Dylan at Play

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Edited by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

So many of the things we like to be were called to action by the idea of *Dylan at Play*. We were—we remain—Bob Dylan listeners, readers, writers, students, and—no shame in this—fans. Since you've got the book in your hands right now, we figure you're one of us, and invite you to join in our acts of exploration and appreciation. It could be the nature of a book like this one to establish a set of boundaries—literary critical, historical, philosophical, whatever—within which a version of Dylan is to be located. *Dylan at Play* has a different plan.

We'll go ahead and take a look at familiar boundary lines—the division between Dylan of the sixties and anytime since, the difference between singer-songwriter and poet (and critic and fan), the apparent opposition of the sacred and the profane—and maybe even a few brand new ones, but take our charge as readers from the way Dylan redraws boundaries and resists classification. We hope your experience of this book will be freewheeling—a trip. Which is why we want to share some recollections of a friend of ours, about a little jaunt he and his son took:

> The drive was short by Montana standards—less than 200 miles east from Bozeman to Billings—and we were up for it. Bob doesn't come to Montana all that often.
>
> My son, Ian, age 15, had seen him twice before, and this was our thing. Fly fishing and Dylan, and this father-son adventure offered a little of both. We planned to crash in a roadside motel just blocks from Dehler Park, home of the Billings Mustangs minor league baseball club, then up for some greasy eggs and bacon, and over the Beartooths in search of cutthroats. Four days. Just the two of us. It was our annual pilgrimage, and this year Bob was the gravy
>
> We loaded the Subaru with various mixes—recent Bob, spooky Bob, bluesy Bob, and the most recently added—Bob on tour volumes 1 and 2, which featured selections from his recent shows at smaller western venues like Austin, Lincoln and Sturgis, South Dakota.
>
> The cottonwoods along the Yellowstone glowed in the golden August prairie heat. Blue-black clouds collected in the west. We watched the approaching storm in the rearview mirrors and compiled top-five hoped-for lists. I've forgotten mine. Ian's went something like this: "Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)," "Man in the Long Black Coat," "Workingman's Blues #2," "Ain't Talkin'," and "Girl from the North Country."

> John Cougar Mellencamp was joining Dylan for the show. Ian had never heard of him, maybe because I'd never been much of a fan. "Jack and Diane" had been huge my senior year in high school. A buddy of mine quoted the song during his graduation speech. But aside from that—and some old acoustic Mellencamp covers of "Do Re Mi" and "Casey Jones" in my iTunes library—I had no real connection with the man.
>
> We arrived in Billings a couple of hours before the show, the low rumblings of thunder in the distance. We checked in, had dinner, and walked to Dehler Park, a mid-sized baseball stadium that held roughly 10,000. A sizable line already formed. Our chances of getting close seemed next to nil.
>
> Miraculously the line moved quickly. In less than 15 minutes we were in the stadium and, to our amazement, the grassy outfield before the giant stage was almost empty. Nearly everyone was seated in the covered grandstands, expecting the hard rain. We quickly walked across the infield and toward the stage, and camped out about fifty feet from Bob's microphone.

That's a great vantage point, when you can get it. Probably many of the writers and readers involved in this book have managed a near front-row experience a time or two, if not at a concert then before the stage of their own imaginations. So you'll find throughout *Dylan at Play* a confluence of the intellectual, the imagined, and the intimate. A discussion of *Chronicles'* Spanish translation treats us to a lively catalog of the American blues and folk idiom, while a plain-spoken history of Dylan fans in digital culture demands serious ethical thinking about web-based community and communication. Whenever the lyrics are being closely read, readers are asked to share in the thrill of interpretation. The model here is magnetism. The essays have been assembled in the hopes that they will provide readers with at least one excuse to play with Dylan the way he always plays with, and for, us:

> The clouds had cleared, and a warm, inky-indigo night wrapped around us by the time Dylan finally strolled on. In those blue striped sailor pants, topcoat, and broad-brimmed white Stetson, he looked like some Gilded Age southern colonel—a character from "Blind Willie McTell" come to life. I'm always struck by how small Bob looks up there. But we screamed like no one around us—immersed in the glorious mythology of the man, drunk on our moment together, and anticipating the surprises he held in store this time.
>
> The iTunes generation and Mellencamp fans hated Bob's voice. They seemed to crave frozen time. They wanted a *Blonde on Blonde* sounding Bob. They wanted the greatest hits, carefully orchestrated into the ultimate playlist, and barely recognized his opener, "Rainy Day Women #12 and #35."

