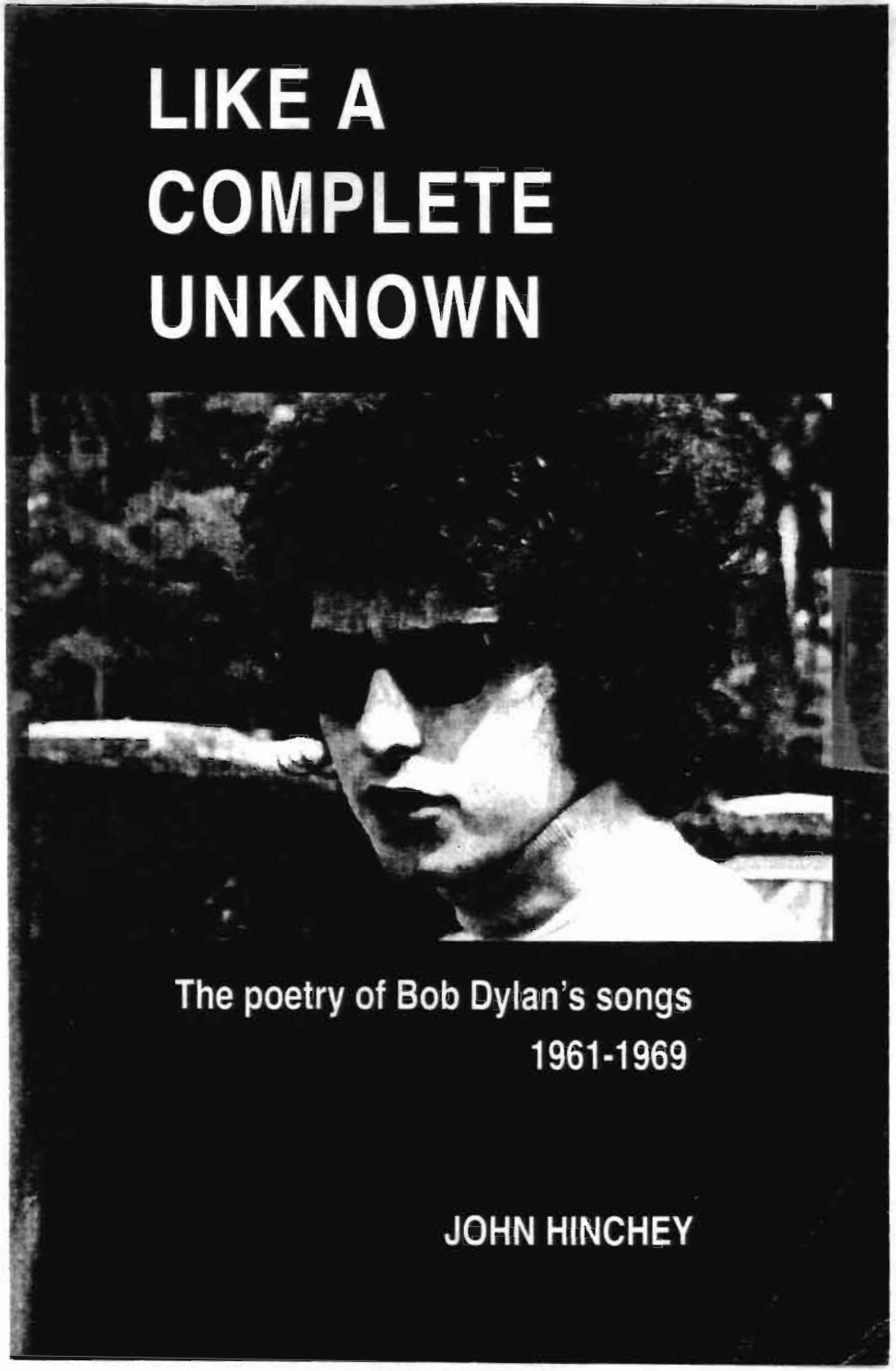

5

Bringing It All Back Home

The snotty and the sublime

When I listened to *Bringing It All Back Home* for the first time, soon after my college roommate introduced me to Dylan, I was stunned. I was already an immense fan, but I wasn't prepared for a collection of songs that would make his earlier work seem, by comparison, almost dull. I've had a similar experience listening to new Dylan records several times since, but never as intensely–although *Slow Train Coming* came close. *Bringing It All Back Home* was the first and last Dylan LP to give me vertigo.

No doubt, the singularity of its effect on me had mostly to do with my own innocence: the psychology of the first kiss. I mention it here because listening to this record again, I have the feeling that the intensity of my relationship to this record somehow blinded me. For all my delight in the aesthetic qualities of these songs–their poetry, their wild humor, their musical inventiveness–I somehow never managed to listen to this record. I've never noticed until now what this record is all about, how its songs fit together, their particular personality. I'm not saying I had a mistaken, or inadequate, sense of this record; I'm saying that I apparently didn't have any sense of it at all.

And what a surprisingly odd record it turns out to be. For one thing,

it's virtually two different records, so different is side one from side two: side one is extremely funny, side two has a Sunday solemnity; side one is mostly social satire, side two strains toward a visionary apocalypse; side one is mutant rock 'n' roll, side two is a mutant poetry reading.

Let's start with side one. One of the pleasures of revisiting Dylan's old records (and some not-so-old ones) is the opportunity it affords to marvel at his profligate invention. Dylan's catalogue is littered with pathbreaking gestures never followed up. Of all Dylan's one-shot wonders, however, "Subterranean Homesick Blues" is the most remarkable.

This song is a miracle of what Dylan would dub "tonal breath control," of rhythms fashioned with such immediacy from the bounce and spin of words that the sense of the words become indistinguishable from voice. To a degree equaled by few other poems I know, there is something indescribably exhilarating about the way the kinesthesia of this lyric renders its precise meanings not irrelevant but redundant, like subtitles in a movie whose original language we already understand.

The exhilaration this song provides depends equally, though, on the fact that the sense of the lyric does command our full attention. A seriocomic bohemian's survival guide, "Subterranean Homesick Blues" is an exploding digest of alternately gnomic and plain-spoken tips on eluding the traps society sets for our freedom. As such, it is a fitting introduction to a set of songs that portray society as the enemy of the artist. What I have been surprised to discover, however, is that compared to "Subterranean Homesick Blues," the rest of the songs on side one imagine society's hostility to the artist in terms that are drastically simplified. The sense of menace and hidden malice that pervades "Subterranean Homesick Blues" is reduced to meanness and mediocrity of spirit, and these other songs excise entirely the discomforting sense that social oppression is allied with biological nature: "the girl by the whirlpool" (or is it "Whirlpool?"), after all, leads directly to the nightmarishly mechanistic archetypal biography ("get born keep warm/short pants romance") that opens the final verse of "Subterranean."

