

Uterior Significance in the Art of Bob Dylan

Glenn Hughes

"[The importance of symbols in] human living is exemplified, for example, by the saying, Let me write a nation's songs, and I care not who writes her laws."¹

It is a commonplace to refer to Bob Dylan as an extraordinarily gifted artist who transformed the medium of popular song, radically expanding and redefining its possibilities. It is also common to note the uneven quality of his artistic output—as songwriter, recording artist, and performer—during the fifty years of his still-continuing career. As the historian Sean Wilentz puts it in his 2010 study, *Bob Dylan in America*: "Dylan's career has been an unsteady pilgrimage, passing through deep troughs as well as high points ..."² Since the period of his early successes and innovations in the world of American popular music in the 1960s, there have been stretches—some shorter, some longer—when he has produced poor, even embarrassing, work, and his artistic reputation rests heavily on the achievements of those early years. Still, he has remained a prolific and recurrently powerful artist, creating significant and highly

¹ Bernard Lonergan, "Art," in *Topics in Education, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 10, ed. Robert M. Doran and Frederick E. Crowe (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 221 (hereafter referred to as *CWL* 10). This formulation of the famous saying is of uncertain origin. The expression of the idea in English is frequently traced back to the Scottish writer and politician Andrew Fletcher (1653-1716): "I said I knew a very wise man so much of Sir Christopher's sentiment, that he believed if a man were permitted to make all the ballads he need not care who should make the laws of a nation, and we find that most of the ancient legislators thought that they could not well reform the manners of any city without the help of a lyric, and sometimes of a dramatic poet." Fletcher's remark may be found in *The Political Works of Andrew Fletcher, Esq., A Discourse of Government* (London, A. Bettesworth, 1732), 372.

² Sean Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 9.

original work right up to the present; and his standing as an American artist of lasting importance, and of enormous influence, is assured.

What Dylan achieved in the medium of popular song is in fact comparable to certain breakthroughs in other twentieth-century art forms, breakthroughs associated with the term “modernism,” or sometimes “high modernism,” such as the creation of formal abstraction in painting by artists such as Kandinsky and Malevich; the development of an English-language *vers libre* employing pastiche, fragmented narrative, and obscure symbolic allusiveness as in the work of Pound and Eliot; the use in films of a sophisticated, often obscure symbolism, together with a breaking-up of narrative structure, by directors such as Fellini, Resnais, and Antonioni; and Picasso’s and Braque’s exploration of a confusing simultaneity of multiple perspectives in cubism.

Indeed, the Dylan/Picasso comparison is one that has proven irresistible to Dylan scholars and cultural critics, as well as to fellow-artists such as Leonard Cohen, who in the mid-1980s described Dylan as “the Picasso of song.”³ The comparison may be thought especially apt for four reasons. First, both artists, in periods of intense experimentation early in their careers, dramatically and shockingly expanded the formal possibilities of their respective art forms. Second, more than any other artists of the twentieth century these two warrant the epithet “protean,” both of them continually changing and mastering new styles and modes while manifesting a technical facility to create successful artworks across an astonishing spectrum of genres. Third, both artists notoriously acted as thieves and magpies in incorporating materials from past art into their own works while transforming them to serve new and original purposes. And fourth, most specifically, just as Picasso famously communicated new forms of vision and feeling in painting through disassemblage and rearrangement of parts, use of overlapping planes of perspective, and juxtaposition of figurative elements from different periods and styles of painting for unsettling and allusive effect, so Dylan—most famously and effectively in the triad of albums from 1965-66 that constitute the high point of his achievement, *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, and *Blonde on Blonde*—enacted similar experiments of fragmented narrative, overlapping shifts of mood, juxtapositions of allusive symbols and rhetoric echoing both past and present times and both high and low cultures, and simultaneous seriousness and humor, in order to invent new, challenging, and even at times grotesque lyrical “stories” that conveyed powerful originalities of vision and feeling.

It is always difficult, when one hasn’t personally lived through the pertinent period while attentive to developments within an artistic medium, to attain an accurate appreciation of, and sense for, the types of

³ Quoted in David Boucher, *Dylan & Cohen: Poets of Rock and Roll* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 6. See, for example, Tim Riley, *Hard Rain: A Dylan Commentary* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 133.

paradigm shifts enacted by Picasso and Dylan. The visual lexicons of cubism, collage, and abstraction have become familiar; and popular songwriting has long since absorbed and programmatically reproduced—almost always in far inferior manners—Dylan’s innovations.⁴ But if one exercises one’s historical imagination sufficiently, and if one allows for a meaningful parallel to be made between developments in “high art” and in “high popular art,” it is possible to appreciate how the newness and strangeness of Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* (1907; first exhibited 1916) is strikingly comparable to that of, say, the Dylan songs “Desolation Row” (1965) and “Visions of Johanna” (1965-66). Both the painting and the two songs are powerful works that were experienced as outrageous and fascinating—especially to other artists in their respective fields—and also as aesthetically uncategorizable within accepted notions of their respective arts; both “gave a new rule” to its medium, to use Kant’s phrase.⁵ In both cases the viewer or listener is presented, to use Bernard Lonergan’s description of significant art, with something exceptionally “other, different, novel, strange, new, remote, intimate” that effects a radical opening of one’s horizon and a transformation of one’s world.⁶ All three works are transfixingly rich and strange, unnervingly vivid, fully realized in their communication of a bewildering variety of intense emotions, and suggestive of unplumbable depths of meaning while conveying the “inevitability of form” that is a key feature of deeply satisfying art.⁷

These comments indicate some of the reasons examples of the best of Dylan’s work may serve as an excellent subject to illustrate the value of Lonergan’s analysis of the nature and purposes of art, specifically with regard to one of the more interesting yet obscure components of that analysis, which is art’s capacity for what Lonergan calls “ulterior significance.” Lonergan’s notion of ulterior significance is somewhat obscure because it directs our attention to something that by its very nature is somewhat obscure: the hidden significances and depths of meaning that we surmise to lie beyond our comprehension—what

⁴ As Mike Marqusee writes: “We tend to forget what an amazing achievement it was to create a popular lyrical idiom that could encompass ‘tax deductible charity organizations,’ a ‘leopard-skin pillbox hat,’ ‘an Egyptian ring that sparkles before she speaks,’ ‘brown rice, seaweed and a dirty hot dog.’ Dylan opened up an established form to a range of words, references, experiences, moods, and modes not previously associated with it.” Mike Marqusee, *Chimes of Freedom: The Politics of Bob Dylan’s Art* (New York: The New Press, 2003), 132.

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 168. “Desolation Row” from *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965); “Visions of Johanna” from *Blonde on Blonde* (1966).

⁶ Lonergan, “Chapter 9: Art,” in *CWL* 10, p. 222.

⁷ On “inevitability of form” in art, see *ibid.*, 215, 219.

