BOB DYLAN

(1941—)

Ian Bickford

BOB DYLAN TOURED England in 1965 and again in 1966. Accompanying him on both occasions was filmmaker D. A. Pennebaker, documenting the commotion of Dylan's abrupt and enormous fame in what would become *Dont Look Back* (1967) and *Eat the Document* (1972). Pennebaker's dominant venture in the first of these documentaries was to reveal the contrasts and narrate the tensions between an uptight, aging establishment (largely represented by members of the press) and a hip, enthusiastic, liberated younger generation. In the second film, however, the same youthful crowds discover their own capacity for cantankerousness as they criticize and indeed boo Dylan's new, loud, plugged-in performances. A young man stares defiantly at the camera long enough to speculate that England might very well have something of her own to offer, some variety of cultural icon, entirely commensurate to the brilliance of the American visitor: "Shakespeare," he suggests by way of example, and then, piquantly, "perhaps."

Equally a symptom and an idiosyncrasy of the way in which Bob Dylan entered into, then occupied, the center of popular culture, the placement of Dylan within a literary rather than a musical canon had by this time become routine. Indeed, the palpable skepticism in this particular British youth's comparison of Dylan to Shakespeare derives its irony from a readiness on the part of scores of his peers to acknowledge Dylan as nothing less than a literary giant, someone who unironically might be compared to and potentially outstage the brightest, the greatest, the reigning representatives of canonical literature, past and present. That Dylan was a writer of songs, moreover that for most of the first decade of his professional career he published nothing but songs, with even the printed lyrical verses accompanying his albums described in one instance as "Some Other Kinds Of Songs," only adds to the complexity of the popular resolve that this singer was not only a singer but also a poet, his songs not only songs but also poems, his influence exceeding the scope of anything to be found on record albums. Poetry, from this perspective, was a context of sufficient cultural authority for Dylan's accomplishments to be measured—positively or negatively—within it. To cast his compositions as poetry was essentially to claim for them an unambiguous status.

A secondary effect of the rhetoric enthroning Dylan as a poet, meanwhile, was to disturb the very definition of poetry, to stage an incursion against the limits of what was possible within that genre. From the earliest moments of Dylan's career his contested literary eminence comprised not only a line of questioning about Dylan but also an equivalent questioning and projected repositioning of poetry itself, along with a questioning of what it meant to be a poet, especially an American poet, in the middle of the twentieth century. This is why such a miscellany of major literary figures—including John Ciardi, Allen Ginsberg, Norman Mailer, Frank Kermode, Stephen Spender, John Clellon Holmes, Anthony Burgess, Kenneth Rexroth, John Berryman, Philip Larkin, and Robert Lowell—all found it necessary at one time or another to take up the question of Dylan as a poet. In the 1960s and 1970s the question became a variety of litmus tests for one's position within a fracturing literary world. Writers hastened to define themselves in relationship to an accelerating avant-garde—sometimes oscillating between positions, as in the case of Norman Mailer, who initially declared, with characteristic truculence, "If Dylan's a poet, I'm
a basketball player,” yet eventually acknowledged, in a full reversal, “Dylan may prove to be our greatest lyric poet of this period.” Even trenchant arguments against Dylan’s songs as poetry added to the energy accumulating behind the debate, helping therefore to rank the debate among the most challenging of literary puzzles. Whether Dylan is or is not classifiable as a poet matters less, perhaps, than the extraordinary impact of his music upon literary writers of subsequent but also of prior generations, such as Allen Ginsberg. The unusual quality of Dylan’s popularity likewise affected popular tastes in literature: “If Dylan has done nothing else,” wrote Henrietta Yurchenco in 1966, “he is responsible for the present widespread interest in poetry.”

The songs of Bob Dylan have long occupied a significant place in university curricula. Robert Shelton reports that as early as 1977 “more than one hundred courses had been taught on Dylan’s poetics alone”; that number has compounded exponentially over the years. Dylan’s lyrics appear alongside a more traditional stock of poems in such standard volumes as The Norton Anthology of Poetry, and articles on Dylan, or referencing Dylan, or borrowing their obligatory epigraphs from Dylan, regularly appear in mainstream academic journals. The Oxford professor Christopher Ricks, celebrated for his work on Milton, Keats, Tennyson, and T. S. Eliot, lectured and wrote on Bob Dylan for three decades before publishing Dylan’s Visions of Sin in 2003. The work is a milestone in Dylan scholarship, exploring what Ricks sees as Dylan’s superb poetics, especially his facility with rhyme, while never losing track of the experiential peculiarities of listening to a song as opposed to reading a poem.

Dylan’s own statements on the appropriateness of discussing his songs in a literary context—of calling him a poet at all—have been as ambivalent as they have been various. When asked in San Francisco on December 3, 1965, whether he considered himself “primarily a singer or a poet,” he dodged: “Oh, I think of myself more as a song-and-dance man.” Yet, during the same year, at the Beverly Hills press conference, Dylan was more direct:

Q: Do you prefer writing poetry or songs?

B.D.: Poems. I don’t have to condense or restrict my thoughts into a song pattern.

(p. 59)

Expressing a preference for writing poetry, Dylan simultaneously distinguishes between endeavors. Poetry and songwriting, he implies, even his own and despite the opinion of most of his fans, are different kinds of writing. Much later, remembering early literary and musical attachments in his autobiographical Chronicles: Volume One (2005), Dylan praises the “street ideologies” of such texts as Jack Kerouac’s On the Road (1957) and Ginsberg’s Howl (1956) yet complains that nothing comparable could be found among hit singles on the radio: “45 records,” he writes, “were incapable of it.” On the other hand, “LPs were like the force of gravity. They had covers, back and front, that you could stare at for hours” (p. 35). In full-length records, if not in singles, Dylan saw a possibility for something equivalent to literature, at least in the mystique and authority of covers—covers of books, covers of LPs. Accordingly, Dylan’s songs grew in scope throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, from his 1962 eponymous first album of almost entirely traditional songs, to the instantly iconic, politically challenging material of The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan (1963) and The Times They Are A-Changin’ (1964), to the roiling visions of Highway 61 Revisited (1965) and Blonde on Blonde (1966), to the literary inflections of Blood on the Tracks (1975). Of the single “Like a Rolling Stone,” twice the length of most songs receiving radio airplay in 1965 yet reaching number two on the Billboard charts after its release that year, Dylan has said the following: “After writing that [song] I wasn’t interested in writing a novel or a play or anything like that. I knew I just had too much. I wanted to write songs” (Scorsese, No Direction Home). More than simply a rejection of his literary ambitions, this statement finds Dylan growing into his medium, discovering avenues within it that would not restrict, as he worried at other moments, but instead free, his will to experiment. Now it was not only LPs with impressive front and back covers but also individual songs on the radio that could command full respect, could
express the “street ideologies” (Chronicles: Volume One) once available only to books and poems, could have the impact of “a novel or a play or anything like that” (Scorsese, No Direction Home).