> "God, he sounds like he's dead," one kid said. But they smoked their weed anyway. Several older songs they probably never recognized—"It's All Over Now, Baby Blue," "Stuck Inside of Mobile," "Highway 61." The arrangements were too foreign, Bob's voice to "raspy" they said. As always, he was too hard to decipher.
>
> Ian and I didn't care. We were hungry and curious and looking for something else. "Shelter from the Storm," was too much to ask for, and yet it was given, freely, in its own way—just offered up in that moment of time, that we, together, will never forget. Later on, the banjo announced "High Water (For Charley Patton)," a personal favorite of both of ours, an eerie "Forgetful Heart," and then Ian's current favorite, "Workingman's Blues #2," and the to us unexpected "Ballad of a Thin Man."
>
> From our seats it was possible to watch Bob as much as hear him. He moved out from behind the piano early on and glided like some vaudeville dancer with a cane, performing the old soft shoe. We drank in his subtle antics—the quirky hip thrusts, the smirks and raised eyebrows, the inside jokes, and the close, good-humored intensity with which the band and Dylan performed, as much for themselves as the 6,000 others. Their friendship was obvious. They improvised like a band of brothers rather than Dylan's subordinates. And yet they were ever respectful, ever watchful for the ringmaster's unexpected flourish or off-the-cuff phrasing.

The pleasure of playing with Dylan that B. Derek Strahn was able to observe that night in Billings, and recreate for us in this reminiscence, is what we have experienced in making this book, and want you to feel as you read it. "Things are about to get interesting right about now," Dylan sings in a lately-penned favorite. Well, he's been making that promise since you got to know him, fifty years ago, or yesterday. And when the promise is kept, as the essays you are about to read show, one of the most interesting things about Dylan turns out to be you:

> For an encore, Dylan announced that it was lead guitarist Charlie Sexton's birthday, then did what anyone else would to acknowledge and embarrass a friend on his special day. "Now I want everyone to sing real loud," Dylan joked, grinning like a mischievous child. Sexton stood sheepish and somewhat dumbfounded, like some awkward six year old. The band hammed up "Happy Birthday" accordingly, enjoying the moment.
>
> Some in the crowd sang—others seemed surprised at Dylan's spontaneity. When the sing-a-long was less than rousing, Dylan made the band play it again, half conducting the audience in his awkward, goofy manner to everyone's delight. We sang at the top of our lungs.
>
> When that strange, wonderful, moment had passed, and the band launched into the closing "All Along the Watchtower," many in the audience seemed stunned by Dylan's animated playfulness. They never

> got that that was the point of the whole evening—and of his whole career. Dylan takes pleasure in teasing his audience, just as he took pleasure in teasing his lead guitarist. At different times throughout the evening he acted like a stuffy diplomat, an intimidating sphinx, and that skinny, hollow-chested kid in your 7th grade gym class. But always acting. Challenging people's expectations, living in the moment, improvising like Charlie Parker or John Lee Hooker. Whether during a 1965 press conference or at 2010 concert, it may be Dylan's least appreciated and most enduring gift.

Gift is a well-chosen word, and the proper response is gratitude. So with thanks to all who have contributed and are about to contribute to *Dylan at Play*, it's time for us to clear the stage. You're on.

PART 1.

LANGUAGE:
DITLEV LARSEN AND NICK SMART

Introduction

"I cannot say the word eye anymore," Bob Dylan wrote in 1965, and the witty homophone makes the sentence itself into a trompe l'oeil. *Dont Look Back*, D.A. Pennebaker's 1967 documentary following Dylan's 1965 concert tour of England captures a *Manchester Guardian* reporter phoning in his review of Dylan's performance. He recites his comments over the phone: Bob Dylan's "tragedy is that the audience is preoccupied with song…[they] applaud the song and miss, perhaps, the sermon" (Pennebaker 42).

A curious novice to this topic may encounter entire courses of study and bookshelves devoted to examining Bob Dylan at play in the fields of the English language, and only dimly recall that it is music through which the words themselves play. Although the fossilized question, "Is Bob Dylan a poet?" is a simple category mistake, the opulence of his language excuses the millions of words thrown at it in attempts to explain and critique. Dylan is gnomic, conversational, lyrical, literal, elegant, primitive, psychedelic, clodhopping, demanding, obscure, new, old, borrowed, black, white, and blue. And, inexplicably, of a piece among all the registers and all the magpie-ing.

