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INTRODUCTION

A Maker

A drumbeat from your finger releases all sound,
and a new harmony begins.

—Arthur Rimbaud, “To a Reason”

This is a book about songs and how they are made. It is about the intersection of lyric, music, and performance. It studies how the forging of these elements produces art that is more than the sum of its parts. My topic of study is the songs of Bob Dylan, the most influential popular songwriter of the last half century. Although Dylan’s acceptance of the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature has elevated his status, pushing him — controversially, of course — out of the world of popular music and into some larger sphere of creative achievement, much of the critical writing about Dylan has tended to skirt or neglect the artistic nuances that give life to the work of this most dynamic and skillful writer and composer. This book offers a close investigation of how the songs work as compositions, as structures, as systems of signs that create meaning and elicit emotion. Neither a technical musicological study nor an exercise in traditional literary criticism, it seeks out places where language and music shape and support each other. It studies in detail Dylan’s writing technique, his intertwining of lyric and music, and his engagements with broader cultural and political topics. It is intended as an investigation of the work of a major artist, an exercise in the close analysis of song, and, on a more practical level, a set of guideposts to Dylan’s compositions.

The massive body of writing about Dylan’s career and the size and variety of his recorded output have generated an entire collection of different Dylans and of different ways of framing his work. Three

approaches come to mind as particularly influential and insightful. The first is what we might call Dylan as disruptor. Dylan is an entertainer, “a song and dance man,” as he once described himself. His initial success was linked to the way he introduced serious and complex lyrics into the mainstream of popular music — a development that transformed the field. Because many of his songs touch on political or moral concerns, he was quickly labeled a philosopher or spokesman, an existentialist prophet, “the voice of a generation,” able to offer up gnomic pronouncements at will.¹ His innovative art, when coupled with his personal evasiveness and concern for his privacy (in contrast, say, to a figure like John Lennon, for whom self-exposure came to be a virtue), has generated a body of writing that seeks to figure out what he “believes” about this or that topic. Moreover, Dylan’s personal and professional courage in following his own interests, regardless of popular taste or the preferences of his fans, has lent his trajectory a dramatic shape that is obviously appealing to biographical criticism or mythography. This leads to a critical approach that combs through his many interviews and occasional writings, looking for statements that might illuminate the songs and tell us what he “really thinks.” It builds the edifice of criticism around the fragile core of the biography. And since no artist can be consistently disruptive or transformative in the ways that Dylan was at the beginning of his career, we are left with a somewhat predictable narrative of triumph and decline, as much of Dylan’s later work is taken to be somehow “less” than his earlier, “disruptive” work.²

As Dylan’s stature has grown, it has become clear that certain themes are consistent across his work. From his earliest days he has not shied away from passing judgment or casting light on racism, greed, corruption, and the miscarriage of justice. This tendency has taken on new importance with the Nobel Prize in Literature, which has often gone to artists known for their moral visions or political stances (Boris Pasternak, Pablo Neruda, Nelly Sachs, and Toni Morrison, among others). Indeed, some of the best work on Dylan of the past two decades sees him as a kind of moral philosopher, setting him in dialogue with other writers, from Virgil to Eliot, yielding insights into the ethics, as well as the mechanics, of his writing.³ This work has drawn its strength and wisdom from a close consideration of Dylan’s lyrics, to the relative exclusion of his music. And if the narrative of Dylan as disruptor often casts his artistic trajectory as

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a story of decline, here we run the risk of a version of Dylan that fails to account fully for the changes in his work, setting him up as always doing more or less the same thing. My book will track how his approach changes, how his moral concerns can both remain constant, yet be articulated — both lyrically and musically — in vastly different ways across time.

Dylan's deep sense of history and his curiosity about different musical traditions — from Mexican border ballads to western swing — have led some commentators to see his work as a kind of parable about American identity and inclusiveness. Here he is taken less as an existentialist hero or a great ethicist than as a quintessentially American bard, the heir to Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams, speaking of and to the promise of America. This is a critical approach that has occasionally considered both music and lyrics and has opened important perspectives on the work, not least by showing how Dylan moves between what used to be called “high” culture and “popular” culture. That I put scare quotes around those two terms is itself testimony to the success with which Dylan, along with a few of his contemporaries, has succeeded in blurring once distinct categories. Yet, a strict focus on Dylan's “Americanness” (more scare quotes) runs the risk of limiting our sense of the songs' aesthetic impact and formal complexity. Much of the power of Dylan's art emanates from how he breaks conventions, or merely gestures toward them as he passes by. For example, he does not sing the blues: he uses the blues.⁴ To be sure, Dylan's work is deeply indebted to American song traditions; he is not a global musical tourist in the ways that, say, Paul Simon, David Byrne, and Caetano Veloso are. But that doesn't mean that the impact of the work is limited to the national imaginary. Art means beyond the space and time of its production. Music doesn't like borders; it moves easily. Poetry moves less easily, yet it still moves, and the drag or resistance produced out of its movement is itself part of its energy. The aesthetic range of Dylan's achievement is especially important to acknowledge going forward, as his work now circulates in a global musical culture. And the next generation of listeners, working in a new digital soundscape, will doubtless hear (and sample) this music in ways that we can scarcely imagine today.⁵

