

Dylan's ultimate mantra seems to suggest that pessimism is not deep, nor optimism shallow. the thematic interplay of these two worldviews is what truly underlies the song's pivoting phrase: "When you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose" (Dylan, "Like a Rolling Stone"). All rock stars benefit from the presumption of freedom, the experience of not being shackled to mundane obligations like work and family. Muddy Waters and Hank Williams were both well-acquainted with metaphors of tumbleweeds and rolling stones; likewise, Jack Kerouac and the whole lot of Beatniks embraced the same anchorless lifestyle, albeit with a slightly different vocabulary. Furthermore, one could certainly argue that "the song is the wish fulfillment of most high school students, male and female, since

they suffer under the most rigid and oppressive social hierarchies” (Shumway 116). Indeed, living “like a complete unknown” might initially seem like a threat to Miss Lonely, but the evacuated being of the polar opposite case—a complete known—is equally devastating (Ricks 185). Thus, while “Like a Rolling Stone” is blistering in the speaker’s harsh judgments, the song is simultaneously triumphant in his exultation of personal liberty and autonomy. As if to acknowledge these seemingly impossible interpretations, the words in the chorus form a question and provide its own answer. “How does it feel to be like a rolling stone?” Dylan asks us. “Like a rolling stone, that’s how it feels” (Ricks 185).

Precisely to this end, literary critics assert that a striking quality of Dylan’s songwriting is the “negative capability” that it embodies (Decurtis 42). Indeed, the term negative capability denotes “the ability to accept mystery and uncertainty rather than trying to rationalize it, regarded as a quality of a creative artist”; the phrase now also refers to empathy more generally (“Negative Capability”). The English poet John Keats originally conceived of the term while analyzing the greatness of writers like William Shakespeare—“a Man of Achievement [...] capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason”—but the description likewise applies to the capacity for difference heard throughout Dylan’s oeuvre, and especially in “Like a Rolling Stone” (qtd. in “Negative Capability”). To Dylan, freedom is concurrently a blessing and a curse, a reality that encapsulates the wraithlike vestiges of the American Dream in a post-truth world. Dylan himself describes this odd feeling of ambivalence during the height of his youthful songwriting in *Chronicles: Volume One*: “I didn’t know what age of history we were in nor what the truth of it was. Nobody bothered with that. If you told the truth that was all

well and good and if you told the un-truth, well that's still well and good. And good folk songs taught me that" (qtd. in Thomas 93).



## Chapter 5

### *Blonde on Blonde* (1966)

The album art for Dylan's 1966 record, *Blonde on Blonde*, featured a blurry photography of Dylan taken on a cold day in Manhattan's Meatpacking District. He was donning a suede jacket and a checkered scarf, obviously dressed for the winter season despite the record's springtime release. Because of the opaque imagery and heady nature of each song listed on the album's track list, many listeners assumed the hazy close-up of Dylan's solemn and unsmiling face in muted shades of amber was an attempt at a "drug shot." However, as Dylan's close friend and photographer Jerry Schatzberg explains, "It was that we were outside, it was very cold and we were shaking. Both of us! That's really what it was, and that's how it turned out" (qtd. in Dolan 32). In Schatzberg's defense as a photographer, Dylan himself selected the accidental image after the shooting session, as the portrait serendipitously represented Dylan's life at the time: "a heedless rush, too fast to stay in focus, even for a second" (Dolan 32).

As Dylan would tell Jann S. Wenner of *The Rolling Stone*, "I was going at a tremendous speed [...] at the time of my *Blonde on Blonde* album" (qtd. in Dolan 30). Most of the album was recorded in between concerts across the country during a particularly strenuous bout of touring. During the month of October, just as the tour was beginning, Dylan and members of the Hawks (who would later become "the Band") went into Columbia Studios in New York and recorded the single "Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window?" a track that pleased Dylan to the point that he actually booted Phil Ochs, a grandee of the folk scene, from the backseat of a limo for insulting it (Dolan 30). Despite the

initial ease of laying down that number, Dylan's recording group found themselves in the middle of an artistic stalemate during the subsequent weeks of the fall and winter. It was not until Dylan's record producer, Bob Johnston, suggested recording the album in Nashville, Tennessee that the making of *Blonde on Blonde* took off.