Abandoning the desire to write a book was no idle sacrifice for Dylan in 1965—nor would he stick to it, exactly. Dylan had signed a contract with the Macmillan Company to produce a volume to which he referred at different moments as a novel, as poetry, and, echoing Hamlet to Polonius, as “a book of words.” Later he would confess it was a mistake to promise a book before writing one, but in a September 1965 interview, at that moment still enthusiastic, he mentioned it by its title, Tarantula, and announced (optimistically) a December release. Plans for publication were moved to the fall of 1966, whereon, in the tumult of a demanding concert schedule, combined with editing of the second Pennebaker film and constant pressure from trespassing fans, Dylan would suffer a motorcycle accident near his home in Woodstock, New York, and withdraw from all obligations—including his book contract. Review copies of Tarantula had already been circulated; pirated editions of these were widely sought. The book’s official publication would not occur until 1971, yet in its various iterations Tarantula represented a major confirmation of the compass of Dylan’s virtuosity. He was, the book proved, a writer whose talents were not constrained to songwriting.

Readers waited more than three decades for a second original book from Bob Dylan. Chronicles: Volume One appeared in 2004 to overwhelmingly positive reviews. Between Tarantula and Chronicles—very different texts, yet thematically linked—several volumes were published of Dylan’s lyrics and other miscellaneous writings. Dylan has also cowritten two films: Renaldo and Clara (1978) with Sam Shepard and Masked and Anonymous (2003) with Larry Charles. His importance as a writer is undoubtedly secure, yet what kind of writer and how exactly to position him within an American literary tradition remains uncertain—any resolution confounded in his eclecticism, his unwillingness to rest even momentarily within a genre, within a persona, within a style.

BIOGRAPHY

Robert Allen Zimmerman was born on May 24, 1941, in Duluth, Minnesota, the eldest of two boys. His first performance was on Mother’s Day, 1946: the four-year-old Bobby sang “Some Sunday Morning” and “Accentuate the Positive” for delighted, praising relatives. When Bobby was six the family moved to Hibbing, Minnesota, where his father, Abe, whose bout with polio had left him with a pronounced limp, joined Bobby’s two uncles in their furniture and appliance business. Bobby’s mother, Beatty, remembered her talented son spending significant time alone in his room. “Bob was upstairs quietly becoming a writer for twelve years,” she said to Robert Shelton, the journalist who first and famously reviewed Dylan in the New York Times and who spent much of his career compiling interviews for a massive biography, No Direction Home (1986). While Beatty would prove enormously supportive of Bobby’s artistic aspirations and eventually of his success, his earliest activities were, for her, a point of anxiety: “I said to Bobby that you can’t go on and on and sit and dream and write poems. I was afraid he would end up being a poet! ... In my day, a poet was unemployed and had no ambition.” Abe, on the other hand, recalled Bobby’s overall aptitude in school, noting only, “History was always a problem for him. ... I used to argue that history only requires you to remember what you had read. He said there was nothing to figure out in history.” The comment was perhaps weighted with particular meaning, for Bobby would gain his first notoriety almost immediately upon gaining his first professional recognition when he began, as the transformed Bob Dylan, broadcasting radically revised versions of his personal history—especially those portions of history having to do with his family.

Indeed, if Bobby Zimmerman had no taste for history, Bob Dylan cultivated a remarkable flair for rewriting it. Partly for this reason, the details of his life exist in perpetual tension with
alternative versions, half-truths, revisions and retractions, strategic manipulations. There is perhaps no living person of whom so much has been written whose biography remains so inveterately—and enchantingly—elusive. In Writing Dylan: The Songs of a Lonesome Traveler, Larry David Smith argues that “Bob Dylan” is the name for a vast, deliberate, and ultimately coherent artistic vision authored by Robert Zimmerman over the course of nearly a half-century and that, in essence, if Dylan is a poet he is also his own poem. Although somewhat overstated in its thesis—no less than in its style—Smith’s book supplies some instruction for examining the circumstances of Dylan’s past: before a certain point, an elaborate pattern of biographical misinformation gives way to an equally elaborate confusion; after that point, Dylan seems to have been so purposeful, so precise, and yet so unpredictable in weaving and stitching and patching the fabric of his identity that one struggles to distinguish between the genuine individual and his adopted roles, between, that is, the person and the performance.

This habit—preferring fibs to facts, refusing to tolerate the details of a prosaic upbringing, of ordinary surroundings—began early. Bobby’s first band in high school, the Golden Chords, quickly dissolved as Bobby became increasingly fascinated with rock and roll. Classmates remember a riotous performance at the Hibbing High Jacket Jamboree Talent Show, amps turned up loud, Bobby pounding on the piano and screaming the lyrics to “Rock n’ Roll Is Here to Stay.” The school’s principal finally cut the microphones, foreshadowing a probably apocryphal account of the folk patriarch Pete Seeger threatening to cut the cables with an ax at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, where Dylan yet again surprised an audience with extreme amplification. In 1959, just after graduating from high school, Bobby played piano in the backing band for the regional musician Bobby Vee; he held on to the gig only briefly, performing under the stage name Elston Gunn, but when Vee had a hit later that year with the song “Suzie Baby,” Bobby Zimmerman told friends and relatives that he was the Bobby Vee they were hearing on their radios. Enrolling at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, where he would stay through the end of 1960 but fail almost completely to attend classes, he began using the name Bobby Dillon, then Dylan, changing his name legally to Bob Dylan in 1962. He was feeling his way toward the elasticity of identity for which he would soon be famous, finding that the farther he traveled from home, the farther his identity would stretch.

