

SELF-ENACTMENT OR SELF-DISCLOSURE: A SEARCH FOR AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES IN THE LYRICS OF BOB DYLAN

DANIELA DOBOȘ
Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași

Abstract:

Bob Dylan is a contemporary icon of popular music and culture, one of the most influential Americans of the 20th century and America's most important "song poet". At the same time, there is perhaps no living person of whom so much has been written but whose bibliography remains so elusive. Not only this but, as Christophe Lebold writes, "the fundamental gesture behind Dylan's oeuvre is indeed the permanent construction and deconstruction of himself". The paper sets out to identify autobiographical influences in Dylan's lyrics, which span five decades, down to the current "mix of inscrutability, flashed teeth, existential angst and deep sorrow, deadpan humour and dead-on breakdowns", as a perfectly satisfactory coda to a remarkable half-century of music making.

Keywords: *autobiography, poetry/lyrics, songwriting, identity*

According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica 2009*, Bob Dylan is "an American folksinger who moved from folk to rock music in the 1960s, infusing the lyrics of rock and roll, theretofore concerned mostly with boy-girl romantic innuendo, with the intellectualism of classic literature and poetry. Hailed as the Shakespeare of his generation, Dylan has sold more than 60 million albums, has written about 500 songs recorded by more than 2,000 artists, has performed all over the world, and has set the standard for lyric writing". One thing that can be safely said about the legendary musician is that he continues to sit at the centre of popular culture; in fact, in 2004 a *Newsweek* magazine article deemed him "the most influential cultural figure now alive" and he has been included on *Life's* list of the 100 most influential Americans of the 20th century. In April 2008 he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize Special Citation, for his "profound impact on popular music and American culture, marked by lyrical compositions of

extraordinary poetic power”. Thus the placement of Dylan and his undisputed verbal sophistication within a literary rather than musical canon is now widely accepted. As Ian Bickford writes, “To cast his compositions as poetry was essentially to claim for them an unambiguous status” (Bickford, 19).

In parallel, one question has confounded music and literary critics for some five decades now: should Dylan be considered a songwriter or a poet? The debate, now chronicled as the *Dylan-Keats wars* (Gray, xviii-xix), has been raging ever since 1965, and in the early 21st century seven well-hyped books appeared almost in sequence: *Dylan’s Visions of Sin*, by Oxford professor of poetry Christopher Ricks, *Dylan and Cohen – Poets of Rock and Roll*, by University of Cardiff professor David Boucher, and *Bob Dylan and Philosophy*, edited by Peter Vernezze and Carl Porter, all of whom make the case for Dylan as a poet; *Lyrics: 1961-2001*, a collection of Dylan’s songs presented in printed form; *Chronicles*, the first volume of Dylan’s memoir; *Keys to the Rain*, a 724-page Bob Dylan encyclopedia, and *Studio A*, an anthology about Dylan by Allen Ginsberg, Joyce Carol Oates, Rick Moody and Barry Hannah. The Dylan bookshelf includes any number of academic works, while Dylan has also been the subject of at least six biographies while still living (by Scaduto; Shelton; Spitz; Scobie; Sounes and Heylin).

Ian Bickford (19) suggests that from the start, Dylan’s contested literary eminence comprised “an equivalent questioning and projected repositioning of poetry itself, along with a questioning of what it meant to be a poet, especially an American poet, in the middle of the twentieth century”, and adds that “whether Dylan is or is not classifiable as a poet matters less, perhaps, than the extraordinary impact of his music upon literary writers of subsequent, but also prior generations, such as Allen Ginsberg” (Bickford, 20). Corcoran (13; quoted in Boucher, 4) states that although Dylan is not a conventional poet, he has the same artistry of mind in the clarity of expressions, the forcefulness of the imagery, the gracefulness of the language and the relevance of the words in different contexts” (see also Anderson). Scaruffi (1999) quite aptly notes that Dylan is “more of a surrealist poet than a folk singer”. His “dance of the intellect behind the words”, defined by Pound, is discussed by Gizari (2001) to prove that Dylan’s poetry will live on past the generations that he has touched in his lifetime.

In an essay of 1969 on the songs of Dylan and Leonard Cohen, Frank Davey expresses an interesting point of view on the literary value of Bob Dylan’s work, seen in the context of the popular song to which Davey believes Dylan belongs: “The most important prerequisite for both a significant poem and significant lyrics in a popular song is that the writer be faithful to his own personal vision or to the vision of the poem he is writing. All the skill and craft generally believed necessary for writing poetry are indeed necessary because these are the only means by which a poet can preserve the integrity of this vision

in the poem”. Davey also argues that “the close relationship between poetry and music scarcely needs to be argued. Both are aural modes which employ rhythm, rhyme, and pitch as major devices; to these the one adds linguistic meaning, connotation, and various traditional figures, and the other can add, at least in theory, all of these plus harmony, counterpoint, and orchestration techniques. In English the two are closely bound historically. Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry seems certainly to have been read or chanted to a harpist's accompaniment; the verb used in *Beowulf* for such a performance, the Finn episode, is ‘*singan*’, to sing, and the noun ‘*gyd*’, song. A major source of the lyric tradition in English poetry is the songs of the troubadours. [...] The lyric poem as a literary work and the lyrics of a popular song are both still essentially the same thing: poetry”.

More recently, Joe Heim (2009) appears to have solved the dispute by referring to Dylan as “America’s most important song poet”. In university curricula, as early as 1977, more than one hundred courses had been taught on Dylan’s poetics, a number which has compounded over the years, as Dylan’s lyrics now appear in such standard volumes as *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. [Note, for example, the first sentence of an academic seminar description: “*This seminar will focus on the prophetic and contemporary, rebellious and conventional, provocative and sentimental, enigmatic and crystal clear lyrics and music of Bob Dylan*”].¹ Classics professor Tom Palaima (1) argues that Dylan is the essential American oral poet of the last half century and his songs “serve the same functions of social enculturation and witness to key realities of life that were the hallmark of ancient Greek oral poetry”. Professor William King (2009), who in 1975 defended the first doctoral thesis on Dylan’s poetry, writes that “Dylan, like Shakespeare before him, is a democratic poet, an artist who reaches out to a wide audience with poetic vision and transforms a medium from popular pap to serious art. Like Shakespeare in the sixteenth century, Dylan writes for performance, not the page”. “Arguably the most influential, important, and closely-scrutinized American artist of the past half century, Bob Dylan is “as difficult to define as the nation that produced him”, argues yet another academic, Dean A. Masullo.

Dylan’s own statements on the appropriateness of discussing his songs in a literary context have been ambivalent, ranging between his 1965 view of himself as a “song-and-dance man” and “I’m a poet, and I know it” (in his song “I Shall Be Free No. 10”). Upon being asked whether he preferred writing poetry or songs, his answer was “Poems. I don’t have to condense or restrict my thoughts into a song pattern” (quoted in Bickford, 20). In a 1964 interview Dylan had declared that “words come first”, and at about the same time, in another interview, he said: “Everybody has their own idea on what’s a poet. Robert Frost, President Johnson, T.S. Eliot, Rudolph Valentino – they’re all

¹ www.union.edu/academic_depts/english/_docs/English_08_Spring.doc

poets. I like to think of myself as the one who carried the lightbulb". In 2008, he named as his own greatest lyrical inspiration the Scottish poet Robert Burns and his "Red, Red Rose" (Simpson 2008), but elsewhere he names Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg among the poets who have inspired him. [see Rollason 2009 for a well-informed parallel between Dylan and Edgar Allan Poe]. Bickford concludes that "[Dylan's] importance as a writer is undoubtedly secure, yet what *kind* of writer and how exactly to position him within an American literary tradition remains uncertain" (21). According to Cella (2009), "few have influenced a language as Bob Dylan influenced late 20th century American."