The transition from "Subterranean Homesick Blues" to "Maggie's

Farm" is like going to sleep in a Dostoyevskyan underground and waking up in *Huckleberry Finn* on Aunt Sally's farm. The issue is still freedom, but its antagonists have shrunk from demons to fools. The song offers wonderfully on-target satire of the pettiness of normal social life, but the pettiness of normal social life is not a plausible threat to–or provocation for–the "head full of ideas" exploding from Dylan's brain.

There is, I would suggest, an oddly sophomoric hysteria just beneath the surface of these songs that you won't find anywhere else in Dylan's work. They sound like they were written by a man who's just discovered he almost took the road traveled by the gray-flanneled dwarf in "Gates of Eden," a road that would have taken him to Maggie's farm in suburbia and a commuter job in Tin Pan Alley. Or maybe they are songs written by a man compelled to tell himself some such story–as a stratagem for stopping his ears to the siren song of that girl by the whirlpool. "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream" is an interesting case in point. It's something of a throwback for Dylan: like the *Another Side* song "Motorpsycho Nightmare" (which would be more at home on the first side of this album), it is a late evolution of his talking blues. It's also the only song on this LP in which the singer functions as a source as well as an observer of the humor. Inserting himself as a picaresque hero makes his critique feel more generous, less privileged. Also, its social critique is from a much more free-floating (to put it mildly) perspective. This song is inspired stream-of-consciousness farce, a true dream: phobias come flying from all directions, like the boiling fat in the exploded kitchen. But I guess I have to notice how many of those phobias–as in "Motorpsycho Nightmare"–circle around issues of domesticity. And after all, taken seriously (which is all but impossible to do: good dream work there, Bob) this is a song that concludes with the image of a great quester unmanned by a terrestrial fat girl.

Whatever its underlying psychology, this oversimplified myth (sensitive artist vs. venal society) sometimes backfires on Dylan. "On the Road Again" still seems as funny as when I first heard it, but now I also hear in its lurid images of home life a somewhat pathological fear of domesticity. "Outlaw Blues" wastes a superbly menacing surliness of

tone and one great couplet ("don't ask me nothin' about nothin'/I just might tell you the truth"), because in this song Dylan reduces his rebel stance to antic capering. It's delightful, but it's a delightful trifle.

And it's a shame that "Maggie's Farm" should find Dylan complaining about having to scrub the floor. Does he expect the servants to do the cleaning? Sure, I know what he's really protesting–the "sing while you slave" ethic–but his words miss the mark. His words misfire because he's shooting at shadows: the song's protagonist is besieged by cardboard caricatures. Dylan's comic reductions of the bourgeois meanspiritedness of Maggie and her family are both deliciously witty and plainly hilarious, but these are not people who in any way really get under his skin. "I just get bored," he finally admits, and it shows. The song never delivers on the promise of its superb opening couplet:

Well I wake up in the morning
fold my hands and pray for rain
I got a head full of ideas
that are driving me insane

The prayer for rain is prompted by his need for something to water and cool off the fevered soil of his mind. But remembering Maggie and her scrub brush, we might start to wonder if he's really just praying for his workday to be washed out.

All of which is perhaps to say that *Bringing It All Back Home* is not *Highway 61 Revisited*: Dylan does not yet deign to converse with his real enemies. The songs on side one feel like they have been unconsciously circumscribed to allow Dylan to focus on a single issue: his assertion of artistic freedom from "them," of his right to the riches of the imagination. "Subterranean Homesick Blues" escapes these limitations because in this song Dylan actually addresses himself to someone not beneath talking to, the anonymous "kid" who is tantalizingly not his audience–i.e., you and me–but his own best image of himself. His song is a talking to himself to keep up his courage as he stands on the corner, chewing gum, and trying his best to remain invisible. In this song, instead of hearing about the "head full of ideas/that are driving me insane,"

we hear those ideas broadcast live and taste the incipient insanity.

"She Belongs to Me" and "Love Minus Zero/No Limit" are the other two songs that manage magnificently to escape the limitations of the simplistic myth that informs side one. In both songs Dylan invokes his muse–perhaps for no better reason than to flaunt her before the bourgeoisie–but having invoked her, he finds himself in the presence of someone beyond his reach. Her very inaccessibility seems to activate Dylan's deepest artistic impulses, forcing him to acknowledge–and provoking him to attempt to overleap–the limits of his imagination.

"She Belongs to Me" demolishes bohemian sentimentalities from the inside, with a surprising portrait of the muse as an unapproachable yet imperious dominatrix. Rejecting domesticity for art, it appears, is to go out of the frying pan and into the fire, to be saved from becoming the "new fool" of the "girl by the whirlpool" only to become the mesmerizing muse's "walking antique." (Indeed, on the studio recording sheet this song is identified by the title "Worse Than Money!")* This song is a straight 12-bar blues, and Dylan would later sing it that way on the *Renaldo and Clara* soundtrack. But here he sings it with a rapt affect that turns it–disconcertingly–into a devotional hymn. The title, of course, is wholly ironic: he belongs to her, but she belongs to no one. Indeed, he cannot even address her directly. Personal pronouns are often readily interchangeable in Dylan's songs, but you can't change "she" to "you" in this song without destroying it utterly. She is someone whom he still lacks the wit, or the nerve, or the grace, to talk to directly.

Or maybe she is someone you don't have to talk to. This imaginative leap implicitly underlies "Love Minus Zero," the very best thing on side one. By all accounts Dylan was a somewhat snotty, callow youth when he wrote the songs on this LP, and in places it shows. Indeed, "Love Minus Zero" sounds like a song that might initially have arisen out of a mood of smug self-satisfaction: "My love, she speaks like

* Michael Krogsgaard, "Bob Dylan: The Recording Sessions (Part 1)," *The Telegraph* 52, 107.

silence"–while yours blabbers artless inanities. But it doesn't retain this tone long enough so as you would even really notice it. "My love, she speaks like silence": this is a lie, and Dylan knows it is a lie, the kind of exploratory lie poets tell, and this self-knowledge changes his tone.

We first hear that altered tone in the reverential delicacy that permeates his images of "my love" and belies his cocky air. And we hear it in the quiet pathos that informs his representations of conventional society's hapless flower-bearing lovers. This quality grows even more overt in the second verse, where the dullards of convention are represented as dime-store and bus-station rappers, images that suggest not the bourgeoisie but the bohemian world Dylan elsewhere embraces as his own. It is as if in recognizing the lie in his claim of easy intimacy with his muse, Dylan is forced to recognize–implicitly, emotionally, if not consciously–his kinship with those who are not her acolytes. Implicit is the recognition that he is closer to them than he is to her.

