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

--Louis A. Renza

“Don’t get up gentlemen, I’m only passing through.”

--Bob Dylan, “Things Have Changed” (1999)

Not a few critics of Bob Dylan’s songs think one ought to discuss them primarily as songs, which is to say not as the equivalent of written poems. The Dylan “text” clearly comprises a perpetually interchangeable complex of verbal lyric, musical arrangement, and vocal performance—his in particular. Moreover, not a few signature Dylan songs like “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” and “Like a Rolling Stone” bear specific cultural traces that one feels compelled to factor into any interpretation of the lyrics. Greil Marcus, for instance, thinks that the social, political, and musical context of Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone” forwards its significance as a threatening if agenda-elusive “Declaration of Independence”: “[The song] was an incident that took place in a recording studio and was then sent out into the world with the intention of leaving the world not quite the same . . . . [It was] like drawing a line to see what would happen.”

Besides their social-political relation to the revolutionary 1960s, any exegesis of Dylan’s lyrics obviously must include other material such as their effect on the “pop” musical scene of the
times. Few critics would dispute the fact that in the milieu of mass-media popular music, he almost singlehandedly advanced the criterion of the songwriter’s performing his or her own songs. No less notably, his “Like a Rolling Stone” stretched the “listening” conventions of radio time for individual songs. Above all, of course, Dylan raised the intellectual decibel level for rock ‘n’ roll lyrics by melding their kinesthetic rhythms with the folk-music lyrical genre and the prosody “beat” poetry.

As if these ingredients comprising the Dylan “text” weren’t enough, interpreters of his lyrics must further come to terms with the celebrity figure of “Bob Dylan.” An ever-present, voyeuristic temptation exists to scan his lyrics for what they say about him per se. This perspective includes reducing them to providing People magazine-like information about his personal life. Fans and not a few otherwise serious critics have scoured his songs to determine his drugs of choice (e.g., “Mr. Tambourine Man”), his love-interests (“Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands”) and marital relations (most of the Blood on the Tracks lyrics), or his latest religious or political affiliation. When it doesn’t devolve into mere “Bobcat” miscellanea, this quasi-biographical perspective can focus on Dylan as “performing artist.” Discographical analysis—how, when and where he recorded or performed certain songs, and how differently he arranged them each time—also tends to multiply both the appearance and meanings of a particular Dylan “text.” For example, he might today vocally render “The Times They Are A-Changin’” in a
plaintive manner, as if resigned to the irony of changing times having become a truism for an aging self, as opposed to the tone of social-generational defiance that characterizes how he first sang the song on the 1963 album *The Times They Are A-Changin’*.

In short, for interpretive purposes, the difficulties in isolating the Dylan “text” makes it seem critically indefensible to focus primarily on the verbal aspect of Dylan’s lyrics. All the foregoing factors and more—how his songs traffic in a variety of cultural-historical issues (the situation of Israel, for example, in the 1983 song, “Neighborhood Bully”), or that allusively refer to both known and obscure works by various poets and other songwriters, or not least, how they deploy different musical genres that cue particular kinds of responses to his lyrics—all but demand multi-disciplinary approaches to his body of work. This fact frames any single interpretation of any one lyric as at once arbitrary and incomplete. There patently exist as many ways to understand Dylan’s canon of works as disciplines of thinking. Inviting multiple, critical perspectives, his songs for that very reason continually slip their semiotic as well as semantic moorings.

Still, if only in the interests of critical economy, one has little recourse but to decide which Dylan “text” to interpret. For starters, this means that the would-be interpreter must partially make up the Dylan lyric he/she wants to interpret, whether or not that turns out to be the version of a song Dylan performed on its first album appearance. Moreover, to determine the artistic value
of his work, it makes sense to fasten as much as possible on the verbal lyrics per se, since that feature has definitively marked his songs as special from the very beginning of his career. Dylan’s lyrics--this surely defines their singularity--noticeably deviate from conventionally understood topics and modes of expressing them in different musical genres. In that sense alone, his lyrics possess a kind of poetic heft. Moreover, they arguably extend what “poetic” means--and perhaps recover what it meant long ago--when reckoned with their aural medium and mass-media reach. By itself, the simple performative immediacy of his sung lyrics surely helps them reach a wider audience and with greater dramatic impact (pace Allen Ginsberg’s performed poems) than written, academically sanctioned poetry of our time.