Our contributors here take us diachronically and synchronically through Dylan's language-play. Ditlev Larsen applies the science of linguistics to examine what we take for granted: Dylan's ability to communicate effectively to a range of audiences so varied as to be often enough incompatible. Nick Smart takes a new look at Dylan's infiltration of the canons of world literature by reading Keats and Dylan through each other's words.

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AND THE LANGUAGE THAT HE USED: EFFECTIVE LINGUISTIC TOOLS IN DYLAN'S LYRICS

DITLEV LARSEN

When analyzing Bob Dylan's lyrics, the focus is most often on interpretation in terms of what is expressed about themes such as love, justice, spirituality and social structures or commentaries. In other words, the exploration tends to center on *what* is being expressed rather than *how* it is expressed. The focus of this article is on the *how*. Of course, how ideas are articulated ultimately also affects what the listener or reader infers. Dylan's lyrics have been subject to countless analyses spanning his entire career of almost 50 years as a recording artist, and discussions occasionally flare up as to whether Dylan is a poet or "merely" a songwriter. It has been suggested that Dylan's lyrics need the music as well as his unique phrasing to be as powerful as they are and that the words would not stand up by themselves (see e.g. Christgau, 1967; Leith, 2007). However, making overly sharp distinctions between the two, the poet and the songwriter, really is a disservice as it diminishes them both. There is no question that there are features in Dylan's use of language that we may find "poetry-esque" and other features we would consider more "songwriter-esque," but by exploring such language use further, we will see that it is precisely that juxtaposition of particular linguistic features or choices that has made Dylan's lyrics so powerful and made him as influential a songwriter, or poet, as he is.

I argue here that it is in large part Dylan's linguistic skills, although they may not constitute conscious knowledge on his part, which has allowed him, over several decades, to command such a broad appeal to intellectuals, academics and the common man or woman alike. Through this appeal he has exerted extensive influence in shaping (popular) culture and music in America and across the world during half a century, and the power of his lyrics (or poetry) is widely acknowledged, which can be illustrated by the fact that his work is used, along with that of more

traditional poets and writers, in arts and cultural studies classrooms at all educational levels.

As an applied linguist by profession, I have long been fascinated by Dylan's habits of language and application of different linguistic tools. Although Dylan is not likely to have any formal training in specific areas of linguistic study, his skills in language usage and "communicative competence," to use a term from applied linguistics, are undeniable, and his marvelous wordplay drawing on features from linguistic subfields such as semantics, pragmatics, syntax and lexis is worthy of detailed scholarly investigation. Such exploration and analysis will help underscore the reasons for his cultural impact in general and legitimize his position as a lyricist whose work will likely continue to be discussed in academic settings centuries from now. I deliberately use the term lyricist here to emphasize that Dylan successfully has incorporated into his work the best of both worlds—the world of the poet and the world of the songwriter.

As a result of all this, we can suggest that what may have made Dylan arguably the most influential musician/songwriter of all time is his ability to always express views in a manner appealing to any audience. This article will investigate that idea further by looking at specific linguistic features showing how Dylan has been able to attain such broad appeal. The starting point will be examining the contrast between sophisticated and mundane forms of expression in Dylan's lyrics. Sophisticated expression is characterized by an elevated register—vocabulary, style, grammar/syntax—associated with a highly educated discourse or style of communication; the kind appealing and desirable to scholars and academics. Mundane expression is characterized by a simpler or more commonplace register associated with an everyday, ordinary communication context, which is usually the most appealing form of communication to "the man on the street." In sociolinguistics, the two contrasting terms have also been referred to as *elaborated code* and *restricted code* of which many people may only have access to the latter (Bernstein, 1972; Wardhaugh, 2006). In his lyrics Dylan may employ one register or code throughout an entire song, and sometimes he may mix the two within a song, but in either case he appears to be able to express equally complex ideas in colloquial or mundane language as in elevated or sophisticated language. Consequently, by employing both codes, he broadens his appeal to all strata of society and to two different parts of an individual's personality—the intellectual and the commoner within us all.

In connection with discussing Dylan's use of code and register a question regarding lexical and semantic choices also emerges. Specifically, Dylan has a great sense of optimally using linguistic agents or tools for

effect or to emphasize a particular passage in his lyrics. Two such agents that he appears to use very effectively can be referred to as *semantically reversed* or *semantically odd/incorrect* expressions and *uncommon collocations*.