Meanwhile, Dylan's textual shadow hovers over contemporary fiction. Thus Salman Rushdie's fictional musician Ormus Cama in the novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) is a fictional Dylan. Here is how Raj, one of the characters, pictures him: "Ormus Cama was the greatest popular singer of all, the one whose genius exceeded all others [...] a golden troubadour the jouncy poetry of whose lyrics could unlock the very gates of Hell; he incarnated the singer and songwriter as shaman and spokesman" (Rushdie 1999a, 307). In an interview, Rushdie (1999b), as famous as a pop star himself, explained that he wanted, in his novel, to treat rock'n'roll seriously, as a vehicle to examine our life and times, by evoking its "best-case portrait: Bob Dylan", declaring: "I remember first hearing early Dylan when I was still at boarding school in England and being astonished. I'd never heard anyone write like that in a song, this fantastically impressionistic but also savage writing, which was completely complemented by his phrasing and his voice". [For an engaging account of Rushdie's storehouse of Dylan quotes, see Rollason 2003].

Much - perhaps too much - has been written about Bob Dylan; I will nevertheless venture one more endeavour, motivated by my deep-seated interest in the music and life of this remarkable man and spellbinding language-oriented songwriter. As Bruce Forbes notes, "Many of us come to the analysis of popular culture with a particular special interest related to our own private enthusiasms" (17).

There is arguably no living person of whom so much has been written whose biography remains so elusive, as Dylan "seems to have been so purposeful, so precise, and yet so unpredictable, in weaving and stitching and patching the fabric of his identity that one struggles to distinguish [...] between the person and the performance" (Bickford, 22). "He's been analyzed, classified, categorized, crucified, defined, dissected, detected, inspected, and rejected, but never figured out", Cohen (1985) writes. Born Robert Allen Zimmerman in 1941, the son of Jewish merchants (upon his birth, according to this mother, he was so beautiful that he should have been a girl), he grew up in the mining town of Hibbing in northeastern Minnesota. When Bobby was in kindergarten, his father bought a house on Seventh Avenue. In the house, Dylan claimed he found something of great significance. "[It] has kind of mystical overtones," he

recalled many years later. The people who had lived in the house previous to that time, they had left some of their furniture, and among that furniture was a great big mahogany radio, like a jukebox. It had a 78 turntable when you opened up the top. And I opened it up one day and there was a record on there, a country record. It was a song called "Drifting Too Far from the Shore." I think it was the Stanley Brothers, if not Bill Monroe. I played the record and it brought me into a different world" (quoted in Santelli 2005). Thus began a lifelong romance with music. "I didn't agree with school. I flunked out. I read a lot, but not the required readings", Dylan later confessed.

Now proficient on piano, Dylan formed his first band and played in a series of others at about the same time that he became fascinated by Beat poetry, Arthur Rimbaud and his celebrated formulation of the shifting, unstable nature of the self: '*Je est un autre*' ('I is another'), Paul Verlaine and folksinger Woody Guthrie. Allen Ginsberg, perhaps more than any other individual writer of the Beat Generation, "opened up for Dylan, and for his whole generation, a bright, babbling, surreal, self-indulgent, sleazy, intensely alert modern world no predecessor had visited" (Gray, 255). Dylan was evidently very impressed by Ginsberg's ability to improvise poetry, which Ginsberg said he had developed when he and poet Jack Kerouac would go on walks together. For his part, Ginsberg was keen to develop his musical side. According to Schumacher (1992), Ginsberg wanted to reach people with his work and "believed in the viability of the minstrel tradition." Dylan taught the poet a few chords and he was able to make a start.

The moment in late 1959 when Dylan first heard a Woody Guthrie record was, as he later recalled in his *Chronicles*, "an epiphany". From then on he became fixated, attempting to talk, write and sing like Guthrie, and constructing a self-mythology based on the hobo characters described in Guthrie's autobiography, *Bound for Glory*. After enrolling at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, where he stayed through the end of 1960 but failed almost completely to attend classes, he changed his name legally to Bob Dylan in 1962. This was a decisive step in his elastic identity. Mercurial, iconoclastic and enigmatic, in the years that followed Dylan variously presented himself as a poet, gospel singer, bluesman, country musician and minstrel. "Dylan has invented himself. He's made himself up from scratch", wrote playwright Sam Shepard (quoted in Garman 2002; see also Shelton, 83). Indeed, at a concert he introduced himself by saying "I got my Dylan mask on today" (quoted in Comentale, 214). Dylan has always taken a keen pleasure with such tricksterism. As Kael (1978, quoted in Comentale, 216) writes, "throughout his career, he seems comfortable only as a put-on artist, a 'surly mystic tease', poking holes in his own authenticity and the sanctimony of his fans". From there, Dylan "has slipped into people's dream baskets", and "has been incorporated into their myths and fantasies" (McClure, 33; quoted in Ball, 23).

Ian Bickford writes that “the rupture of the subject ‘*je*’ from its first person status in the third person verb form ‘*est*’ constitutes in its very incoherence a strikingly consistent gesture across Dylan’s oeuvre” (23). Lebold suggests that “the fundamental gesture behind Dylan’s oeuvre is indeed the permanent construction and deconstruction of himself” (63). This projection of identities is central to Todd Haynes’s 2007 film *I’m Not There*, in which six different actors of different ages, genders and ethnicities play a person recognizable as but never called Bob Dylan.

“It’s a strange business,” writes French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (95), “speaking for yourself, in your own name, because it doesn’t at all come with seeing yourself as an ego or a person or a subject. Individuals find a real name for themselves, rather, only through the harshest exercise in depersonalization, by opening themselves up to the multiplicities everywhere within them, to the intensities running through them . . . It’s depersonalization through love rather than subjection . . . We have to counter people who think ‘I’m this, I’m that’ . . . by thinking in strange, fluid unusual terms . . . Arguments from one’s own privileged experience are bad and reactionary arguments.” Recently, in another interview for *Newsweek* magazine, Dylan put it this way: “I don’t know who I am most of the time. It doesn’t even matter to me. . . . I find the religiosity and the philosophy in the music. I don’t find it anywhere else. . . . I believe the songs” (quoted in Anderson 2005). [For a Jungian interpretation of the Dylan opus, see Dugic 2005].

And in another 2001 interview for *Time* magazine, Dylan made a somewhat surprising confession, namely that all his songs are autobiographical: “Yeah, all of ‘em. Every single one, every line. It’s completely autobiographical, as most of my stuff usually is on one level or another”.