More to the point, Christopher Ricks and other critics have shown how Dylan’s lyrics ply rhymes, word-play, and even clichés that bristle with metaphorical double-takes. At minimum, the textual complex and verbal wit that characterize his entire oeuvre forces one to contest reductive judgments about whether or not his lyrics possess “high” poetic value. According to Michael Gray, for example, A. S. Byatt in a 1992 BBC broadcast maintained that, unlike canonical poems in English, Dylan’s lyrics don’t merit second readings. As Gray paraphrases her remarks, “the qualitative difference between Keats and Dylan is that with Keats, she could take you through one of his poems and reveal many layers,” whereas with Dylan lyrics “she wouldn’t know where to begin” doing that.
Gray plausibly dismisses Byatt’s judgment. Even the titles of Dylan’s albums, especially when coupled with their songs, can retroactively resonate with multiple “layers” of poetic significance. When one considers the songs on Modern Times (2006), for instance, the album’s title becomes curiouser and curiouser. In no particular order, it alludes to the time-period we live in; to Charlie Chaplin’s cinematic satire of “modern times”; and so likewise to (is it?) Dylan’s lyrical contretemps with the twentieth- and twenty-first-century scene.

Beyond that, the title perchance even exposes the very myth of the “modern.” After all, the songs in Modern Times (not to mention its cover9) demonstrably exemplify the drag of past precedents affecting Dylan’s present compositions. All but lost phrases from old songs, from songwriters as well as historically and literarily incorrect poets like Henry Timrod, infiltrate Dylan’s song-lyrics helter-skelter. The vocal-musical arrangements of some songs conjure up much older musical styles, such as the prosodic monotony backing up his crooning in “Beyond the Horizon.”10 To similar effect, he often resorts to anachronistic locutions, such as “mystic garden” and “yon cool crystal fountain” in the song “Ain’t Talkin’.” Conversely, the other songs suggestively appear to treat old myths as still relevant “modern” ones. The title and opening lines of “Spirit on the Water”--“Spirit on the water/ Darkness on the face of the deep”--evoke Genesis and perhaps an Old Testament ethos at large, as if they could yet make sense in our modern, scientific
era. At the same time, the past hardly poses as an ideal haven from the modern for the Dylan speaker. Just so, when “passing by” the translucent fountain in “Ain’t Talkin’,” he records how “Someone hit me from behind.”

If anything, the Dylan lyric’s typical mise en scène presents listener/readers with virtually impossible choices as to which line of interpretation to take. Even a particular song can relate to its album’s title or topical motif in puzzling ways. In such cases, it is as if the song were but one of many possible variations on a fungible theme. “Went to See the Gypsy” on New Morning (1970) provides a good case in point. The persona meets a gypsy in some “dark and crowded room” of a large hotel. The two greet each other as if the gypsy had been expecting to see (the narrating) Dylan: “. . . he said ‘Well, well, well.’” The two exchange a phatic greeting—“‘How are you?’ he said to me/ I said it back to him”—but for some reason the song never renders, the Dylan narrator abruptly leaves and goes down to the hotel lobby “To make a small call out.”

Apparently intuiting that he has some doubt about his meeting with the gypsy, “A pretty dancing girl” urges him to go back to the room, for the gypsy

“can move you from the rear,

Drive you from your fear,

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

The song’s self-evidently elliptical narrative has all the makings of a significant anecdote, but concerning exactly what seems difficult to determine. The listener/reader clearly must fill in--or even make up--the narrative particulars in order to interpret the lyric. Michael Gray among other critics thinks the song refers to Dylan’s actual meeting with rock ‘n’ roll icon Elvis Presley, who toward the end of his career had of course performed in Las Vegas. Yet the narrative clearly has more significance for the song’s persona than this simple biographical anecdote. One cannot help but notice, for instance, how other songs on New Morning one way or another confess Dylan’s (at the time) ambivalence about his supposedly settled family situation vis-à-vis a lingering artistic ambition. That is, they variously intimate his desire to believe in the importance of marital-domestic life (e.g., the song “If Not for You”), his inward rejection of artistic fame (e.g., “Day of the Locusts”),

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and yet also his suffering a kind of metaphysical malaise ("Father of Night") in having made these very same judgments.