Loneragan in *Insight* describes as “the sphere of the ulterior unknown, of the unexplored and strange, of the undefined surplus of significance and momentousness.”⁸ Both the world and the concrete potentialities of our existences are rich with mysteries, reaching from those we surmise in quotidian encounters with the suggestively beautiful or uncanny or fraught, all the way to the ultimate mystery of the divine ground of reality. Art, Lonergan tells us, when it is important or good enough, always reminds us of the “‘plus’ that is in things,” of “the something more that this world reveals,” a “something more” that is always present although it “cannot be defined or got hold of.” And our awareness of this “ulterior presence” as evoked by art can imbue existence with a sense of import and adventure, even of grandeur, especially when the symbols of an artwork intimate not merely an ulterior but an *ultimate* significance—that is, when they awaken our wonder not just to the mysterious and indefinable depths of meaning in our worldly involvements, but to our participation in sacred or divine being.⁹

Before proceeding to show how Dylan is, at his best, a master of ulterior significance in his power to evoke the mysteries that human living is involved in, it will be helpful to lay some foundations through briefly considering two topics. The first of these is the distinctive character of Dylan’s gift—obvious from the beginning of his career—as a lyricist, songwriter, and performer. The second is Lonergan’s account of “symbolic meaning as the essential medium of art” as this applies, first, to the medium of song, and then specifically to Dylan’s best work.

1 Dylan’s Songwriting, Imaginative Empathy, and Empathic Mimicry

Dylan first gained notice as a singer-songwriter of so-called folk music, and became at a very young age a central star of the “folk revival” of the early 1960s. He was soon recognized to have a talent for composing and performing songs that simultaneously sounded deeply traditional and yet utterly fresh, and certain early works were felt to voice with clarity and intelligence many of the cultural and political concerns—including concerns about civil rights—that were “in the air” at the time. Few people, however, in the early years of his fame, realized just how deep and wide were the sources upon which Dylan drew for the power in his “folk” and “protest” songs. As would become clear only later, he was at the time something of a musical sponge, acquainting himself with and absorbing the influences of a huge variety of American popular song forms available to him through recordings and live performances.

⁸ Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 3, eds. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 556.

⁹ Lonergan, “Art,” *CWL* 10, pp. 214, 222, 224.

It is well known that his first hero and inspiration as a songwriter was Woody Guthrie. No less of an influence on his early sense of himself as a songwriter and on his compositions, however, was the 1930s Delta bluesman Robert Johnson.¹⁰ But these two names scarcely scratch the surface in indicating the range of material Dylan was striving to absorb and creatively make his own. First, it entailed “folk music” in its entirety—a category that includes British folk ballads, Appalachian mountain music, hillbilly, bluegrass, white gospel, black gospel, country and western, rural blues, union songs, Irish and Australian outlaw ballads, Tex-Mex borderlands music, hobo music, hokum, and early acoustic urban blues. In the first years of his songwriting and performing, Dylan drew from all of these idioms—and quickly added those of rock ‘n’ roll (an early love and practice well before his immersion in “folk” music), Tin Pan Alley, Chicago R&B, southern soul, and the kind of Brecht/Weill compositions typified by “Pirate Jenny” from *The Threepenny Opera*.¹¹ As Mike Marqusee writes, “recorded music enabled Dylan to ransack the American musical heritage like Ezra Pound at loose in a library of medieval manuscripts.”¹² And his genius for imitation and creativity enabled him, first, to write new compositions that showed a remarkably adept mastery of traditional forms (e.g., “Bob Dylan’s Dream,” “John Brown,” “Percy’s Song,” “Boots of Spanish Leather,” “Seven Curses,” “North Country Blues”), and second, to expand the possibilities of those forms, in terms of both content and structure, in ways that astonished his growing audience (“A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall,” “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” “Only A Pawn in Their Game”).¹³

In part, what allowed for this early mastery in the composition of “folk songs” was a striking poetic talent. Dylan showed from his

¹⁰ For the respective influences of Guthrie and Johnson on Dylan, see Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 243-48, 280-88.

¹¹ David Hajdu, *Positively 4th Street: The Lives and Times of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Mimi Fariña and Richard Fariña* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 10; Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*, 334; Marqusee, *Chimes of Freedom*, 151. For the impact of the song “Pirate Jenny” on Dylan’s songwriting, see Dylan, *Chronicles*, 272-76; Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*, 43-43; and Clinton Heylin, *Revolution in the Air: The Songs of Bob Dylan, 1957-1973* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2009), 151-54.

¹² Marqusee, *Chimes of Freedom*, 151.

¹³ “Bob Dylan’s Dream” (1963) and “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” (1962) from *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* (1963); “John Brown” (1962) from *Bob Dylan: Live at the Gaslight, 1962* (2005); “Boots of Spanish Leather” (1963), “North Country Blues” (1963), “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” (1963), and “Only a Pawn in Their Game” (1963) from *The Times They Are A-Changin’* (1964); “Percy’s Song” (recorded 1963) from *Biograph* (1985); “Seven Curses” (recorded 1963) from *The Bootleg Series, Volumes 1-3 (Rare & Unreleased), 1961-1991* (1991).

songwriting beginnings a rare gift for handling the core elements of strong lyricality in poetry and song: alliteration, assonance, metrical sensitivity, and rhyme (Oxford Professor of Poetry Christopher Ricks has acclaimed Dylan as “one of the great rhymesters of all time”) in the service of an effective use of compelling imagery to tell a story or convey a mood or experience.¹⁴ Also, Dylan possessed an uncanny ability to experience an imaginative empathy with the figures in both inherited songs and those of his own invention—to “inhabit” these personae and communicate feelingly their passions and perspectives, whether they were fictional characters of legend, historical persons told of in ballads, archetypal hoboes or outlaws or orphans or disillusioned lovers, or persons of the present whose stories Dylan had read about in the newspapers.¹⁵ In his own songs, this imaginative empathy found expression in his lyrics. But in both traditional and original compositions, it was also apparent in his singing, in his talents for phrasing and delivery.

Much attention has been devoted to Dylan’s singing voice. Depending in part on whether or not one looks for “attractiveness” and conventional sounds, textures, and phrasings in vocal music, one tends to be either put off or fascinated by it. For those receptive to it, from the start of his career Dylan was recognized to have an almost preternatural gift for what might be called “empathic mimicry,” using a combination of precision in timing, control of emotional tone, and inventive and surprising phrasing in the service of lyrical meaning, that could be spellbinding. The result—a very intentional result—was an ability to sound as if he were from any historical time and place in America; and, when singing from the perspective of aged or roughed-up characters, to sound as if he were channeling a singer four times his age.¹⁶ Tim Riley writes that the early Dylan had a voice “as strange and arresting as those of [certain] backwoods white-blues performers . . . a barbed yawp that made him sound like he was born an old-timer.”¹⁷ Greil Marcus makes the same point in a more concrete way: “The way Bob Dylan sang on his early records,” he writes, “he could have been born in Virginia in the seventeen hundreds, turned up for the Gold Rush in California in 1849, headed up to Alaska in the 1890s, made it down to Mexico in 1910 ...”

¹⁴ Christopher Ricks, *Dylan’s Vision’s of Sin* (New York: Ecco Press, 2003), 19.