The (Turbulent) 1960s

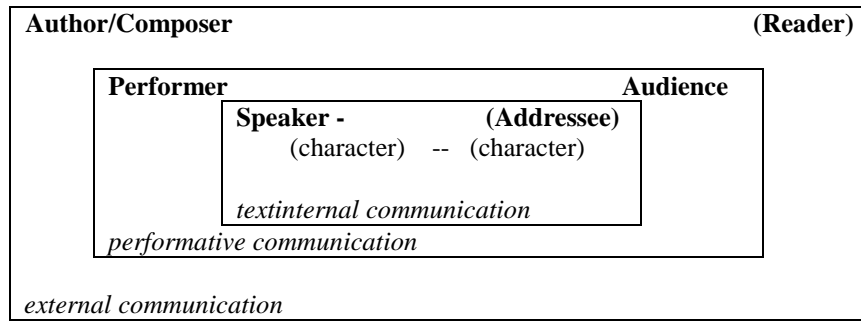
As Starr and Waterman (64) note, “few eras in American history have been as controversial as the 1960s”- “the tumultuous decade defined by the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, by destructive riots and demoralizing assassinations” (Lipsitz, 207), while popular music played an incontestable role in defining its character and spirit. Lipsitz further remarks that “perhaps no area of American culture better epitomizes the complicated realities of the sixties than popular music”. Dylan was “always among the first to anticipate evolution and darkness in the 1960s” (Krief, 98).

In late February 1961, skinny, myopic, curly-haired Dylan, not yet 20, arrived in New York City’s Greenwich Village against a merciless winter - “Coldest winter in 17 years,” he would sing on “Hard Times in New York Town.” Here he played as a regular at the Café Wha? and Gaslight, which provided the setting for the Bohemian movement, and was soon “discovered” by

the *New York Times* critic Robert Shelton. At this time Dylan immersed himself in the bohemian culture of Greenwich Village, where leftists were participating in the folk music revival around Woody Guthrie, their patron saint. “Song to Woody” was the first original composition Dylan ever sang in public. In it he lampooned the response to his arrival on the scene in the deliberately mispronounced ‘Green-wich Village’. “I’m out here a thousand miles from my home/ Walkin’ a road other men have gone down”, the song went, and continued: “I walked down there and ended up/ On one of them coffee-houses on the block/ Got on the stage to sing and play/ Man there said ‘Come back some other day,/ You sound like a Hillbilly,/ We want folk singers here’”. It returned to the road theme in the last stanza, as the narrator announced his intention to disappear “somewhere down the road some day”; thus the road, as symbol of freedom and of searching, has been a crucial theme in Dylan’s songwriting from the beginning.

In March 1962, Dylan’s eponymous debut album, dominated by Guthrie’s spirit, was released to mixed reviews. This first album was a collection of folk standards, and two originals, which quickly established its author as an authentic traditional artist. According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Dylan’s singing voice – “a cowboy lament laced with Midwestern patois [...] confounded many critics”. Besides “Song to Woody”, this first album contained a second song authored by Dylan, titled “Talking New York”, describing the hardships of the early days: “Well, I got a harmonica job, begun to play/ Blowin’ my lungs out for a dollar a day/ I blowed inside out and upside down/ The man there said he loved m’ sound”. The early 1960s was a period of explosive growth for acoustic urban folk music. “[Bob Dylan] was the man who, virtually single-handedly, dragged urban folk music into the modern era of rock” (Starr and Waterman, 70).

Personal authenticity and communication between performer and listener on a personal basis are a major asset of 20th century popular song, being developed by performers at least since the 20s, with the rising importance of the technical innovations like electrical recording, radio, microphone and movies. For instance, Irving Berlin’s ballads create a “lyrical space [...] that is designed for the self-absorbed, plaintive singer who inhabits it. The solitary consumer [...] inhabits the same space” (Furia, 158). In one of the best-known books of cultural criticism focusing on the 1960s, Richard Poirier (1971) argues that the self is a socially constructed convenient fiction, an invented persona related to the purposes we pursue. The invention/ reinvention of the self takes place primarily in performance, which is an act of self-discovery, self-perception and self-gratification. The same is certainly true of Dylan, and of his love songs in particular, as he has created a new, his own authenticity.



(based on Frith 1998: 91)

Frith (158-159) suggests that to understand how songs generate meaning, we should consider them as “speech acts” rather than as poems: “we have to treat them in terms of the persuasive relationship set up between the singer and the listener. From this perspective, a song doesn’t exist to convey the meaning of the words; rather, the words exist to convey the meaning of the song” (166).

Boucher (75) states that Dylan, like Leonard Cohen, benefited from the tendency among critics and audiences to think of the producers of popular culture as creative artists or authors, a phenomenon which in the early 1960s was called ‘the auteur theory’, introduced into America by Andrew Sarris. The elevation of the performer to the status of artist became manifest in the new cultural icon of the singer-songwriter. Boucher (76) further comments that, unlike other popular music performers who wrote their own material, in Dylan’s case there was a qualitative difference, facilitated by the broadening of the subject matter of the song – the espousal of a cause or the expression of an emotion different from love. Bob Dylan in fact “elevated this art form to new heights” (Boucher, 77): the fusion of folk and rock-and-roll with powerful lyrics and disturbing images propelled him to the status of poetic icon, whose example a whole generation of singer-songwriters wanted self-consciously to emulate, among which Leonard Cohen. What Dylan actually does is shift emphasis away from the power of music to the power of language. In the process, he turned music into a form of mass communication.

At this point, before engaging in tracing autobiographical references in Dylan’s lyrics, it would be useful to refer, albeit briefly, to the communicative conventions that are said to characterize the genre. Frith (91) writes: “Consider [...] how different genres (opera, folk, rock, punk) read singers: as protagonists of their song? As revealing themselves?” and also “different genres have quite different conventions of lyrical realism”. An answer to such questions with reference to Dylan is given by Christophe Lebold, whose argument begins by pointing out that “Dylan’s poetic texts are first written and then performed;

Dylan's poetry is rhythmically re-written by the voice; and Dylan uses the songs to *write* himself – in other words, to construct a series of numerous and competing personae” (50). Lebold thus puts forward the hypothesis of the song as a hyper-literary object, and further applies Barthes's distinction to argue that Dylan's songs are “more often than not *writerly* rather than just *readerly*” (60). He argues that the semantic openness and sophisticated imagery, as well as the constant blending of poetic idioms, require a fair amount of hermeneutic activity on the part of the listener. Barthes (1970) terms a *writerly* activity the active engagement with meaning and with the poetics of words, which draws on the reader's/ listener's imagination and creativity. Also, Katharina Reiss (163) describes multi-medial texts as “hyper-texts”, to include songs, stage-plays, film scripts, opera libretti, comics and advertising materials; hyper-texts must take into account the information supplied by other sign systems, apart from language.

Michael Billig further comments that in the 20th century, Jewish creativity owed much to the simultaneous power and powerlessness of the outsider. “Dylan's music was that of an outsider posing as a dispossessed insider. He claimed an American folk tradition that had not belonged to his grandparents. In taking over this tradition and claiming to be its guardian, he could not but subvert it. His imagination would not stand still. He had to keep moving--to keep wandering--as if fearing exposure, just as, when a young man, he had feared being revealed as "Zimmerman." The result has been an uncomfortable but undoubtedly genuine originality that resists easy summary”. There is a common-sense way in which songs are taken as an index of the writer's innermost self. Howard Sounes (154) for instance suggests that “it was in his songs that [Dylan] really revealed himself”. Freedland (519) notes: “Jews have inhabited the (Tin Pan) Alley [...] right up to Simon and Garfunkel and Bob Dylan. They were all heirs to those Jewish fiddlers (*Klezmer*, my note, D.D.), who went from town to town, wedding to bar mitzvah, some of whom earned the traditional penalty for not pleasing their audiences – the sound of a crashing tin pan in the alleys where they played”.