In the frozen "Winterlude" of his imaginative state, to make use of another New Morning song and title, Dylan thus fantasizes meeting a "gypsy": that is, someone who might tell him what vocational direction he should follow to recover what his creative work once meant for him. Given the gypsy’s popular status, indicated by his "crowded" hotel room, one way to reinvigorate his career would entail Dylan’s returning to the entertainment circuit. As the dancing girl attests to, this option defines the gypsy’s own means of a ("Las Vegas") vocational reprise. Even so, the persona still has a "small" doubt, likely because the gypsy’s "low and dim" room, not to mention his initially incommunicative greeting, reminds Dylan of the entertainment world’s suffocating as opposed to creative atmosphere. So he goes down to the lobby to phone and check with someone outside that world, perhaps his wife or else someone personifying his artistic conscience, about whether or not he should indeed follow the gypsy’s vocational model.

In this reading, the "pretty dancing girl" more accurately personifies his own inner attraction to performing his lyrics and once more trying to realize his artistic potential in public. She representatively articulates what most tempts him about following the gypsy’s lead: to be in the limelight again (and so no longer in "the rear"), to regain his self-confidence (overcome his "fear"), and, more pointedly, to realize his ideal selfhood, i.e., break through...
to his “mirror” image or how he really wants to appear before others. Earlier in the lyric’s narrative, his doubt was “small,” a mere hesitation; it did not entirely banish his inclination to return to the “crowded” public scene. The “pretty” girl in the lobby still had the erotic wherewithal to entice him to adopt the gypsy’s way. After he sees the “river of tears,” however, Dylan comes to doubt that option more emphatically. Judged against his past creative determination to write and sing lyrics with existential point, the gypsy represents a severely limited way out of Dylan’s present creative malaise and anxious sense of self-isolation. Seeing “the river of tears” reminds him precisely of that earlier artistic criterion, and so of what he really wants to do: “With music in my ears,” to compose lyrics consonant with the pains that both he and others actually suffer.

With that newly determined proviso, he then can go back to see the gypsy. His “river” epiphany has made it clear that he will return to the entertainment world only if he can indite personally and ethically relevant work there. The gypsy, however, has disappeared along with the girl, which is to say, the moment of his strong temptation to again write and perform his lyrics in public has itself passed. In line with the motif threading throughout both the album’s title and songs, Dylan now finds himself in a “new morning” (“It was nearly early dawn”) and in the same place (the “little Minnesota town”) where—being a likely autobiographical allusion—the creative musical-lyrical impulse first took hold of him.
Yet it remains unclear whether this version of “bringing it all back home” signifies his imaginary recovery of a new artistic beginning or instead constitutes a vocational recession, which is to say a diminished version of himself as artist. One could make the case either way. On one hand, Dylan here imaginatively rehearses his very origins as an ambitious musical artist who could once fantasize composing songs without thinking too much about their likely mass-public entertainment value. What with his “big hotel” and entourage, the gypsy self-evidently fails this vocational charge, no doubt as Dylan himself came to do during the period before his 1966 accident. Now he thinks to recover this earlier stance. Yet on the other hand, returning homewards resonates with the reason why he “went to meet the gypsy” in the first place. That is, his return “home” signifies precisely a failure of artistic nerve. The song thus expresses his inability to get beyond his present creative impasse. He finds himself, as it were, back at square one, at least in terms of the creative standard to which he holds himself accountable. It is as if he hasn’t progressed beyond the point of fantasizing his composing artistic lyrics.

Does “Went to See the Gypsy” thus reflect a “New Morning” or a “New Mourning”? Here one encounters what one might most aptly term the doubly compounded ambiguity of the typical Dylan lyric. From one angle, one can easily enough register the ambiguous metaphorical resonances of his lyrics, for example such as what the tambourine man signifies for him in “Mr. Tambourine Man.” The same kind of ambigu-
ity in fact applies to his famous and otherwise pro-civil rights song, “Blowing in the Wind,” what with the moral stalemate allowed by its as if endless its questions: e.g., “How many years can a mountain exist/ Before it’s washed to the sea?” One can always claim that Dylan’s poetic ambiguities—the infinity of obstacles, say, to the achievement of any utopian human peace—trump conventional moral concerns about notable social grievances, and instead favor disclosing the complexity of the real. For Dylan, the latter sets the bar for whatever constitutes ethical decisions. Yet from a different angle, the autobiographical strain in his lyrics further undermines that same ethos of ambiguity. The self-referential turn manifest in “Went to See the Gypsy,” for example, intimates that even generally accessible poetic disclosures of the real remain secondary to Dylan’s own—and not the reader/listener’s—vocational concerns in the moment of his composing the song in question.

