

The symposium kicked off Sunday afternoon with a very brief performance by the surviving members of Koerner, Ray, & Glover--**Spider John Koerner and Tony Glover**--who played a handful of songs from their original repertoire--though Koerner may also have played a recent original (I forget). This was followed by an interview with **Bobby Vee** about his association with "Elston Gunn." (Vee made it clear he still hadn't gotten over his amusement/bemusement) at Dylan's (then Zimmerman's) insistence on the triple "n." (When describing the current status of his own career, playing in a band with his sons, he identified each of the members as [first name) "Vee.") Vee turns out to be a very charming, unpretentious character, and a genuinely avid Dylan fan, dubbing him "our Irving Berlin."

Next came **Greil Marcus's keynote speech--"Hibbing High School & the Mystery of Democracy."** His prose was characteristically circuitous and highly wrought, but 2 people I talked to immediately afterwards--including Michael Gray, who was sitting next to me--said that they were surprised to find his talk so accessible & impassioned--qualities they often found lacking in his books. I knew what they meant, but I think they're wrong--or I think this: if they found Marcus's talk in a book, they'd probably have the usual problems with it, and if they had his books on tape, they'd probably find it just as accessible & passionately felt as his talk--because appearances to the contrary, Marcus is actually an oral storyteller, a tall-tale spellbinder, a 4th of July orator. The closest analogy actually is Faulkner (when it's not Melville): The "difficulty" of Faulkner's most labyrinthine prose disappears when someone (who understands it) reads it to you.

Anyway, Marcus's talk was sparked, he explained, when he was doing a reading from one of his Dylan-related books at a bookstore in SF (Cody's, I think he said), and during the discussion afterwards the mostly old-geezer (i.e. his & our age) males in the audience began asking themselves how in the world someone like Dylan ever emerged from such an ur-nowhere as Hibbing. At some point, a somewhat younger woman (age 35-40 Marcus guessed) got up and, empurpled with indignation, asked, "Have any of you ever *been to* Hibbing." Of course, no one had. "Well, if you had you'd know how it produced a Dylan. The walls there are filled with poetry." Marcus says he began planning his trip to Hibbing while she was still talking. He went there last year, fortuitously during Dylan Days, when the town had the welcome mat out for visitors. Most of his talk was about the High School, and when he concluded his detailed verbal tour of it by declaring it to be "the most impressive public building in the U.S. outside Washington, D.C."--and he was talking about more than its mere architecture--it felt like no one in the audience would disagree at all with the assessment. (Many of them had seen it themselves on a pre-symposium buss trip to Hibbing the day before). (One of my favorite bloggers, Ken Gegenhuber at celestialmonochord.org, was at the symposium and offers his own illustrated intro to Hibbing High at www.celestialmonochord.org/2007/03/dylan_symposium.html)

Marcus's Dylan Days visit to the school included a visit to the classroom where Dylan took an American lit class from B. J. Rolfzen, who was there to host the visitors. Rolfzen reminisced a bit about teaching Dylan--who always sat in the same seat in the first row, right in front of Rolfzen, as if to announce, Marcus imagined, "this class is for

me!”) But then Rolfzen, now in his 80s and retired, surprised everyone by proceeding to give mini English class. According to Marcus, he passed out Xeroxes of William Carlos Williams’s “So Much Depends” (aka “Red Wheelbarrow”) and then read it aloud. Then he read it aloud again, and again, and again, etc., his voice landing sharply each time on different words. Marcus himself did the same thing, and it became clear before he even spelled it out, that the poem morphed each time into something slightly different, its mood and flavor and weight always showing different colors. Rolfzen never said anything *about* the poem to the class but simply brought it to life for his “students” to contemplate. Marcus was more than a little impressed--astonished is more like it--by this, So was I--who wouldn’t be? It dawned on me listening to him that I had never noticed--despite its being the most famous poem by one of my favorite poets, a poem I had taught myself several times--that I had never noticed that the title is a complete sentence: “So much depends.” Duh!

One the concurrent sessions later in the symposium featured a screening and discussion of *Tangled Up in Bob*, a documentary of the poet Natalie Goldberg’s visits to Hibbing to satisfy her desire to understand where Dylan came from--psychically as well as physically. I didn’t attend this session, in part because I had picked up a DVD of the film at the gift shop in the Weisman Museum, where I had also viewed the *Bob Dylan’s American Journey* traveling exhibit. Anyway, it’s really good, and it also features a lot of Rolfzen, who among other things is shown conducting a similar class for visitors, this time reading Williams’s “This Is Just to Say.” This time he read it only once but repeated the title a few times, each time improvising a sentence--e.g., “This is just to say I’ll be home late tonight.” This is just to say your boy was killed in the war.” And so on. (I’m making up these examples--I forget what he actually said.) There’s also lots of Goldberg’s conversations with Dylan’s childhood buddy and bandmate John Bucklen, and lots of Hibbing itself, the geography, climate, the buildings, etc. Very much worth picking up.

Back to Marcus--one tidbit he mentioned (I forget the context) is that back in Hibbing, Dylan/Zimmerman had written a song called “Big Black Train,” a rewrite of “Mystery Train” whose lyrics Marcus read. I don’t think he mentioned how he came upon it. Maybe this is already known but it was news to me.

The first day ended with a talk on “**Dylan and the Beats**” by **Ann Waldman**. I’m a big fan of her poetry, but the talk was a bit of a disappointment, partly I suppose because I was already very familiar with the terrain she was covering and partly because it was a very rambling talk. The one point she made that struck me as sorta new (to me) and cogent was the extent to which Dylan was influenced by the Beats’ interest in the musicality of language, the sonority of vowels and the noisiness of consonants. She also began and ended by reading (performing) excerpts from her superb Rolling Thunder rhapsody, “Shaman Hisses You Slide Back into the Night.”