All this lends to "Love Minus Zero" a humane sweetness largely absent from the rest of side one, but I think the song's real power derives almost entirely from its extraordinary final verse:

The bridge at midnight trembles
the country doctor rambles
Bankers' nieces seek perfection
expecting all the gifts that wise men bring
The wind howls like a hammer
the night blows rainy
My love she's like some raven
at my window with a broken wing

This verse emerges from the song that engenders it like a butterfly from its cocoon, utterly transforming what has preceded it. Here Dylan finds the wit–and the humility–to draw on images of conventional society for images of a chastened sense of self, transforming pity into a sobering self-recognition. The "perfection" which, by virtue of his coziness with "my love," he had imagined for himself is conceded to be the pipe dream of pining bankers' nieces. The howling wind blows away any

residual sense he may have that mere individual sensitivity governs access to an elemental wisdom, or, as Dylan delightfully puts it, "all the gifts that wise men bring." Dylan sees himself in that rambling country doctor, and the trembling midnight bridge is his tentative, tenuous, suddenly quite unstable access to his "love." For this sublime lady, whom he has encouraged us to imagine as if sitting next to him, is now revealed to be at once less accessible and more invisibly inward than that. She has metamorphosed into a raven whose presence, a temporary and arbitrary gift of the indifferent storm, is but an imagined thing, and not just an imagined thing ("like a raven") but an imagined imagined thing ("like some raven"). This little word, "some," an untranslatable idiomatic shrug of the mind, is a characteristically Dylanesque evasion, but here it is deployed against himself, to acknowledge that his deepest intuitions of truth and beauty all but evade his ministering mind.

All this seems to me an accurate account of the cognitive processes that inform this final verse and that sustain what you could call its moral authority. But all this humility and compassion is in fact but a minor element of its overall effect; indeed, a minor element that is the mirror image of its deepest effect. By yielding to the truth–or seeming to–Dylan has reclaimed and vindicated his lie. By acknowledging his kinship with rambling doctors and overreaching bankers' nieces, he has in fact appropriated them as images of himself. He has put the denizens of Maggie's farm, as it were, to work for his own imagination.

And though he has been forced to allow his muse her inscrutable distance, he has indeed persuaded her to speak to him–"with silence"–in the image of the raven she offers him. The raven is an emblem of her inaccessibility, her indomitable silence, yet as a poetic emblem, it speaks–as surely as Poe's raven speaks. Indeed, it delivers in silence the same message as Poe's talking bird: "nevermore." For in representing the muse as a bird, this emblem bespeaks her human silence, her refusal to enter through the window at which she appears.

II

"A poem is a naked person," Dylan tells us in the liner notes he wrote for *Bringing It All Back Home*. By that severe definition, "Love Minus Zero" becomes a poem only in its final line, a line that turns the final verse into an incandescence that consumes the song that engendered it. I have tried to trace the path that leads up to this climactic flash, but what's important is not what it is "about." The image of "some raven" is not really "about" anything, not even, as is sometimes said of such images, about itself. It is an image, at once perfectly translucent and perfectly opaque, that manages to get to a place where it does not have to be "about" anything. It offers itself rather for what, literally, it is: a trope, a turning of a mind that finds and loses itself only in its own perpetual turning.

I don't intend to get sidetracked here in the sinkhole of literary theory, but I think it is important to draw attention to the flavor of this sort of image because, somewhere about the time he wrote "Love Minus Zero," Dylan had gotten addicted to the taste of it. It gave him a thrill–and not just any old thrill but the very thrill whose allure had first drawn him onto the stage. Dylan may, as he claims, have become a poet quite incidentally, as a by-product of his songwriting–itself an activity he claims to have taken up only because he neede something suitable to sing. (And if the truth be told, he probably became a singer only because no other singer knew how to create a suitable context for his harmonica solos.) But it seems pretty clear to me that in 1965 Dylan-the-poet was light years ahead of Dylan-the-performer. He was beginning to thrill himself with his poetry in ways he still could only dream of doing as a singer or musician.

The thrill in question is the illusion of presence, of seeming to be here now. This is the conquest of time that Dylan would later define as the "heroic" task of all art. Meaningfulness is a function of our existence in time, a measure of connections between then and now, or between now and again, or between here and there. Dylan's raven trope is like the mythical snake's head that swallows its own tail, a turning of

the mind on its own thought that momentarily dissolves thinking in an incandescence that, technically speaking, is meaningless. Meaning eventually returns, to be sure, but only in retrospect, from the vantage point of a succeeding incandescence. Thus in the great triple shock of images that concludes "Love Minus Zero," the uncanniness of the raven is domesticated somewhat by that of the window, the uncanniness of which is displaced in turn by that of the broken wing, which, since it comes last, remains (ironically) untamed. The broken wing is the final form of the muse's temporary availability to Dylan's poetic ministration, but it is also an emblem of the irreducibly enigmatic character of her availability. The muse insists upon her unaccountability.

What I am talking about, I guess, is the triumph of liveliness–of life–over mere meaning. At the most mundane level, the purpose of all tropes, of all figures of speech, is to make our language vivid–which means to vivify it, to make it life-like, and in that sense, to make it seem real. By 1965 Dylan had reached the point where he was able–as only the best poets can–to subordinate the life-likeness of his tropes to the immediate liveliness of his troping. "Some raven"–like few images before it in Dylan's songs–matters less as an image than as an act, less for its meaning than for its power, a power that arises from the way we recognize it as an act of a restless mind, wrestling with its world. The larger verisimilitude of such an art comes to rest on our recognition that the poet's activity is representatively human–that, insofar as life is the difficult art of seeming to be here now, living itself is a kind of troping, a kind of figuring. A poet (and such a performer as Dylan would soon become) is just doing what we're all trying to do, except that as an artist, he is doing it in a way that clarifies and celebrates just what it is that we are trying to do: to hold our ground, here and now.

III

Whether or not my own account of the nature of Dylan's poetic advance is judged to be adequate–or even on-target–I don't see how anyone can listen to side two of *Bringing It All Back Home* without noticing that

somehow, somewhere, Dylan the poet has turned things up a notch. Indeed, this extraordinary quartet of songs sounds very much like Dylan's self-conscious celebration of his discovery of a new power. These four songs have little in common–in theme or method–except their poetic muscle-flexing.

The poetic exuberance of these songs remains astonishing. To stick with Dylan's conceit, the modulations of imagery in "Love Minus Zero" are like a series of costume changes that hint at but never directly reveal the "naked person" underneath–at least not until the climactic raven image. But the songs on side two are almost entirely comprised of the equivalent of raven images. Each of these songs unfolds as a series of uncoverings, of dis-coveries, of their own imagery, so that we are offered successive naked truths that are continually unmasked as the faces of still lower layers. Each of these songs finds its final end in what will become Dylan's signature gesture: a self-disclosure that takes the form of a disappearing act.