Difficult enough to unravel let alone specify as to their specific, semantic content, such concerns would thus seem to take the song in question out of range to the reader/listener’s codes of understanding and existential relevance. If that is the case, then at least this kind of Dylan lyric defines itself as in essence non-interpretable. A 1991 Dylan song entitled “Series of Dreams” appears to articulate just that stance. Dylan there seems to hold that the “dreams” he refers to mean just dreams: a series of them in constant, effervescing disappearance from sense and memory. He allows us to think that he himself “just” allows them to appear without at-
tempting to draw anything “too scientific,” i.e., meaningful, from them. Dream-interpretation, Freudian or other, is left aside. At most, dreams here metaphorically point to the data of his raw experience, toward which he here adopts something akin to the countercultural, neo-romantic stance he had sketched for his “lover” in an earlier song, “Gates of Eden” (1965). Just as his alter-self in that song’s ersatz “Eden” resists analyzing her dreams in favor of living life to the naked bone—

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

--so, too, in “Series of Dreams” he would avoid intellectual examinations of his experiences for their supposed hidden meanings:

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

Comprised of Dylan’s dreams, this song, then, appears to warn us off from interpreting it as well.

Still, one cannot avoid noticing how the dreams Dylan speaks of verge on nightmarish moments. Why does he write a song about just a series of dreams? A wound lurks in them that feels “permanent” and
inescapable: “...there’s no exit in any direction/ ‘Cept the one that you can’t see with your eyes.” As the lyric’s refrain has it, he is forced to face such dreams head on: “Dreams where the umbrella is folded/ Into the path you are hurled.” Even so, he chooses to suffer them minus any rationalized shield: “Wasn’t making any great connection/ Wasn’t falling for any intricate scheme.” At the same time--herein lies the lyric’s most notable ambiguity--he wants to escape these trauma-evoking dreams. First of all, he refers to them in “quasi” fashion (i.e., “like a”), which itself suspiciously suggests a rhetorical act that would evade their otherwise unmediated impact. Second, he demonstrates a prevaricating reflex in the way he obliquely alludes to himself, that is, as if he were an anonymous “someone [who] wakes up and screams” when having these dreams. Not only that, but the wish to escape them occurs even in the course of his dreaming them: “In one [dream], I was running, and in another/ All I seemed to be doing was climb.”

On second glance, then, “Series of Dreams” doesn’t simply refer to “just a series of dreams,” as if Dylan were indifferent or at most merely curious about them. On the contrary, the word “just” reverberates with irony. Whereas our dreams are subject to amnesia as soon as we wake up from them, his remain explicitly memorable and stick in his craw. He may wish to purge them--one can maintain that this lyric enacts that very wish--by insisting that they lack meaning; but in fact, we can sense easily enough that they possess all too much meaning for him, even if he helplessly seems unable define
it. At minimum, the song “Series of Dreams” accrues a poetic resonance insofar as it expresses anyone’s experience when teetering on the edge of encountering an abyss in self. After all, as previously noted, he can’t “see” any escape while dreaming them, nor can he imagine one happening by lucky chance: “And the cards are no good that you’re holding/ Unless they’re from another world.”

Considering the song from a critical-biographical viewpoint, however, a Dylanologist might entertain a very different interpretation of this lyric, especially by noting how in 1991 Dylan still held to a religious-ideological position. Despite his then apparent disaffection from former Christian-fundamentalist views, they still occasionally appear to infiltrate certain songs at least through the 1989 album Oh Mercy. For example, “Political World” on Oh Mercy situates people in a milieu of damnation. Salvation can’t ever occur “in a political world,/ [Where] Love don’t have any place.” In “Ring Them Bells,” we hear the Dylan speaker ask “St. Peter” to help people wake up from their secular fixations: “Ring them bells St. Peter/ . . . with an iron hand/ So the people will know.” The world that these putatively post-Christian songs sketch still positions mankind as doomed to despair, alienation—in essence, to “original sin.” Any way one looks at it, one’s worldly experiences come down to a series of Godless dreams: mere fictions wherein one can never feel genuinely real. Our only solution to this unreality consequently lies in “another world,” akin to the religious mythology of an eternal afterlife that while living we can never “see.”
Over his entire career, for that matter, Dylan tends to valorize the invisible—consider his inaugural “The answer . . . is blow-in’ in the wind”—over the material world. Some songs like “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” (1963) and “Thunder on the Mountain” (2006) edge toward expressing an imminent apocalypse, secular or possibly religious in character. Other songs circle around the invisible in different fashion. For example, “Visions of Johanna” from Blonde on Blonde (1966) stages an erotically present “Louise” who only “makes it all too concise and too clear” that the holy (“Madonna”-like) figure of “Johanna’s not here.” In “Where Are You Tonight? (Journey Through Pure Heat)” from Street Legal (1978), Dylan associates the “invisible self” of another female figure with a “truth . . . too profound and too pure,” even for the likes of “Marcel” (Proust) and “St. John” (of the Cross), questers, respectively, after lost time and a self not voided of God. Indeed, that same “dark” God could already intrude on a pre-religious (sic) Dylan as a “Father of Night” in the midst of then “New” Bourgeoisville lifestyle.