The 2nd day began with a talk on Dylan’s reception in Italy by **Dylan’s Italian translator, Alessandro Carrera**, a University of Houston languages professor. He talked first about Dylan’s initial trip to Italy in January, 1963 (the month after he had come to England for *Madhouse on Castle Street*): he went to Rome to meet Odetta & then to Perugia looking for Suze R. It was on this trip that he discovered Burroughs, probably (Carrera surmises) at the Folkstudio in Rome, a club in Rome run by Harold

Bradley, an African American painter who Carrera says had also been a Cleveland Browns fullback. (However, I could find no confirmation of that and the Pro Football Hall of Fame website--on a page devoted to African American pioneers--lists a Harold Bradley who played guard in college at Iowa and (position unspecified) in the NFL for the Chicago Cardinals in 1928. Maybe the Folkstudio Bradley was this guy's son. My search for Bradley did yield this nice anecdote, at www.nataliedarbeloff.com/autobio15.html:

By day Reg and I were employed by the Teatro Club (he did a bit of everything, I designed posters, publicity etc.) but on many evenings we would be performing or listening at the Folkstudio on Via Garibaldi, a popular club right near us, created and run by handsome [Harold Bradley](#), African-American painter/actor/singer with a fabulous voice resembling Paul Robeson. We became good friends with Harold and his German wife Hannelore. Our musical repertoire expanded, boosted by an indulgent audience of fellow amateurs. But sometimes, the performers had arrived at, or were definitely on their way to world-class stardom.

One night a skinny kid in a baseball cap sat at the back and listened attentively and eventually, like almost everyone else who came to the Folkstudio, sloped up to the front and sang a couple of songs. To my eternal shame I cannot remember what he sang or whether I liked it. What I do know is that he (accompanied by his manager, Al Grossman) came out with us to a corner bar and was hilariously, articulately drunk, probably stoned too, and that I haven't laughed so much in all my life. Unfortunately I can't recall a single word of what Bob Dylan said that made me laugh.

Carrera wondered whether Dylan's "When I Paint My Masterpiece" (set mostly in Rome) was inspired in part by the painter Bradley. He said the "on a hilltop chasing wild geese" verse in that song is--like that of American poets typically, he added--"Dantean" in its implicit vision of "nature as the divine sublime." He implied (or maybe stated) that this feeling has long since disappeared from Italian (and maybe all [West] European) poetry. He also reminded us that this verse must draw on early childhood of Duluth, which is very hilly, and not Hibbing, which is flat (except for the big hole!). Someone in his audience suggested it may also allude to the geese that saved Rome by providing advance warning of Gauls trying to sneak up the Capitoline Hills, where the Romans had taken refuge.

Carrera then discusses Dylan's reputation in Italy, which he compared to Fellini's: both artists have disappointed & even outraged their audience's expectations far more often than they have satisfied them. He also mentioned that when Patti Smith--then seen as Dylan's heir--made her Italian debut in 1975, she appeared wrapped in an American flag and graciously (she thought, this being a Catholic country) dedicated a song to the pope. Everyone was outraged! "Italy is not a Catholic country," Carrera said. "It's a political country." The pope, of course, is anathema to the Italian left. He also mentioned how much Dylan's performance "for" the pope in the late 90s similarly outraged the sensibilities of his fans. (The Italian right, it was implied--or maybe stated, I don't rightly remember, doesn't much care for Dylan anyway.) Carrera said the Italian left felt finally vindicated "after waiting 45 years) by *Modern Times*: He quoted something indicating that D's use of the word "proletariat"--by itself sweet music to their ears--was the lens through which they read the entire album as a lament for the hardships endured by the working-class under globalization. "And who knows," Carrera wryly concluded. "Maybe it is!"

The last part of his talk was devoted to Italian cover versions of Dylan, which have always involved translation. He played several examples, always providing

projections of both the Italian lyrics and English translations of those lyrics, making it clear that in an effort primarily to translate the musical values of Dylan's poetry, that the covers are often partial and sometimes wholesale re-writes of Dylan's lyrics. The most imaginative of these rewrites--by far--was the Italian hip-hop version of "Like a Rolling Stone" by Articolo 31 that is featured on the *Masked & Anonymous* soundtrack. It's really a completely original adaptation of Dylan's poem (or, of the poetry of the Dylan song, for anyone who insists on being finicky about it.). If you have any friends who know Italian, get them to translate it for you. It's worth it.

Carrera concluded by discussing his experience translating Dylan, and I wish he'd write a whole essay on this. He called *Chronicles* a "mouth book--its language comes from the mouth not the hand," and said that in translating it he tried to find Italian equivalents for the variety of voices he discovered in it--including (among others) the voices of "Nick Adams, Augie March, Huck Finn, Holden Caulfield, Dean Moriarty, and even Proust." His annotated bilingual translation of *Tarantula* is due out this year.

Carrera was followed by the first "concurrent session" of 4 different 3-person panels--an arrangement that required me to pass up some stuff I wanted to hear--although it also gave me an alternative to some stuff I wanted no part of. For the first one I chose "**Younger Than That Now: Dylan's Back Pages.**" **Stephen Scobie**--a delightful man I had known only from his Dylan writing and from a couple email exchanges--read 3 poems--including the fabulous "Echo Echo Echo"-- from *And Forget My Name*, his collection of "speculative" poems about Dylan's childhood. I had gotten this book when it came out, but I think I read it too fast, as biography rather than as a book of poems. Poems are meant to be read one by one, in small doses. I really enjoyed his reading, esp. with his Scottish vowels.

Next was **Mick Cochrane**, a Canisius College English prof and fiction writer whose "**Bob Dylan's Lives of the Poets: Theme Time Radio (TTR) as Buried Autobiography**" began with a very imaginative and cogent comparison of Theme Time Radio to Johnson's *Live of the Poets*, primarily in terms of its place in (and toward the end of) each writer's career: a commercial enterprise into which each pours more of themselves than those who initially approached them to do it had bargained for. Dylan is also like Johnson (Cochrane says) in his delight in biographical detail, his wry, often dark sense of humor, and his desire to rescue treasured works from oblivion. Cochrane called Dylan & Johnson both "grumpy old man" for whom these respective undertaking initiated a new identity as a "gregarious old-timer." He also drew attention to how much Dylan's shows are preoccupied with mortality (e.g. his interest in the circumstances of many of his artists early deaths)--something he didn't have to mention is always true of Johnson. He noted that the first song in the first show was by Muddy Waters, whom Dylan introduced as "one of the ancients whom all moderns prize" and pointed out that the ancient/modern dichotomy is an 18th-century notion. (I thought it had started in the 17th- or even late-16th and was on its last legs in Johnson.) "TTR is Dylan's own roll call of the ancients." A bit hyperbolic, but good point. (If Cochrane were to call Detroit Cobras singer Rachel Nagy one of the "ancients" to her face, she'd stomp him to death beneath her high-heeled boots.)