Chronologically, Dylan's construction of complex object-songs began in the 1960s, at the same time as or very soon after his eponymous debut album. At the same time a romance with Suze Rotolo proved “a watershed for his songwriting” (Bickford, 24), while he also embraced Rotolo's activism and social consciousness (“meeting her was like stepping into the tales of 1,001 Arabian nights”, Dylan confesses in his *Chronicles*). His second album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963) included four songs that became anthems of the 1960s culture of protest, often labelled as “political statements” – “Blowin' in the Wind” and “Masters of War”, with their apocalyptic denunciation of greed, corruption and militarism (“[...] young people's blood/ Flows out of their bodies/ And is buried in the mud”), as well as “Oxford Town”, which weighed

in for civil rights with reference to the political developments in the South, and “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall”, which showcased Dylan’s metaphorical imagery in a symbolist poet stand (e.g. “a black branch with blood that kept dripping”; “a new born baby with wild wolves all around it”; “a young woman whose body was burning”), all with “a chary clear-eyed wisdom” (Porter, 206). In “Down the Highway” the young white bluesman pays tribute to his mentors and masters. Rodnitsky (28) comments that “from the beginning, Americans sang about politics, wars, heroes, bad men and misery, but their style was overwhelmingly personal”. In Dylan’s case, such songs, with their concern, reflect that of the Beat Generation’s opposition to the civilizational values that the military-industrial complex generated. Dylan contributed to the politicization of popular music that would continue for the next half-century, to the present time (Kanter, 315).

“Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right” introduced the yearning yet sarcastic characteristic Dylan love song – Dylan had a different way of seeing almost everything. The biggest insult is saved for last: “you just kinda wasted my precious time/ But don’t think twice it’s all right” and “I’m on the dark side of the road”. “Girl from the North Country”, the other early Dylan love song and one of his most enduring, partly based on the English ballad “Scarborough Fair”, to which Dylan’s “north country fair” is an allusion, is a nostalgic juxtaposition of present and past (as in “Bob Dylan’s Dream”). By remembering the girl in the North Country, he reconnects with this mythical place and searches for the lost youth. Pastoral beauty is represented here by the winter: “where the winds hit heavy on the borderline”; “where the snowflakes storm”; “where the rivers freeze and the summer ends”. Verses 2 and 3 paint an image of the girl, which is most probably not a real one, but rather an image of innocence based on archetypal male fantasies (Kloss, 2006). This is also the first instance of Dylan creating an image of an idealized woman, a topic he would return to later with more mature songs, like “Love Minus Zero/ No Limit”. Tamarin (132) writes that “for Dylan, loving a woman, or even just liking her, was never simple. He always seemed outside looking in, hurt or yearning or angry”.

The album also features the song “Bob Dylan’s Dream”, an ode to youthful friendship, which was largely inspired by Dylan’s time hanging out with friends in his Greenwich Village apartment in 1961: “I dreamed a dream that made me sad/ Concerning myself and the first few friends I had”. This is a song which contrasts the realities of adulthood with the simpler times of his youth, when moral decisions were easily made: “I wish, I wish, I wish in vain/ That we could sit simply in that room again./ Ten thousand dollars at the drop of a hat, / I’d give it all gladly if our lives could be like that”. Dylan has named three songs after himself: “Bob Dylan’s Dream”, “Bob Dylan’s Blues”, and “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream”. Within actual song texts, the self-references are even fewer: there is the line “You may call me Bobby, you may call me Zimmy”

in “Gotta Serve Somebody” from 1978. On another level, Rollason (45) aptly remarks that one thing among many Dylan and E. A. Poe both share in is the *oneiric*, or the fascination of dreams: indeed, so many of Dylan’s songs actually unfold as dream narratives.

This second album, with its lyrics of political as well as cultural radicalism, helped establish Dylan as a leading voice of the counterculture. It presents a series of intensely personal meditations on important questions. *Freewheelin’* was the first album where Dylan began to convert life experience into song. However, as Boucher writes, Dylan was “not merely a blues and protest singer, but also an entertainer who relied on humour as part of his performance. [...] He communicated with the audience, was self-deprecating and often conveyed messages through the medium of the talking blues song [...]. His stage persona was that of the sympathizer with the working man, the articulator of social injustices” (78). Thus irony and humour have always been a large part of Dylan’s persona, like in these lines from “I Shall Be Free”: “Well, my telephone rang it wouldn’t stop/ It was President Kennedy calling me up/ He said: ‘My friend Bob, what do we need to make the country grow?’/ I said: ‘My friend John, Brigitte Bardot/ Anita Ekberg/ Sophia Loren/ Country will grow’”. Dylan has in fact developed an uncanny talent for surreal comedy, as in this early sample from 1963: “Well, I got a woman sleeps on a cot/ She yells and hollers and squeals a lot/ Licks my face and tickles my ear,/ Bends me over and buys me beer”.

Released in February 1964, *The Times They Are A-Changin’*, the first to feature all original material, was even more concertedly political than the previous album. This third creation is also notable for Dylan’s revisiting his native Hibbing, Minnesota in a song called “North Country Blues”: with the pits closed down, the children must leave because ‘there ain’t nothing here now to hold them’. Thus the North Country of *The Times...* is very different from the idyllic North Country of the previous album (“Girl from the North Country”). In fact, employing his customary diversionary tactics, to this day, Dylan has revealed very little about his early life: “I don’t even remember being a child” – he once said – “I think it was someone else who was a child” (quoted in Kane, 18). As for the North Country, Dylan has frequently expressed his attachment to the northern regions of his origins – in a song called “California” (from *Bringing It All Back Home*) he admits to missing the climate of the north where, if nothing else, four seasons prevail.

The title song, *The Times They Are A-Changin’*, with its exuding confidence and inevitability of tide change evident in the water metaphor, became the anthem of a generation, effectively articulating for the first time a social change than began to occur in the 1950s which later became known as the generation gap (Boucher, 171). Several songs alluded to his fractured relationship with Suze Rotolo. In assessing Dylan’s first three albums,

Crampton, Rees & Marsh (10) write that these “effortlessly displayed the qualities which would distinguish much of his career as a songwriter of iconic quality: unparalleled skill as a wordsmith of endless fertility and imagination; cunning often cynical humour; rich, visionary themes; anti-establishment verve; and beautiful, passionate, melancholic insights on the subject of love”.

Dylan’s third album was rapidly followed in August 1964 by a fourth, the intensely poetic *Another Side of Bob Dylan*. The same year Dylan is quoted as saying “I don’t want to write *for* people anymore [...] I want to write from inside me” (quoted in Porter, 206). By now, Dylan’s songwriting had shifted “from the folk protest and the likes of “Blowin’ in the Wind” toward the more complicated and, crucially, personal allegories” (Ramaecker, 81), in what could be termed Dylan’s turn to introspection. *Another Side...* is much more personal and emotional than his previous albums: relevant in this respect is “My Back Pages”, interpreted as its author’s farewell to folk protest. Here, Dylan is critical of his own self-assuredness as “each verse ends with the revelation that with relinquishing the burden of self-righteous indignation came the shedding of years” (Boucher, 63-64): “I was so much older then/ I’m younger than that now”. The hilarious “Motorpsycho Nitemare” is related to the songwriter’s passion for his motorbike. Coyle and Cohen (148) suggest that “Dylan’s self-personifying impulse can be said to have been there from the beginning”, and the title of his fourth album is proof to that. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the process has continued to the present day. With *Another Side...*, Dylan’s language began to become increasingly complex, and his next three albums integrated literary allusions with poetic language in a stream-of-consciousness style; some of the songs tend toward the impressionistic, revealing Symbolist influences.