Aidan Day has accordingly argued that Dylan’s supposed carnivalesque inventions of self throughout his career (and here one can add: as celebrated in the Todd Haynes 2007 film, I’m Not There) are haunted by his belief in the transcendental “Judgment” of Old Testament scripture. Day holds that Dylan definitively returns to this vision in post-Christian songs like—with its title again alluding to an invisible—“Caribbean Wind” (1985): “The hearing of the an-
cestors in ‘Caribbean Wind’ was only another expression of an ima-
gination constituted in an Hebraic conviction of the inevitable and
dread-inducing nature of divine judgement.”14 Day further claims
that in retrospect, the apocalyptic rumblings of Dylan’s earlier
songs are no less anchored in Old Testament visions of final Judg-
ment than more recent songs like “Thunder on the Mountain” on Modern
Times. Even the “vacuum of the mystery tramp's eyes in the 1965
'Like a Rolling Stone' may be seen to define less an exhilarating
freedom than a disturbing void of being. It may actually feel and
be very bad to have no direction home. It may be a symptom of an ab-
surd irresponsibility” (Day, 99).

Day’s thesis about Dylan’s late vision of an existence without
redemption has a compelling, hermeneutic cogency. It certainly ap-
plies to the songs of Dylan’s latter-day albums. For example, his
expressed alienation from hope for an Imitatio Guthrie self once
bound for glory seems all but complete in “Cold Irons Bound” from
Time Out of Mind (1997): “I’m twenty miles out of town in cold irons
bound.” Yet this same sentiment also suggests the persistent co-pre-
sence of “another side of Bob Dylan.” The song’s iron-clad Dylan
persona—Bob Dylan in the process of composing his song, if not the
quotidian Dylan—here signals an inconsolable detachment from any
existent community (“town”), whether its credo be formally Old Tes-
tament or New. The same kind of a-theological disaffection from com-
munal identity mitigates his recourse to what Greil Marcus terms an
“old, weird America,” to which one might claim that Dylan’s constant
“love and theft” of American folksong materials, especially in his
last three albums, otherwise testify.\textsuperscript{15}

They don’t. I am arguing that Dylan’s creative penchant for in-
decisive situations throughout his works ought to give one pause be-
fore making any decisive judgment about his concession to either Old
Testament or New Testament final judgments about the human scene.
Right from the beginning of his career, many of his song-lyrics in
fact thematically turn on the issue of vocational indecision. For
example, “Restless Farewell” (1964) hesitantly promises that he has
arrived at a decisive (“my feet are now fast”) view of life. He will
move on from an older (“past”) vision to a different one, no doubt
to be reflected in the kinds of songs he intends henceforth to com-
pose. Still, this valedictory decision remains ambiguous and at the
very least still undefined. His bidding “farewell” to the past and
to “be down the line” points only toward some indefinite future
where an as yet unspecified something different will transpire. As
the last song on \textit{The Times They Are A-Changin’}, “Restless Farewell”
forecasts the tenor of songs that will appear on Dylan’s next two
albums, \textit{Another Side of Bob Dylan} and \textit{Bringing It All Back Home}. In
both collections, indecision \textit{in itself} begins to assume for him the
status of a self-liberating ethos, at least when determined against
both early-1960s American mainstream culture and its counter-cul-
tural alternative. After all, that alternative comes rife with what
he already terms in “My Back Pages” (1964) the “crimson flames” of, i.e., the burning demand for, decisive judgmental stances against political authority. The Dylan lyric instead promises to practice disaffection from all such decision-provoking positions: “To understand you know too soon/ There is no sense in trying” (“It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)” (1965).