The panel was rounded out by "**Portrait of the Artist as America: Bob Dylan's Geography of Masks,**" a talk by University of Strasbourg (or Marc Bloch University in

Strasboug--the program says both) literature prof **Christophe Lebold**. The talk was a bit more academic in its lingo than I would have preferred, but he had something real to say & for the most part he wielded his vocabulary effectively & didn't let it wield him. He began by noting that Dylan had introduced the "ethics of the mask" into the folk universe (in the 60s he wore the mask of the joker, in 75 the mask of whiteface--at once an inversion of blackface and the mask of the circus clown and the shaman--and the mustachioed Clark Gable mask he's been wearing this century which places him in the era before his own.) Masks, said Lebold, are figurations or exaggerations of the real self and noted that Dylan "doesn't sing about the problems of the self but about the self as a problem"--which latter he says is a definition of the "lyric mode" (the former being, I would say, the characteristic singer-songwriter mode). Dylan's songs, he says, enable his listeners to "explore their own subjectivity." I like that formulation a lot & agree with it mostly--sometimes he sings about both (e.g. Blood on the Tracks) and in his minor work he sometimes sings mainly about his problems--and I think it's what lifts him above all his would-be peers except Tom Waits, who, great as he is, is simply a lesser and less ambitious talent.

Lebold goes on--it's his main point--to say that Dylan's work & career enacts or embodies the American obsession with new forms, with spontaneity, with an authenticity of identity that is rooted in a valorization of new forms & spontaneity. It is in this context that the "myth of America lost" enters and becomes central to Dylan's work. One consequence is what he calls a "Judas complex," which covers several forms of "bad consciousness." The "task of the American artist," as Dylan takes it up, is 3-fold: to "unearth or retrieve the weird old America" (as defined above), to judge America against this standard, and himself to "keep faith with the original American spirit--playful, free, the spirit of tall tales and the blues." "Looseness" and "fun" are prime criteria. [Lebold is one of the few critics, Dylan or otherwise, to acknowledge that the blues, whose material is sorrow and deprivation, is itself nonetheless a form of good times, an essentially comic art form.] He then gave a lot of examples of this element in Dylan, starting with the "electric trickster with a touch of the Shakespearean clown" of the mid-60s Dylan. He analyzes the light bulb Dylan is carrying at the press conference held on his arrival in England (in *Don't Look Back*) as a trope embracing simultaneously electricity, the intellect, and Diogenes candle. His '65 "top hat" is the emblem of the magician & trickster. Where Elvis is a "solar" figure, a Prometheus, Dylan is "lunar--with his many phases and faces."

A very rich talk--almost too rich for a *talk*. Lebold's insights are themselves much more playfully imaginative than his manner. An occupational hazard, I'd say, knowing first-hand alas whereof I speak.

The early afternoon plenary session--"**I Was Thinkin' about Alicia Keys: Dylan, Black Female Singers, Love and Theft**"--was scheduled as a panel with 3 speakers, but one of them was a no-show, so the remaining 2--Princeton English prof **Daphne Brooks** and George Washington English prof **Gayle Wald** (author of the new book on Sister Rosetta Sharp)--revamped their presentations into a single tag-team talk. It was all very good and engaging, but it ended up being a lot more about various (mostly black) women singers influenced by Dylan than about Dylan himself: I had expected to hear more about the way Dylan's singing or writing may have been influenced by their

voices. A lot of interest was said about Nina Simone as canny protest singer, and what Maria Muldaur brings to Dylan's songs that he doesn't, but I don't remember anything said--if it was--about Dylan himself. I'm not complaining, because it was a very enjoyable session. Odetta was also a major focus, and I learned that Dylan was in the control room when Odetta was recording *Odetta Sings Dylan* and Wald (I think it was her) observed, quite rightly I think, that her version of "Don't Think Twice" was her way of telling him to get out of there and leave her alone to do it her way. Interestingly, in the light of that, while she was playing Odetta's version (from the '65 or so *Odetta Sings Dylan*) I was thinking that she should have changed the lyric slightly to make it accord with her feeling she was projecting, it was impossible to imagine the owner of this voice going anywhere on account of anyone else. She says singing "shoo" not "I gotta go." And it would have been relatively easy & interesting to reframe the lyric to accommodate this: e.g., "I'm not the reason you're moving on [i.e., it's all you, asshole!]."

The late afternoon session I attended was "**The Mongrel Dogs Who Teach: Literary Interpretations of Dylan.**" **Gordon Ball**, the VMI English professor (and Beat scholar) who annually nominates Dylan for the Nobel Prize outlined the case for that--which I found (not surprisingly, I suppose) well presented and convincing--but I discovered, somewhat to my surprise, that as I listened that idea of Dylan winning the Nobel became increasingly alarming. If he wins it I hope he's dead--or at least fully retired from public life. I mean, for a 65-year old man to have a #1 record is cool; for an antique, inscrutable old geezer to win a geezer is cool, for a funky Vincent Price look-alike (and to a lesser degree sound-alike) to win an Oscar that he parades at his concerts as if it were his mother's photo is doubly cool. But a Nobel Prize? I don't think so. Didn't Henry Kissinger get one of those? No, if Dylan wins the Nobel, the fan base under age 50 (or maybe even 60) will abandon him in a heartbeat. That's when he'll suddenly seem *old*, the way their parents and teachers are old. The uncool old.