How he arrived finally at the surname Dylan is one of those disputed affairs which should, as a matter of extensive accumulated evidence, be simple enough to resolve; Dylan, however, has consistently and persistently gone out of his way to agitate the issue, to muddy it as much as possible, to shroud it in the kind of mystery that keeps his biographers searching and his audiences fascinated. The popular theory is that he borrowed his name from Dylan Thomas, yet, if there is truth in this, it must be only fractionally true, given the initial discrepancy of spelling and the likelihood that Dylan was introduced to the Welsh poet’s verse only after experimenting with homophonic versions of his name. Robert Shelton points to the young Bobby’s idolization of the Gunsmoke character Matt Dillon, as well as a Hibbing family named Dillon to whom Bobby held some relation. In fact, Dylan petitions Shelton to right the record: “Straighten out in your book that I did not take my name from Dylan Thomas.” Much later, interviewed in Martin Scorsese’s 2005 documentary of the same title as Shelton’s biography (Scorsese and Shelton both derived their title from a line in “Like a Rolling Stone”), Dylan, referring to the sequence of events leading to his new name, said, “It really didn’t happen any of the ways I’ve read about it.” Presumably this includes what he read in Shelton’s account, an account shaped upon Dylan’s own statements and at least informally authorized by him. Hence, No Direction Home (the film) corrects and inverts No Direction Home (the book), injecting a nearly comic tension between the titles whereby seeking direction leads only to new varieties of misdirection, and “home”—or origin—recedes always further toward indeterminacy. Dylan has frequently used his contact with scholars, biographers, and the...
press, including Shelton, with whom he shared a friendship and to whom he owed a considerable debt for effectively introducing his music to the world, as an occasion for renewing control of the details of his life, revising those details wherever necessary, introducing fresh contradictions where strategically productive. For example, he insisted to Shelton that he had arrived in New York City at the close of 1960, not, as previously believed, at the beginning of 1961, and that he did not go directly to Greenwich Village but spent two months around Times Square, turning tricks. Shelton, attuned to what he calls Dylan's "put-ons," does not assign any particular veracity to the story, and in Scorsese's film Dylan again reverses his rendering, now radically simplifying it: "Got out of the car at George Washington Bridge. Took a subway down to the Village."

Dylan elides these details in *Chronicles: Volume One*, but he does return to the subject of his name, offering yet another version which reinstates Dylan Thomas as central to the narrative. He also writes this: "One of the early presidents of the San Bernardino [Hell's] Angels was Bobby Zimmerman, and he was killed in 1964 on the Bass Lake run. / That person is gone. That was the end of him." Replacing the former Bobby Zimmerman with a stand-in, a kind of crash-test dummy, Dylan effectively kills himself off, projecting his identity into the death of someone else who happens, conveniently, to bear the same name. He simultaneously conjures his own 1966 motorcycle accident, rumored in its aftermath to have been disfiguring or even fatal. Dylan's identity, by his own design, begins to fracture, to take up residency in new and various bodies, some surviving, some succumbing. Footage included in Scorsese's *No Direction Home* depicts Dylan shortly before his accident, exhausted, frustrated with the intense pressures of his second major English tour, joking, "I think I'm going to get me a new Bob Dylan next week. / Use the new Bob Dylan, see how long he lasts." In concert on Halloween 1964, Dylan famously announced from the stage, "I have my Bob Dylan mask on." His discussion of literary influences in *Chronicles* gives pride of place to a single syntactically intricate line from Arthur Rimbaud: "Je est un autre," or "I is another." The paradox contrived in the rupture of the subject "Je" from its first-person status in the third-person verb form "est" constitutes in its very incoherency a strikingly consistent gesture across Dylan's oeuvre. If Bob Dylan represents nothing but a prosthetic identity for Bobby Zimmerman (who is supposed to have died in one motorcycle accident or another), the prosthesis would logically bear replacement as successive iterations wear out. This network of ideas is central to Todd Haynes's 2007 film *I'm Not There*, in which six different actors of different ages, genders, and ethnicities play a person recognizable as but never called Bob Dylan. The aforementioned line, "Je est un autre," topped Haynes's single-page film proposal to which Dylan granted his rare approval, and one of the film's seven versions of Dylan is actually named Arthur Rimbaud. Haynes clearly understood the importance of Rimbaud to Dylan's overarching aesthetic, and he understood as well that recognition of this importance would be invaluable in gaining Dylan's trust, therefore gaining a green light for the film.

It was in Minneapolis that Dylan was introduced to the songs of Woody Guthrie. Guthrie's impact on Dylan cannot be overstated. Dylan began playing almost exclusively Guthrie compositions in his coffeehouse performances around the folk-oriented "Dinkytown" section of Minneapolis. In the fall of 1960 he read Guthrie's autobiographical *Bound for Glory* (1943), which quickly replaced *On the Road* as his touchstone for American seeking and dreaming. When Dylan learned that Guthrie was hospital-bound in Morris Plains, New Jersey, he decided to pay a visit to his hero. Guthrie suffered from Huntington's chorea, an inherited neurological disorder, deadly as well as profoundly disabling, and Dylan found him languishing in a psychiatric institution, the older singer's mind still sharp but his body given over to uncontrollable tremors and spasms. Visiting him there and, later, at Brooklyn State Hospital, Dylan played guitar and sang for Guthrie, taking requests for Guthrie's own songs. At this point Dylan's repertoire comprised entirely songs written by others. "I wasn't yet the poet musician that I would
become,” he writes in Chronicles. If Dylan’s relationship to Guthrie was derivative, if Dylan copied Guthrie’s singing, his style, and even his mannerisms, the stage for such a frank and heartfelt homage was also the platform for an imminent creative leap beyond Guthrie. Dylan’s first major foray into songwriting, “Song for Woody,” addressed directly to Guthrie and set to one of Guthrie’s own melodies, would ambitiously form a connection between Guthrie’s declining health in a hospital bed and Dylan’s own youthful momentum, thereby describing a transfer of energy if not of identity. When Dylan recorded “Song for Woody” it would be one of only two original compositions on his first album; that album would be the last crafted primarily of borrowed songs until Dylan’s return to a traditional songbook in the early 1990s.

In Greenwich Village, 1961, Bob Dylan played as a regular at the Café Wha? and at the legendary Gaslight before his first major performance at Gerde’s Folk City, opening for John Lee Hooker. Because Dylan was under the legal age of twenty-one, Gerde’s proprietor Mike Porco signed as his guardian for membership in the American Federation of Musicians, local 802, required for wage-earning performers. It was at a later Gerde’s appearance with the Greenbriar Boys that Dylan was “discovered” by the New York Times critic Robert Shelton. Shelton’s September 19, 1961 review was enthusiastic, naming Dylan “one of the most distinctive stylists to play in a Manhattan cabaret in months” and predicting the direction of Dylan’s career “to be straight up.” Not quite a month later, after having endured rejections for recording contracts including, most crushingly, his revered Folkways Records, Dylan met the influential producer and A&R executive John Hammond at Columbia Records during a session with Carolyn Hester, on whose eponymous album Dylan played harmonica. Without requiring an audition—in some versions of the story without ever having heard Dylan sing—Hammond offered Dylan a record deal on the authority of Shelton’s review. Dylan signed on the spot.