While Nashville had been gaining traction as a major recording center since the 1940s, the bluegrass city remained as uncharted territory for most rock musicians. However, once in Nashville, Dylan pieced together a band that was much more in touch with his vision for *Blonde on Blonde* than anyone would anticipate from a motley assortment of "long-haired New York hipsters" and "well-scrubbed Nashville good ol' boys" (Wilentz 115, 116-7). The first day of the Nashville sessions proved to be productive—the first session produced the momentous track "Visions of Johanna"—but all of the remaining marathon dates reached long past midnight (Wilentz 117). However, the song set a pace for the latter recording sessions, and on the second day Dylan laid down another landmark track, "Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands," which stretched past 10 minutes and occupied the entire D-side of *Blonde on Blonde* (Dolan 32). This session began at six in the evening and ended around five-thirty the next morning, as Dylan had toiled over the lyrics for hours. The Nashville musicians, accustomed to cutting only three- to four-minute songs a day, labored through the writing process alongside Dylan; according to those who participated, "the level of efficiency was military: hurry up and wait" (Wilentz 117-8).

Dylan departed the studio in Nashville to perform another series of concert dates and returned during mid-March to finish the record. The songs recorded during these following sessions were shorter and their production flowed faster than ever, resulting in a batch of classics that included "Rainy Day Women #12 and 35" and "I Want You," which

served as the album's working title for a short while. After the final mixing in Los Angeles, California, Dylan completed the album that spring (Dolan 32). The upshot of *Blonde on Blonde*—"let's acknowledge it as *BOB*," writes Michael Coyle and Debra Rae Cohen—was Dylan's most epochal work yet (143). As Wilentz asserts, this latest record was "a gigantic peak in Dylan's career" that "describes basic, not always flattering, human desire and the inner movements of an individual being in the world" (125). Like *Highway 61 Revisited*, *Blonde on Blonde* explored the paradoxical nature of human relationships but with a more poignant focus on man's alienation from the last thing he has left to confide in—"i.e. a woman" (Wells). Indeed, as complicated as the album was, it affirmed Dylan's popularity as an American icon, reaching number nine on *Billboard* (Wilentz 128).

The album changed how the general population thought about the artistic possibilities of rock 'n' roll (Wilentz 126). The vernacular that Dylan assembled on *Blonde on Blonde* exceeded whatever listeners had come to expect from a "Dylan song" by allowing Dylan an ironic distance from his own celebrity, challenging whatever the rock genre had come to represent (Coyle 144-5). Here was vulnerability being exposed at an extreme. However, the self-reflexivity of the album "at once invite[s] and ridicule[s]" any attempt to divine any singular meanings in the songs (Coyle 143). Indeed, "like the French poets from whose books he lifted more than a few pages, Dylan immerses his listeners in the twinned processes of weaving and unweaving myth—which is why the songs of *BOB* seem so often self-interfering and contradictory" (Coyle 143). For example, the third stanza of "Visions of Johanna" ironically renders the pitfalls of fame, which are the self-destructive tendencies that have hastened the deaths of talented celebrities like Heather Ledger and Amy

Winehouse in recent times: “Now, little boy lost, he takes himself so seriously/ He brags of his misery, he likes to live dangerously” (Dylan, “Visions of Johanna”).

“Visions of Johanna” arguably contains the hardest language to decipher in Dylan’s discography. Dylan’s highly personal images and references constantly shift throughout *Blonde on Blonde*, but in this specific song, Dylan goes to lengths to employ concentrated diction and profuse imagery (Johnson). Written in an unconstructed stream-of-consciousness, the opening stanza lyrically sets the scene of the song’s narrative situation:

Ain’t it just like the night to play tricks when you’re tryin’ to be so quiet?