Generally, semantics is defined as "the study of words, phrases and sentences" (Yule 100); however, in more strictly linguistic terms semantics is concerned with what is the conventional or *conceptual meaning* of words. This is sometimes also referred to as *literary meaning* as opposed to pragmatics, which is concerned more with context and communicative intentions of the speaker or writer. Although it is possible that Dylan through his play with semantic rules has a particular communicative purpose, it seems futile trying to determine what Dylan's pragmatic intentions were with certain expressions. It is possible, though, to investigate the potential effect his lyrics, words and phrases may have on a listener in purely semantic terms—not as much how one might interpret the words, but rather how and why they stand out.

Let us take a closer look at what it means for a sentence to be semantically reversed. Linguistically speaking it is very easy to construct a sentence that is perfectly correct grammatically and syntactically, but at the same time, if not semantically incorrect, then at least odd and likely also meaningless as Chomsky (1957) famously illustrated. Syntax is concerned with the order or position of nouns, verbs and other parts of speech in a sentence and does not take into account what in linguistics is referred to as "semantic features." For example the sentences *the hamburger ate the boy* and *the horse is reading the newspaper* contain no grammatical/syntactical problems, but the conceptual meaning of the nouns is the key to the "incorrectness" of these sentences. In the first sentence *boy* posses the semantic features *animate* and *human*, characteristics necessary for performing the action of the verb (to eat), whereas *hamburger* does not posses those features. It appears reversed. In the second sentence horse is indeed animate, but the feature of being human is also necessary in order to perform the verb's action (to read). Both sentences are, therefore, semantically incorrect although the former perhaps more so than the latter. The idea that a horse is reading seems to be conceivable in certain contexts such as a children's story where animals often take on human characteristics. For a writer, the balancing act here is to be able to navigate the difference between creating effects that draw attention and make you think rather than simply constructing silly nonsense expressions. This particular balance is one Dylan manages to perfection. Examples that come to mind in this connection are such as the following:

- The post office has been stolen and the mailbox is locked
- Feed that horse and saddle up that drum
- Like a mattress balances on a bottle of wine

The reversal of the logic in these expressions leads directly into the other linguistic tool Dylan has mastered very effectively. The three examples include a collocation effect. *Collocation* refers to the act of placing together linguistic elements in a noticeable way. Dylan uses conjoining of lexical items for effect extraordinarily well, which results in surprising and thought-provoking expressions that draw attention regardless of whether they appear to be part of an elevated or simpler register. The listener's (or reader's) innate semantic knowledge again plays an important part. When we listen, we know what the words mean, but we may not know or understand why one follows the other—the effect is created, we stop to think. Goldblatt and Necarsulmer (2006) have suggested that this points to something paradoxical about Dylan's language as it is, obviously, littered with expressions never before having been written or uttered, yet there is something common or real about those expressions. They point to such examples as the phrases "warehouse eyes" ("Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands"), "reindeer armies" ("It's All Over Now, Baby Blue"). It can be difficult to determine whether these expressions belong to an elevated, sophisticated register or to the ordinary register of everyday speech; of course it may partly be dependent on the larger linguistic context in which the expression is present.

This uncertainty of where the language belongs is intriguing as it is leads us back to the recurring discussion as to whether Dylan's song lyrics are poetry and if so what the quality of that poetry is. However, Gezari (2001) correctly pointed out that it is not clear whether this discussion has resulted in Dylan being ushered into the company of "serious poets," which in itself is a rather elitist term, or if he still belongs in the category of popular poetry, the kind heard in popular music. Gezari (2001) concludes that ultimately it "doesn't matter whether you love Dylan, a popular poet, because his language is like that of serious poetry or because it isn't" (2). Using the Ezra Pound v. T.S. Eliot stanza from "Desolation Row" as evidence, she further suggests that Dylan himself has pointed out that we should be concerned with how serious poetry appears to be isolated from ordinary people. Whether it was Dylan's intention to point that out or not, I cannot say. However, I do contend that what Dylan has contributed through his use of language and linguistic tools, although most likely not a conscious effort, is showing that there need not be such a dichotomy in types of poetry.

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Bob Dylan Songs

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SHE MIGHT BE IN TANGIER: BOB DYLAN AND THE LITERARY

NICK SMART

Oscar Wilde, who may figure in this exploration a bit later, calls criticism the autobiography of the critic. Fair enough.