More or less. Dylan's creative energy sometimes flags, falters, and flails about. "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" doesn't always stay on the right side of the thin line it treads between the irresistible emotional momentum of variably suggestive imagery and the numbing effect of endless reiteration, and even "Mr. Tambourine Man" is not perfect: its third verse ("Though you might hear laughing spinning . . .") is one of Dylan's most powerful and brilliant pieces of visionary writing, but like the third verse in "Love Minus Zero," it is a sidelight to the main lyric that is presented as if it were just another verse. Not much of a flaw, perhaps, but think about it this way: had Dylan been able to incorporate this visionary swerve as a structural element in his song–say, like the stanza-length bridges in the 1989 *Oh Mercy* song "What Was It You Wanted?"–maybe he would not have chosen to skip this verse in nearly every live performance of "Mr. Tambourine Man" (until the mid 90s, when he began skipping the second verse instead!). Finally, like most of Dylan's long-winded prophecies of this period, the other two songs on side one could use some editing. Most obviously, the splenetic fourth section of "It's Alright Ma" (the one about the "ratrace choir" and "society's pliers") is a turgid, melodramatic dud, fueled not by the imagination but by self-righteous rage. (Dylan seems to agree with this assessment: he has long since dropped this section from his live performances of the song.) And the "motorcycle black madonna" verse in "Gates of Eden," splendid as it is, disrupts the momentum of a song in which it probably doesn't belong in the first place: it sounds like the beginnings of the lyrical idea that eventually found form as "Ballad of a Thin Man."

This said, these songs are largely driven forward by a poetic exuberance that expresses itself as Dylan's impatience with the terms of his own imagination. In "Gates of Eden" Dylan's appetite for self-surprising turns takes on a desperate, even mournful cast. This song enacts a struggle to escape its own nightmare vision. Its opening stanzas are the very definition of the portentous. They are full of significances that, when deciphered, turn out to be quite banal. On the other hand, that seems to be the point. These opening stanzas deliver their poetic truth viscerally, in a feeling they convey about a too-humanized cosmos, as oppressive as it is impressive, that delivers truths that forever fail to satisfy our hunger for the truth. There is something clotted and constricting in the enfolded imagery, corkscrew syntax, and short-winded rhythms of these opening stanzas that evokes a world in which matter suppresses spirit and in which force substitutes for authority. Their banality is the banality of evil, the hollowness of truths whose light–like the waxy glow of the cowboy angel's candle or the lamppost-cop safeguarding hungry babies' right to wail–serves only to render the darkness visible.

The rest of the song is a progressive series of attempts to dissolve this pasteboard-mask world that bars the singer from Eden. First come two stanzas in which Dylan holds the world at arm's length by twisting his nightmare into a more overtly sardonic, even comic allegorizing mode. In the fifth stanza, Dylan finds the withering visionary tone that will see him through the song, a tone that allows him for the first time to assert his own presence in this song. But in identifying his voice with that of the "lonesome sparrow," he both gets ahead of himself (that par-

ticular tone doesn't enter the song until his lover comes to him at the end of the song) and underestimates his power here. In these middle stanzas, Dylan's voice allies itself rather with the "precious winds" that blow away the "kingdoms of experience."

And it is as the voice of the wind that Dylan blows away even the "foreign sun" in stanza eight. This stanza is one of my sacred texts: it blew right through me when I first heard it, long before I could even pretend to understand what it might mean. Yes, the sun "squints" in vain to find me, because whoever is to be found lying in my bed, it isn't really me; and yes, "friends and other strangers" scurry about at sun-up to get on with the imperatives of life (and life only); and yes, the only real freedom we have in this world is the freedom to die. And yes, everything matters, because nothing does. This is Dylan at his most primal, an apocalyptic spirituality that beggars all religion, that thrills and frightens me in equal measure.

What it earns Dylan's song is a moment of splendor in Eden, a "dawn" presided over not by the sun but by his own imagination, with a "lover" who, like the "hugging and loving Bed-fellow" who, under similar circumstances, visits Whitman in section 6 of "Song of Myself," is neither friend nor stranger, let alone a mere actual lady. But she brings him a gift of her dreams that neither of them violate–as I no doubt have violated Dylan's vision–by talking about. And finally, it has earned him a truthfulness for the words in which he tells us all this, a truthfulness we had better catch as it comes, for it won't last any longer than it takes for them to reach our ears, outside the Gates of Eden.

"It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" covers similar thematic ground but is otherwise as different from "Gates of Eden" as night and day. For one thing, it is a much better song, in part because it *is* a song–a virtuoso piece for what you might call boy oracle–while "Gates of Eden" (which Dylan rarely performs) is neither very musical nor easily adaptable to different interpretive moods. It is also, if not a better poem, then certainly a more remarkable and daring poetic invention. "Gates of Eden," wonderful as it is, is a rather conventional Romantic poem–a blend of Blake and Shelley by way of Eliot. "It's Alright Ma" is something completely different, a prophetic comedy whose idiom is a post-Beat adaptation of the headlong vernacular of Woody Guthrie's talking blues but whose tone blends the peremptory, harassing severity of the Old Testament prophets with the charismatic aphoristic wit of the Gospel voice of Jesus.

This last assertion may seem a stretch, but I find it inescapable. The voice we hear in "It's Alright Ma" is fashioned to a crucial degree out of Dylan's self-aggrandizing identification–as a poet–with the voice of Jesus, much in the same way that his earliest performances were prompted by an equally self-aggrandizing identification with the voices of Hank Williams, Robert Johnson, Woody Guthrie, and others. I would suggest that "It's Alright Ma" is best approached as the sort of song with which we might imagine Jesus to have regaled *his* mother during what John Prine calls "The Missing Years." This is pretty much unprecedented, at least in my experience. Lots of poets and fiction writers have done what Prine does in his song–appropriate the story of Jesus for their own ends–but who has ever tried to sound like Jesus? And not just sound like him, but do so in a way that uses Jesus's voice to midwife their own?

I call this song a prophetic comedy to draw attention to the behavior of its voice, which I hear as a thoroughly comic protagonist, a sort of picaresque seer. The first of the song's five three-verse sections is composed in an oblique allegorical mode similar to that with which "Gates of Eden" begins, but already there is a crucial difference. Dylan projects himself into his visionary Vanity Fair, and he puts himself there as part of the problem.

The "you" addressed here is clearly Dylan himself, but Dylan before (or just as) he first saw what he now sees, just as his free spirit is about to dissociate itself from his earth-bound ego. Thus the tone of lines like "you know too soon/there is no sense in trying" comes across in a delicious double-take: an initial depressed disillusionment gives way immediately to a sense of liberation from oppressive illusions. This movement is recapitulated in the refrain, when, stepping forth in his own voice to assure "Ma" that the "foreign sound" she hears really is

him, Dylan dismisses the world of death as a mere exhalation–"just sighing"–of his invisible spirit.

The remaining four sections, by this measure, are the sound of Dylan just breathing to himself, a sound that we *see* as it blows through the song's apocalyptic images of the world we think we live in. Dylan represents the spirit's mastery of the ego by threading the lyric with a largely hidden opposition in which sound, or voice, is privileged over sight, or image. This privileging of voice over image comes through most forcefully in a way that is so obvious we don't even notice it. I'm referring to the speed and apparent freedom with which Dylan's voice moves through the elaborately overdetermined, almost absurdly over-rhymed verse structure he fashioned for this song. This is partly a function of a super-charged aphoristic wit with which line after line erupts from and dissolves its context while still advancing it. It is also partly a result of a elliptical syntax that Dylan nowhere else employs and that here allows him to leap-frog more ground than he should be able to. Listening to this song is like watching a man continually pour a gallon of whiskey from a pint jar. The eventual effect is to undermine our confidence that the material limits of pint jars count for much.