From the start of his career, Dylan was rarely short of female admirers. Sounes (2002) suggests that he “enjoyed the charity of kindhearted women”. Thus *Another Side...* featured “All I Really Want to Do” and “It Ain’t Me Babe”, which questioned the assumptions of love and the male-female relationship, as well as one of Dylan’s most autobiographical songs, the vitriolic “Ballad in Plain D”, brimming with regret and desperation following the breakdown of his relationship with Suze Rotolo (“Of the two sisters, I loved the young”). In fact, several other songs on the album, written in the course of a week, reflect the intense personal turmoil that the breakup inflicted on him. Suze Rotolo, the daughter of a cultured left-wing family and a central figure in Dylan’s life at an important period of his career, was an inspiration for several other early songs, including “Boots of Spanish Leather”, “One Too Many Mornings”, “I Don’t Believe You”, “Tomorrow Is A Long Time” and “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right”, with its telling lines “I once loved a woman, a child I’m told/ I gave her my heart but she wanted my soul”. Rotolo left for Italy, largely at her mother’s bidding (who used to refer to Dylan as “that twerp”), and then extended her stay, leaving Dylan heartbroken. Suze is never

referred to by name; rather, she's the 'gal', 'honey babe', or 'the one'; later, she became "the fortuneteller of [his] soul". Each of the songs dedicated to her, as Bulson (2009: 128) writes, "provides some mature reflection on the fragility of love". In her 2008 memoir of Greenwich Village in the sixties, Rotolo remembers Dylan at the time as "a beacon and a black hole", but also "an elephant in the room of [her] life": "he had this intensity about him, and you got sucked in".

David Boucher remarks that the music Dylan recorded between 1965 and 1968 is "to a large extent a journey of self-exploration" (65; see also González 2005). This new phase is best represented on the following albums, *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965), *Highway 61 Revisited*, and *Blonde on Blonde* (1966). In fact, the material on these albums alternates between poetic and personal, as many songs express the futility of the American dream illusions, picturing the reality beneath the appearances. The influence of Rimbaud is often quoted to refer to this period, but Shelton (2003) mentions the tradition of the grotesque with its two sides, the terrible and the ludicrous which, he argues, is an essential component of Dylan's vision of the world. Indeed, the albums of this period clearly belong in an atmosphere of Babylonian Carnival. Starr and Waterman (71) consider the year 1965 to have been pivotal in Dylan's career, as "he moved from being the most distinctive songwriter among American urban folk artists to being an epochal influence on the entirety of American popular culture".

Highway 61 Revisited is full of references to the corroding effects of fame, a fact which reveals that Dylan was somewhat leery about his success (Varesi, 58). In "Ballad of a Thin Man", the line "What does this mean?" most certainly refers to interviews where reporters persistently asked Dylan what his songs were about. Boucher (182) states that Dylan was actually describing himself in "She Belongs to Me": "She's got everything she needs/ She's an artist, she don't look back/ She can take the dark out of the nighttime/ And paint the daytime black". Other critics, however, take this song to have been inspired by Joan Baez, who was besotted with Dylan in 1963-65; some even suspect he used her to boost his career. Baez is believed to have been the inspiration behind two other powerful songs of the period – "Visions of Johanna" and "Queen Jane Approximately". (For an alternative reading of Johanna as Joan of Arc (Jehanne), see Karwowski, 2001).

Moreover, the title track, "Highway 61 Revisited" introduces the Christ imagery, which Dylan will continue to use as part of his autobiographical language; here, like Isaac, and like Jesus, he sees himself offered for sacrifice. Highway 61 runs through Duluth, Minnesota, where Dylan was born. "The language of these songs sometimes achieves an intoxicated richness" – Marqusee writes – "the language is highly idiosyncratic, but entirely up-to date. The songs are sprinkled with arresting images, epithets, verbal paradoxes" (140). By likening himself to Jesus, Dylan accomplishes several things simultaneously,

besides invoking a large narrative in just a few words; for instance, he makes himself appear innocent. Specifically, “Dylan's use of this imagery provides him with a paradigm that helps communicate/illustrate his role as an artist” (Gilmour, 5).

Blonde on Blonde, considered “the first work of art of rock music which was to influence a whole generation of musicians, as exemplified by the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper*” (Scaruffi, 1999), best represents the new mode of expression Dylan had devised, combining his primary poetic influences – Rimbaud and Verlaine, the folk vernacular of Guthrie and the immediacy of the Beat writers, with a driving rock beat. Though mostly made up of love songs (Dylan had married Sara Lownd(e)s in November 1965), *Blonde on Blonde*, with its innovations, the blues of desolation and the visionary ballad, evoked “a dark urban netherworld of the New York demimonde [...] into which Dylan had recently been sucked” (Gill, 102-103), thus ushering in the emerging counterculture. Scaruffi (1999) writes that the intense bitterness of Dylan’s parables relates to “a perpetual, indefatigable and maniacal autobiography”.

These were the three-dimensional songs Dylan had said he was now aiming for: they contain more symbolism and move between different verse levels in comparison with the early albums. By this time Dylan had come to see his songs as experiences, and comprehending the meaning of the words was not necessary to understanding the experience (Boucher, 185). The song that best epitomizes this phase of Dylan’s career is probably “Desolation Row” with its circus of grotesques, the final song off “Highway 61 Revisited”. By 1969 these songs had changed the way the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and others made music (Harris, 119).

It has also been claimed that between 1963 and 1966 Dylan’s music was influenced by opium and LSD, as critics point to one line from “Rainy Day Women # 12 & 35”: “everybody must get stoned”, and to the song “Mr. Tambourine Man”, which includes overt drug references and visionary imagery, such as its “twisted reach of crazy sorrow” (see Marshall for an reading of this song as highly introspective but on the nature of songwriting). Dylan described LSD as “a medicine which makes you aware of the universe [...]; you realize how foolish objects are” (quoted in Gill, 86). Drugs, he said, were not integral to his writing, but simply helped bend the mind a little. Jesse Jarnow (195) writes that “under the influence of marijuana, Dylan’s phrases and rhymes swelled, giving the lyrics a magical feel”.

For many critics, Dylan's mid-'60s trilogy of albums - “Bringing It All Back Home”, “Highway 61 Revisited” and “Blonde on Blonde” - represents one of the great cultural achievements of the 20th century. Mike Marqusee (139) writes: “Between late 1964 and the summer of 1966, Dylan created a body of work that remains unique. Drawing on folk, blues, country, R&B, rock'n'roll, gospel, British beat, symbolist, modernist and Beat poetry, surrealism and Dada, advertising jargon and social commentary, Fellini and *Mad* magazine, he forged

a coherent and original artistic voice and vision. The beauty of these albums retains the power to shock and console". The songs of the mid-sixties often express the horror of the human condition, of being stuck inside of desolation row. As William King (2009) writes, "these songs are complemented by another series which express the frustration of seeking help which cannot be reached, of striving endlessly and futilely to escape this condition, songs which implore help from some mythic or mystical figure". And in John Porter's words: "Here a painful, violent rage overflows through a weird swirl of imagined characters and situations, unresolved mysteries, the sense of confusion and alienation hurled in bitter accusations of which Dylan himself is the target as much as the disoriented victims of his songs" (207).