Obligatory autobiographical statement: In eighth grade when I chose to write out from memory all the words to "Tombstone Blues" (1965) instead of attending to a discussion of the *Ox Bow Incident* (1940), I did so because I knew Dylan was a poet. I had found T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound goofing it up in "Desolation Row" and received the shiver. Bob knew that I knew that he knew. Too many years later, no Prince Hamlet and never meant to be, a line in *Chronicles* makes me think that Dylan is a pretty fair critic as well.

Chapter 3 of *Chronicles*, "New Morning," and Dylan writes:

> I had just returned to Woodstock from the Midwest, from my father's funeral. There was a letter from Archibald MacLeish waiting for me on the table. MacLeish, Poet Laureate of America—one of them. Carl Sandburg, poet of the prairie and the city, and Robert Frost, the poet of dark meditations were the others. MacLeish was the poet of night and stones and the quick earth. These three, the Yeats, Browning and Shelley of the New World, were gigantic figures, had defined the landscape of twentieth-century America. (*Chronicles* 107)

There is too much to say about this passage. In it Dylan reckons that great poets are gigantic, and shows himself to be more of a student of the literary than many outside the academy would like to admit. Anyone who thinks the definition of the landscape of twentieth-century America comes not from television or films, or even novels, but from poems, is showing a rarified sense of the hierarchy of artistic forms. But what closer, and more self-interested, inspection reveals to me is the name missing from Dylan's Trinity of British poets. Having been trained long ago to look for the signs of profound influence in the presence of the precursor whom the poet neglects to mention, I had to ask, *what, no Keats*? Hadn't Dylan read Christopher Ricks?

Ricks sets the standard for the kind of work being done here. *Dylan's Visions of Sin* (2006) never hesitates to consider Dylan a major artistic figure standing, in the Ricks' section of one's shelves, alongside Milton, Eliot, and, perhaps most uncannily, Keats. At some point the relationships between the music, the words, and the performances will be suitably sorted, but for now the artist's sense of his own potential for greatness, and the words, the literary creations, that express such a confident and anxious yearning are the full issue.

Ricks's harmonic converging of Keats and Dylan, so persuasive in its use of the Nightingale Ode and codes, inspires one or two additional comparisons: first, think of the scope of poetic ambition Dylan and Keats share, second the frenzy of near perfect compositions that flows from particular periods in each poet's life, and finally the power of Keats's and Dylan's muses as catalysts for the art. Beginning at the beginning, with the intimation of immortality, remember the very early sonnet in which Keats positions his own origin at the summit of poetic achievement.

"On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (1816) begins with the line, "Much Have I travell'd in the realms of gold..."(1). Travelling, then, is a crucial element of Keats' formula before it is vital to Woody Guthrie's, as it is vital to Woody Guthrie's art of experience before it becomes Dylan's necessary mode. In the Keats sonnet, travelling means reading, and thereby coming into contact with the words that form the realms of gold, the sites of antiquity from which derive and still contain the standards of poetic championship. Two Dylan songs spring to mind as cognates of Keats' kick-start ode.

Consider the travels in "When I Paint My Masterpiece" (1971):

> Oh, the streets of Rome are filled with rubble,
> Ancient footprints are everywhere.

Imagining, or remembering, his time in a realm of gold, a fallen empire still scored by masterworks, brings Dylan, as it did Keats, close to the origins of ambition and inspiration. There, unsurprisingly, he meets one of the many muses whose presence in his songs, mortal or otherwise, helps release the great poetry:

> Got to hurry on back to my hotel room,
> Where I've got me a date with Botticelli's niece.
> She promised that she'd be right there with me
> When I paint my masterpiece.

In this verse the connections between the artists are crackling. Keats tells Fanny Brawne, in a letter on July 25, 1819 "I will imagine you Venus

tonight and pray, pray, pray to your star like a heathen" (Keats 291). Botticelli gives the art history books and the museums visions of Venus. Dylan dates the niece. Seems like our poets are steadily falling from grace, but, as we shall soon see, the beauty to whom prayer, praise, and pain can be devoted has no small role to play. First, though, let's listen to the second echo of Keats's meditation on the power of inspiration. In the Chapman sonnet, Keats breathes the "pure serene" of Homer, a psychic nectar to be remixed as the Romantic sublime (7). Dylan, in the role of folk singer rather than ode singer, must breathe the dust of roads that are to be travelled, and eventually detoured from.