Similarly, being “twenty miles out of town” or in a state “not dark yet” in Time Out of Mind holds off from final judgment about the human scene as well as about Dylan’s particular existential situation. That tension, to move toward but not judge events as final, defines the space of the late Dylan lyric as much as his earlier ones. In these later lyrics, however, finality assumes the form of a religious-like apocalypse as opposed to merely social catastrophes and a threat to self-liberation. Something of this religiously va-lenced indecision also informs the futility marking the “dreams” of the Dylan speaker in “Series of Dreams.” Here he finds himself un-able to believe in this world as an end in itself—the ersatz negative-theological stance of “Like a Rolling Stone”: “When you got no-thing, you got nothing to lose.” Yet neither can he hold to the es-chatological alternative of Christian conviction or else of a Jew-ish-redux vision.

By the time Dylan composes “Series of Dreams,” he thus has al-ready tried to commit himself to one or another absolutist credo: “I’d already gone the distance.” Not only does he find himself un-
able to believe either one can define the real for him, he also no longer even desires them to do so:¹⁸

Wasn’t looking for any special assistance
Not going to any great extremes
I’d already gone the distance
Just thinking of a series of dreams

Dylan can no longer believe in the happy or non-alienated terminus ad quem of this life or in some salvific afterlife. Both poles now resemble “dreams” to him. He once hallucinated both as if true, and no doubt could easily do so again. Nevertheless, he has traversed both, as if experiencing a “series” of them without any one of them having made an absolutely decisive difference. The same applies to his present inability to believe in either version of the really real. In short, everything appears to him as if part of a series of dreams.

Besides inching toward the harsh, skeptical turn of his Time Out of Mind songs,¹⁹ this quixotic vision perforce includes particular lyrical works like the present “Series of Dreams” itself. Indeed, one could claim that the song is a kind of meta-song in which Dylan is reflecting on the value of his previous body of work. One could easily enough connect the song’s dream-motifs to those in any number of past Dylan songs.²⁰ For example, “One Too Many Mornings” (1964) concerns a wound of love that endures in permanent stalemate: “You’re right from your side,/ I am right from mine.” Made by us
listener/readers, such connections unavoidably remain mere speculation; but if they exist, they would set up deeper complications for us than trying to resolve the song’s staging of dreams either as dreams or as metaphors of continually surpassed ideas about real reality. For example, does he adopt a merely indifferent (“just a . . .”) stance toward his former body of work? Or does he instead, as with how one can read the song being about dreams alias actual past experiences, adopt an anxious relation to them? And if the latter, why or how do his former songs open up abyssal questions for him? Do they point to the impermanent relation he has to his lifetime of work, once construed in positive terms as possessing decisive, existential value, and perhaps credentials for a certain kind of artistic immortality? On the other hand, does his stance against interpreting his past instead express a wish not to know and thereby judge his work in any final sense?

At the very least, my surmise that the song’s references constitute a coded, autobiographical reflection on his own work should not surprise listener/readers of Dylan’s lyrics. One can find similar kinds of reflection in force as early as “I Want You” (1966) and most of the songs on John Wesley Harding (1967). It becomes more pronounced in mid-career songs like “Changing of the Guards” (1978) and “When the Night Comes Falling from the Sky” (1985):

Look out across the fields, see me returning,

Smoke is in your eye, you draw a smile.
From the fireplace where my letters to you are burning,
You’ve had time to think about it for a while.

Here again, a problematic ambiguity confronts the listener. Where is the Dylan speaker returning from in this 1985 lyric if not the Christian-religious segment of his career. He even acknowledges that we (“you”) are likely “burning,” i.e., discounting, his Christian lyrics as deserving of canonical inclusion. Just the same, before we agree with him on this anticipatory judgment, he proceeds to dampen our own dismissive judgments of that career-phase by insinuating that “to think about it for a while” might lead us to reassess those very judgments.

Similarly “Series of Dreams” invites a series of Dylan’s own as well as our interpretations of his songs, with none of them ever decisively the “right” one. Indeed, the song’s very premise consists in the annulment of his own intentional meaning, or more accurately the failure of his as well as our ability to discern it. The song’s “dreams” obliquely include multiple, referential possibilities: not only literal dreams or mental experiences replete with existential trapdoors, but also his past experiences viewed from a now formidable, temporal distance. Put another way, Dylan songs like “Went to See the Gypsy” and “Series of Dreams” often disappear behind a haze of special or doubly reflected autobiographical references. On one level, they concern his private life, which at best we can reconstruct only in very general and/or probabilistic terms and from an
external perspective, and so at odds with his. On a second level, he uses these same autobiographical materials as tropes to define his relation to the very songs he is composing or performing.