¹⁵ Dylan wrote of his early immersion in the worlds of folk songs and ballads: “I loved all these ballads right away.... I was beginning to feel like a character from within these songs, even beginning to think like one.... I could rattle off all these songs ... as if all the wise and poetic words were mine and mine alone.” Dylan, *Chronicles*, 240.

¹⁶ This gift is exceptionally apparent in the young Dylan’s recordings of the traditionals “No More Auction Block” (recorded live in 1962) and “Moonshiner” (recorded 1963), both from *The Bootleg Series, Volumes 1-3 (Rare & Unreleased), 1961-1991* (1991).

¹⁷ Riley, *Hard Rain*, 31.

And on through his albums of the 1960s, Marcus summarizes, Dylan “caught fifty states, four hundred years, and four seasons in his voice.”¹⁸ This capacity for empathic mimicry had three major consequences, from the point of view of our concern with Lonergan’s account of art: (1) it enabled Dylan to communicate the feelings of concrete persons in concrete situations with great impact; (2) it made him able to, in Sean Wilentz’s words, “make the present and the past feel like each other,” to sound like he was singing “in more than one era at once,” and thus evoke with peculiar efficacy the timelessness of truths about the human condition;¹⁹ and (3) through a reliance on unpredictability and emotional freshness in phrasing and delivery, it allowed Dylan to produce in the listener a constant awareness, line by line as a song was being sung, of the *possibilities* in human experience—of possible ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, suffering, acting, and being.

Finally, this empathic mimicry served an artistic gift, exercised both in songwriting and performing, of rare emotional range. Dylan could, as both writer and singer, convincingly sound world-weary in one song and hopelessly naïve in the next; he could inhabit in successive ballads the sensibility of a dashing, love-’em-and-leave-’em gambler and that of a poverty-stricken widow; his singing and stage persona could alternate rapidly between slapstick and a chilling seriousness, tender vulnerability and an imperviousness to all hardship. Now he reminded one of Charlie Chaplin, now of James Dean, now of the prophet Jeremiah. “As an artist,” writes Greil Marcus, “he was funny, outrageous, prophetic, denunciatory, appalled, unpredictable, [and] inside any of those qualities you could hear wariness, slyness, thinking, a will to stay a step ahead, in control.”²⁰ No songwriter or songwriting performer had yet appeared who was such a shape-shifter. And the effect could be at once endearing, mesmerizing, and frightening.²¹

Let us turn now to Lonergan’s analysis of symbolic meaning in art, and apply it to Dylan’s songwriting compositions.

¹⁸ Greil Marcus, *Bob Dylan by Greil Marcus: Writings 1968-2010* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2010), 124, 144.

¹⁹ Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*, 12.

²⁰ Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 221.

²¹ Shortly after writing these paragraphs, I came across the following comment by Greil Marcus: “Empathy has always been the genie of [Dylan’s] work, of the tones of his voice, his sense of rhythm, his feel for how to fill up a line or leave it half empty, his sense of when to ride a melody and when to bury it, so that it might dissolve all of a listener’s defenses—and this is what allowed Dylan, in 1962 at the Gaslight Café in Greenwich Village, at home in that secret community of tradition and mystery, to become not only the pining lover in the old ballad ‘Handsome Molly,’ but also Handsome Molly herself.” Marcus, *Bob Dylan by Greil Marcus*, 366.

2 Symbolic Meaning in Dylan's Art

Central to Lonergan's account of the significance of art is the point that art is able to open up a consciousness to previously unexplored ways of being-in-the-world—that is, it is able to produce in us *felt experiences* that we had never imagined, and that expand our sense of what we ourselves might be, or might be part of, or might become, or might choose to become. And art is able to do this because it uses the language of *symbols*.

Symbols, although they may have a conceptual dimension (obviously so in the case of words used symbolically), are essentially images; and images employed skillfully by an artist become symbols that, first, invite us to undergo certain experiences by conveying meanings at a preconceptual level with emotional immediacy, and second, are able to evoke the richness of human experience by communicating or suggesting many meanings simultaneously. As Lonergan writes, an artistic symbol is an image that is intentionally “overdetermined” with meaning; one symbol might even carry contradictory meanings, not being bound by the logical principle of noncontradiction.²² And since the principal purpose of art is to communicate *emotional meanings*—meanings embodied concretely in the artwork, and that we in turn concretely experience and, as it were, *feelingly enact*—a careful artistic creation of groups of symbols rich with meanings, composed into a compelling unity of form, can awaken in us feeling-laden apprehensions of depths of significance in a way that non-symbolic languages cannot.

The symbolic languages of art include those of music, painting, sculpture, architecture, dance, film, photography, drama, poetry and song. Each of these has its distinctive powers of communication, certain privileges belonging to each medium that allow it best to evoke certain types of feeling and experience. The pure nonconceptuality and emotional immediacy of music have led some to argue that it, of all artistic media, has the greatest power to evoke not only complexities of human emotion, but also the mysteries of meaning that we know to lie beyond the boundaries of human understanding, and which enthrall us, or frighten us, or beckon to us as realities that complete the meanings we partially comprehend.²³ The verbal arts, on the other hand, are

²² Lonergan, “Art,” *CWL* 10, p. 220.

²³ The literary and cultural critic George Steiner states: “In ways so obvious as to make any statement a tired cliché, yet of an undefinable and tremendous nature, music puts our being as men and women in touch with that which transcends the sayable, which outstrips the analysable. Music is plainly uncircumscribed by the world as the latter is an object of scientific determination and practical harnessing. The meanings of the meanings of music transcend.” George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 218.

recognized as being capable of the most *specific* symbolic evocations both of human experiences and of realities that lie beyond our full understanding, since words allow for the most *exact* communication of apprehensions and intimations of meaning. Words, then, have the unique symbolic virtue of being capable of carrying extreme conceptual precision along with profound emotional resonance—for, as Lonergan notes, while words have a “proper meaning” (that is, a specific referent or class of referents), they also carry “a retinue of associations” which may be “visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, affective or evocative of attitudes, tendencies, and evaluations.”²⁴ What the talented verbal artist does, Lonergan indicates, is to exploit such retinues of associations, so that words—and especially words denoting visual or other images—attain a maximum of resonance, pertinent to the communication of specific concrete experiences and feelings, in the consciousness of the listener or reader. Their purpose is to provoke a “dynamic situation,” or a series of dynamic situations, in the consciousness of the listener or reader so that she concretely re-enacts the scene, the dramatic moment, the intense feeling, the compelling or disturbing vision, that the artist has succeeded in “objectifying” in the artwork.²⁵

What we find in the artistic medium of *song*—whether classical *lieder*, operatic arias, church hymns, parlor ballads, folk songs, rock ’n’ roll, Gregorian chant, or the songs of tribal peoples—is the uniting of musical symbols and verbal symbols in artworks that draw upon the powers of both media. When the combination of music and words creates a particularly satisfying unity of form—when the melody, rhythm, tempo, instrumentation, etc., of the music carries meanings that complement and intensify the meanings of the words (whether through mimicry, counterpoint, adding of nuance, or other means), and when the feeling-laden meanings of the sung words are felt to have found their “inevitable form” in their actual musical setting—songs can take on an exceptional, sometimes mystical, significance for the listener or singer.