His first album sold poorly. After its March 1962 release, Dylan was referred to at Columbia as “Hammond’s Folly.” Dylan expressed personal dissatisfaction with the album and wished almost immediately for an opportunity to supplant it with new material. Meanwhile a romance with Suze Rotolo was proving a watershed for his songwriting, not only in such characteristically arm’s-length love songs as “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right” and “Down the Highway” but also in an initially wholehearted embrace of Suze’s activism and social consciousness. Dylan had previously shown little interest in politics, but under the tutelage of Suze and her sister Carla, as well as such Village folk personalities as Dave Van Ronk, he began to learn and write about an array of social issues. His second album, The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan, released May 1963, includes three songs that would become standards in the 1960s culture of protest. The lyrical yet vague expression of outrage and hope in “Blowin’ in the Wind” stands in counterpart to “Masters of War” with its very specific admonition of the American weapons industry, while “Oxford Town” weighed in for civil rights with a powerful if somewhat incredulous response to the episodes of hatred and violence accumulating in the South.

In July 1963 Dylan made his first of several appearances at the Newport Folk Festival, where the singer Joan Baez, only a few months older than Dylan but already a major star in the folk galaxy, extolled him to the audience as a new and crucial voice. During the same month, Peter, Paul and Mary’s version of “Blowin’ in the Wind” came very close to topping the charts. Dylan joined Martin Luther King Jr. later that summer for the celebrated March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, performing “Only a Pawn in Their Game” and “Blowin’ in the Wind” for an audience numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Only two years after arriving in Greenwich Village an impish midwestern nobody, Bob Dylan found himself endorsed within liberal politics and the folk music establishment as a genius—and in the label he would grow to hate—the voice of a generation. Yet he was already resisting these designations and the public
responsibilities they required. From his first interview with Shelton he had begun developing the system of feints and falsehoods designed to frustrate the media in its efforts to classify him within a particular role or genre, and what began as simple evasion accelerated toward a full-blown mutual antagonism between Dylan and the mainstream press. A cover story in Newsweek on November 4, 1963, confirmed Dylan’s distrust of the media and left him warier than ever of the consequences of his own fame. The story billed itself as an exposé, airing Dylan’s suite of fabrications about his past, specifically about his family, and aggravating an unsubstantiated yet tenacious rumor that “Blowin’ in the Wind” had been plagiarized.

It was in the context of this sense of being under attack, of holding a beleaguered position toward a public whose adoration verged on harassment, whose praise resembled a kind of pillorying, that Dylan watched the rest of the year unfold. President John F. Kennedy was shot and killed in his motorcade in Dallas on November 22, and his alleged assassin Lee Harvey Oswald took a deadly bullet two days later. Live television cameras carried the second shooting into the homes of a shocked nation as Oswald collapsed before Jack Ruby’s gun. On the 172nd anniversary of the ratification of the Bill of Rights, Friday, December 13, in the ballroom of the Americana Hotel in New York City, Dylan accepted the Thomas Paine Award from the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee for his work contributing to the advancement of equality and rights. He was drunk and nervous, sharing the dais with the novelist and activist James Baldwin, looking out at an audience comprising the Old Left’s old guard, and in his speech—after joking that the number of bald heads in the room was an indicator of the event’s social irrelevance—he compared himself to Oswald, expressing sympathy with what the president’s killer must have felt. The audience booed. Dylan later composed a letter in verse apologizing, not for the substance of his comments but for obstructing the intake of charitable dollars from a suddenly uncharitable crowd. He tried to explain the awkward sense of guilt that he felt about the societal expectations demanded of him, which were both burdensome and not well-defined. It was a mistake, Dylan continued, to lose oneself in a society of blame, to disperse and hence dilute responsibility for such ills as poverty, violence, war, and intolerance across a national community of individuals. Instead the individual must feel these varieties of guilt distilled within himself, must understand himself to share a personal, not a communal, relationship to the violent occurrences of what Dylan, in his letter, calls “the times.” These were metaphysical more than political ideas. Dylan expressed them poorly in his speech, only slightly better in his apology. His message, in other words, suffered distortion. From that moment he began to learn to use distortion as a method for enacting, if not always fully communicating, a message. His rapport with audiences would never again be entirely comfortable.

Released in February 1964, The Times They Are A-Changin’ was even more concertedly political than The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan, but this third album quickly gave way to a fourth, the much more personal, lyrical Another Side of Bob Dylan (August 1964). By March 1965, with the release of Bringing It All Back Home, Dylan had begun what turned out to be the incredibly difficult errand of reclaiming his rock-and-roll roots. Several tracks on Bringing It All Back Home include heavy electrical instrumentation, including “Subterranean Homesick Blues,” “Maggie’s Farm,” and “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream,” but for the moment Dylan’s live performances remained acoustic. After his Newport debut in 1963, Dylan had traveled with Joan Baez for several tour dates during which the two would each play a solo set and Dylan would join Baez onstage for harmonic versions of a number of his songs. Though Baez headed the bill, Dylan earned a slightly higher cut per show. Dylan was Baez’s protégé, and she took pleasure in being able to help him at the start of his career. The two singers developed a close friendship and then a romantic liaison that would overtake Dylan’s relationship with Suze Rotolo. Baez was leading Dylan into the frenzy of his new life as a celebrity, yet her home in Carmel, California,
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where Dylan often stayed, afforded an equivalent refuge from that life. It was understood though unspoken that Dylan would offer Baez the same partnership in the planning of his own future performances; however, when she accompanied him to England in 1965, she found herself relegated to the background. Dylan was now established in his fame and disinclined to share the stage.