In short, his dreams refer to a series of mental phenomena less and less definitive to him and less and less accessible to us listeners. These dreams perforce include his poetic-lyrical works, which self-evidently once expressed his personal desires in collision with “real” obstacles. All such “dreams” have since become dispersed as only partially recoverable data or evanescent memories. This temporal transformation, focused upon in his acts of composition, retrospectively frames Dylan’s lyrical works as having become significant for their lost significance. Thus, the very iterability of a Dylan lyric, on which “Series of Dreams” itself ponders, allows it to survive in the present as a kind of private if also elusive memo of what it once meant for him in an already amorphous former scene of writing. His past songs a.k.a. dreams come to resemble, one might say, those bags floating or “blowing in the wind” at the end of the movie American Beauty. They end up in a semiotic dead-end, capable of meaning this and that, temporarily dependent on whatever point in one’s life one encounters or formerly encountered them.

Dylan’s song-lyrics thus leave one in the position of having to guess at their meanings, as if one were always one remove from the song’s specific semantic concerns. A. S. Byatt was therefore right in not knowing where to begin discussing or deciphering a Dyl-
an lyric. She was wrong to suppose that this exegetical block symp-
tomatically reflects a deficit as to its interpretable layers. On
the contrary, just as with “Series of Dreams,” most of Dylan’s lyr-
ics parlay multiple registers of meaning, which their moving-target,
multi-genre textual composition only serves to intensify. As I in-
timated earlier, to interpret it, the reader/listener must continu-
ally choose the Dylan text to “read” and the meaning with which to
endow it—as I have done throughout this paper. To make that una-
voidable choice, however, is already to misread the sentiment ex-
pressed in “Series of Dreams”: that neither those “dreams” nor his
words about them mean “anything specific.” By definition, in other
words, the Dylan lyric evades final, specific interpretations, even
as it requests interpretation per se. If that sounds like a truism
about poetic effect generally, one also needs to register how his
typical lyric simultaneously undercuts that same effect. That is,
his lyrics require second reflections by us listener-readers, but
in dis-relation with the immediacy, or the at best fugitive reflex-
vity, allowed by their musical-vocal medium.

One can further speculate about the extent to which such covert
evasiveness constitutes the Dylan lyric’s motivating and self-de-
fining desideratum. A certain skittish commitment to any single ide-
ological, musical-generic, and even lyric-cum-poetic position, never
mind to the many personal relationships refracted by his songs,
clearly seems to enable his art from his early phase through the
withholding motif, as expressed in the “ain’t talkin’” refrain of
one that recent lyric in Modern Times. His noted reliance on fortu-
itous prosody (e.g., the rhymes in songs like “Everything Is Broken”
and “Dignity”), along with his borrowing of phrases and images from
the Bible, literary works, and other songs and sources, arguably
dramatize a similarly motivated, vocational promiscuity.

All of this raises a series of questions that go beyond com-
monly understood ethical issues such as plagiarism and the like. For
example, does Dylan’s spontaneous conversion of straight song-lyrics
into enigma signify an act of unique insight into the real? Or does
it instead manifest a kind of bad-faith mystification of the musi-
cal-verbal icon, say, that would keep “meaning” under arrest for as
long as possible lest it disturb an essentially aesthetic illusion
that it wants to instantiate? One could quite easily read a song
like “Mr. Tambourine Man” (1964), for instance, either way. Dylan’s
“skipping wheels of rhyme” will never catch up to the wordless,
rhythmic, elusive or dreamlike tune he wants to keep in mind at the
time of composing songs precisely like the present one.

Then again, the trajectory of Dylan’s entire oeuvre may lie in
an entirely different bracket of thought. His drive toward enigma--I
would claim that this depiction comprehends his formal and non-for-
mal “religious” sensibility as well--may in fact mean to counter
what he terms in “Series of Dreams” a much “too . . . scientific”
world. In “Political World,” he had already analogously authored a
screed against a social environment rabidly politicized; in “Nettie
Moore” (2006), he lays low a “world of research . . . gone berserk,”
perhaps including the kind of analysis of his work going on right now. The critical target of his songs comes down to any kind of social environment intent on blocking the one desire consistently manifest in his songs from “Like a Rolling Stone” through “Ain’t Talkin’”: in the primordial strangeness of life as such. This refers to an unabating absence of meaning vis-à-vis existence—not, however, to existence judged meaningless. That absence at once defines and negates the goal that he feels compelled continually to uncover only in and through seriatim acts of lyric composition. Unlike artists who thrive on ecstasies of negation, or the aestheticized pains of a bad moon rising, Dylan doesn’t simply postulate the void shadowing his experiences; he seeks to expose it again and again, and against his own will. “Every moment of existence seems like some dirty trick/ ... Any minute of the day the bubble could burst,” he writes in “Sugar Baby” from “Love and Theft” (2001). If anything, this scene is what his aborted song “I’m Not There,” most likely alludes to: that in places where one thinks meaning appears or ought to reside, e.g., with “her,” he’s missing, “not there,/ I’m gone.”