One of the factors that allows this union to be so powerful is that *words themselves* have a musicality: each evokes certain meanings due to the way it sounds to the ear, and they can be linked and arranged together in ways that create modes of musicality between themselves (such as rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and so on). This musicality of words, which is central to the communication of felt meaning in poetry (and the best prose), can be exploited in song through a multitude of means, including melody, pace, volume, the abbreviating and extending of words and phrases, and—in delivery—various intricacies of phrasing.

There is an inescapable limitation to writing about the significance of Bob Dylan’s art insofar as one concerns oneself with his lyrics without considering their melodies and musical settings (and, in Dylan’s case, as previously indicated, with his recorded performances). Still,

²⁴ Lonergan, “Art,” *CWL* 10, p. 229.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 217-19, 229.

because his best lyrical compositions have an unusually rich symbolic power simply on the level of words—and also because we can imagine how they might gain additional meaning from apt musical setting and expert phrasing—they can serve well to illustrate the allusive and existential reach of symbolic meaning. Two examples from Dylan's songs will suffice to illuminate this point.

Written when he was twenty-two and released on his fourth album, *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, “Chimes of Freedom” (1964) is a song whose situational premise is two lovers taking shelter from a night storm in the doorway of a cathedral.²⁶ Dylan presents the experience as an occasion of epiphany, in which lightning and thunder synaesthetically become one with church bells tolling out a promise of freedom and redemption for all who suffer. The fourth of its six verses conveys a sense of the whole:

Through the wild cathedral evening the rain unraveled tales
For the disrobed faceless forms of no position
Tolling for the tongues with no place to bring their thoughts
All down in taken-for-granted situations
Tolling for the deaf an' blind, tolling for the mute
For the mistreated, mateless mother, the mistitled prostitute
For the misdemeanor outlaw, chained and cheated by pursuit
And we gazed upon the chimes of freedom flashing²⁷

There are two “dynamic situations” of the singer's experience being presented simultaneously in the symbols here. First, there is the hallucinatory transformation of rain, storm, and lightning into bells chiming out tales and circumstances, tolling as a witness, and as a moral and spiritual promise, to the suffering of the world. Second, there is the recognition and identifying of the chimed-for, the witnessed-to. For the effective communication of the first, Dylan relies on imagery and syntax that merges different types of sensory experience into each other while at the same time compressing narrative, moral, and spiritual meanings into elemental images of nature (“the rain unraveled tales,” “chimes of freedom flashing”). For conveying the second, Dylan lists—as he does in each verse—a sequence of human types in vivid images: “disrobed faceless forms of no position,” a phrase conveying the feelings of humiliation, helplessness, and anonymity in victims of social and political oppression; “the misdemeanor outlaw,” a concise image for those hounded to the margins of society and denied opportunity for the sake of merely petty trespasses. Overall there is here, to use one of

²⁶ “Chimes of Freedom” from *Another Side of Bob Dylan* (1964).

²⁷ All quoted lyrics are as sung on cited recordings, not as printed in the sometimes misleading versions or “transcriptions” in Bob Dylan, *Lyrics, 1962-1985* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985) or Bob Dylan, *Lyrics, 1962-2001* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

Lonergan's words, an "overexuberance" of symbolic meaning—within lines, within verses, and in the lyric as a whole. And the song's symbolic meanings revolve around three themes that appear consistently in Dylan's work: indignation at man's inhumanity to man; the permanence and depths of suffering in human history; and intimations of ultimate moral and spiritual redemption.²⁸

A second example shows another side of Dylan's art: less concerned with social than with personal experience, more fragmented and unkempt in its allusiveness, mordant and ironic rather than unguardedly sincere, and using its condensations of imagery to convey *coherencies of mood* rather than coherent narrative. Here is the first verse of "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues" (1965):²⁹

When you're lost in the rain in Juarez
 And it's Eastertime too
 And your gravity fails
 And negativity don't pull you through
 Don't put on any airs
 When you're down on Rue Morgue Avenue
 They got some hungry women there
 And they'll really make a mess outta you

The images come thick and fast, some of them highly specific ("lost in the rain," "Juarez," "Eastertime"), some of them more general but with familiar meanings ("Don't put on any airs," "hungry women"), some of them obscure but pointedly suggestive ("When your gravity fails / And negativity don't pull you through"), and all of them adding up to a litany of warning, evoking a definitely miserable and possibly dangerous situation. There is narrative here, but only barely—just enough to give imaginative and emotional unity to the sequence of images, whose purpose is clearly to convey, not a description of social or worldly events, but a mood—a feeling. "The point," Dylan said in 1965 about this song and its companions on the album *Highway 61 Revisited*, "is not understanding what I write, but *feeling* it." Of course, this is the concern of every artist—successfully communicating emotionally significant experience. But when the artistic medium is a verbal one, words must be used in a symbolically charged and original way if ready-made conceptual understanding is to be pierced by fresh experiences of emotional possibility. In this type of song, Dylan is doing what symbolist, expressionist, and surrealist poets had done before him in the "fine arts" medium of poetry: use feeling-laden verbal images to evoke

²⁸ "I don't know about other people's sympathy," Dylan said in 1966, "but my sympathy runs to the lame and crippled and beautiful things." Jonathan Cott, ed., *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews* (New York: Wenner Books, 2006), 106.

²⁹ "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues" from *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965).

in the psyche, not a unity of *understood* experience, but a unity of *felt* experience whose distinctive emotional character includes the psychological dislocation of *not being able to clearly understand the experience*. It is one way of provoking a sense of mystery—a sense of there being more to what is happening in and to oneself, and in the world, than one can figure out. This topic of mystery, as we shall see, has remained one of Dylan’s abiding concerns.

Now, it would be silly to claim that Dylan introduced this type of narrative-deprived and fragmented symbolic lyricism into popular song. A glance at British and Appalachian folk songs, or early blues lyrics, will give the lie to that supposition. But he *did* do something new by using it with the sophistication of an avant-garde artist who consciously and carefully juxtaposes highbrow and lowbrow cultural references; images grabbed from a large variety of locations and epochs; urban and rural experiences and perspectives; sacred and secular symbols; concrete and abstract terms; and literary language and street jargon. In other words, he brought high modernism into the mainstream of commercial popular song.³⁰ No songs of this nature—songs like “Highway 61 Revisited” (“God said to Abraham, ‘Kill me a son’ / Abe says, ‘Man, you must be puttin’ me on’ . . . Well Abe says, ‘Where you want this killin’ done?’ / God says ‘Out on Highway 61’”), or “Desolation Row” (“They’re selling postcards of the hanging / They’re painting the passports brown” . . . “And Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot / Fighting in the captain’s tower / While calypso singers laugh at them / And fishermen hold flowers”), or “Visions of Johanna”: (“Inside the museums, infinity goes up on trial / Voices echo, this is what salvation must be like after a while” . . . “the ghost of electricity howls in the bones of her face / Where these visions of Johanna have now taken my place”)—had ever been written before.³¹ And it was Dylan’s artistic mastery of the

³⁰ The “high modernism” in Dylan’s mid-1960s work—a perennial topic in Dylan scholarship—was deliberate, and reflected both his reading and self-schooling in “high” culture, as well as his aspirations to be a “serious” artist. In his 2004 memoir *Chronicles*, Dylan wrote: “I always admired true artists who are dedicated, so I learned from them. Popular culture usually comes to an end very quickly. It gets thrown into the grave. I wanted to do something that stood alongside Rembrandt’s paintings.” Dylan, *Chronicles*, 430. Asked, once, what it is that he views himself as doing, Dylan replied: “I am an artist. I try to create art.” Quoted in Ricks, *Dylan’s Visions of Sin*, 11.