We sit here stranded, though we’re all doin’ our best to deny it

And Louise holds a handful of rain, temptin’ you to defy it

Lights flicker from the opposite loft

In this room the heat pipes just cough

The country music station plays soft

But there’s nothing, really nothing to turn off

Just Louise and her lover so entwined

And these visions of Johanna that conquer my mind (Dylan, “Visions of Johanna”)

A young man, who is a poet of sorts, finds himself “stranded” in a dark and silent room with a woman named Louise. Emptiness dominates the setting; lights flicker, pipes cough, a radio plays, but nothing is happening. In this scene, Dylan leads one to believe that Louise’s lover is, in fact, the young man himself, although his mind is not actively with his body that is “so entwined” with Louise. Rather, the young man exists like an astral projection hovering next to his corporeal body, enraptured by his soul’s desire for another woman’s love. Louise offers the young man “a handful of rain,” tempting him with the option to

refresh and restore their relationship as a cleansing shower might, but the young man already has realized the inevitable truth: “we’re all doin’ our best to deny it.” The young man’s unrequited love for Johanna is palatable, but his reluctance to admit his state of denial openly to Louise has immobilized him. As a consequence, everyone is static in this room.

Through all this, Louise remains calm. The couple hears prostitutes chattering about their sexual conquests in the streets below the stifling room that neither person is able to escape, and a watchman asks a question that appears to go unanswered (unlike the callbacks repeated in the choruses of “Blowin’ in the Wind” and “Like a Rolling Stone”):

In the empty lot where the ladies play blindman’s bluff with the key chain  
 And the all-night girls they whisper of escapades out on the “D” train  
 We can hear the night watchman click his flashlight  
 Ask himself if it’s him or them that’s really insane  
 Louise, she’s all right, she’s just near  
 She’s delicate and seems like the mirror  
 But she just makes it all too concise and too clear  
 That Johanna’s not here (Dylan, “Visions of Johanna”)

The young man absently studies her appearance, noting that her deepening wrinkles look like “the ghost of ’lectricity howl[ing] in the bones of her face” (Dylan, “Visions of Johanna”). Her face is ravaged by Johanna *in absentia*, and the young man knows that he continues this half-hearted relationship with Louise simply because she is still there: “Louise, she’s all right, she’s just near.” His feelings for Louise are nonexistent, rendering his imaginary “visions of Johanna” more real than his physical intimacy with Louise. Moreover, Louise

“seems like the mirror,” implying that she is harboring conflicted emotions, as well; indeed, “she recognizes [their relationship] is prostituted love, something the young man is also coming to recognize” (Johnson). Dylan sees this false relationship as a “negation of life and vitality,” which the motif of prostitution signals throughout Dylan’s songwriting (Johnson). Certainly, the central conflict of the song is the irreconcilable tension between the ideal and the real, as the final dissolution of the song portrays these two forces destroying each other at last: “While my conscience explodes/ The harmonicas play the skeleton keys and the rain/ And these visions of Johanna are now all that remain” (Dylan, “Visions of Johanna”).

In “Visions of Johanna,” Dylan’s voice is a touchstone that he calculates to accommodate and comment upon the characters and sentiments in the song’s lyrics. Indeed, the track is backed by an entire studio of musicians, but the sound of the band is restrained, and Dylan’s voice is uncontested in its control of the song’s pace. Additionally, Dylan has adopted a softer, “intimate voice” that expresses the young man’s vulnerability and regret. Dylan perfects this intimate voice throughout *Blonde on Blonde*, where he sings by intoning close to the microphone and rarely pitching the melodies where he has to strain for a blues effect (Negus 124). Certainly, Dylan’s voice is an ever-evolving instrument on the record; “by turns sibilant, sibylline, injured, cocky, sardonic, and wry,” it surprised many listeners that had become accustomed to him sounding harsh and raspy (Wilentz 125). This strategy of vocal manipulation presented new challenges for Dylan in the writing process, as it was difficult for him to conceptualize the sound of lines like “Name me someone that’s not a parasite and I’ll go out and say a prayer for him” (Dylan – “Visions of Johanna”). While this obstacle perhaps explains the lengthy recording sessions that went into the making of *Blonde on Blonde*, tracks like “Visions of Johanna” are clear evidence that

Dylan succeeded in channeling powerful emotion through the vocal parts of his songs (Wilentz 125).