The other 2 panelists didn't do much for me. **Kevin Dettmar** talked about the history of Dylan's presence in college curricula, which meant a lot of talk about the great "relevance" scare that began when I was in college and brought up a lot of really distressing memories. When I graduated in '68 I felt I was escaping just in time. Dettmar did a good job with his topic--I just didn't want to hear it again. **David Yaffe** was supposed to talk about whether it was "possible to criticize Dylan and understand him while on the Rolling Tenure Revue" [i.e. in the context of trying to earn tenure-earning brownie points]--a question to which I'd think the obvious answer is: possible, yes; likely--absolutely not. But if he actually talked about that, I don't remember it. All I remember related to the 2nd half of his talk's seemingly schizoid title. "The Rolling Tenure Revue; or, Rollin' and Plunderin', Theft and Theft," i.e., a lot of talk about Dylan's alleged plagiarism in his recent work, esp. *Modern Times*--a charge with which Yaffe seemed to be agreeing. But it was hard to tell. He ultimately fixed on "Rolling & Tumbling," which he said was (lazily, uncreatively--& thus plagiaristically) based on the Muddy Waters song, which in turn was based on a verse from Robert Johnson's "If I Had Possession over Judgment Day," which in turn was based on an earlier blues the name (and author/performer) of which I always forget [I've know about this pedigree for eons, it seems, the Rolling & Tumbling riff being one of the most common--and beloved--in the blues repertoire], which in turn was almost certainly based on something unrecorded. Now this is where I got fatally confused. At first Yaffe seemed most concerned that

Dylan had taken sole credit for authorship. If that was his concern I was still uncertain of his point: if it's about giving credit where credit's due, then it's just silly: everybody who cares knows where credit for *this* borrowed stuff is due: if you don't recognize the music and the opening of the lyric as Muddy Waters's, then you probably won't recognize the conventional 12-bar blues prosody either. Is Dylan supposed to acknowledge that debt explicitly, too? If so, are we asking him to give credit where credit is due, or are we just asking him to be PEDANTIC? And if it's about giving money where money's due, who exactly is owed money: the dead Muddy Waters whose stolen song is in the public domain now? Robert Johnson whose, etc., etc? But this never got cleared up because at the end he seemed possibly to be saying that Dylan is not only a thief but a fraud in trying to pass off as something new what was in fact just a cover of a Muddy Waters song.

He might not have actually said this, but that's the closest approximation I could make as to just what he was saying, and it was in this state of confusion that I raised my hand during the Q&A. I started by pointing out what to me I thought everyone would agree was obvious--that despite their common elements--which with the music in some instances is everything--no one could listen to these 4 songs and confuse them with each other: they are 4 quite distinct creations. But before I could actually ask my question--which would have been something like, "so what are you criticizing exactly about the relation between Dylan's song and Muddy Waters's--or any of the others"--Yaffe interrupted me and insisted "But Dylan's song is the *same* as Waters, the first verses [which he had played] are *exactly the same*." At which point, stunned, I interrupted him with, "They are not the *same* songs--and first verse's aren't even the same--the last line in the respective opening verses is entirely different. And Waters's song has only 3 verses--Dylan's 9. [I was winging it: Waters's song actually has 4 [though I swear I've heard a recording with 2 verses & then a repeat of the 1st] and Dylan's actually it has 11]." But before Yaffe was able [or would have to] respond to all this, the moderator cut me off & said we didn't have time for an argument. [Consider this a gloss on "likely--no" above.]

Anyway, that was the one and only session I left feeling I'd just been wasting my time.

There was a plenary panel discussion Monday night entitled "**Planet Waves: Dylan in Global Perspectives.**" It began with "**Like the Night: Reception and Reaction Dylan UK 1966,**" a talk by C.P. Lee, who wrote a book on the infamous "Judas!" show in Manchester. He gave a detailed history of the origins of the English folk movement--in leftist labor-oriented politics--to provide the context for the kind of animosity he faced in '66. It was well done, with a lot I didn't know about Ewan McColl & the Singers Clubs, but I was too pooped to take good notes. **Mikiko Tachi**, an American studies prof at Chiba University in Japan discusses "**Dylan's Reception in Japan, 1960s to 1970s,**" which was mainly the story of the frankly farcical notions the Japanese had about Dylan; e.g., they were under the impression in the 60s that Dylan toured college campuses with Joan Baez protesting the Vietnam War. "Incomprehensible but beautiful" was how one Japanese critic described him, and when Tachi showed English translations of Japanese translations of some of his lyrics, it was clear that he was largely uncomprehended. (It occurred to me after this was over that this was a real missed opportunity: unless the enthusiastic Japanese response to Dylan was all hype--he was referred to there as the "god of folk"--then they must have been responding to the communicative power of his music and voice. It would have been nice to learn what they

heard in him when the words were either incomprehensible or [when translated] reduced to doggerel and/or banality.) This session ended with a talk by USA art history prof Thomas Crow on **“Dylan and Warhol.”** I was familiar with the history he rehearsed but he made some points about it that had never occurred to me (and with which I might or might not agree): He linked “Desolation Row” to Warhol’s Factory (where everybody went by other names); he linked the “selling postcards line” to Warhol’s paintings of race riots and the electric chair; he suggested that “Like a Rolling Stone” is about Edie Sedgwick (Miss Lonely) and Warhol (the mystery tramp & the diplomat [who I see as different and opposed characters in the song]); he referred to what he called Warhol’s “murder ballad aesthetic: still images of danger and desire imposed on the shards of popular culture.”

The last day started with **Christopher Ricks’s talk, “Running Through the Back of My Memory,”** which turned out to be about trains in Dylan’s songs, especially the sound of trains. As is usual with Ricks, the talk took the form of a mosaic of somewhat related observations, not so much rambling as an ambling through his chosen topic. That is, as usual with Ricks, the pleasure is not in any map or overview he provides but in the details encountered along the way, some of them quite minor pleasure, some of them quite suggestive. He began by noting that Dylan’s 2 TTR shows in the week’s leading up to his talk had been about trains--and that this was the first time Dylan had devoted 2 shows to one topic--and after assuring that he didn’t think Dylan had done this for him, nonetheless one needed to “take what you can gather from coincidence.” My notes on his talk are sketchy, and there was a lot of hopping about, mosaically or otherwise, so I’ll just reproduce my notes for what they’re worth:

--The first TTR show opens with a Meade Lux Lewis cut in which Dylan draws attention of the train-like rocking rhythm produced by his left hand--[a boogie woogie trademark.]