The same applies in reverse: that is, to us in relation to the Dylan lyric, and also effected by the paradoxical noli me tangere characterizing his performances on his so-called Never Ending Tour. The Dylan song provokes the frisson of its meanings always in the process of disappearing as if “with the man/ In the long black coat,” as another Oh Mercy song expresses it. The strangeness of the

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existent, or more precisely of the uncanny, bijou aspect of one human experience or another, ends up defining what we seek and surprisingly continue to find in his lyrics. That is because Dylan deploys the scene of lyric composition to do the same for him: “In this age of fiberglass I’m searching for a gem” (“Dirge,” 1973).

Endnotes

1. An essay version of this talk was later published as “Bob Dylan’s 116th Dream: Reflections on the Lyrics,” Auto/Biography (a/b) 23:2 (Winter 2008): 226-44.


5. Paul Williams most notably has discussed Dylan’s works along these performative lines in his multi-volume work covering Dylan’s entire career. See, for example, Bob Dylan: Performing Artist: The Early Years 1960-1973 (Lancaster, PA: Underwood-Miller, 1990).
6. The title of a recent collection of essays on Dylan’s works demonstrates yet another critical venue: *Bob Dylan and Philosophy: It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Thinking)*, ed. Peter Vernezze and Carl J. Porter (Chicago: Open Court, 2006). Other books on Dylan have emphasized the Christian and/or Judaic aspects of his lyrical musings.


9. A Wikipedia article notes the following: “The cover photo is "Taxi, New York at Night", 1947, by Ted Croner. The image was previously used as a CD cover by the defunct band Luna, on their 1997 single "Hedgehog/23 Minutes in Brussels".


10. For the derivation of several songs on this album, see


11. *Song & Dance Man III*, 105. Clinton Heylin accepts this occurrence as fact in his *Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades Revisited* (New York: William Morrow, 2001), 319. It also remains possible, however, that Dylan’s meeting with Presley may have been an entirely imaginary event, or perhaps occurred in the sense that Dylan simply attended one of his shows and nothing more.


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

99. Day’s essay is a revised version of a paper first delivered at “A Series of Interpretations of
Bob Dylan's Lyrical Works: An Academic Conference at Dartmouth College,” Hanover, New
Hampshire, on August 11-13, 2006. Besides “Caribbean Wind,” Day also discusses “I and I” and
“Ain’t Talking” along these same Old Testament lines, as well as revises his view of Dylan’s

15. In a 1997 interview, Dylan made the point that he looked to these old folksongs as his
abiding religion.

16. In “Highlands,” here again the final song of the album, Dylan doubly underscores his inability
to decide what he wants before his famous contretemps with the waitress in the Boston
restaurant: “I got no idea what I want/ Well, maybe I do but I’m just really not sure.”

17. Some critics make this claim for Dylan’s return to Judaism based on evidence of the *Shot of
Cheyette’s essay cited below.

18. Bryan Cheyette astutely notes that the two men at the railroad station in “I and I” (1983)
“waiting for spring to come, smoking down the line,” represent Dylan’s divided self, the
converted (Christian) and unconverted (Jewish), unified by an “insouciance at the potential end
of the world.” “On the ‘D’ Train: Bob Dylan’s Conversions,” ‘*Do you, Mr. Jones?*: Bob Dylan
with the Poets and Professors*, ed. Neil Corcoran (London: Pimlico, 2003), 250. I read the two
figures as instead personifying would-be Christian and Jewish apocalyptic solutions to the base
human condition. Dylan finds himself now separated from both expectancies, going “barefoot” alone and experiencing the Real without cushions of credos: “Noontime, and I’m still pushin’ myself along the road, the darkest part . . . .”

19. In “Not Dark Yet,” for instance, Dylan professes that he can’t “even hear a murmur of a prayer” (Lyrics, 566).

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

21. The “Dylan” connection is permitted by the movie’s own inscription: its protagonist, played by Kevin Spacey, comically tries to recover his young, 1960s-style revolutionary and sexual manhood by pumping iron while playing “All Along the Watchtower.”