This intimate voice likewise colors the song that pulls the hardest against the nihilism articulated on the earlier tracks of *Blonde on Blonde*, “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands.” Influenced in part by country ballads and bluesy crooners, the song is straightforward in its request to be read as sincere (Coyle 149). Clocking in at 11 minutes and 21 seconds, the track comprises the full fourth side of the double-LP, a first in the history of rock. This recording strategy physically separated the track from the other songs on *Blonde on Blonde*, which actually had more to do with the way that Dylan wanted listeners to experience the song than its rambling duration; indeed, the song would have fit onto the record’s third side, making the decision not one of practical necessity (Wilentz 126).

Whereas many of the album’s songs are characterized by self-involvement and frustration, “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands” is remarkably authentic in its hopefulness (Wilentz 126). Dylan called the song “a piece of religious carnival music,” which is appropriate granted the faint melodic echoes of Johann Sebastian Bach, such as the chorale “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring” (Wilentz 118). More accurately, the song is a celebration of his first wife Sara Lownds, with whom he had four children. Lownds was a model and appeared in *Harper’s Bazaar* before meeting Dylan in 1964, although at the time she was married to a photographer named Hans Lownds and Dylan was still romantically involved with Joan Baez (who maintains that Dylan based the Louise character in “Visions of Johanna” on her). Nevertheless, the couple found a way to be together once Lownds divorced her husband and moved into the Chelsea Hotel to be near Dylan. Robert Shelton,

Dylan's biographer, describes Dylan's perception of Sara Lownds during the height of this infatuation as "a Romany spirit, seeming to be wise beyond her years, knowledgeable about magic, folklore and traditional wisdom" (227-8). In this vein, Dylan enumerates his new wife's qualities in a Petrarchan catalogue in "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands," even suggesting the limitations of language in comparison to her unspeakable beauty (Coyle 149):

With your mercury mouth in the missionary times  
 And your eyes like smoke and your prayers like rhymes  
 And your silver cross, and your voice like chimes  
 Oh, who among them do they think could bury you?  
 With your pockets well protected at last  
 And your streetcar visions which you place on the grass  
 And your flesh like silk, and your face like glass  
 Who among them do they think could carry you?  
 Sad-eyed lady of the lowlands  
 Where the sad-eyed prophet says that no man comes  
 My warehouse eyes, my Arabian drums  
 Should I leave them by your gate  
 Or, sad-eyed lady, should I wait? (Dylan, "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands")

"Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" opens with the sad-eyed lady's mouth and soon moves to her smoky eyes, musical voice, and silk-like skin. After all this, the speaker issues a question that expands into a series of further questions—"Who among them do they think could carry you?"; "Oh, who among them do they think could bury you?"; "Or, sad-eyed



lady, should I wait?" (Ricks 97). In the song's refrain, Dylan then offers his "warehouse eyes" and "Arabian drums" to the sad-eyed lady, proposing to leave them at her gate if she refuses to see him (Coyle 149). While these two obscure images are perplexing, lyrical manuscripts from the Nashville sessions show that Dylan was working in a contemporary mode of what T. S. Eliot called "the dissociation of sensibility," which Eliot defined as "cutting of discursive thought or wit from poetic value, substituting emotion for coherence" (Wilentz 125-6). Dylan had begun experimenting with this mode as early as 1964, but the gesture is emphatic in "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands," where Dylan readily sacrifices his "prophetic visions" and "spiritual potency" for the sake of his beloved, a vow that resounds like Prospero's drowning his book of spells (Coyle 149).

The release of *Blonde on Blonde* crystalized Dylan's persona as an artist in 1966, confirming his status as a major rock star with three singles that broke into the top 40 that summer. Whereas *Highway 61 Revisited* presented a social critique, *Blonde on Blonde* as a complete record constituted an inward return to the introspective themes that Dylan tackled in his early folk songs, but now in the style of rock 'n' roll. However fragmented and surreal *Blonde on Blonde* might have been, it provided outsiders a rare glimpse into Dylan's rich internal world (Shumway 118-9). Here was a folk singer who evolved into the first rock musician that identified as a real artist, presenting himself in the same intellectual stratosphere as Ezra Pound, Pablo Picasso, and Igor Stravinsky. This new persona was radical, but no longer only in the leftist sense; indeed, Dylan was "no longer rebel but seismograph" (Willis 235).