Ricks mentioned and read from The recently published *Dow’s Dictionary of Railway Quotations*: very suggestive quotes which I don’t remember and have no notes of

“lots of Dylan songs are launched on trains--a characteristic way of getting a song moving”

quotes (and I think amplifies) an email got from someone asking and partially answering the question of why the line [from “When the Deal Goes Down”] “the midnight rain follows the train” is so good. The answer involved 1) rain [splashing on the train windows] sounds like the line 2) the way the word “train” is contained in “midnight[rain]” and 3) the buried pun [via the splashed-on widows] on “pane/pain

He was critical of Michael Gray’s “theme of trains” entry in his encyclopedia: for one, he thought the “theme of” makes the trains too abstract, and he objected to Gray’s identification of the train with the theme of salvation: a “symbol,” Ricks noted, “is an axis not a direction [on that axis].” I.e., the train in Dylan does not represent salvation but the salvation/damnation axis. [this is certainly true, but I think the train in Dylan often occupies a different axis altogether.] He pointed to the early “Train A-Travelin” as a damnation train and pointed out that in “Slow Train” the train represents a “coming judgment in which almost everybody will be found wanting.”

A long riff on the sound of trains in poetry & song, Dylan’s & others, which included playing recordings of moving trains, during which he observed that among

methods of locomotion--from canoes & wagons to motorcycles, autos, and planes [all of which he also played recordings]--the train is the only one whose sound is polyphonic and polyrhythmic--i.e. the clattering of the wheels, the chugging of the engine, the ringing of the bell, and the blaring of the whistle. He read Whitman's "To a Locomotive in Winter," read Dylan's comment from the *World Gone Wrong* liner noting the "low hum of meters & syllables" in Blind Willie McTell's "Broke Down Engine," the line from "Freight Train Blues" (recorded by Dylan on his first album) "A freight train whistle taught me how to cry." Walking, Ricks noted, which is Dylan's favorite mode of locomotion (in his songs) is itself: i.e. has no characteristic or intrinsic sound. [He also observed of "Ain't Talking, Just Walking," as an aside, that he ain't talking because he's singing. Maybe, but I don't think so. To me pungent talk punctuated repeatedly by "ain't talking, just walking" [with Ricks observation in mind that "walking" = "being quiet"] is to suggest unexpended reserves of what you could say if you really wanted to create a stir--or if anyone in the room wants to mess with you, which in this case means call into question the truthfulness of what you are saying, as in "Oh, that's just Dylan, a well-known old grump. An amusing fellow, for sure, but I wouldn't pay him any mind. Pass me the sweet & sour sauce, would'ya?"]

He read [from?] Anthony Hecht's poem "Green An Epistle" to get the line "not so much a color as the sensation of color" to define a kind of mimesis relevant to the presence of trains in Dylan: i.e. he imitates not the way a train looks or sounds but the way it feels to see or hear it." I think this is a fine insight, not limited to trains in Dylan, or to Dylan among poets. I'll try to remember it!

Ricks also acknowledged somewhere in this talk Greil Marcus's comments, in his talk, on "Bob Dylan's Dream," which Marcus hears as Dylan imagining himself an old man looking back. Very different than my reading, but I think it finds more in the song, and so is preferable to mine.

"Dylan is a great imitator who therefore loves anti-mimetic effects." A reference apparently to his singing, since all the examples were of the way the meaning of lines are thrown into relief by singing them in a way that counters that meaning: i.e. singing the line "90 miles an hour down a dead end street" at 2 MPH.

Finally on to "Slow Train," the lyrics to which he had had passed out to everyone before he started. He was running late & I think he didn't have to say as much as he had planned on the song because what he did say didn't require us to have the entire lyric before us. He made these points:

he played Elvis's "Mystery Train" with its melismatic bend on "coming round the bend" and then Dylan's emphatically nonmelismatic "coming round the bend."--which Ricks said underscored the oncoming train's terrifying undeflectibility. In fact, he pointed out, there is no melisma anywhere in the song. [He brought up his notion that what distinguishes song from poetry is the ever present possibility of melisma, even if it is not used. I've never found this persuasive, any more that I find Eliot's definition of the difference between prose & poetry/verse--which Rick has adopted and brought up here--as different systems of punctuation. Both these definitions strike me as true but useless.]

The word "coming" is not in the title of the song (unlike the title of the album). I forget what significance he saw in this.

Slowness of the tempo of the song is important to the sense of ineluctable menace.

There is no train in the body of the song (i.e. it is only in the refrain) He drew attention to the song's "extraordinary rhyming," the pattern of which varies: the last stanza is the most intensely rhymed but the only not to rhyme into the refrain

The "so low" in "so lowdown" is a lowering down of the sound of "slow"