In 1967, "holed up in Woodstock, on *John Wesley Harding* Dylan journeyed into the wilderness, invented country rock and revealed some home truths": the new LP contained a series of brief, cryptic parables which confronted fear, sin, and false conceptions of freedom, for example "All Along the Watchtower" and "I Dreamed I Saw Saint Augustine". Later the songwriter himself referred to it as "the first biblical rock album" (quoted in Gill, 108). More revealing is the fact that it seems to contain various musings upon the singer's own situation, "transmuted through a style that married American myth to religious allegory" (Gill, 108).

There are, for example, a couple of see-through allegories about Dylan's relationship with Albert Grossman, his first real manager: "Dear Landlord" (Dylan had previously lodged at Grossman's places in Woodstock and Gramercy Park) criticizes the manager's attempt to engage the artist's creativity into a materialist agenda. "The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest" places the two men in a parable comparable to the Devil's tempting of Jesus, Dylan reflecting on how close to disaster he was brought by the blandishments of fame and fortune (Gill, 109). Gill believes *John Wesley Harding* to be the most personally revealing of all Dylan's albums. "For a generation raised in a time of conformity, Mr. Dylan validated the imagination and independence of thought; his work was central to the creativity of the 1960s in the United States, and has affected others elsewhere" (Ball, 18).

The (Chaotic) 1970s

The 1970s, as Street (quoted in Lipsitz, 233) explains, "tended to substitute glitter for rhetoric, sequins for beads, decadence for politics, and open plagiarism for originality". Dylan's first album of the decade was *New Morning* (1970), which contains some more of the most nakedly autobiographical lyrics in Dylan's canon, for instance the song "Day of the Locusts", with reference to the graduation ceremony at which he received an honorary doctorate from Princeton: "There was little to say, there was no conversation / As I stepped to

the stage to pick up my degree.” And then it happens: “Oh, the locusts sang off in the distance, / Yeah, the locusts sang and they were singing for me.” The apocalyptic possibilities inherent in a rite of passage like graduation are not lost on Dylan: “Darkness was everywhere, it smelled like a tomb.” The song concludes with his escape: “Sure was glad to get out of there alive”. “The graduation experience as Armageddon. Who else would, or could, sing that? ”, Janssen and Whitelock (106) aptly ask themselves.

Following his most creative period, the 1960s, the early 1970s found Dylan in “something of a slump” (Bickford, 27). At the end of April 1974, however, he started taking a course given by art teacher Norman Raeben, who was to have a radical effect on the songwriter’s own art: Dylan said “he put my mind and my hand and my eye together in a way that allowed me to do consciously what I unconsciously felt” (quoted in Gill, 147). Raeburn had brought Dylan to a novel understanding of time, enabling him to view narrative less in strictly linear terms, but to bring together past, present, and future in a more powerful focus.

The result was the celebrated album *Blood on the Tracks* (1975), the first album, Dylan claimed, in which he was able consciously to take a focus and intensify it like a magnifying glass in the sun (Boucher, 71). Raeben’s influence was clearly visible in the blurring of first and third person, distance and intimacy, and past and present. The album’s producer said “Blood on the Tracks” was an outpouring of Dylan’s life, his most emotionally naked and vulnerable music, which was “almost cathartic for him in the studio” (Gill, 146). Dylan himself referred to these songs as “private songs”, indeed his most intimate and direct tunes (Heylin, 386-401; Gray, 59-61). Such emotional outpouring came at a very troubled time for him, and so the album is held to be Dylan’s most confessional, as exemplified by the painfully direct and personal “Idiot Wind”, which deals with spite, confusion, self-loathing and the disillusion of love. “It was an album of genius—of powerful emotional complexity, unerring fresh insight and the kind of maturity that manifests itself not remotely as grown-up tiredness but as pure, strong intelligence” (Gray, 60); in Furtak’s words (18) the dominant feeling is absurdity, and this is clearly spelled out in “Tangled Up in Blue”: “She was married when we first met/ Soon to be divorced/ I helped her out of a jam, I guess/ But I used a little too much force/ We drove the car as far as we could/ Abandoned it out West/ Split up on a dark sad night/ Both agreeing it was best”. Here Dylan performs a mythical reinterpretation of his life, as the narrative littered with biblical allusions sweeps from his native Minnesota, through the coffee house days in New York, down to New Orleans and then out west, haunted by fateful visions of his female soulmate.

Sacrificial imagery is present again, for instance in the beautiful “Shelter from the Storm”, in which a female character offers refuge to the songwriter, a

kindness extended in all of the ten verses. The author's innocence is professed repeatedly, as in "I bargained for salvation an' they gave a lethal dose" or "I offered up my innocence and got repaid with scorn".

Each song, from the slow blues "Meet Me In The Morning" to the lengthy "Idiot Wind", offers an insight into Dylan's relationship with Sara, and the artist's talent is to stretch the personal until it appears universal and use the universal to elucidate the intensely personal, for instance "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go"'s self-explanatory and self-referential lines: "Situations have ended sad/ Relationships have all been bad/ Mine've been like Verlaine's and Rimbaud". "You're A Big Girl Now" and "If You See Her, Say Hello" are both heart-broken farewells to his wife Sara. For comparison, "Wedding Song" (*Planet Waves* 1974), with its references to "babies one, two, three" was an example of a romantic tribute to his wife - "You breathed on me and made my life a richer one to live/ When I was deep in poverty you taught me how to give", Dylan writes - in stark contrast to another song from the same album, the bitter "Dirge". Dylan's now estranged wife Sara, mythologised in song, was the only woman that Dylan wrote about directly," his ultimate muse and mystic Madonna-like woman" (O'Brien, 72). As outlined in "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" (Lowlands = Lownds), Dylan's intensely personal and moving hymn to beauty - "eyes like smoke", "voice like chimes", "flesh like silk", "face like glass", she was a great source of inspiration in any number of songs, including "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight", "To Be Alone With You" and "Lay Lady Lay". (For an alternative reading of the "Sad-Eyed Lady..." as the Catholic Church, see Karwowski 2001).

Yeats suggests that to create art, writers split and debate themselves: "Of the quarrel with others, we make rhetoric; with ourselves, poetry." As Robert Bell, who makes a note of Dylan's frequently self-reflexive lyrics, suggests (109), Dylan began his career with some quarrelsome rhetoric, forceful but single-minded utterances, and "his development indicates a more seriously comic and self-ironic interrogation": "Dylan's ability to make poetry out of the quarrel with himself, to fashion lyric debates from ballads and romantic monologues, is nowhere more striking than on his 1974 album *Blood On The Tracks*". A major source of its power is many-mindedness, its blend of voices, sometimes juxtaposing inflections incongruously, to suggest that single, fixed attitudes are inadequate, that any formulation of feeling competes with strikingly different attitudes" (116).

Further autobiographical elements can be traced on Dylan's previous album, *Planet Waves* (1974), which contains a striking contrast between some of Dylan's most sincere love songs and his most stinging "hate" ones. Michael Gray (538) writes: "The whole album devotes itself to revisiting, as the adult with the mid-'60s surreal achievement behind him, the Minnesota landscapes and feelings from which he had emerged in the first place— and recalls these

Minnesota years largely for the first time. [...] The result is nostalgia-soaked but genuinely beautiful.” “Hazel” deals with a girlfriend he had had long before he first set out for New York City; and in “Something There Is About You” he sings: “Thought I’d shaken the wonder / And the phantoms of my youth / Rainy days on the Great Lakes / Walkin’ the hills of old Duluth . . . /Somethin’ there is about you / That brings back a long-forgotten truth . . .”. But *Planet Waves*, which Anderson (3) compares with Plato’s *Symposium*, also further explores the meaning of love; in fact, Anderson states that here Dylan’s love “is not directed at any particular persons but at immortality through the works he creates [...] he’s a poet driven by eros to create beauty and truth” (13).