By the end of the song, even these syntactic liberties are barely adequate to keep pace with the astonishing cognitive leaps with which this whirlwind lays bare the hollowness of the respectable world:

Old lady judges watch people in pairs
Limited in sex they dare
To push fake morals insult and stare
While money doesn't talk it swears
Obscenity who really cares
Propaganda all is phony

The crux of this passage is the transition that links conventional sexual mores and money as varieties of materialism, and does so in terms that link an obsession with keeping up appearances with a desecration of "talk." This association allows Dylan to define both as forms of "obscenity," because both attempt to entrap the spirit in material form

where it can be watched and measured. (The imagery and logic of this verse strikingly resembles a passage from Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" that identifies one of the "three old shrews of fate" as the "the one-eyed shrew of the heterosexual dollar.")

This opposition between voice and image is also worked into the lyric's narrative plot. Dylan's alter-ego "you" returns in the song's third section as his spirit's anxiety-ridden Blakean spectre, an incorrigibly gullible psychic side-kick forever seduced by the "advertising signs" that commonly pass for the real world. The lyric's pivotal moment occurs in the second verse of this section–the song's exact mid-point–when this spectre, forced to confront "life outside," encounters a fellow spirit in its primary form as a living voice:

You lose yourself you reappear
You suddenly find you got nothing to fear
Alone you stand with nobody near
When a trembling distant voice unclear
Startles your sleeping ears to hear
That somebody thinks they really found you

I have never been able to listen to this verse without feeling instinctively that this "you" is more than a little frightened to discover you have "nothing to fear." "To stand alone" feels like it's too much for "you," so that it's no surprise when "you" make the usual materialist mistake and mishear that "trembling distant voice unclear" as just another advertising sign, "somebody [that] thinks they really found you."

I've always been delighted by the miraculous vernacular pungency of this denouement. To say that a voice finds us would be to say that it captures our attention, and to say it "really" finds us would be to say that it finds the attention of what is the deepest and truest in us. But Dylan's phrase focuses ominously on what–as "you" hear it–the "somebody" behind that voice "thinks" they found out about you in capturing your attention. This is the voice not of a solitary human spirit seeking the company of another but of an advertiser trawling a target market.

"You" are compelled to hear another voice this way because to hear it as it is–"trembling," "distant," and "unclear"–would require you to embrace your own solitude. But as Dylan rebukes his backsliding ego in the next verse, "there is no answer" and the self "belongs to" no one: we have nothing to fear precisely because we cannot be found out, by ourselves let alone by each other. We can only talk back and forth across the abyss that secures the unfathomable solitude out of which we talk and sing.

The abyss itself is secured by death. This song that began by invoking (or seeming to invoke) "being born" and "dying" as touchstones of good and evil, respectively, concludes by invoking "death's honesty" as our universal calling card. Having concluded his argument, for the finale Dylan enters his prophecy in his prophetic persona for the first time, and he does so to offer a paradoxical image of a voice that eludes the snares of all images, the ruthlessly iconoclastic voice that throughout the song has been illuminating the "darkness at the break of noon" by shattering everything we see:

My eyes collide head-on with stuffed graveyards false gods I scuff
At pettiness that plays so rough
Walk upside down inside handcuffs
Kick my legs to crash it off
Say okay I've had enough
What else can you show me?

The imaginative force of the entire song is encapsulated in the final line quoted here, in the way that what Dylan has to "say" swallows and nullifies anything the world has to "show" him.

This sublime clowning opens the song's final refrain to a prophetic exultation that is positively Biblical in its severity. This refrain begins with an almost contemptuously ironic image of the prophet's martyrdom, a martyrdom that will never happen because the prophet's "thought-dreams" can not "be seen" but must be *heard*, and the materialists who might martyr him are precisely those who do not know how to listen for a spirit that must be heard to be apprehended. And even if

they could hear his "thought-dreams," his voice–the unborn voice of the universal spirit of prophecy–cannot be killed because it does not merely live. This voice, as Dylan said of traditional music, "is too unreal to die."*

Dylan concludes by staking out the highest ground imaginable from which to reassure "Ma" of his safety, a better place disclosed negatively, in the immensely reverberant implications of his final word:

But it's alright Ma
It's life and life only

Dylan stakes out his high ground by replacing the polarity between "living" and "dying" with which the song opened with an implicit opposition between the natural world of life-and-death and an unnamed realm from which Dylan's spirit will shrug off its merely natural fate as "life only."

"It's Alright Ma" is the first song in which we hear the unmistakably prophetic accent that has since become a recurrent central element of what we all recognize as Dylan's voice. Crucially, this prophetic voice first arises as a kind of interior doppelgaenger, a previously hidden "foreign sound" that emerges like a phoenix from the ashes of an ego under the stress of a humiliating powerlessness: "To understand you know too soon there is no sense in trying." Who said that? Whoever it is, he wasn't around when Dylan wrote "My Back Pages," a song that treats a similar–if not an identical–psycho-spiritual crisis. "My Back Pages" is a protest song; the voice we hear in it is a retrospectively self-critical ego. "It's Alright Ma" is prophecy; the divine voice we here in it pounces upon the poor ego in the very instant of its greatest vulnerability and confusion.

This prophetic spirit is manifested as an inner voice that displaces the ego, the "I," into a "you." Sometimes, as in "It's Alright Ma," the prophetic voice appears as a new, transcendental "I," but technically, this voice is no "I" at all. Indeed, its "foreign sound" tends to undermine

* Nat Hentoff, "The Playboy Interview: Bob Dylan," in *McGregor, A Retrospective*, p. 130.

our belief in the reality of any "I" or "you," except for the instrumentality each of us possesses as the current sender or receiver, respectively, of an essentially anonymous transmission of voice. Or, as Dylan himself puts it in the liner notes to *Highway 61 Revisited* (and with a crucial pun that links this issue to the opposition between the visible world and the voice), "I cannot say the word eye anymore" because "there is no eye–there is only a series of mouths."

"A series of mouths"–as if ear and mouth were but the flip sides of the same organ, or as if the voice were transmitted in a kiss. This is a fantastical vision, a transcendental intuition rather than an actual experience. The voice in Dylan's songs is always beset by some form of displacement between "I" and "you," between mouth and ear, and this existential rift is also usually compounded by a deep resistance by "you" to the transcendental terms of address. Whether he is courting himself or another, Dylan almost always finds himself addressing a recalcitrant listener.

IV

"Mr. Tambourine Man" is an exception to this rule, and I think that helps explain what makes this song, perhaps Dylan's best, so special. "Mr. Tambourine Man" is a prayer, a prayer in which the ordinary ego, hungering for a freer, stronger consciousness, addresses the transcendent power that gives it life. But it is a remarkably (for Dylan) innocent prayer, utterly exempt from the self-doubt and even self-hatred that both plague and enrich later prayer-songs like "What Can I Do for You?" or "Every Grain of Sand." "Mr. Tambourine Man" is one of Dylan's few songs in which he is not at all struggling against himself, and it is the only such song to which he brings all his powers and ambition.