The morning session I attended was "**Open the Door Homer: Bob Dylan the Epic Poet.**" It turned out to be the one session in which I learned a lot I didn't know (as opposed to merely having my understanding of what I already know sharpened or deepened--which, needless to say, is a very good thing in itself.) Robert Polito--a poet who teaches writing at the New School in NYC--presented "**Bob Dylan's Memory Palace**"--a greatly revised and expanded version of "Bob Dylan: Henry Timrod Revisited," a piece of his I had read sometime earlier online (here: www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/feature.html?id=178703). His talk was based on a European mnemonic art the 16th-century Jesuit Matteo Ricci taught to the Chinese as a "mental structure that will lodge the living and the dead." Or at least he said that. It turns out (according to wikipedia) that Ricci's "memory palace" was just the latest way of talking about the "method of loci" invented (the legend goes) by the classical Greek poet Simonides--a topic the 3rd speaker in this session would address. Wikipedia also noted that Ricci taught it to the Chinese only as a method for storing information, "though it had traditionally been taught, both in dialectics and in rhetoric, as an instrument of composition"--and Polito was definitely referring to it as a precedent for Dylan's method of composition in his recent work. He began by noting that Dylan typically "smuggles in" his allusive (if that's the right word) material "undercover": e.g., he alludes overtly to Ovid's *Art of Love* but all the Ovidian quotes are from (Peter Green's translations of) *Tristia*, *Amores*, and *Black Sea Letters*. Polito called it a "mechanism for rendering all times modern" by "carrying on a conversation with the great dead." (He must have quoted the Dylan line about rescuing ghosts "from their crumbling tombs.") (A bit of trivia: "The Bells of St. Mary's" is a phrase in Timrod. I don't recall seeing that in the lists of Timrod thefts.) He also called the presence of Timrod in the MT songs "a misdirection for Ovid. He observed that the Ovid lines Dylan uses all sound like they came from old blues. He noted without explanation that Ovid also provides the scaffolding for [many? all?] the songs. And he also quoted some lines from Green's translation that "make Ovid sound like he's channeling early Dylan." One of the quoted lines (as I recall) began "don't think twice," and his characterization did ring true. [Peter Green is almost 20 years older than Dylan.] "Dylan's method is not just folk process but modernism, collage." [In his online piece he distinguished between modernist collage that presents itself as collage and that which disguises it within "an apparently seamless surface. He cites *The Wasteland* as an example of the former and Kenneth Fearing, Lorine Niedecker, Frank Bidart, and John Ashberry as exemplars of the latter. He puts Dylan in the latter. I don't remember him making this distinction in his talk, but then maybe I just didn't take notes on it because I had already read it.] He cited "exile, ghosts, romantic and spiritual abandonment" as themes common to Dylan's late songs and Ovid's late poems. (This, I think, is what he meant by Ovid as scaffold.) He noted that

the Ovidian lines Dylan quotes are often from Ovid's poems about his poetry and suggested that "art and tradition seize the [poetic] ground zero once occupied [in Dylan's songs] by love and [then] by God." (The bracketed words are mine, but they indicate my understanding of what he was saying.) "Who else writes songs as layered and textured as these."

Next up was **Richard Thomas**, a Harvard classics prof, with "**Smooth Like a Rhapsody': Dylan and Epic.**" "Dylan's intertextuality is as perfect as Vergil's with Homer; nothing sticks out." [Polito's point, also.] He notes that some classicists think Ovid may have been "playing at exile" [and sharing the joke with his alleged exiler, Augustus] and asks whether Dylan might be as well. Thomas argues that "intertextuality creates epic universality." This strikes me as an extreme way of putting it ("creates???"), but I understand what he's getting at & it makes sense to me. He reports that Dylan gets his Virgil from the Mandelbaum translations. Thomas thinks Dylan's has "gotten" his Vergil only fairly recently (and later, he told me that he thinks that he has only recently read many of the books in Gooch's library he so vividly remembers reading 40+ years ago in *Chronicles*.) He pointed to Dylan's citation of the Greco-Roman decline of the Ages in the 2001 Rome interview, said he has a sense of latter-dayness that is very Ovidian, and said his use of Vergil in "Lonesome Day Blues" reflected his ambivalence about [the American] empire. Thomas called the *Aeneid* an "epic about ideology and struggles for power" and noted that Dylan told Mikal Gilmore that "*Love & Theft*" is an album about power. He sees the Yakusa material as akin to this: "imperial Rome, imperial Japan, imperial America" and noted that it is Aeneas who "establishes my rule through civil war." He quoted a passage about the Muses in Hesiod's *Theogony* that seems to anticipate Dylan the equivalence of truth & untruth in *Chronicles* (page 35). He reported that many Thucydidean [sic?] scholars think Dylan (in *Chronicles*) has captured the essence of Thucydides. He also cited Dante's *Purgatorio* (canto 21, ll. 94-99) as evidence that Dante--not Petrarch, let alone Plutarch--is the "Italian poet" in "Tangled Up in Blue." He also cited a passage from Book 2 of Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid* (it begins "Thus wandering in my way without a guide") as the basis for the excised "jealousy & fear" verse in the "Jack of Hearts." (He had all these parallels projected on a screen, and I didn't get a real good look at this one, but from what I was able to read before he moved on, this connection, unlike the others, seemed very tenuous.)

Well, wait a minute--let me see if I can find it online. . . . OK, here it is:

*Thus, wand'ring in my way, without a guide,
The graceless Helen in the porch I spied
Of Vesta's temple; there she lurk'd alone;
Muffled she sate, and, what she could, unknown:
But, by the flames that cast their blaze around,
That common bane of Greece and Troy I found.
For Ilium burnt, she dreads the Trojan sword;
More dreads the vengeance of her injur'd lord;
Ev'n by those gods who refug'd her abhorr'd.
Trembling with rage, the strumpet I regard,
Resolv'd to give her guilt the due reward:*

I still don't see it, except as a very loose analogue.

During his talk Thomas mentioned that during the Saturday visit to Hibbing, he slipped over to the library [public? high school? dunno) and discovered that Dylan's high school Latin teacher's name was Irene Walker. During the Q&A Ricks said he was delighted to hear that D's Latin teacher was named "Irene," which he said he would insist on giving the Greek pronunciation [Ee-ray-nay], and he said this could be added to other facts about Dylan's life--like the girlfriend named Echo--that Scobie had earlier said, in introducing his own poems, that he could never have gotten away with inventing. [Actually, when you think of it, Dylan's whole life is something no fiction writer could have gotten away with inventing, except he--Dylan--did!]

The final speaker was Stephen Arnoff, editor of *Zeek: A Jewish Journal of Thought and Culture* (zeek.net) and a Jewish Theological Seminary grad student. His talk was titled "**In Memoriam: Welcome to Bob Dylan's Modern Times.**" He echoed a lot of what had been said by the first 2 speakers, so my notes are a bit sketchy. He began (I think) by saying "Nothing is late or early in the Torah" (apropos of what specifically, I forget, but obviously resonant with the earlier talks and a very cool thought.) He told the story of Simonides & his invention of the "method of loci"--you can look it up on wikipedia, which gives an abridged version of the legend I had coincidentally read about in a book on Greek lyric poets I had just started rereading before the symposium. Anyway, the method of loci, or "memory tableau," a mnemonic strategy for storing information in a way that it can be readily retrieved. Arnoff said the legend suggests one role of the poet. He says Dylan uses various tableau--e.g. the road--to re-member his walking through what Arnoff (after quoting Dylan in the 2001 Rome interview [I think] telling the reporters "I'm someone who has always felt like he was walking around in Pompei") called "the U.S. of Pompei."