An important component of Dylan’s break from Baez was his increasing impatience with her faith, shared by folk audiences, that protest, and especially singing as a form of protest, could change the world. Close followers of Dylan could certainly have noticed in the body of his songwriting and in the matter of his public statements a long evolution of his priorities away from politics and protest—after all, as early as 1963 he was distancing himself in interviews from overtly political interpretations of songs like “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall”—yet it took his 1965 performance at Newport to force such a recognition. This was Dylan’s third year as one of the festival’s headliners, and he used the occasion to dissolve the usual folk formula for performance. Instead of standing onstage alone with his guitar and harmonica, he invited Al Kooper and members of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band to join him; Kooper and Mike Bloomfield had recently performed on the recording of “Like a Rolling Stone,” and Dylan told them he wanted to reproduce the feeling and the sound they had achieved in the studio during that session. Mastered bootlegs of the concert capture the band’s sharp intensity behind Dylan’s strong vocals, yet the audience expressed immediate dissatisfaction at the opening performance of “Maggie’s Farm”—a similar rendition to the one they would already have heard, electrified, on Bringing It All Back Home. Legend depicts the Newport audience as despairing that Dylan, their idol and exemplar, had sold out to the corporate interests of rock and roll and that his electric guitar and his amplified band were symbolic of his betrayal. It is in this version of the narrative that Pete Seeger, guardian of folk principles, went looking for an ax to cut the cables. Yet if the same audience was capable of accepting, even enjoying, Butterfield’s electrified blues earlier in the festival’s proceedings, furthermore if plugged-in tracks drew none of the same ire in receptions of Bringing It All Back Home, the crowd’s recoil must have stemmed at least partly from other causes. Many, including Seeger, report that the engineering of the sound was simply bad, the microphones distorted, the instruments too loud. Dylan played two more songs—one was “Like a Rolling Stone”—then left the stage with the other musicians. He returned alone to play a very short acoustic set, mostly to placate the audience, and bade farewell to the festival with “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue.”

This was the first in a long series of shows following the same pattern. Dylan discovered that he could goad an audience into booing simply by strapping on an electric guitar. He began testing this ability, extorting dismay and distaste from concertgoers just as he had already learned to stimulate their adoration. He asked the Hawks—Robbie Robertson, Levon Helm, Garth Hudson, Rick Danko, and Richard Manuel, an alchemical group of musicians who started out together backing the country and rock-and-roll singer Ronnie Hawkins and who would eventually call themselves the Band—to join him for a tour of U.S. cities and Toronto, then Australia, then Great Britain. Helm quickly left the tour, partly, he wrote later in his autobiographical This Wheel’s on Fire: Levon Helm and the Story of the Band (1993), because he could not endure the continual antagonism emanating from audiences. Much had changed for Dylan in the single year since his first British tour. Pennbaker’s camera found wilder hair, unpredictable gestures verging on paroxysmal, and an opaque, amphetamine-charged demeanor. More significantly, the grainy color footage for Eat the Document (not released until a 1972 PBS broadcast and even now rarely seen) catches Dylan’s energy onstage in counterpoise with disgruntled fans inveighing against the pop sensibilities of “the group” and painting Dylan as a sellout. Dylan began each show with a solo acoustic set, always warmly received, followed by an electric set with the Hawks. During this second half of the show he would trade barbs with hecklers in
the crowd. One shouted, “Judas!” Dylan replied, “I don’t believe you. You’re a liar.”

The constant battle with his fan base took a toll. Back in the States he faced dozens of additional concert commitments, along with an impending book release and rigorous editing of *Eat the Document*, into which he had injected considerable personal attention and involvement. On July 29, 1966, Dylan suffered his motorcycle accident. Although he has been secretive about the details of this event, his injuries—several fractured vertebrae, by many accounts—seem to have been real but not incapacitating. He allowed exaggerated reports of his accident to circulate as a tactic for escaping the destructive pace of his life. Retreating to what he hoped would be a quiet life in Woodstock, he spent time with his wife, Sara, whom he had married in a private ceremony on November 22, 1965, and their first child, Jesse, born January 6, 1966. Sara had a daughter, Maria, from a prior marriage, and the family continued to grow. Anna Dylan was born on July 11, 1966, Samuel on July 30, 1968, and Jakob on December 9, 1969. Dylan also continued to develop his creative relationship with the Band, writing and recording with them in the basement of their house, Big Pink, in nearby Saugerties. When the results of those sessions finally emerged in 1975 as *The Basement Tapes*, it became apparent that Dylan’s most reclusive period was also among his most productive and certainly among his most musically inspired.

The flow of albums continued, albeit at a more leisurely rate than the torrent of his earliest writing. *Highway 61 Revisited* had been released in August 1965 and the double album *Blonde on Blonde* in May 1966. The contemplative *John Wesley Harding* appeared in December 1967, and *Nashville Skyline*, released in April 1969, would prove to be one of Dylan’s most popular albums with its country inflections and guest appearance by Johnny Cash on “Girl of the North Country.” The early 1970s, however, found Dylan in something of a slump, critically if not creatively. Many considered *Self Portrait* (June 1970) to represent Dylan’s worst work, while *New Morning* (October 1970) received an only slightly better response. Late in 1972 Dylan was persuaded by the songwriter and actor Kris Kristofferson to join the director Sam Peckinpah in Durango, Mexico, for the filming of *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, released the following year. Dylan wrote a score for the film and played the minor role of Alias. The film was poorly reviewed, though Dylan’s music for it found an appreciative audience.

Dylan was still wary of public appearances. Trespassing fans had continually invaded his privacy in Woodstock, and in an effort to escape what he began to view as their dangerous obsession with him, he moved back to Greenwich Village with his family late in 1969. There the harrying treatment continued: “Dylanologist” A. J. Webberman mined garbage outside Dylan’s home on MacDougal Street. Rare concerts included a tribute for the late Woody Guthrie at Carnegie Hall in January 1968; a headlining set at the Isle of Wight Music Festival in late August 1969, concurrent with the Woodstock Music Festival taking place in Dylan’s own territory and from which Dylan was conspicuously absent; and participation in George Harrison’s Concert for Bangladesh at Madison Square Garden in August 1971. He would not return to full public view until January 1974, when he launched his first large-scale tour since returning from Great Britain eight years earlier. The tour accompanied the release of a new album, *Planet Waves*.

Momentum increased. *Blood on the Tracks*, appearing in January 1975, and *The Basement Tapes*, released in July of the same year, comprised yet another renewal for Bob Dylan, with many critics calling these his best albums to date—no matter that *The Basement Tapes* had been recorded almost a decade prior. Encouraged, Dylan began planning a new variety of tour, inviting old friends such as Joan Baez, Bob Neuwirth, and Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, as well as the poets Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky and musicians T-Bone Burnett, Mick Ronson, David Mansfield, Scarlet Rivera, Rob Stoner, and Howie Wyeth to join him on an improvisational, impressionistic, unstructured circuit of the Northeast, playing concerts both scheduled and unscheduled, everyone traveling together as the Rolling Thunder Revue. Throughout this tour Dylan wore
white makeup on his face and presided over performers who would come and go haphazardly from the stage. Two concerts in support of Rubin “Hurricane” Carter, an African American boxer convicted of murder on questionable evidence and whose trial many felt to have been an example of racial injustice, represented Dylan’s return to political demonstration. The Rolling Thunder Revue also doubled as the occasion for Dylan’s four-hour film _Renaldo and Clara_ (1978), for which Sam Shepard acted as resident screenwriter. Sara Dylan plays Clara, and Bob Dylan, as Renaldo, occupies the film as a sort of fractured, composite identity, at once an outlaw, a pimp, a husband, and a rock star. Ronnie Hawkins, meanwhile, plays a character named Bob Dylan. The film is generally regarded as a failure, but it stands as an enormously ambitious foray for Dylan into a medium with which he could claim only modest experience. In scope it far exceeds—and perhaps was conceived as an amplification of— _Eat the Document,_ and Dylan’s writing with Shepard, even at its most incomprehensible, is highly imaginative. The best moments in the film are abundantly surprising, even luminous, and, for Dylan, unusually revealing.