> I'm out here a thousand miles from my home,
> Walkin' a road other men have gone down.
> I'm seein' your world of people and things,
> Your paupers and peasants and princes and kings.
> Hey, hey Woody Guthrie, I wrote you a song…

As Keats must translate Homer into the Romantic idiom, Dylan, not long after 1962 and "Song To Woody," will add the beat vibe and vernacular of Kerouac's road—as in, "… knocked me out/and robbed my boots/and I was on the road again" in "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream" (1965)—to Guthrie's folk ways of saying. The advanced notice that the precursor is to be both admired and departed from comes at the end of "Song to Woody." Taking reverent note, like "some watcher of the skies/ when a new planet swims into his ken," of the Orion's Belt of "Cisco an' Sonny an' Leadbelly too," that share the night with Woody, Dylan confesses to Guthrie "The very last thing that I'd want to do/Is to say I've been hittin' some hard travelin' too."

Humility and hubris mix here, as Dylan prepares to shed the cloaks of false origins, the carnivals and migrant fields in which his time was never spent. In the confession that Guthrie's plain-speaking, protest-singing, fascist-slaying life and rhetoric are not and will not be his own, Dylan prepares to know his song well before he really starts singing. He knows, I suppose, that the language his poetry wants is yet to be discovered. And even if discovery won't be the result of hard travelin' for the already getting-famous Dylan, it will be the fruit of very hard artistic labor, as it was for Keats.

In seven months of fevered composition in 1819, Keats writes the major odes. It is an almost unimaginable period of concentrated artistic productivity, and literary history's astonishment over it forms another signal point of comparison. Between January and August 1965, Dylan records *Bringing It All Back Home* and *Highway 61 Revisited*. The songs

on these albums, which are the performance pieces of the celebrated British tours of ’65 and ‘66, stake out the fresh territory any poet must discover if his mark is to stand out loud and bold. Tony Glover writes of the Highway 61 sessions,

> At the time I was conscious of watching history go down. Bob was in high gear, at a creative peak…Sometimes the recording creative process can be deadly to watch…but that wasn’t the case here, Bob liked working fast and the band was good at synching up with and abetting his drive. There really was a feeling of magic afoot. (Glover 26)

The magic Glover felt derives from the new poetic territory Dylan creates and through which we all can travel. Michael Gray’s description of the achievement is as good as any: “It’s the carving out,” he writes, “of a new emotional correspondence with a new chaos-reality” (Gray 321).

Surely, Eliot would recognize the previously unheard but already essential objective correlatives at work, and perhaps share in the modernist ache they evoke. The songs of ’65 and ’66 are poetic triumphs, but they don’t sing of poetic triumph. Again like Keats, Dylan’s expressions of ambition are tempered with recognition of the awful sublimity of the order he writes his way into. Keats stands hopeful but unanswered in front of Psyche, unsure whether he wakes or sleeps after the nightingale flees, and in possession only of what he already knew, that beauty and truth are all he needs to know, after the urn is induced to speak. In his turn, Dylan admits that “there are no truths outside the Gates of Eden,” and acknowledges, when returning all correspondence not postmarked Desolation Row, when going back to New York City having had enough, and when wishing fellow discoverer Columbus, “Good luck,” that his quest is far from complete. As Shelley discovered too, “Mont Blanc yet gleams on high” (127).

So let us see Dylan a little further along the way, by considering his relationship to the muse. And let us start, again, with Keats and one of those major odes. The still-possible relationship between poet and deified beauty in “Ode to Psyche” is not one Christopher Ricks chooses to take up, perhaps because it is not a patently sinful one. The critic’s remarkable work with the great Dylan line, “Sad-eyed lady of the lowlands,/Where the sad-eyed prophet says that no man comes,” does connect to Keats’ “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” (1820). But La Belle Dame is the kind of Goddess who only robs your boots and leaves you “living in a foreign country/ bound to draw the line,” so that you may never stray beyond the pale again. Psyche offers the priest or poet a little more hope, which is

why Keats applies to be “Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat/ Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming” (48-49).

The echo seems inescapable (and if the notice of it elsewhere has escaped me, I give credit). Ricks, in making his case for the presence of nightingale in Dylan writes, “I believe that Dylan knows the famous more-than-anthology piece, and that he had it in mind, even if not consciously or deliberately when he created his own re-creation of it” (Ricks, 361). I think the same must be true for “Ode to Psyche,” the song about a girl too beautiful to know only this mortal existence. At least some of Dylan’s dates with the nieces of Botticelli’s contain the same proposition.