In 1966 Dylan had sustained serious injuries in a motorcycle accident, following which he recuperated at his Woodstock, New York home. The convalescence ended in the summer of 1967, when he and The Band initiated a five-month jam session, most of which was much later released as the critically acclaimed *Basement Tapes* (1975), Dylan’s “discovery of roots and memory” (Greil Marcus, quoted in Doggett, 154), which in fact were never intended to be released. The album also signalled Dylan’s distance from the prevailing mood of youth culture. Nothing on the album chimed in with the preoccupations of the age – the Vietnam War, LSD experimentation or sexual liberation. Instead, there was search for personal redemption in “I Shall Be Released”, a sense of disillusionment and abandonment in “Tears of Rage”, persistent existential angst in “Too Much of Nothing”, and failure as a form of success in “Love Minus Zero/ No Limits”. Then there’s the celebrated “I’m Not There”, “an ultimate confession of failure: the song of a man who should have been “there,” but who has failed this elementary duty of presence, witness, support, accompaniment” (Scobie 2007: 7). Michael Gray writes that the pivotal theme of all Dylan’s major work of the 1970s is his journey from Sara to Jesus (82).

Many of the songs on the January 1976 album *Desire* are once again influenced by the troubles and felicities of Dylan’s marriage: in particular “Sara”, a rose-tinted ballad wishfully-if-belatedly-recalling his love for his wife (“Scorpio Sphynx in a calico dress”), easily the most personal song Dylan ever wrote. In “Isis”, an allegory about his own marriage, he wrote: “I could not hold on to her”. Sara and Bob Dylan divorced in June 1977, and Dylan later confessed: “I wasn’t a very good husband, but I believe in marriage. I first got really married and then got really divorced” (quoted in O’Brien, 72). However, at the time of the divorce he responded by indulging freely in wine, women, fun, and rancorous bitterness.

The truly central album of the decade is *Street Legal* (1978). It brings together “Dylan the consistent moralist, Dylan the writer who draws heavily on the Bible, Dylan caught in the struggle between the flesh and the spirit, Dylan ending his key relationship, Dylan the betrayed victim both of what he sees as love in vain and of all of us” (Gray, 82). On this album, “Changing of the

Guards” opens with Dylan reflecting on his own career: the opening line “sixteen years” is a statement of Dylan’s career span and the weariness felt, as he sees himself being dissected by everyone who wants a piece of him, plus a glancing reflection back on the New York days.

The 1980s

The following decade was difficult for Dylan, even by his own account. In 1979, only a few years after speculation that he had veered into a variety of Zionism, he confused fans by becoming a born-again Christian. Getting born again prompted Dylan’s most intensive period of writing since the 1960s and resulted in one great gift to music, *Slow Train Coming* (August 1979), and three other albums of gradually diminishing religiosity: *Saved* (1980), which appears to deal more with its author’s personal redemption, the more spiritual *Shot of Love* (1981), and *Infidels* (1983). There has been endless speculation on Dylan’s brush with Christianity; nevertheless some see in this turn “no blind devotion, no blatant conversion, but simply the company of another Jewish man in his thirties who lived 2,000 years ago” (Krief, 99).

Slow Train Coming is notable also because it marks a return to the condemnation of hedonism, materialism and individualism that partially characterized the albums of 1965-67, as well as hypocrisy, corruption and failing to live by one’s conscience. Dylan condemns false ideologies, including Marxism and capitalism, multinational corporations and foreign interests for controlling and manipulating the American economy through oil ownership (Boucher, 173). Boucher further comments that *Slow Train Coming* being so religious should not have come as a surprise, as Dylan’s early albums, from the first eponymous one, were obsessed with death and God (216). Jann Wenner (1986) states that *Slow Train Coming* is “pure, true Dylan, probably the purest and truest Dylan ever. The religious symbolism is a logical progression of Dylan’s Manichaeic vision of life and his train-filled struggle with good and evil”.

The 1980s are nevertheless generally regarded as Dylan’s musical worst decade: “he was the enduring symbol of all things mythical, poetic and sublime, plunged into an era of conspicuous consumption”, writes Sheppard (198), who further playfully comments: “If you want to know if Bob Dylan is having a good decade, examine his wardrobe” (196). *Oh Mercy* (1989) is the best album of the decade, a timeless-sounding record moving again in a profoundly personal atmosphere, between the soft “Where Teardrops Fall”, “What Good Am I?” and “Shooting Star”, with their self-examining lyrics, which are among the most candid in the author’s oeuvre. The darkest song of the album, “Most of the Time”, makes it sound as if all the misery and suffering can be traced back to frustrated love: “Most of the time/ I’m strong enough not to hate/ I don’t build

up illusion 'til it makes me sick/ I ain't afraid of confusion, no matter how thick/
I can smile in the face of mankind/ I don't even remember what her lips felt like
on mine/ Most of the time".

The 1990s

As Dylan himself indicates in his memoir *Chronicles*, which is about roots and rootlessness, and has been described as “a dissident history of the sixties” (Webb, 8), after years in the wilderness (“My own songs had become strangers to me”), he experienced several epiphanies during 1987 that would set him on the path to his second creative golden age – something that continues to this day. Recorded during January 1997, after serious medical treatment for pericarditis, his new album *Time Out of Mind* reflected his near-death experience and conveyed beautifully the maudlin, the resignation, and the fear of growing older and facing up to death, thus returning full circle to the fascination with death of his first album, which faked the world weariness of an aging man worn out. The 1990s and beyond have proved to be mainly times of self-interrogation. In 1990, Dylan pointed out that “people can learn everything about me through my songs, if they know where to look” (quoted in James, 180).

Time Out of Mind is a blues album, engaged and personal, on which Dylan, now love-sick, finally sounds like the old bluesman he wanted to be when he was 20; it contains two of the most extraordinary songs Dylan has ever written: “Not Dark Yet” – in which the aging songwriter, who introduces himself as steeled and scarred, tries to come to terms with the emptiness of love and the limits of his own humanity: “Shadows are falling and I've been here all day/ It's too hot to sleep and time is running away/ Feel like my soul has turned into steel/ I've still got the scars that the sun didn't heal/ There's not even room enough to be anywhere/ It's not dark yet, but it's getting there”. He is also worried about “Tryin' to get to heaven before they close the door”, and then “I've been down on the bottom of a world full of lies/ I ain't looking for nothing in anyone's lies/ Sometimes my burden is more than I can bear/ It's not dark yet, but it's getting there”. In “Highlands” Dylan seductively entices his audience to step into his own psyche and perceive the world through his eyes. “Highlands” “found Dylan walking disconnectedly through his life, staring with envy at others, who enjoyed the liberty of being anonymous” and having “an intrusive, vaguely flirtatious conversation with a fame-smitten waitress” (Kent, 237). “The album treats life like a journey which climaxes in the transition from this world into the city of God. The writer is very aware that this journey has been treated before and relies heavily on the language of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*” (Hirst, 2003). Time creates new distances: thus the album title.