Sara and Bob Dylan divorced in June 1977. Many of the songs on the January 1976 album _Desire,_ especially the directly confessional “Sara,” are occupied with the troubles as well as the felicities of their marriage. The following decade was difficult for Dylan, even by his own account. In 1979, only a few years after pervasive speculation that he had magnified his Jewish heritage into a variety of Zionism, Dylan confounded fans by becoming a born-again Christian. The net effect of this decision was to alienate audiences with sermons before concerts and gospel themes dominating three successive albums: _Slow Train Coming_ (August 1979), _Saved_ (June 1980), and _Shot of Love_ (August 1981). Subsequent appearances with Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers and the Grateful Dead were marked, Dylan remembers in _Chronicles,_ by a lack of energy and a greater lack of inspiration, although some concert recordings of that period capture Dylan at the top of his vocal capacity. Critics and fans tend to wish the 1980s had never happened for Dylan; certain songs, however, especially from _Infidels_ (October 1983) and _Knocked Out Loaded_ (July 1986) display a lyrical nuance equal to anything in Dylan’s repertoire. Dylan’s daughter with backup singer Carolyn Dennis was born on January 31, 1986, and named Desiree Gabrielle Dennis-Dylan. Dylan and Dennis were quietly married in June of that year and quietly divorced in October 1992.

A final album of the 1980s, _Oh Mercy,_ recorded in New Orleans with producer Daniel Lanois and released in September 1989, commenced the latest of Dylan’s transformations. The album’s blues inflections cast forward to Dylan’s next project with Lanois, _Time Out of Mind_ (September 1997), which brought Dylan three Grammy awards, including one for Best Album. Between _Oh Mercy_ and _Time Out of Mind,_ Dylan celebrated thirty years in the recording industry with an all-star anniversary concert at Madison Square Garden. He also released two albums of traditional songs and blues: _Good as I Been to You_ (November 1992) and _World Gone Wrong_ (October 1993). These events found Dylan cycling back to his earliest fascinations as a songwriter. Indeed, his next achievement, _Love and Theft,_ released on September 11, 2001, compiles lines and themes from Dylan’s lifetime as a reader and listener into taut compositional structures of motif and memory. _Modern Times_ (August 2006) explores similar terrain.

Since 1988 Dylan has played over one hundred concerts per year. His film _Masked and Anonymous_ premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2003. He published _Chronicles: Volume One_ in October of the following year, and May 2006 occasioned the launch of _Theme Time Radio Hour_ on XM satellite radio with none other than Bob Dylan as its brusque, mercurial host.

**SONGS**

Nominees for the 1996 Nobel Prize in Literature included one writer whose only book at that time had been published twenty-five years earlier. He held an honorary doctorate in music from Princeton University although he had never bothered
to attend classes even as an undergraduate at the University of Minnesota. This was clearly an unusual candidate for the world’s preeminent literary honor. Still, his nomination meant something, and the writer to whom he found himself a runner-up, the Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska, supplied illuminating remarks in her Nobel Lecture on the uncertainty poets feel toward poetry and toward a society that is in turn uncertain exactly how to deal with—even to recognize—poets. She discussed the wariness with which poets confess to being poets, suggesting that they would rather call themselves almost anything else. She might as well have been talking about Bob Dylan, her fellow nominee, who in 1965 sidestepped the designation of “poet” in favor of “song-and-dance man.” Dylan’s tongue was only partly in his cheek. He understood that poetry is at once an exclusive and an ill-defined category, and that establishing his work within it would generate expectations and with them limitations. In other words, he wanted to avoid the very debate that tried on one side to boost his writing into an authoritative literary position and on the other to send him back to the lower divisions of the arts, to songwriting as a subclass of writing.

In any case, it was surely not *Tarantula* that earned Dylan his Nobel nomination—though the merits of that book are many—but an intuition of now several generations of audiences that something in Dylan’s *other* work, his work in song, was classifiable if not as poetry then at least as literature of some kind. Interviewed shortly before his death for Scorsese’s *No Direction Home*, Allen Ginsberg recalled weeping when he heard the song “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” for the first time and thinking that Dylan had managed to transmit the lessons of a prior generation of writers into a new form, hence a viable future. “Poetry,” said Ginsberg, “is words that are empowered, that make your hair stand on end, that you recognize instantly as being some form of subjective truth that has an objective reality to it because somebody’s realized it. Then you call it poetry later.” The category itself is ex post facto in Ginsberg’s understanding, even incidental, applied in the necessity to explain an experience of profound communication. This is simply a different way of approaching Dylan and Szymborska’s shared hesitation to endorse the poet’s lexicon, which, Ginsberg shows, regards poetry from the wrong end of the process of naming.

Ginsberg was responding to a quality in Dylan’s writing that corresponded to a Beat aesthetic of internal exploration and prophetic language. It is significant that he singled out “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” from the songs collected on *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* as these particular lyrics don’t really fit the context of the political ballads and talking blues that typified Dylan’s earliest compositions. The “hard rain” of the song was often taken to represent a nuclear rain, but Dylan explicitly resisted this interpretation. In fact, the lyrics build upon an old traditional song, bringing to it the same type of biblical incantation that Ginsberg had pursued in *Howl* and later. This was undoubtedly Dylan’s breakthrough composition, and in its context one can see even the much more immediately popular “Blowin’ in the Wind”—a favorite of the protest movement—struggling to exceed protest and achieve something more recognizable as prophecy. If first Dylan asks, “How many years can a mountain exist / Before it’s washed to the sea?” he soon places himself stumbling “on the side of twelve misty mountains” to “reflect” his message “from the mountain so all souls can see it,” and, in a sense, ride the mountainside to its watery grave: “Then I’ll stand on the ocean until I start sinkin’.” If, moreover, he begins by asking, “How many roads must a man walk down / Before you call him a man?” he answers his own question with a specific number: “I’ve walked and I’ve crawled on six crooked highways”. Ginsberg was especially impressed with the wisdom of the penultimate line of “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall,” its promise to “know my song well before I start singin’.” The song ends with a kind of beginning, a statement of readiness, the rehearsal over.