One of the rare moments of mirth in Martin Scorsese’s *No Direction Home* is a reminiscence, accompanied by a smile mischievous and wistful beneath Dylan’s gambler’s mustache, about two girlfriends from high school, both of whom, “seemed to bring out the poet in me.” With that comment in mind, I propose that some of the love songs are just love songs, and some of them are relationships to the very same goddess Homer addressed before beginning his odyssey when he pled, “Sing in me, O Muse.” John Lennon once observed that silly love songs do not poetry make, but even still, the vast number of blues, folk, and pop set pieces of found and lost love that overgrow his canon can by no means disqualify Dylan as an artist—much the contrary. These lines from “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands” (1966)

> The kings of Tyrus with their convict list
> Are waiting in line for their geranium kiss,
> And you wouldn't know it would happen like this,
> But who among them really wants just to kiss you?

send Ricks to work for many profitable pages. To kiss the muse is to write a poem. Maybe not all poets would want to have written the lines, “jewels and binoculars hang from the neck of the mule,” but who among them wouldn’t claim, if they could, the question, “Ain’t it just like the night to play tricks when you’re tryin’ to be so quiet?”

These “Visions of Johanna” (1966) are staggering to a student of poetry. And if *Blood on the Tracks* (1975), where the always-leaving muse who now “might be in Tangier” and will be looked for in “San Francisco, Honolulu, Ashtabula,” is not quite as transcendent as the pale *Blonde on Blonde* (1966), maybe it’s because the songs of the later album are patterned on the difficult loves of Chekov, a choice which allows Dylan to tell us with prosaic practicality,

> Situations have ended sad,
> Relationships have all been bad.
> Mine've been like Verlaine's and Rimbaud.

Whether it is the muse, or the ancient footsteps, or more and more sad-eyed ladies that keep Dylan moving, the point of the discussion we are having here is that where Dylan goes his fame waits, and follows. Maybe La Belle Dame, who feeds Keats' palely loitering Knight a meal of manna that will leave him hungry forever, *is* the right model. Does she show up again in "High Water (for Charley Patton)" (2001), in the form of a roadhouse waitress who tells the hungry Dylan if he wants something to eat he better "Take it off the shelf…?" Fat Nancy's words are exhortation, both to self-reliance and to movement, and echo with caution in the Roman streets of Dylan's ambition. "As great as you are, man," Fat Nancy tells him, "you'll never be greater than yourself."

This line may have been written for Dylan when he visited Tompkins Square Park with Allen Ginsberg, the then self-proclaimed most famous living poet in the world, only to be repelled by stone throwing squatters afraid that the cops would follow the celebrities. Fame, Ginsberg remembers Dylan telling him once they had beat it back to MacDougal Street, is a vice with no redeeming virtue. The quip would be a fitting epitaph for Dylan's Poetic Champion avatar, were it not for the serious literary work he continued, and continues, to create. So we will let the vice and virtue quandary stand as a demarcation between celebrity and immortality, and a rumination on what it does and should take to be famous, an answer that it is the responsibility of listeners and readers to supply.

Which brings us back home to the literary aesthetic of Oscar Wilde, who visited the Louvre, saw the Mona Lisa, and heard loud and bold the words of his teacher Walter Pater, speaking brilliantly of the image's power. Therefore, Wilde declared, the ability to make one's impression of artistic terrain everlastingly expressive of it is the skill and surpassing contribution of the literary artist. By this standard, I conclude Dylan is a literary artist because he wants to be and is stylish enough to pull it off. In reference to Pater's concept of *Anders-streben*, and why all art aspires to the condition of music, Nina Goss's blog, *Gardener is Gone* is framed by the audacious assumption that all art, aspires to the condition of Bob Dylan. My response to that is this: When I remember my visit to the Louvre, I think, "Mona Lisa must have had the highway blues/you can tell by the way she smiles."

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Bob Dylan Songs

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PART 2.

BELIEF:
STEPHEN HAZAN ARNOFF AND KIM LUISI

A disservice that the western intellectual tradition may have done to the life of the mind is the neutralization of religious art. We encounter the Pieta with fluency in the aesthetic potency and provenance of the thing. We may converse with its voices of feeling and sensation, and we know not to do as children would: insist it is right or it is wrong about what it represents.