Dylan's prayer is addressed to an element of his own spirit; specifically, to the power through whose grace he makes his music. Mr. Tambourine Man is invoked as the genius of song, as the liberated and liberating presence the singer feels within himself as he writes his

poems, as he sings his songs–as he gets naked. The greatness of this song arises in part from the singer's richly ambivalent relationship to this transcendent power within himself. The tone he takes in addressing his genius is at once commanding and imploring: his prayer is both a celebration of and a plea for a nakedness he does and does not possess. It is both a neo-Whitmanesque rhapsody about a secret self and a neo-Keatsian ode addressed to a power beyond his reach. The song itself is the "trip" it seeks but, paradoxically, still fails to apprehend, except as a memory or an expectancy, an echo caught in the "vague traces" of its "skipping reels of rhyme." The entire song is possessed of this double consciousness that Dylan describes with such delightful good humor in the third verse. This is the double consciousness of a creative will beside itself with joy, an ego that is at once nothing in itself and the maddeningly inextinguishable medium through which its genius discloses its presence.

And yet. To say this much does not go far enough. "Mr. Tambourine Man" is a rare song, a rare poem. It does, and it doesn't, true. But it does, and it doesn't, and it does. The double consciousness I speak of is finally a red herring. The astonishing thing about this song is the way its unsleeping ego is reduced to a piquant shiver in the greater voice that swallows it. The voice we hear at last is neither Whitmanesque nor Keatsian but Emersonian, the mercury voice of pure spirit, heartless and unaccountable as the turning wind:

Though I know that evening's empire
has re-turned into sand
Vanished from my hand
Left me blindly here to stand
but still not sleeping

The sense of this passage, and the emotions attached to that sense, are both blown away by its poetry. Dylan always sings "re-turned," not "returned," a small change that makes a big difference: It turns a mournful, melancholy recognition of loss into an wholly aestheticized

appreciation of change, of the spirit's incessant metamorphoses. This shift in perspective, and its accompanying liberation, is precisely what the singer is requesting when, at the end of the last verse, he asks, "Let me forget about today until tomorrow."

Dylan's pun on "returned" is one of only two instances where the sense of the lyric itself insists on a level of awareness and feeling that we otherwise glean exclusively from a disparity between the lyric's literal sense and the sound of its voice. Though "Mr. Tambourine Man" is not a "drug song," it is truly psychedelic. But its power lies in the way its psychedelia co-exists with the sober plain sense of a man still seeking to make a connection. Listen again to the opening verse:

I know that evening's empire
has re-turned into sand
Vanished from my hand
Left me blindly here to stand
but still not sleeping
My weariness amazes me
I'm branded on my feet
I have no one to meet
And the ancient empty street's
too dead for dreaming

The sense of this is plain enough: after a sleepless night spent in visionary yammering, probably with friends, the singer emerges into the morning sun, probably from a bar or coffeehouse (OK, there are drugs involved–but they are wearing off), where he finds himself suddenly bereft, an inflamed spirit in a diminished body stranded in the labyrinth of an alien world. "Branded on my feet" is an especially crucial image for Dylan, one which recurs as the title of the *Basement Tapes* song "This Wheel's on Fire" and in the announcement, by the enigmatic title character of the *John Wesley Harding* song "The Wicked Messenger," that the "soles of his feet" are "burning." In the light of the intimate linkage of walking and talking in Dylan's poetry, I'd suggest that "I'm branded on my feet" is the equivalent of "My tongue is on fire." Thus, "I have no one to meet" means "I have no one to talk to, or to sing to."

But who's kidding who, here? These lines may say something like this, but their quotidian sense is only a vestigial element of the feeling they convey, which is a feeling of imaginative power and freedom. Of course, he may not have anyone to talk to, but he has found one, or invented one: Mr. Tambourine Man. This opening verse is itself the very sound of the Tambourine Man's "jingle-jangle morning," a tripping kaleidoscope of "sand" and "hand" and "stand," indifferent to the logic (and the psychology) that connects them. In this song, reason is just a pretext for rhyme.

A similar relationship between sound and sense obtains in the second and fourth verses, where the singer's yearning for transport and for deliverance from the womb of time, respectively, are realized poetically in the "jingle jangle" of his words. For the most part, the lyric's double consciousness–of yearning ego and celebratory spirit–are, like matter and anti-matter, sealed off from each other. The largest exception to this is the remarkable third verse, where this issue is addressed directly, and with a blend of cognitive sophistication and nonchalant charm that would make even the most erudite deconstructionist weep with envy. I've read a fair amount of erudite literary criticism myself, but I've never read anything that fully acknowledges, let alone so persuasively addresses, the way our language-bound consciousness both does and does not suffice the claims the spirit makes upon it.

This verse functions as a gloss on the rest of the song, but that is only part of the story. It also turns the song's point of view on its head. It's as if, overhearing the sound of his own sound, the singer recognizes himself as the Tambourine Man's voice. But since he is still addressing the Tambourine Man, he must be addressing something deeper or finer or purer in the Tambourine Man than his audible music, an unheard music that the song itself, "your tambourine in time," merely traces and shadows:

And if you hear vague traces
of skipping reels of rhyme

to your tambourine in time
I wouldn't pay it any mind
it's just a ragged clown behind
it's just a shadow you're seeing
that he's chasing

The "shadow" the Tambourine Man sees is this song, a song whose music "he," the singer, is pursuing. But the voice of this line, its implicit "I," is thereby distinguished from the "I" (now "he") who sings the rest of the song. For this one giddy moment–just about the time it takes for us to get our heads spun around by the syntax of this line–the singer addresses the Tambourine Man as an equal, face to face, or addresses himself in the voice of the Tambourine Man.

The final verse represents a falling off from this sublime perch. It resumes a more recognizably human perspective, but with a difference. The relationship between its dual elements–sound and sense, rhyme and reason, spirit and self, imagination and will, call them what you will–has changed. The ironies that have shadowed the lyric until now yield to an uncanny harmony, a kind of duet in which the singer seems to outrace the "reels of rhyme" he leaves in his wake, a "parade" from which he has always just disappeared. Listening to this final verse, it's hard to be sure which is the singer and which the song, or (to borrow a Yeatsian figure that's wholly appropriate here) which the dancer and which the dance. It's as if, the "jingle jangle morning" in which he follows his genius were, at last, nothing other than his own brightening:

Take me disappearing through the smoke rings of my mind
down the foggy ruins of time
Far past the frozen leaves
the haunted frightened trees
out to the windy beach
far from the twisted reach
of crazy sorrow
Yes to dance beneath the diamond sky
with one hand waving free

silhouetted by the sea
circled by the circus sands
With all memory and fate
driven deep beneath the waves
let me forget about today
until tomorrow

This I am not moved to call neo-anybody. This is just plain new. This is Dylan: the voice of a self-possessed yearning that both provides its own answer yet remains full of an unquenched expectancy.