When Dylan sang to his solemn fans at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival that “it’s all over now, Baby Blue”, he was picking up the same...
thread. The “blue-eyed son” of the first line of “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” emerges again in this new incarnation, but instead of looking into an apocalyptic future, “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue” describes a world already flooded, its “seasick sailors ... rowing home” and “the saints ... comin’ through” to mark an end. Unnecessary any longer to “accept it that soon / You’ll be drenched to the bone”, as Dylan advised in “The Times They Are A-Changin’,” or to anticipate “[t]he hour when the ship comes in” as dreamed of in the song titled for that line, the only course now is to “take what you need / Grab it fast” and “[l]eave your stepping stones behind” to follow willingly when finally “something calls for you.”

The flood described here is not the drowning of the Pharaoh or the conquering of Goliath as Dylan had once forecast. Instead it is total, threatening to drown the accusers along with the accused. Dylan’s audiences at live performances can be counted on to break into a cheer at the following lines from “It’s Alright Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)”: “Goodness hides behind its gates / But even the president of the United States / Sometimes must have to stand naked.” Yet these lines do less to isolate the president as the perpetrator of successive wars and social atrocities than to place each individual in the audience in the same isolated position. To shine a light upon the nakedness of power is to reflect—unsettlingly—that light back upon the individual. Less pronounced and less often noticed are these lines:

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


That illusion, the illusion of finding someone else in the midst—which is to say the mist—of one’s isolation, suddenly makes even the act of plunging from the stepping-stones into the flood in pursuit of a calling voice seem futile, foolish.

Dylan’s songs travel farther and farther into this bleak, lonesome environment, eventually finding their rhythm and pulse in what Dylan once described as the “wild mercury sound” of Bringing It All Back Home, Highway 61 Revisited, and Blonde on Blonde. Even his most commercially successful recording, “Like a Rolling Stone,” contributes to the narrative of a fall from precarious confidence into chaos and isolation, and its companion songs on Highway 61 Revisited begin to populate the destroyed terrain with an assortment of outlandish characters, as though describing what kind of civilization emerges after the dominant civilization fails. John the Baptist converses with the commander in chief in “Tombstone Blues”; Mister Jones argues with a one-eyed midget in “Ballad of a Thin Man”; God and Abraham negotiate in “Highway 61 Revisited”; Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot spar in “Desolation Row.” A similarly bizarre citizenry inhabits the Basement Tapes, which the critic Greil Marcus imagines as portraying an “Invisible Republic” based on “The Old, Weird America” of traditional music (these phrases are the titles of successive editions of Marcus’s seminal book about the Basement Tapes, published in 1997 and 2001).

Christopher Ricks joins Allen Ginsberg in noting Dylan’s extraordinary facility with rhyme. Chief among Dylan’s rhymes in Ricks’s treatment is the opening couplet of the second stanza of “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue”: “The highway is for gamblers, better use your sense. / Take what you have gathered from coincidence.” Indeed, Ricks writes, “[A]ll rhymes are a coincidence issuing in a new sense. It is a pure coincidence that sense rhymes with coincidence, and from this you gather something” (p. 34).

Ginsberg, for his part, often expressed admiration for a rhymed couplet in “Idiot Wind,” among the more vituperative of the songs on Blood on the Tracks: “Idiot wind, blowing like a circle around my skull / From the Grand Coulee Dam to the Capitol.” Ricks elaborates that the richness in this rhyme extends from the likeness of the Capitol dome to the white expanse of a skull—an eerie image and a critique of statehood and power. One might also notice the inscription (as with compass hands upon a map) of a circle from one national landmark to another, with the individual at its radial center. The singer remains
pivotal to—literally—and yet remote from the
span of his republic.

More recently, the songs included on Love
and Theft reintroduce the thematically persistent
flood and its aftermath of wet clothes, washed-
out roads, and abandoned street corners. Isolation
is yet again a central premise, yet these composi-
tions seem also to confess the thoroughness with
which they are connected to a tradition, to his-
tory, to the world surrounding them with its “idiot
wind.” Thirty-five years earlier, in “Ballad of a
Thin Man,” the mysterious Mister Jones fell
under Dylan’s fire for the pretensions of being
popular with professors, for being “well read”
and for having “been through all of F. Scott
Fitzgerald’s books”; whereas now, in “Summer
Days,” a “worn out star” finds himself reliving
nearly word for word a moment from Fitzgerald’s
The Great Gatsby (1925): “She’s looking into my
eyes, she’s holding my hand / She says, ‘[You
can’t repeat the past.’]’ / I say, ‘[You can’t?] What
do you mean, you can’t?’ Of course you
can.[’] ” Compare these lines to a conversation
between Jay Gatsby and Nick Carraway:

“I wouldn’t ask too much of her,” I ventured. “You
can’t repeat the past.”

“Can’t repeat the past?” he cried incredulously.

“Why of course you can!”

In fact, Dylan repeats the past with a nearly
obsessive enthusiasm—to such an extent that two
later albums, Love and Theft and Modern Times,
have undergone minute critical scrutiny for what
some regard as magnificent appropriation of a
diversity of cultural texts and what others regard
simply as plagiarism. Dylan presumably took the
very title Love and Theft from a historical text by
Eric Lott: Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy
borrow heavily from Confessions of a Yakuza: A
Life in Japan’s Underworld (1991), by Junichi
Saga. For Modern Times, Dylan turns to a now
obscure Civil War-era poet named Henry Timrod
for inspiration. If once Dylan stood baffled and
remote at the center of his imagined postapoca-
lyptic civilization, he now appears to have cast
himself as the historian of that civilization, piec-
ing together its voices, bringing them back to
life.

In recognition of his “profound impact on
popular music and American culture, marked by
lyrical compositions of extraordinary poetic
power,” Dylan was awarded a Pulitzer Prize
Special Citation on April 7, 2008.

TARANTULA

In the introduction to the first official edition of
Bob Dylan’s Tarantula—an introduction titled
“Here Lies Tarantula”—the publisher narrates the
long process and the series of delays of the
book’s publication. The manuscript was set aside
at Dylan’s insistence in 1966 and not revived
until 1971. The body of the text is treated as an
artifact, promised “the way [Dylan] wrote it when
he was twenty-three—just this way.” As for its
substance, the publisher’s introduction admits
that in the beginning “We weren’t quite sure what
to make of the book—except money. We didn’t
know what Bob was up to.” The sense was that a
first book by as famous a person as Dylan would
be valuable more for its status as a curiosity than
for anything it might say. The life of the book in
pirated editions and in later published editions
certainly confirms this calculation: it is one of
those texts widely circulated but infrequently
read.