[This made me think of Michael Ventura's version of Dylan in an *Austin Chronicle* column I read about 10 years ago called "Music to Know America By." It's conveniently online (www.austinchronicle.com/issues/vol16/issue14/cols.ventura.html). Here is what he said:

Bob Dylan. To paraphrase Joyce, the American dream is a nightmare from which we have not awoken. Perhaps we cannot. Perhaps that is its nature. In a voice half banshee and half wraith, Bob Dylan made songs of that dream, and of yet a deeper kind of dreaming, the phantasmagoria of pictures and surreal events that all of us encounter in sleep. Some people walk in their sleep; it's as though Dylan sings in his sleep. Nobody in his songs is quitehuman, everyone is touched with ghostliness, a Halloween/Day of the Dead music in which the mask takes on more life than the face beneath it. When nothing is left of America as we know it, if Dylan's music survives they will hear fragments of our films, pages of our Bibles, whispers in our bedrooms, explosions of our wars, animals trapped and freed, and the tenderness of our oldest songs burned with the first and bitterest voice of punk. Everything in America is in his songs, but in fragments, as though he's picking through ruins. But there is also a strange energy, as though the ruins have a life of their own and could become whole again. He once said, "All I'm trying to tell you is that anything is possible." Which is what America was supposed to be about in the first place.]

Arnoff described Dylan as a "rhapsode stitching together the fruits of his greedy reading and listening into a memory tableau." [He was clearly using the word "rhapsode" in its

root sense and referring to the actual practice of the Homeric rhapsodes.] What Arnoff was saying is that Dylan's songs themselves are "memory tableaux." The example he examined in some detail was "Desolation Row," which he called a "contemporary usage of the method of loci to remake the world in his imagination so he can survive it." He also noted that "desolation" means a state of being "forsaken" (the implication apparently being that Dylan is retrieving forsaken things.) He recommended a book by Mary Carruthers on mediieval memory culture. [The title, which he didn't mention but which I just looked up on Amazon is: *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*--it costs \$36.\$30.50 on Amazon--ouch!]

Finally, during the discussion, someone mentioned, in defense of Dylan's thieving ways, Vergil's (apocryphal?) observation that "it is harder to steal a line from Homer than to steal Hercules' club."

This was followed (for me) by a session on *Masked & Anonymous*. The 3 panelists--UMass Afro-American studies prof James Smethurst and UMass-Boston American studies professors Rachel Rubin and Judith Smith, as well as the panel chair Ohio State comparative studies prof Barry Shank, each screened a bit of the film and commented briefly on it before opening the session to a group discussion. I ended up having more to say here than at all the other sessions combined (as, I suspect, did many others there: it was organized to get us talking) so I'll also summarize my own comments--or what I recall of them.

Smethurst showed the opening of the film up to the appearance of the Midas/Judas Building, and linked the film's apocalyptic skid row to the world Dylan grew up in, esp. the polyglot port of Duluth. It was all a revelation to me--the sociology of Duluth. (A guy in the audience later said he was from L.A. and when he saw the film for the first time the previous night--there was a screening--he recognized contemporary L.A., if somewhat exaggerated.)

Rubin showed what she called the Prospero scene--Jack Fate descending the stairs to the bus stop where he chats with Prospero before boarding the bus. Rubin noted how stuffed the scene was with things that scream "read me" [apparently the graffiti on the wall next to the stairs includes the Russian word "lies"] and described this as the chief characteristic of the film: so much to be interpreted--despite the fact that there is no payoff for this interpretive activity, no interpretation that works. The film, she said implicitly cautions against relying on any single interpretive scheme--such reliance results in [or is a symptom of] obsessive-compulsive disorder--she cited Pagan Lace as an exemplar of this.

Smith, whose academic specialty is the sociology of families, showed a sequence on Fate's memories of his father and called the film a family story in which biological kinship (as natural citizenship) is equated with betrayal. The film instead favors "adoptive kinship" [as, she noted, does Dylan generally--citing his myth of life as "going home" in *No Direction Home*]: e.g., Fate's encounter with Oscar Vogel immediately follows his failed encounter with his father and represents his affiliation with the minstrel tradition (the minstrel figure, she said, is his "spiritual father").

Shank showed the scene in which Edmund announces his takeover of power and the shift from "symbolic violence to real violence." He argued that Edmund's action "constituted the political" in the sense defined by someone named Carl Schmidt: "to define firmly friend and foe so as to clearly engage clearly who it is who will die for the

state” [and it seemed implied those whom the state will need to “eliminate”]. I (like many others, it seemed) didn’t buy everything Shank did with this frame of reference, but it certainly opened up (for me, and again, it felt, for others) a way of looking at the film. Shank noted that (contrary to Schmidt) the one weapon that commits real violence in the film comes from the order of the symbolic--Blind Lemon’s guitar--which suggested that there was a political role for (and power in) the arts. I don’t think anyone bought this--I remember saying that after all, Friend (the journalist) is bludgeoned and not sung to death--that this act was a betrayal of the symbolic (one that moreover destroyed it: the guitar is ruined), a capitulation to the desire to solve a “political” problem [annoying journalists] once and for all [and now that I think of it a capitulation not just to this desire but too the delusion that any aspect of the human muddle is susceptible to a final solution]. In any case, by the end there seemed to be at least some measure of agreement that the moral (if any) to be taken from this denouement is that the power of the symbolic is shattered when it is used politically. (I got the feeling Shank also came to see it that way--he struck me as one of those teachers who likes to toss out provocative but possibly half-baked idea like grenades, just to cause an explosion and stir up discussion.)