³¹ “Highway 61 Revisited” (1965) from *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965). Giles Harvey, in a *New York Review of Books* review of recent books by Sean Wilentz and Greil Marcus, drives the point home: “No songwriter before him would have thought to include Paul Revere’s horse, the ghost of Belle Starr, Jack the Ripper, the Chamber of Commerce, John the Baptist, Galileo’s math book, Delilah, Cecil B. DeMille, Ma Rainey, Beethoven, and the National Bank in a single song, as Dylan does in the rollicking phantasmagoria of ‘Tombstone Blues’ (1965), a fairly typical example of his output at the time.” Harvey, “Bob

resources and techniques of verbal symbolic meaning—his “poetic” genius, if one wants to put it like that—together with the cultural resources at his disposal, the technological and commercial opportunities of his time and place, and the peculiarities of his temperament and musical sensibilities and interests—that made such an accomplishment possible.

3 Ulterior Significance

Dylan’s love of “the undefined surplus of significance and momentousness” in reality, and his mastery in evoking it, has enabled him repeatedly to fulfill what Lonergan deems the principal duty of the artist, which is to invest an artwork with “ulterior significance” so as to put us imaginatively in touch with those hidden and higher meanings with which our lives are involved, meanings that lie beyond our comprehension even as we sense their presence.³² In the most charged and revelatory modalities of art’s suggestiveness, that presence is experienced as the sacred or divine presence in whom all lines of existential concern and meaning meet—in Lonergan’s words, as “the presence of one who is not seen, touched, grasped ... yet is *present*.” It is that particular “sense of ulterior presence” that is the basis of art’s capacity not only to fascinate but also to induce spiritual insight, a piercing awareness of the numinous, or even awe and worship—and thus, at its most inspiring, to lead us to consider changing our lives. As Lonergan sums up the matter with utmost brevity: “The fundamental meaning important to us in art is that, just as the pure desire to know heads on to the beatific vision, so too the break from the ready-made world [that art induces] heads on to God.”³³

Now, during Dylan’s “high modernist” phase of 1965-66, when he did most to redefine the contours of what popular song could be, he was concerned to evoke mysterious and not-fully-knowable realities primarily in the dimension of worldly adventures and human encounters, which was often accomplished through the surrealist techniques of

Dylan After the Fall,” *New York Review of Books*, November 25, 2010.

“Tombstone Blues” from *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965).

³² Lonergan, *Insight*, CWL 3, p. 556; “Art,” CWL 10, p. 222.

³³ Lonergan, “Art,” CWL 10, p. 222, 224-25. Lonergan argues that art lacking “ulterior significance,” whether suggestive of the sacred or not, may be quite aesthetically sophisticated, may show great technical facility and be formally compelling, but it will lack existential profundity. And a good deal of art is only more or less sophisticated “play,” aimed at providing the delights of entertainment and distractions from the familiar routines of everyday living. Lacking ulterior significance, such art does not—in taking us out of “the ready-made world” so that we can refresh our awareness of the potentialities of self-creation—fulfill art’s most important function, which is to orient our consciousness and freedom toward the mysteries, and especially the divine mystery, in which we participate.

fragmentation, jarring juxtaposition, allusion without resolution, and intentional obscurity. Sometimes this resulted in songs recognized to be original and evocative but, for some, unsatisfying in their lack of intelligibility or narrative structure. (Critics have leveled such complaints against, for example, the well-known compositions “Gates of Eden” (1964) and “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands” (1966)—unconvincingly, in my view.)³⁴ But Dylan succeeded frequently, in most songs of this period, in using a combination of symbolic allusiveness and unities of disjointed narrative to create works that felt emotionally complete and convincing while conveying a real sense of ulterior significance—“unities of vision” that suggested that personal and local dramas of modern life were somehow bound up with real mysteries of meaning beyond our ken. “Mr. Tambourine Man” (1964), “It’s Alright Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)” (1964), “Like a Rolling Stone” (1965), “Highway 61 Revisited” (1965), “Ballad of a Thin Man” (1965), “Desolation Row” (1965), and “Visions of Johanna” (1965-66), are all songs that fascinated listeners in part because of the ways in which they evoked everyday life as immersed in mysteriously consequential, if not clearly graspable, depths of existential significance.³⁵

But we have also noted Dylan’s overt concern (as in “Chimes of Freedom”) with expressly spiritual mysteries—mysteries encompassing the ultimate meanings of human suffering and freedom, of moral struggle and hope, of mortality and intimations of immortality, of redemption and salvation. And if one focuses not on one period of Dylan’s art but on his fifty years of work as a whole, it is apparent not only that he has regularly evidenced a concern to evoke, through his best songs, a sense of the mysterious and uncanny, but that this concern has consistently been associated with an explicit sense of a sacred or divine reality more permanent than the worldly, to which human hopes and fears are ultimately oriented, and in relation to which human actions and decisions take their final meaning. To put it simply, Dylan as an artist has repeatedly evidenced a religious sensibility. Which is why, not incidentally, for a few notorious years he succumbed to the comforts of a literalist, fundamentalist Christianity, before realigning his existential and artistic compass to the elemental mysteriousness of transcendence—which in Dylan’s case has always been a biblically-informed apprehension of transcendence.

In fact, the impact of Biblical language and symbolism on Dylan’s songwriting, and his reliance on Biblical themes and imagery to express his deepest apprehensions and concerns, have been obvious from the

³⁴ “Gates of Eden” from *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965); “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands” from *Blonde on Blonde* (1966). Marcus, *Bob Dylan by Greil Marcus*, 49; Heylin, *Revolution in the Air*, 294.