V

"Mr. Tambourine Man" presents Dylan at his most naked: It is a poet's poem, a singer's song. But he has never since written a song like this; he has never since sought a similar incandescence of voice. What he did instead was to write "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue." "Mr. Tambourine Man," which dates from early 1964, was probably composed before any of the other songs on *Bringing It All Back Home*, but "Baby Blue" is the only song here that sounds like it was composed in its aftermath. And unlike its progenitor, "Baby Blue" is a prototype for hundreds of songs to come.

At one level, "Baby Blue" is a simple song, obvious in attitude and unequivocal in tone. It takes the "chain of flashing images" aesthetic of "Mr. Tambourine Man" and turns it into an ethic: the self is an incessant turning in the wind and the rain in which nothing survives change except that which suffers change–the wind and the rain, the spirit and the soul, I and you. "I" know this, and "you" better learn it fast. Period. End of song.

But this is to rob the song of its essential drama, which arises from Dylan's highly inventive handling of the relationship between the singer and Baby Blue, or, more specifically, between the song's (unstated) "I" and its "you." Beginning with this very song, this "pronominal romance"–to borrow a term Leslie Fielder coined to describe the

courtship dance of "I" with "you" that animates Whitman's "Song of Myself"*–moves to the center of Dylan's poetry, where it becomes an extremely volatile and ambiguous affair of sometimes dizzying complexity. "Baby Blue" *is* a simple song, but even here the psychology of this relationship between the speaker and his imagined listener is slippery enough to imbue the song with a layered richness of tone and implication utterly beyond anything Dylan had previously written.

For starters, the singer is a double agent. For the most part, he speaks as an impersonal spirit, a kind of guardian angel, kindred to Mr. Tambourine Man. However, the magnificent blast with which the song opens (truly one of Dylan's greatest single lines) sounds at first very much like the enraged shout of a man with a very personal stake in these goings-on. He's throwing her out; what is over is a love affair, hers and his. "You must leave now" is not far from "Go away from my window." But this is the only time we are permitted to hear this tone; indeed, it disappears so rapidly that we might even wonder whether it was ever present: maybe "you must leave" means "there is a necessity that you go" and not "I order you to go."

Well, who knows. The human voice is such a mercurial thing, as Dylan himself, as much as anyone, has helped us realize. But I do hear in this opening shout the accents of a fiercely personal exigency, one whose almost palpable repression, throughout the remainder of the song, is a major source of its power. For instance, in the second line, when the singer tells Baby Blue "whatever you wish to keep you better grab it fast," he is not threatening to throw her belongings in the dumpster if she doesn't clear them out immediately. But the violence of that thought does shadow this line's overt meaning–Baby Blue's need to accommodate herself to the radical discontinuities in human identity to which this rupture has exposed her–and it inflects the pathos of the succeeding image of "your orphan with his gun, crying like a fire in the sun." This uncanny figure seems, in part, to represent the singer's merely personal identity: wielding a gun, he is all menace and malice. But it is a child's harmless toy gun, and his primal "cry" is swallowed up in and nullified by the life-source that engenders it. His former identity is the orphan of a spirit that has abandoned it.

* Leslie Fiedler, "Walt Whitman: Portrait of the Artist as a Middle-Aged Hero," p. 70.

Baby Blue is in the same boat, and in pointing himself out to her, the singer is implicitly asking her to recognize her own orphaned self. But while the singer is reconciled to this change (and thus is able to sing this song), his ex-lover is being taken by cruel surprise. But the singer's cruelty is now secondary, a by-product of other motives. What may have begun as a kiss-off song has turned into a transcendental come-on, an invitation to accept a self Baby Blue does not yet recognize or desire to acknowledge.

The cruelty of Baby Blue's surprise is intended, that is, as a liberating violence, and the wonder of this song is that is pulls this off. In fact, I doubt that most listeners hear even a hint of nastiness or meanness in the song. This is largely the result, I think, of the fact that the singer never says "I." The lyric's "I" is wholly implicit (as a necessary speaker), in the same way that, in a soliloquy, a "you" is always implicit (as a necessary listener). In fact, this song is a second-person soliloquy. Just substitute "I" for "you" in the lyric, and this aspect of the song's rhetoric becomes obvious. Perhaps the singer addresses her in the voice of a guardian angel because that's who he is, an inner voice harassing her toward the embrace of a sublime spiritual nakedness. This is how I usually hear the song, probably because Dylan often sings it with an enraptured joyousness that nearly dissolves awareness of anything beyond his own augmenting ecstasy of anticipation. The singer is Baby Blue's spirit, giving *herself* a good hard talking to, or, if you will, Baby Blue is just the singer's name for his own wounded heart, which he is trying to retrieve.

Boy-girl song, a girl's soliloquy, a boy's soliloquy–pick whatever scenario you want, it hardly matters. Dylan's songs are famously open-ended and ambiguous, but this is where it begins. "Baby Blue" is his first song that is simultaneously a continuous fiction–a story–and a discontinuous series of figurations; and it is his first song that is simulta-

neously a self-exploration and an interrogation of another. And these and other firsts flow directly from the fact that is it also his first song that is a truly open-ended address to a "you" who is not a pronoun but, as it were, a pre-noun: not "you" as in some particular ex-girlfriend or even some particular composite of ex-girlfriends or whatever, but "you" as in whoever you are or might ever be who's listening to me. Baby Blue may have begun as a composite of all the women (or even all the men, women, and children) Dylan ever left behind, or even as a composite of all his own experiences of having been abandoned. But unlike the female figures in "Don't Think Twice," "It Ain't Me Babe," or "I Don't Believe You," Baby Blue does not remain a figure from the past; she becomes a figure out of the future, an image of emotions as yet unknown and unfelt. What we encounter here for the first time in Dylan's work is the second-person equivalent of the "egotistical sublime," Keats's term for the mind's confrontation, in Wordsworth's poetry, with its own illimitable greatness. "Baby Blue" is "you" as an ever earlier morning sky, an infant listener whose response, evermore-about-to-be, realizes the song's naked truths.

I suppose this must sound a bit like gibberish, and I must admit I am having a difficult time here finding adequate words to reconcile what I think I understand with what I know I hear. So let's cut to the chase. Dylan often sounds like not only is he making up what he sings as he sings it but also like he is singing it specifically and personally to me. This is an illusion–an illusion resulting from the fact that his songs are often structured in a way that requires me (or you) to complete them. They are structured, that is, in a way that asks "how do you feel" about this. We always have some answer; our answer is never exactly the same. Dylan never sings a song the same way twice; but more importantly, we never listen to it the same way twice. And beginning with "Baby Blue," Dylan's songs–most of them, anyway–begin to take this into account. Dylan changes during the course of "I Don't Believe You," but I (and you) must change during the course of "Baby Blue." The lyric requires our answer, an answer the singer never hears.