It may be possible to see in the battlefield of writing on the religious matter of Bob Dylan's work a new ground for discussing religious art. There is an entire culture of writing on Dylan and religion that does not neutralize the fissile energy of religious meaning into spiritless appraisals and cataloging. Writers of different spiritual commitments hear in Dylan a voice for their own faiths and theologies. For the uncertain, or the certainly agnostic, there is the model of Paul Williams's essay, "What Happened?" (available in Omnibus Press's 1996 collection of Williams' 1966-1995 writing on Dylan, *Bob Dylan: Watching the River Flow*)—a masterpiece of the personal essay in any context—which wrestles ardently and truthfully with the crisis of facing down Dylan's religious art. The strongest players in the field of Dylan and religion invite us to articulate the experience of art through languages of faith, doubt, mystery, transcendence, and ultimately, right or wrong.

These essays place the reader in just that terrain. Stephen Hazan Arnoff offers us a Bob Dylan who is a visionary, a prophet, for an era in which traditional religious forms may be inert, but spiritual appetites remain sharp. Kim Luisi's Bob Dylan is an evangelical voice of endurance, salvation and redemptive love.

NO MARTYR IS AMONG YE NOW: BOB DYLAN AND RELIGION

STEPHEN HAZAN ARNOFF

"Walking," in the words of "Ain't Talkin'," "through streets that are dead," Bob Dylan has been probing themes of covenant and salvation for five decades. His work embodies a prophetic voice anticipated more than a century ago by German sociologist Max Weber. Weber taught that the covenantal systems of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam function within the tension of two competing energies. On one side of his scale of religion rests charismatic or prophetic sensibilities. At the opposite end lies rationality, an urge for systematizing and regulating religious charisma. According to Weber, the most enduring societies manage to balance the tension inherent between spirit and structure. But when the flow between charisma and rationality slows or ceases, religious structures erode, and oppression ranging from everyday meaninglessness to authoritarianism and systemic religious violence emerges. Yet Weber also suggested the possibility of religious figures and movements that might emerge to salvage the "soul" trapped in fossilized covenants:

> No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals… (Weber 124)

The cluster of songs explored here show how Bob Dylan navigates and reanimates static inherited covenants while interpreting both collective and personal religious, political, and romantic history to construct new ones. In a world of "Ain't Talkin'" – where there "ain't no altars on this long and lonesome road" – Dylan models Weber's "great rebirth of old ideas and ideals" with prophetic art that refreshes and reimagines ancient covenants in a modern creative idiom.

I dreamed I saw St. Augustine

I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine

I dreamed I saw St. Augustine,
Alive as you or me,
Tearing through these quarters
In the utmost misery

Laconic like a classical proverb, in a few short lines "I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine" epitomizes Dylan's creative struggle with inherited covenantal materials as well as his technique for transforming this material into something of use for his own religious sensibilities. In the mode of Weber's prophets, Dylan uses charisma – as a performer, cultural commentator, and most profoundly as the composer of music and lyrics – to inhabit and expand the contours of a traditional religious vision. This is a pattern repeated throughout Dylan's career.

The many seekers of Dylan's canon represent figures of sharp spiritual awareness. They often lament their lack of a ritual center for atonement or lasting communion with the divine. In the words of "Dirge," Dylan's narrators inhabit "the hollow place where martyrs weep and angels play with sin." While Dylan's heroes are active at the charismatic crossroads of religious feeling, they inhabit a static material world, unanimated by the spiritual magic that defines the essence of martyrs and angels they admire. Similarly, the wanderer in "Shelter from the Storm" longs to "turn back the clock to when God and her were born," the mythic past of the spirit being the only vessel appropriate for containing his passion. The searcher in "Angelina" looks for his lover and asks "Where would you like to be overthrown/In Jerusalem or Argentina?," signifying worldly tension of both spiritual and political corruption. The mournful lover of "Oh Sister" warns of irreversible transgression beyond the possibility of spiritual paradise. "Our Father would not like the way that you act/and you must realize the danger," he says. Again, spirit flows, but the forms of the mundane world cannot contain or maintain it.

The original Greek meaning of the word "martyr" describes a person who witnesses or testifies to an event or idea. In the cult of early Christianity, and in beliefs paralleled to some extent by Judaism in late antiquity, martyrdom comes to mean sacrificing one's life as an act of testimony. A person testifies for truth by embodying the most extreme conclusions of their revelation. In this sense, martyrdom is the ultimate covenantal commitment. As deeply as Dylan's narrator in "I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine" enters the action of a religious drama, he still returns