## Chapter 6

### “Infinity Goes Up on Trial”

Bob Dylan met privately with several members of the Swedish Academy on the first of April in 2017 to retrieve the gold medal and diploma that accompanied the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature. Academy member and secretary Sara Danius reported on this intimate ceremony, writing that “Quite a bit of time was spent looking closely at the golden medal, in particular the beautifully crafted back, an image of a young man sitting under a laurel tree who listens to the Muse. Taken from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the inscription reads: *Inventas vitam iuvat excoluisse per artes*, loosely translated as ‘And they who bettered life on earth by their newly found mastery’” (qtd. in Thomas 12).

Danius’ cheerful reporting of this private event leaves plenty of interpretive space for knowing readers to spy between the lines of her retelling. Apart from Dylan, everyone in the room would have seen the medal many times before; the evasive syntax of “quite a bit of time was spent looking closely at the golden medal” suggests that Dylan was the only participant who was laboring to examine the Latin inscription of the medal. An artist who notices everything around him, Dylan would have known the young man depicted on the backside of the medal, which was designed by Swedish engraver Erik Lindberg in 1902, was the poet Virgil. On the golden engraving, Virgil sings in the shade of a tree, looking up at the Muse with her stringed lyre or *cithara*—the Greek word that gives us “guitar.” Having integrated the Homeric tradition into his songs, including the 2012 track “Early Roman Kings,” Dylan surely recognized the context of the engraving as Virgil’s description of the paradise awaiting poets in the afterlife: “And faithful poets whose songs were fit for

Apollo/ Those who enriched our lives with the newfound arts they forged/ and those we remember for the good they did mankind” (qtd. in Thomas 14).

The genius of Bob Dylan reaches back toward the not-too-far-off worlds of the Greeks and Romans, the bastions of antiquity where lyrical poetry, which would go on to shape humanism in the twenty-first century, first arose from the lyrics to songs of *Kleos*, a Greek work that roughly denotes “glory” but literally translates into “what others hear about you” (Nage 26). Indeed, the fundamental idea of renown in antiquity was necessarily connected to the ability to hear sound, as Homer’s epics were transmitted orally in the late eighth or early seventh centuries, B. C. In this poetic sense of history, the blind bard of Ionia virtually sang the assorted virtues of humanity into power; these are the axiomatic virtues that, in turn, we hear imbedded into Dylan’s focus on humanity today. As Thomas explains, “Dylan’s art has long enriched the lives of those who listen to his music, through a genius that captures the essence of what it means to be human” (17). To this extent, Dylan’s songs are justifiably great literature; they spring from the seminal traditions of Homer, Virgil, and Shakespeare while also incorporating the “illiterate and semiliterate” genres of blues and folk, musical forms that have nourished the spirits of certain communities more than any “great literature” preserved in a dusty library has (Thomas 311). Indeed, every age has its own version of *Kleos* and, more importantly, its own version of Homer to speak it into existence.

In general terms, literature as a branch of study denotes “familiarity with letters or books; knowledge acquired from reading or studying books, esp. the principal classical texts associated with humane learning” (“Literature”). Based on the nexus of influences that come together in his work, Bob Dylan undeniably possesses a familiarity with letters

and books; and, furthermore, Dylan possesses the rare ability to extrapolate wholly original comments on the experience of participating in the modern world from this internalized web of historical sources. As such, Dylan's synthesized take on literature requires the contextualization of the New Historicists, which analyzes Dylan's songs as cultural artifacts while also treating the history shaping those songs as something that is "historically contingent on the present in which [it is] constructed" (Greenblatt 1-3). Some literary critics would argue that this method of analysis is aesthetically reductive, either diminishing literature into history or history into literature, but the view that artistic works of literature are cultural formations promises enriching opportunities to learn from the past that is underfoot by considering the elements both inside and outside of the text (Greenblatt 1-3).

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