I said earlier that "Baby Blue" is a simple song, and it is. Dylan's lyrics begin to get increasingly complex with his very next song, "Like a Rolling Stone," in which he discovers that although he can never hear your answer, he can imagine it and respond to what he imagines. Beginning with "Like a Rolling Stone," Dylan ropes his listener into shadow dialogues he conducts with himself. Listening to these songs is like listening to one end of telephone conversations or (in the case of songs like "Visions of Johanna" or "She's Your Lover Now" to one end of conference calls.)

By this measure, the four verses of "Baby Blue" boil down to "Hello? Hello? Hello? Good-bye!" The key verse is the third, another of the album's disguised bridges:

All your seasick sailors
they're all rowing home
All your reindeer army
they're all going home
The lover who just walked out the door
has taken all his blankets from the floor
The carpet too is moving under you
and it's all over now baby blue

Baby Blue's retreating sailors and soldiers are a fairly transparent image of the futility of her ego defenses, and their nausea reflects the radical unmooring of her reality. But this verse is itself seasick with repetition, not only in the reflexive rhyme on "home" but also in the redundancy with which the moving carpet echoes the folding sky in the previous verse. Baby Blue's world may be going to pieces, but the singer's words here are full of an unpleasant sense of re-treading the same ground, of running in place. (Indeed, Dylan, perhaps becoming disoriented, actually sings "empty-handed army" on the album cut, a lyrical flub that imports "empty-handed" from the "empty-handed painter" in the previous verse.) By the end of this verse, the refrain "it's all over now" begins to sound a bit desperate, like wishful thinking.

He resolves this growing impasse by shifting his rhetoric, in the last verse, from declaration to exhortation, thereby bequeathing the lyric's

realization to Baby Blue, who is hypostatized as "you" in a second reflexive rhyme. The final time round, the refrain refers less to Baby Blue's former world than to the song, which at last relinquishes itself to her listening. But Dylan also somehow manages to make this final verse seem to be something very much like the sound of her listening. There is a uncanny sense that Baby Blue has suddenly stepped forth from the shadows, even though the singer (whoever or whatever he is) is of course still talking. Part of this, I guess, has to do with the way the lyric embeds within itself images of the song ("something that calls for you") and the singer, with whom I identify the "vagabond who's rapping at your door." Insofar as the singer might also be her ex-lover, he is also present here as the most recent of the "dead you've left." But notice it is "the dead you've left," not "the dead you leave." Baby Blue has stepped forward, her naked listening confronting and containing within its attention the voice that is "standing in the clothes you once wore." There is a sense that the acts of speaking and listening, the polarities of "I" and "you," have somehow been folded into a single hushed moment. When it comes round the final time, the refrain embraces more than the end of something; Baby Blue is "all over now" the way a dawn suddenly floods the morning. No "fire in the sun," she's "another match."

VI

"Another match" is also another mate. "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" is a love song. Although it has taken me a long time to see it that way, I've always heard it as a love song. It sounds like a love song–not just the song, the music, but the lyric, too. The words sound like a greeting. "Baby Blue" is an anti-love song that turns into a friendship song that turns into a love song. It is, to be sure, an extraordinarily antithetical love song, attaining to a virtually disembodied eroticism that is, depending on your point of view, either a sublime paradox or impossible nonsense. I've put my money on the former, but not without hedging my bet: I have referred to Baby Blue as a kind of morning sky in part because it fits Dylan's imagery but mostly because I find it impossible to think of her as another person, male or female. She is too rarefied, too internalized. She is a mood, an inner weather; she is Dylan's rosy-fingered dawn, an Americanized Aurora.

She also enables Dylan, it seems to me, to recover by song's end an innocence that began to disappear from his songs in "Girl of the North Country," a song about the uneasily shared affection two boys feel for the same girl. This innocence appears without irony only in the song that (ironically) announces its disappearance from the singer's life: "Bob Dylan's Dream" is a song about a companionability so innocent Dylan doesn't even mention–or maybe even have to remember–whether these "first few friends" include any girls. The issue, of course, is not girls, or even sex particularly. The issue is adulthood, which Dylan experiences–always–as an adulteration, as a loss of an unselfconscious togetherness indistinguishable from solitude. In adulthood, one becomes two, and the many replace the few.

"It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" retrieves this lost innocence, emotionally and imaginatively, in the completeness with which the singer identifies with Baby Blue's second-person sublime. What I am struck by is how great a distance Dylan traveled–in less than two years! I am also struck by the even greater psychological distance that separates "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" from his next major song, composed less than six months later. "Like a Rolling Stone" opens the very Pandora's box that "Baby Blue" so blithely finesses. Suddenly, we are two again, and soon we will be very many indeed, with a vengeance.

In composing "Baby Blue" Dylan had attained a maturity and completeness of vision that short-circuited the travails of adulthood, but that, for that very reason, could not be sustained. Indeed, "Farewell Angelina," a *Bringing It All Back Home* outtake not officially released until the *Bootleg Series* (1991), is something of a halfway house between the innocent intimacy of "Baby Blue" and the duplicities of "Rolling Stone." (It actually feels like an early version of the lyrical impulse that found its resolution in another *Highway 61 Revisited* song "Queen Jane Approximately.") Strikingly similar to "Baby Blue" thematically–its images of the shifting grounds of social and psychologi-

cal identity are even more hauntingly pentrating–"Farewell Angelina" tells a very different story. The singer has little or no faith that Angelina can ever usher in her own new dawn, and with a oddly gallant mournfulness, he simply abandons her, "a table standing empty by the edge of the sea," to a deterioration her pride seems to invite.

Dylan has (as yet) never written anything as luminously transcendental, as angelic, as "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue," let alone "Mr. Tambourine Man." Measured by the aesthetic that informs these songs, even the best of Dylan's subsequent work is noisy, muddied by all sorts of psycho-sexual duplicities. At times still an angel, perhaps, but with a certain inevictable darkness in his eyes. I don't think the artist who made *Bringing It All Back Home* was ready for this–perhaps that is what is behind the mournfulness of the prescient "Farewell Angelina." Though Dylan says (in the album's liner notes), "I have given up at trying for perfection," he hasn't, or hadn't when he wrote and recorded these songs. And though he says "I accept chaos," he hadn't. This LP is a grand refusal of chaos, and in its best moments, a sublime triumph over it. After all, isn't that what it means to bring it all–ALL!–back home?

6

Highway 61 Revisited

Let's rock!

Bob Dylan is a

1) folk singer
2) rock 'n' roll singer
3) blues singer
4) pop singer
5) gospel singer
6) country singer
7) all of the above

A good desert-island topic, don't you think? Since 1997, I've been marveling at the way Dylan has been turning himself into some sort of country singer, but for a very long time, I've thought of Dylan as, first and foremost, a blues singer. It's his most congenial mask: aggressive, suspicious, devious, wildly shy, disarmingly humorous, incorrigibly mean, slyly charming, insolent, upset and upsetting in every way.

The blues is the first (and only?) individualist's folk music–a concept that would be an oxymoron anywhere but America. The blues is