As someone else observed “the political ‘solves’ the moral confusion of the human condition only by creating perpetual Civil War: which is what Edmund does. [“impose my rule through civil war”: takes up back to Aeneas and Augustus]. One of the panelists asked whether the film was optimistic or pessimistic, where it left us--a formulation of the question which prompted me to answer that the film pretty much leaves us where it found us--as long as we feel that Edmund’s final solution will [like Bush’s war] eventually collapse of its own absurdity, his civil war dwindling eventually into the chronic scramble which is the human condition.

[It occurs to me now that all this illuminates Dylan’s longstanding feeling that “politics is sin.” It’s fairly clear that he means totalitarian politics, not just of the Stalinist or Hitlerian or Bushwacky variety, but even the milder forms--liberal or conservative--motivated by the delusion that any real problem can ever be resolved once and for all (as opposed to ameliorated)--which seems to be to have been the usually unacknowledged normative tenor of American politics on all sides during my lifetime. The flip side of this is Dylan’s insistence that “the war won’t cease until He returns.” (“Until He returns” is gentle way of breaking the news that it won’t be in ours or anyone else’s lifetimes.) Politics becomes sin for Dylan when it tries to usurp the role of religion, which, Dylan knows (“my religion is in the songs”), means the role of art--what Shank/Schmidt calls the symbolic. Religion as we usually encounter it, as Emerson more or less said, is just ossified or arthritic poetry. And finally, if there’s anything I learned in 25 years of covering the human comedy of city politics, it is that the chief aim of politics is to *prevent* civil war--whether it be between the red states & the blue states or between a hot dog vendor and the owner of the gourmet restaurant on whose sidewalk he is plying his trade. Well, there’s actually 2 things I learned--the other is that after 3 or 4 beers almost anyone will spill their guts to you!]

There was some discussion of the way Bobby Cupid’s killing of friend mirrored on a small scale Edmund’s takeover. My memory can’t entirely distinguish now what I said from what I heard, but I do remember using the phrase “going postal”: that’s what happens at the end, successively to Uncle Sweetheart, to Friend, to Jack Fate, and then to Bobby Cupid. The first 3 all pull back--as if restrained by some seasoned sense of the

futility (if not the sinfulness) of trying to resolve their life's nemesis--of maybe just by the awareness that such an opportunity never presents itself. Cupid--who I've never really trusted throughout the movie--isn't held back because--well, maybe just because he was having a bad day--shit happens--or maybe because he's a punk, an innocent, a naïf. Somehow it's as if you have to commit a crime before you're able to recognize or even understand it. It reminds me (now) of that verse from "Spirit on the Water": "I want to be with you in paradise/and it seems to unfair/I can't go back to paradise no more/I killed a man back there."

During the discussion, one guy said that he thought the movie was a failure because it was "too intellectual." At one time--after I watched it a couple times on DVD--I felt sort of the same way about it. This was after my initial enthusiasm had died down: when I saw it in the theater I was so amazed that it wasn't only not horrible but engaging to watch that I went a bit overboard. But now I raised my hand to disagree with this "too Intellectual line." I had changed my mind--and this is the gist of what I said--after having viewed it 3 times within a week in the course of putting it on to show other people. By the 3rd time I simply gave up/got tired of watching it the way I had been up until then--i.e., trying to figure it out--and just watched the actors, as if they were real people carrying on in my living room. What I noticed--by a kind of osmosis rather than any intellectual apprehension--was that for the most part their body language didn't fit the apocalyptic dystopian temper of the dialogue. Then I suddenly recognized was just an ordinary day at the office: people interacting with varying degrees of bad faith, concerned only with getting by, getting along, getting in and getting out with their hides and maybe even their money back. The dialogue morphed into a kind of sound track of their collective suppressed awareness that they were not only being cruel & indifferent to each other but even pissing their own lives away. I thought to myself, "This must be the world we actually live in looks and sounds to Dylan." Or, as I can put it now, "So this is what he means by 'walking around in Pompeii.'" As I had noticed the first time I saw the film, everybody in the movie awakens from their sleepwalking once or twice in the course of the film--says or does something that makes us see them as fully human and alive--but these moments are fleeting and have no impact on themselves or the others.

One last thing I remember is the consensus that the performance of "Dixie" in the movie was both transfixing and somehow central to the movie. I offered the opinion that the setting of the performance--with the entire crew & cast raptly listening and watching--depoliticized (in one sense) the song by turning it into a song of the exile. It accomplished this in part because as the camera scans its multicultural audience, we imagine that they're all thinking of different homes, different Dixies, they want to get back to. I said there was something sublime in the way Dylan repeatedly throws not just his voice but his whole body into "away," and everyone agreed in a way that made it clear to me they were all already thinking that [we watched the scene before discussing it], but no one (including me) offered any explanation why that was so powerful.

The conference ended with **Michael Gray**, who titled the talk "**Highway 61: Dylan's Chosen Route Through Space and Time.**" It was about Dylan and the blues. Most of the talk traced ground familiar to anyone who's read Gray's books--though he is a very engaging speaker [the only one in the entire conference to stand directly in front of his audience & not standing behind a podium or sitting behind a table] and it was good to hear this familiar material rehearsed with such verve & aplomb. He did have some things

to say about *Love & Theft* I didn't remember him saying or writing elsewhere. He called its fictional singers "a gallery of old geezers" that, as with old geezers, "we never know if they're talking about what happened yesterday, or 30 years ago, or 100 years ago." He called the line "I wish my mother was still alive" (which he has praised elsewhere) a "wonderful old geezer moment," and he concluded by dubbing the album "Highway 61 Revisited on a Bus Pass." It's too bad he doesn't have a weekly or at least monthly TV show in which he can introduce his favorite musicians in talks like this (he played a lot of recordings & showed a couple videos): He has a wonderful facility for fishing up the right descriptive/evaluative words to nail down the exact sense he has of whatever it is he's talking about at the moment. His talk sounded both well-rehearsed and--in the crucial details of his sentences--freshly improvised. A fitting finale for a symposium that had so much to say about rhapsodes and making something new out of old materials.