It was a good time to be Bob Dylan again, still clued to the contemporary zeitgeist, as his new song “Things Have Changed” revealed: “I'm standin' in the

gallows with my head in a noose/ Any time I'm expecting all hell to break loose/
People are crazy, times are strange/ I'm locked in tight, I'm out of range/ I used
to care, but things have changed". This song contains, in the confessional spirit
of his 1990s work, the telling line "I've been trying to get as far away from
myself as I can". "Things Have Changed" won him an Oscar, as it was part of
the soundtrack to the film *Wonder Boys*, about mid-life crisis.

The 2000s

In 2001 came another masterpiece, more playful and witty in spirit than
Time Out of Mind, with more potent songs – *Love and Theft*, which *Billboard*
deemed "a sublime rumination on fleeting romance and enduring memory, the
poetry of place names and the potency of song". Isolation is yet again a central
premise. Two lines in the melancholy song "Mississippi" seem to summarize the
whole album: "Say anything you want/ I have heard it all" and "Well my ship's
been split to splinters and it's sinking fast, /I'm drownin' in the poison, got no
future got no past. / But my heart is not weary, it's light and it's free, / I got
nothin' but affection for all those who sailed with me".

"Lonesome Day Blues" returns to lost relationships, and includes the
straightforward line "I wish my mother was still alive" (Dylan's mother had died
in 2000). Furtak writes that here "Dylan looks directly at a world lacking any
clear purpose and makes an appeal that is filled with absurd faith in what is still
possible" (28). The range of musical styles and variation in moods make this
album a more complex and intricate collection than the somber *Time Out of
Mind*. There are wide cultural influences in the songs, from *Alice in Wonderland*
to *A Street Car Named Desire* in "Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum". There is
also what looks like an exuberant joy that Dylan finds in pouring out words and
puns on this album, where the songs are long and the lines filled to bursting
point. The album ends with "Love" acting like a sword which divides this world
between good and bad but also with an invitation for all to join this struggle of
salvation before it is too late "You got a way of tearing a world apart, Love, see
what you done/ Just as sure as we're living, just as sure as you're born/ Look up,
look up - seek your Maker - 'fore Gabriel blows his horn."

"Songs, to me, were more important than just light entertainment," Dylan
(34-35) wrote. "They were my preceptor and guide into some altered
consciousness of reality, some different republic, some liberated republic. . . .
Whatever the case, it wasn't that I was anti-popular culture or anything and I had
no ambitions to stir things up. I just thought of mainstream culture as lame as
hell and a big trick."

The second album which marked Dylan's fifth creative decade was aptly
titled *Modern Times* (2006), taking its clue from the Charlie Chaplin movie.
["Modern times" are defined as "the New Dark Ages" in the liner notes to his

1993 album of traditional songs, *World Gone Wrong*]. Filled with self-depreciative asides, *Modern Times* marked its author's unwillingness to stop living and feeling, as he writes of regret, faith, romance, chaos, morality and mortality: "my mind tied up in knots, I keep recycling the same old thoughts". There is also religious imagery, of apocalypse in particular, suffusing the songs. Many songs express a search for meaning of some kind or another, for some sort of redemption, along with a haunting skepticism and a sense of estrangement from the modern world, as well as yearning for love, acceptance, and salvation. In "Nettie Moore" he deems that "Everything I've known to be right has been proven wrong".

In "Ain't Talkin'" Dylan assesses the state of the world and of himself and finds both lacking. He describes his travels through the world ("just walkin'") and observes "this weary world of woe/ Heart burnin', just yearnin'/ No one would ever know"; he also talks of his walks "in the mystic garden" of "wounded flowers dangling from the vine", but "There's no one here/ the gardener is gone/ In the last outback at the world's end"; also, "Well, it's bright in the heavens and the wheels are flyin' Fame and honor never seem to fade The fire gone out but the light is never dyin' Who says I can't get heavenly aid?"; or again in "Beyond the Horizon": "It's dark and it's dreary I've been pleading in vain I'm wounded, I'm weary My repentance is plain". As ever, Dylan is circling, defining what he is by what he isn't, by what he doesn't want, doesn't like, doesn't need, locating meaning by a process of elimination.

Finally, in 2009, in his late 60s, Dylan continues to surprise with his latest creation, *Together Through Life*, born out of casual circumstances, another album with a timeless quality and lyrics which seem more vulnerable and melancholy than ever. Heim (2009) comments that "gone, for the most part, is the fever-dream wordplay that the master has been slowly phasing out since he began his run of classics with 1997's *Time Out of Mind*: he now sounds more humane than ever": "I lost the way and will/ Can't tell you where they went' ("Life Is Hard"); and then, "Motherless, fatherless, and almost friendless too". "This Dream of You", an intuitive look back and forward, is an unguarded, vulnerable song with a "fragile heart" (Thompson 2009): "There's a moment when all old things become new again/ But that moment might have come and gone/ All I have and all I know is this dream of you/ which keeps me living on". Then, "I'll run this race until my earthly death/ I'll defend this place with my dying breath". Heim (2009) further describes "the mix of inscrutability, flashed teeth, existential angst and deep sorrow, deadpan humour and dead-on breakdowns", which "make it a perfectly satisfactory coda to a remarkable half-century of music making".

Dylan's archetypal poetic identities – prophet, trickster, man of sorrow, everyman - as Lebold argues, can be approached as texts. Lebold writes that "the songs thus eventually come to fictionalize his biography in a theater of identities

that brings into play a participatory game: the audience is made to interrogate Dylan's postures and impostures and to construct apocryphal versions of his life/lives, thus further enriching in fiction the many literary pleasures derived from the songs" (57-58). An example in point is "Man in the Long Black Coat", the centerpiece of *Oh Mercy* (1989), in which Dylan introduces three characters that are as many potential versions of himself: via "a tight network of allusions" - the abandoned husband, the man in the long black coat and the fanatic preacher are stylized versions of the aging Dylan of post-seventies fame, the mid-sixties amoral Dylan of *Don't Look Back*, and the preacher of the Christian period (Lebold, 67). Lebold concludes that Dylan can be thus inscribed in the contemporary reflection on identity as a *construct*. At this point, we might as well quote a short piece from Dylan's book *Tarantula*, ("a series of thoughts, as they came to me"), written in 1966 and published in 1971:

here lies bob dylan
demolished by Vienna politeness—
which will now claim to have invented him
boy Dylan—killed by a discarded Oedipus
who turned
around
to investigate a ghost
& discovered that
the ghost too
was more than one person (*Tarantula*, 120)

Such indeterminacy of Dylan's character is aptly discussed by Scobie (11): "The ghost—along with other key images: double, shadow, mirror, brother, alias—stands for *identity at one remove*, which is how Dylan always sees himself". "Bob Dylan is the ultimate other; he has made a career out of defining himself *differently*. By so doing, he has been able to touch on all the major social and political ideas of his time, without ever quite touching down in any dogmatically defined position (though he's some close)" (Scobie, 13).

Having completed this brief auto-referential search through Dylan's lyrical creations, a logical conclusion seems to be in order: namely that Dylan the 'auteur', who "both shapes and is shaped by the best and worst of America" (Anderson 2005) and who is constantly reinventing his lyrical self, appears no easier to understand. Nevertheless, it is easy to be seduced by Bob Dylan's lyrics, and if the meaning of a word is its use, as Wittgenstein expressed it, the same is true to a high degree about Dylan himself, both as a musician and a poet. "In his musical career, he has proven time and again that he owns the most bottomless bag of tricks in the business", Malcolm Jones Jr. writes in *Newsweek* (1995). In the words of fellow musician Tom Waits, "Dylan is a planet to be explored". I believe few Dylanarians would disagree.

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