³⁵ “Mr. Tambourine Man” and “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)” from *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965); “Like a Rolling Stone” and “Ballad of a Thin Man” from *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965).

beginning of his career and have never abated. “I have always read the Bible,” he stated in 1968; and scholars who have devoted research to identifying Biblical sources of specific phrases, words, events, and images, storytelling structures, and types of diction in Dylan’s work, leave no doubt that the practice has continued throughout his later life and career.³⁶ But many statements of Dylan have made clear that his receptiveness to Biblical texts and symbolisms is itself grounded in an abiding respect for and existential openness to all of the most important mysteries of the human condition: mortality, suffering, the enchantments and confusions of erotic love, epiphanies of timelessness, the war between the flesh and the spirit, sinfulness and complicity in evil, the longing for innocence and redemption, the promise and fear of divine judgment, and the question of historical direction and purpose. Indeed, as he tells it, what first attracted Dylan to “folk music” (or “traditional music,” as he has more encompassingly called long-handed-down ballads, “spirituals,” “old-time” music, blues, shanties, and all their kin) was that “the main body of it is just based on myth and the Bible and plague and famine and all kinds of things like that which are nothing but mystery and you can see it in all the songs.”³⁷ “All these songs about roses growing out of people’s brains and lovers who are really geese and swans that turn into angels I mean, you’d think that the traditional music people could gather from their songs that mystery—just plain

³⁶ Cott, ed., *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*, 119. For a concise summary of the influence of the Bible on Dylan’s lyrics and work, see Michael Gray, *Song & Dance Man III: The Art of Bob Dylan* (London and New York: Continuum), 392-393. Gray’s long, scholarly study is probably the single best source for investigating specific Biblical references and allusions in Dylan’s lyrics; see his Index under the heading of “religion” and its sub-headings “Bible,” “Christ,” “Christianity,” and “God.” A consistently recommended monograph is Bert Cartwright, *The Bible in the Lyrics of Bob Dylan* (Wanted Man, 1985; revised ed., 1992). Christopher Ricks, Oxford Professor of Poetry, identifies many specific references in Dylan’s lyrics from twenty-seven biblical Books and Letters in his *Dylan’s Visions of Sin*; see the heading “Bible” in the General Index. Clinton Heylin is also helpful for identifying Biblical references in Dylan’s lyrics in his two-volume chronological song-by-song snapshots of Dylan’s compositions; see Heylin, *Revolution in the Air*, and *Still On the Road: The Songs of Bob Dylan, 1974-2006* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010). Mike Marqusee sums up nicely the different modes of the Bible’s influence on Dylan over the years: “Critics are right to note the influence of the Bible in Dylan’s work of all periods, but it was only later that this interest acquired a ... formally religious significance. What grabbed the young Dylan about the Bible was what grabbed him about folk and blues: its archaic and resonant language, the metaphysical power that enabled it to speak of a deeper experience, a more abiding mystery, than the language of newspapers and magazines. A visitor to Woodstock found two books on Dylan’s table: a Bible and a volume of Hank Williams’s lyrics.” Marqusee, *Chimes of Freedom*, 237.

³⁷ Quoted in Marcus, *Invisible Republic*, 30.

simple mystery—is a fact, a traditional fact.”³⁸ It is clear that Dylan’s fascination with, and insistence on attesting to, all the basic mysteries of existence is the existential source of the generally “spiritual” flavor—whether muted or glaringly obvious—of so many of his songs, as well as of his responsiveness to Biblical symbolism.

Given his lifelong attraction, then, to the mysterious, and to evocations of sacred reality, it is not surprising that Dylan has explicitly concerned himself in his songs with questions of the relation of historical and worldly time to timeless, transcendent truth and being. From early on his songs—especially those in which he relied on the form of traditional ballads—aimed to create in the listener a sense of living in multiple eras at once, and thus in the embrace of a timeless sense of human solidarity and universality. Eventually it became one of his deliberate artistic concerns to create songs having “to do with the break-up of time,” where a song’s symbols and allusions and diction and narrative, or quasi-narrative, locate the singer and listener in what could be either biblical times or the present, or perhaps in very specific historical epochs simultaneously—say, the American Revolutionary (or Civil War) era *and* the southern United States in the early twentieth century *and* modern times.³⁹ About such compositions—notable examples would be “As I Walked Out One Morning” (1967), “Shelter from the Storm” (1974), “Isis” (1975), “Changing of the Guards” (1978), and “Blind Willie McTell” (1983)—Dylan himself once stated, “You’ve got yesterday, today, and tomorrow all in the same room, and there’s very little that you can’t imagine happening.”⁴⁰ The imagination is opened up because a sense of the full scope of the human drama is suddenly present, while at the same time the listener is led to feel how human existence of all times and places is shot through with enduring, timeless meaning. At their most successful, such songs carry the feeling of myth, because they remind us experientially that human existence is lived always in the intersection of timelessness and time, in the “in-between” of worldly and transcendent reality.

Because Dylan’s sense of the transcendently mysterious is so strong, and because he is a Westerner with a spiritual consciousness and imagination primarily shaped by the Judeo-Christian tradition and by the Bible, and finally because he has persistently been drawn by his moral

³⁸ Cott, ed., *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*, 98.

³⁹ Dylan quoted in Heylin, *Still On the Road*, 23: “Those are the songs I [now] wanted to write. The ones that do have the break up of time, where there is no time, [while] trying to make the focus as strong as a magnifying glass under the sun.”

⁴⁰ “As I Walked Out One Morning” from *John Wesley Harding* (1968); “Shelter From the Storm” from *Blood on the Tracks* (1975); “Isis” from *Desire* (1976); “Changing of the Guards” from *Street Legal* (1978); “Blind Willie McTell” (recorded 1983) from *The Bootleg Series, Volumes 1-3 (Rare & Unreleased), 1961-1991* (1991).

temperament to “the border experience of the examination of conscience,” as Eric Voegelin puts it, where questions both of history’s meaning and of ultimate moral judgment converge, his songs often have a strong eschatological bent.⁴¹ The ulterior significance signified or questioned or evoked is frequently that of the fulfillment of human meanings beyond time in their *historical* end—the mystery of the divinely-intended conclusion of all temporal human wanderings and hopes, the last dynamics and goal of the trajectory of what Martin Luther King, Jr., called “the arc of the moral universe.”⁴² An intense eschatological sensibility is already present in Dylan’s first genuinely outstanding composition, “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” (1962), based on the form and melody of Child Ballad #12, “Lord Randall,” which finds Dylan evoking again and again a sense of “end times” through symbol-laden answers to questions put to the song’s narrator about where he has been, what he has seen and heard, whom he has met—

I’ve been out in front of a dozen dead oceans
I’ve been ten thousand miles in the mouth of a graveyard

I saw a roomful of men with their hammers a-bleedin’
I saw a white ladder all covered with water

Heard the sound of a thunder, it roared out a warnin’
Heard the roar of a wave that could drown the whole world

—each stanza concluding with the recurring insistence of the melodically scale-ascending, frighteningly prophetic refrain:

And it’s a hard, and it’s a hard, it’s a hard, it’s a hard
And it’s a hard rain’s a-gonna fall.

An eschatological tension is also vivid in other songs of Dylan’s “folk” period—for example, “Whatcha Gonna Do?” (1962), “When the Ship Comes In” (1963), “Chimes of Freedom” (1964), and “Farewell, Angelina” (1964-65)—and only becomes more common thereafter.⁴³

⁴¹ Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*; in Voegelin, *Modernity Without Restraint: The Political Religions; The New Science of Politics; and Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, vol. 5 of *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Manfred Henningsen (Columbia, Mo: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 311.