Not unlike Dylan’s work in film, Tarantula is
in fact a serious and ambitious undertaking by an
artist possessing remarkable confidence in his
distinctive vision and experimental technique—
and, problematically, a nearly total disregard for
the usual bounds of coherency or linearity. In
other words, Tarantula fails much as Renaldo
and Clara fails, its failure of a piece with those
elements that make it after all an exciting and
rewarding if difficult work of art. One thinks of
Dylan’s own lines in “Love Minus Zero/No
Limit”: “[There’s no success like failure / And...
failure’s no success at all.” Sam Shepard reports
in The Rolling Thunder Logbook (1977) that in
making Renaldo and Clara, Dylan wanted to
emulate such great French filmmakers as Marcel
Carné and François Truffaut; similarly, the
publishers of Tarantula remember discussing
Rimbaud with Dylan in establishing their mutual
hopes for the book. Dylan’s taste for the avant-
garde emerges most fully in his work outside music—after all, his music must compete in a popular industry—yet the experimentation of Tarantula calls attention to some of the strangeness, the fragmentation and instinct for the absurd to be found in even the most popular of Dylan’s songs. Certain characters from Highway 61 Revisited and The Basement Tapes reappear in Tarantula, reminding us that Dylan’s images, if ephemeral, are not insubstantial or even fleeting, but they are ephemeral in the manner of ghosts, difficult to catch or fully perceive yet somehow continuous, dependable in their way, haunting a landscape over a long term.

Tarantula alternates stream-of-consciousness prose occasionally likened to (though perhaps not as fully realized as) James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake with sections of verse that sometimes refer back to and sometimes depart entirely from the prose. The book is divided into chapters, each chapter ending in a lyric epistle signed by an oddly named character: “homer the slut,” “Mouse,” “Lazy Henry,” “truman peyote,” “The Law,” “louie louie,” “your uncle Matilda,” “your friend, Friend,” et cetera. These names never repeat, though one begins to suspect of them an accumulation of aliases for a small number of consistent voices. Epistles ending certain middle chapters carry no signature, and the last chapter includes no epistle. In general the names of the characters peopling Tarantula—in the prose and verse as well as in the epistles—occur in single chapters and not again, though one character, Aretha, appears throughout. Indeed, her name is the first word of the first chapter. Another character, incidental yet hard to ignore, appears late in the book and only long enough to die: It is Dylan himself. When the publisher’s introduction plays on this theme with the variation “Here lies bob dylan”—yet we will remember that he also contrives to kill himself off in Chronicles: Volume One: “One of the early presidents of the San Bernardino Angels was Bobby Zimmerman, and he was killed in 1964 on the Bass Lake run.” If it is a coincidence that Dylan writes his own death into each of his two published books, and if it is furthermore a coincidence that the second death dates to 1964, a year during in which Dylan was hard at work writing the text that would include the first, this must be the kind of coincidence from which we are meant to “gather something,” as Christopher Ricks suggests. To “stand up & say ‘san bernardino’ “ is a nonsensical act, and to hope for anyone to “get the message” is even more absurd. But if San Bernardino is where Bobby Zimmerman was lost in Dylan’s personal mythology, to “go back” there in the chaos of the shipwreck would be an act of recovery, and suddenly the monotone in which the words are to be spoken resembles the “trembling distant voice” from “It’s Alright Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)” of “somebody [who] thinks they really found you.”

The question “are you a man or a self?” carries some urgency. After all, this is the Bob Dylan who finds it possible to imagine “[getting] ... a new Bob Dylan next week” and who goes out on Halloween with his “Bob Dylan mask on.” From such a perspective, Chronicles can be read as Dylan’s attempt to recover the man within the
The book surprised readers upon its publication with its lucidity and directness—radically different from Tarantula’s convolutions—yet many critics found Dylan’s choice of material to be puzzling. A memoir rather than an autobiography, that is, a book recounting sections of a life, not a life in its entirety, Chronicles seems determined to avoid discussing those events most burning to the curiosity of audiences. Three chapters deal with the years in Greenwich Village, yet Dylan brushes aside his motorcycle accident in a single sentence and writes nothing of Newport 1965. Instead readers find lengthy accounts of recording sessions for New Morning and Oh Mercy. This is partly a reminder that a person exists behind the celebrity whose memory of the things that happened to him—moments that stand out as important—may not conform entirely to what his fans remember of him. Still, the chapters share a more specific commonality, an idea that Dylan has expressed at intervals that an artist must never remain within a scene, must always seek an exit from any aesthetic room in which he finds himself. In Chronicles, Dylan reflects upon those moments when he stood at some variety of brink—the brink of fame, the brink of depression, the brink of irrelevance. He writes a great deal about the books and authors he turned to at each moment. In the second chapter he mentions Dante’s Inferno: one possibility for understanding Dylan’s self-portrait in Chronicles is as a pilgrim lost at successive junctures in a dark wood, probing, in the manner of Dante, for a way out.

Among the most rewarding passages of Chronicles are those in which Dylan discusses his influences. We find a diverse and challenging constellation. Suze Rotolo introduced Dylan to the works of the avant-garde artist Red Grooms and playwright Bertolt Brecht. In fact, it was an admiration for Brecht’s musical lyrics even more than Guthrie’s that spurred Dylan to songwriting. The blues guitarist Robert Johnson emerges as another influence, as well as Elvis Presley, and perhaps most significantly Rimbaud. When Dylan decided to write songs, we learn, he went to the New York Public Library to read archived newspapers in search of an understanding of historical America—this in an era when “topical” songwriters were mining the current dailies for their material. He was especially engaged with the Civil War items in those papers, wherein, as Robert Polito has observed, he may have first discovered the poetry and reporting of Henry Timrod, eventually his source for the album Modern Times.

In the Bob Dylan of Chronicles: Volume One we discover a careful student of literature, of history, and of people around him, foraging for something he can use, a voice, an exit, a raft in the flood.

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BOB DYLAN
BOB DYLAN

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CRITICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL STUDIES


Bob Dylan, Soundtrack: Renaldo and Clara. Robert Allen Zimmerman was born 24 May 1941 in Duluth, Minnesota; his father Abe worked for the Standard Oil Co. Six years later the family moved to Hibbing, often the coldest place in the US, where he taught himself piano and guitar and formed several high school rock bands. In 1959 he entered the University of Minnesota and began performing as