⁴² Martin Luther King, Jr., “Where Do We Go From Here?” (1967), in King, Jr., *I Have A Dream: Writings & Speeches That Changed the World*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperOne, 1992), 179.

⁴³ “Whatcha Gonna Do?” (recorded 1962) from *The Witmark Demos: 1962-1964* (2010); “When the Ship Comes In” from *The Times They Are A-Changin’* (1963); “Farewell, Angelina” (recorded 1965) from *The Bootleg Series, Volumes 1-3 (Rare & Unreleased), 1961-1991* (1991). Noteworthy

Apocalypticism infuses many of these songs—intimations or straight-out declarations of a universal, inescapable divine judgment that will reveal all that has been hidden and pay all moral and spiritual accounts. The source of apocalyptic imagery in Dylan's work may be said to derive equally from his long and deep acquaintance with the Bible—and a peculiar attraction to the Book of Revelation⁴⁴—as well as from a temperament drawn always toward viewing things *sub specie aeternitatis* and suffused with moral fervor and apprehensions of ultimate judgment. “[The sense that] every day is a judgment,” Dylan said a few years ago, “is instilled in me by the way I grew up; where I come from: early feelings.”⁴⁵ And the most dire of those songs convey a feeling of imminent crisis and destruction, of being on the edge of final judgment and doom right here and now. It is a feeling clearly communicated in the well-known “All Along the Watchtower” (1967), with its ominous conclusion:

All along the watchtower, princes kept the view
While all the women came and went, barefoot servants too
Outside in the distance a wildcat did growl
Two riders were approaching, the wind began to howl

and by this couplet from “Jokerman” (1983):

False-hearted judges dying in the webs that they spin
Only a matter of time 'til night comes steppin' in

songs with pronounced eschatological imagery, chronologically listed, include “Gates of Eden” (1964) and “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)” (1964) from *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965); “The Wicked Messenger” (1967) and “All Along the Watchtower” (1967) from *John Wesley Harding* (1968); “I Shall Be Released” (recorded 1967) from *Bob Dylan’s Greatest Hits, Volume 2* (1971); “This Wheel’s on Fire” (recorded 1967) from *The Basement Tapes* (with The Band) (1975); “Changing of the Guards” (1978); “Jokerman” (1983) from *Infidels* (1983); “Ring Them Bells” (1989) from *Oh Mercy* (1989); “Not Dark Yet” (1996) from *Time Out of Mind* (1997); “High Water (For Charley Patton)” (2001) from *Love and Theft* (2001); “Ain’t Talkin’” (2006) from *Modern Times* (2006); and—not surprisingly—a number of songs from Dylan’s trio of “Christian” albums, *Slow Train Coming* (1979), *Saved* (1980), and *Shot of Love* (1981).

⁴⁴ “I believe in the Book of Revelation,” Dylan said in an interview in 1984—a number of years *after* his so-called Christian period. Ricks, *Dylan’s Visions of Sin*, 384-5. Indeed, imagery from the Book of Revelation appears over and over again in Dylan’s songs; for identification of these and insightful discussion, see especially pertinent passages (by index) in Gray, *Song & Dance Man III*, but also Ricks, *Dylan’s Visions of Sin*.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Heylin, *Still On the Road*, 468.

as well as by the opening lines of the much-admired “Blind Willie McTell” (1983):

Seen the arrow on the doorpost
Saying this land is condemned
All the way from New Orleans
To Jerusalem⁴⁶

and by vivid lines in less well-known songs such as “Angelina” (1981):

I see pieces of men marching, trying to take heaven by force
I can see the unknown rider, I can see the pale white horse⁴⁷

This is the “Jeremiah” side of Dylan’s personality and art, which for a few years (to much critical dismay) emerged in a strident, self-righteous form—with symbolic allusiveness and allegorical suggestiveness replaced by unambiguous, literalist, scripture-based sermonizing—in some of the songs on the three “born again Christian” albums of 1979–81. But for most of his career, eschatological tension or apocalyptic foreboding, when present in his songs—from “Blowin’ in the Wind” (1962) to “Series of Dreams” (1989) to “Ain’t Talkin’” (2006)⁴⁸—has tended to be embodied in open-ended symbolism or in the multi-layered, mythic imagery of visions, dreams, parables, and allegories, and suffused with a mood of mystery, unresolved questioning, and respect for the human universality of both sinfulness and suffering.

Some of Dylan’s finest songs express, at once, an acute sensitivity to the eschatological tension in human existence; a sense of the inescapability of divine judgment; awareness that the outcome of human spiritual longing remains a mystery; hope—frail or confident—in some kind of ultimate redemption; and a careful use of imagery to “make the present and the past feel like each other,” thus evoking both the concrete sweep of history and the constant “flux of divine presence” in human affairs.⁴⁹ “Chimes of Freedom” (1964), already looked at, is one such

⁴⁶ Since beginning to perform “Blind Willie McTell” in concerts in the 1990s, Dylan has taken to singing these last two lines as “All the way from New Orleans / To *New* Jerusalem.” The lyric change names the “heavenly city” whose establishment at the end of time is promised by the Bible, and so emphasizes the eschatological focus of the singer’s concern.

⁴⁷ “Jokerman” from *Infidels* (1983); “Angelina” (recorded 1981) from *The Bootleg Series, Volumes 1-3 (Rare & Unreleased), 1961-1991* (1991).

⁴⁸ “Blowin’ in the Wind” from *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* (1963); “Series of Dreams” (recorded 1989) from *The Bootleg Series, Volumes 1-3 (Rare & Unreleased), 1961-1991* (1991).

⁴⁹ Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*, 12. On the “flux of divine presence” in human experience and history, see Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 4, *The Ecumenic Age*, vol. 17 of *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Michael Franz (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 404-410.

song; another is 1983's "Blind Willie McTell," often referred to as one of Dylan's masterpieces;⁵⁰ and a third is "I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine" (1967). A close look at the last song will allow us to show how Dylan employs symbolic materials to evoke the "ulterior presence" with which the greatest art is always concerned, and to indicate how the themes just mentioned can be united in a not-untypical Dylan song-parable.

"I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine" appeared on Dylan's *John Wesley Harding* (1968), an album largely composed of stripped down, three-verse parables and allegorical stories "that confronted fear, sin, and false conceptions of freedom."⁵¹ Some of its songs are evocative of the American western frontier, while others are distinctively biblical in tone and symbolism. Bert Cartwright, in *The Bible in the Lyrics of Bob Dylan*, has identified sixty biblical references in the album's 40 minutes of songs. Dylan himself described *John Wesley Harding* as "a fearful album ... dealing with the devil in a fearful way, almost," and also as the first album of biblical rock—though the music sounds nothing like rock 'n' roll, or country or urban blues, or folk music, exactly.⁵² It didn't sound quite like anything familiar in popular music up to that time. With an instrumental field consisting, with a few exceptions, of acoustic guitar, a subdued backing of bass and lightly handled drums, and harmonica, its simplicity of sonic ambience complemented and emphasized the "timeless landscape, saturated in historical suffering" that its combined stories brought into view.⁵³ In keeping with the allegorical character of many of the album's compositions, the St. Augustine who figures in this song is not the famous St. Augustine of Hippo (nor yet St. Augustine of Canterbury, d. 604), but rather a *symbol* of sainthood—the saint as an authoritative and compassionate mediator of the divine. The song's allegory also manages to unite spiritual and secular dimensions of human experience by Dylan explicitly basing the words and melody of the first lines of the song on the well-known "I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night," a "protest song" about a union organizer for the International Workers of the World convicted and executed for murder in 1915 on what was widely viewed as insufficient evidence, a song portraying Hill as a martyr.⁵⁴ Dylan thus in his own song fuses the political hopes for social justice in twentieth-century America with—and in fact subsumes them into—overtly eschatological

⁵⁰ For excellent discussions of the symbolic intricacies—historical, biblical, and existential—of "Blind Willie McTell," see Greil Marcus, "Dylan As Historian," in Marcus, *The Dustbin of History* (Cambridge, Ma: Picador, 1995), 80-87; and, especially, Gray, *Song & Dance Man III*, 517-47.

⁵¹ Boucher, *Dylan & Cohen*, 66.

⁵² Cott, ed., *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*, 260; Boucher, *Dylan & Cohen*, 66.

⁵³ Marqusee, *Chimes of Freedom*, 228.

⁵⁴ See Heylin, *Revolution in the Air*, 362-64.

longings, enabling the song to speak for the human condition in as universal a way as possible.

The first verse establishes the spiritually haunted mood of the song (enhanced by its somber, delicate melody), in which an unusual mixture of language, symbolism, and compressed narrative creates the kind of timeless ambience Dylan is so fond of, where the here-and-now is permeated by events and questions of ultimate import:

I dreamed I saw St. Augustine
 Alive as you or me
 Tearing through these quarters in
 The utmost misery
 With a blanket underneath his arm
 And a coat of solid gold
 Searching for the very souls
 Who already have been sold

In a dream, a vision, the singer sees the saint from early Christian times as not dead after all, but alive in the present as a frantic, suffering seeker—for what? For souls to save, or for souls capable of being saved, but discovering that in these times all souls already have “been sold”—with the word *sold*, given the present-day setting of the saint’s visitation, suggesting both the bondage of sin and modern absorption in the world of secular and commercial concerns. The saint’s blanket conveys lowliness and solidarity with the human; the coat of gold suggests his spiritual nobility; together they create an allegorical figure with simultaneously ancient and modern features who bridges the humbly human and the graciously divine.

The second verse delivers the saint’s message to the singer as well as to us, his contemporaries:

“Arise, arise,” he cried so loud
 In a voice without restraint
 “Come out, ye gifted kings and queens
 And hear my sad complaint
 No martyr is among ye now
 Whom you can call your own
 But go on your way accordingly
 And know you’re not alone”

First we are called to arise—we who all see ourselves, now, as “gifted kings and queens,” that is, as imbued with individual exceptionality and privilege—and to come out from our immersion in worldly concerns and listen to the words of spiritual authority, which are a complaint, though a sympathetic rather than a damning one. There are, we are told, no “martyrs” in present times—no one living a life of such spiritual commitment that he or she is in danger of being, in some sense, “nailed

to the cross of this world.”⁵⁵ All the same, the saint assures us, we have not been abandoned either by him or by divine presence, even though we—including the singer-narrator—have abandoned due attention to higher things, to God, to the paramount question of our own salvation. For this we are not condemned outright, but adjured to “go on [our] way accordingly,” that is, in the way that we must given the circumstances of life in modern times and our entrenched proclivities, but still knowing and remembering that we are “not alone”—that saintly and divine presence has not abandoned us, and that spiritual redemption remains always a possibility, even in such a dissolute and desolate era.

The third verse expands, briefly and with the vivid weirdness of allegory, upon the content of the dream-vision, and concludes with a description of its impact on its recipient:

I dreamed I saw St. Augustine
Alive with fiery breath
And I dreamed I was amongst the ones
That put him out to death
Oh I awoke in anger
So alone and terrified
I put my fingers against the glass
And bowed my head and cried

Now we see clearly that the figure of St. Augustine is symbolical—neither of the historical St. Augustines was “put to death”—and also that the figure represents both divine compassion for sinful humanity and the fire of divine judgment (“fiery breath”). And the dream’s final scene entails the singer experiencing himself as a member of a wayward and vicious crowd that martyrs the saint—which is to say, as one complicit in our modern turning away from spiritual awareness and responsibility, in the modern killing of the spirit. He awakens angry, pierced by a loneliness deriving both from alienation from present-day society and from a sense of separation from divine presence, and terrified by his guilt and existential uncertainty about the state of his soul. The dream has induced a “border experience of the examination of conscience,” in which anger and fear submit to grief, as the awakened narrator, awakened in both a literal and a spiritual sense, bows his head and weeps, putting his fingers against the coolness of the window glass to assure himself that his fearful dream is indeed over—the window symbolizing, also, his feeling of invisible separation both from his fellow human beings and from God.

“I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine” meets and illuminates the criteria, it appears to me, that Lonergan sets for the most significant art: it evokes the “ulterior presence” of the divine through an inventive, powerful use

⁵⁵ The phrase is Martin Buber’s; see Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 67.

of symbols as it explores “potentialities of concrete living” with respect to profound issues of spiritual apprehension, struggle, and aspiration. Historical religious symbolism, and the language and mood of biblical parable, are used to convey the meaning of a personal experience of epiphanic vision, spiritual self-disclosure, and yearning for redemption; and the song, like any good artwork, invites and allows the listener to undergo for himself or herself that experience. Thus it evokes in us an awareness of our historical solidarity with the “elementary apprehension[s] of aspiration and limitation” that constitute the spiritual horizons of all peoples, and reminds us that the drama of human existence is most fundamentally one of human-divine invitation and refusal, hope and despair, forgetfulness and remembrance. It shows, I think, Dylan at his best: attuned to the character, confusions, and needs of his times, and able to compose telling symbols, both verbal and musical, into a “unity of vision” that reminds us, commandingly but not didactically, of what we are and what we might be.⁵⁶

The American poet William Carlos Williams once described James Joyce as “a priest of best intelligence.”⁵⁷ In similar fashion, Dylan the songwriter might well be described as a “priest of best suggestiveness,” having been gifted to an extraordinary degree with the ability to create an art of popular song that brings his listeners repeatedly into communion with existential mystery and with divine ultimacy.

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⁵⁶ Lonergan, “Art,” *CWL* 10, pp. 216, 222, 224, 232.

⁵⁷ William Carlos Williams, “A Note on the Recent Work of James Joyce” (1927), in Williams, *Imaginations* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 337.