My own discussion will focus on how Dylan gets his job done. I want to look at features of the work that can help us grasp questions

of politics, history, and ethics beyond the level of theme or argument. My interest will be in style and form — features that should ground any broader consideration of the author's cultural importance. For it is in the intersection of lyric and music — in the details of structure — that Dylan's art generates new types of knowledge. Lyric poetry, like much song, often seems to live outside of history and the flow of social conversations. Yet, precisely for this reason, we can turn to lyric forms for insights into social experience. As the poet Robert Pinsky has noted, in lyric, "Communal life, whether explicitly included or not, is present implicitly in the cadences and syntax of language: a somatic ghost."⁶ Whereas many of Dylan's first fans lamented that he early on abandoned "political" music (by which they meant topical songs about current events), it is clear that his most original insights into social and political reality often come through his depictions of power, love, memory, desire, and art itself. Through the ways in which they shape language and rhythm, poetry and song grasp how politics works. As Pinsky points out, poetry is a form of art that brings the body into the social world. "Poetry penetrates to where the body recognizes the stirring of meaning," he writes, in lines that are doubly true for song, which seizes the body and moves it. "That power," Pinsky continues, "is social as well as psychological. If all art is imitation, what does the art of verse imitate? It imitates the social actions of meaning."⁷ Put differently, songs are most political when they are not talking about politics, but when they are giving voice to the social relations and the play of power and resistance that shape our collective experience. For it is then that song — like any art — can generate new types of knowledge, grasping what cannot yet be conceptualized in thought.

Yet, one might wonder, why focus on one author who will be singled out for attention? Does this not in some sense privilege an idea of the songwriter as "genius" (as outmoded as that idea may be today) — and a "white male genius" at that? Would it not be better to set Dylan up as one of a pack, in the history of a mode of representation (in this case, rock and roll), or in the history of a moment (American popular culture's rise to global dominance)? The answers to this are several. First, as will be clear, Dylan's work is obsessively about dialogue and about the multiple voices through which art takes shape. In this regard, we might understand "Bob Dylan" less as some type of discrete "genius" than as a site, a wavering node of influences

that coalesce to speak in new ways, through which we can reflect on the kinds of knowledge that art makes happen. But more compelling, perhaps, is that Dylan's own art, from its very first manifestations, has consistently questioned, taken apart, and criticized every feature of the very culture that has made it possible, from the arrogance of stardom to the vacuity of the press and the capitalist machine underpinning middle-class consumerism. And he has developed modes and tools for understanding and grasping collective experience, our relationship to language, memory, and form — our “somatic ghosts.” This is why even when Dylan's art is irritating or confrontational, it elicits attention from listeners. For it is clear that something is happening in it that speaks to both our moment and beyond our moment, something that points to the space where ideas end and where, as Pinsky puts it, “the body recognizes the stirring of meaning.” To do this, as we will see, Dylan's art steadfastly refuses to limit itself, to offer convenient “positions” on topics of “importance.” These are the “positions” (on race, identity, sexuality, state power, commercialism, and so on) that are often set forth in the art of Dylan's colleagues. They are, in themselves, useful. What sets Dylan apart is that his work registers the impact of social and political change, not only on selves and communities but also on art itself, as the medium of communication.

Throughout the book I will be using the somewhat grand-sounding term “poetics” to refer to Dylan's different ways of working. What I have in mind is an approach that touches on the content or themes of Dylan's songs, on their formal structures, and on the interplay of theme and structure, both musically and lyrically. As we will see demonstrated in a number of instances, Dylan can best be understood as a combiner. He is a maker, which is the original meaning of “poet” (*poiein*, in Greek, means “to make”). So, a *poetics*, in this context, is quite simply a way of making things. Our task then becomes to explore how, at certain moments, songs are made and how specific literary and musical techniques work to generate particular manifestations of style in song.

When we speak of style we can touch on several interlocking senses of the word. For much literary, visual, and musical criticism, style involves the way in which artists manipulate different levels or historically defined registers of representation — the “high” style of tragedy, the ornamented style of the “Baroque,” for example. The concept of style works as a point of intersection where the individual

pulse of artistic creation interacts with the collective dimension of artistic reception. The individual artwork inevitably unfolds within and against convention, tradition, commonplace, cliché. Style means not only individual expression but also the conformity of the individual voice to broadly accepted notions of what is appropriate or even fashionable. Thus, the Petrarchan poet of the Renaissance or the country music balladeer, for example, channels her or his personal experiences through conventions of a style recognizable to a readership or listenership. Style shapes and, we might say, cushions the violence of individual expression, making it palatable for a reading or listening public. This means that no matter how dramatically an artist may change direction, he or she must remain within a certain set of parameters that are recognizable to the listener, viewer, or reader. And it follows that older styles will continue to leave their traces, ghostlike, in the very works that seem to be departing in new directions.⁸

We can link artistic technique to the more general social world by recalling for a moment the work of the Russian critic Mikhail M. Bakhtin. For Bakhtin, the language of art is inherently dialogic, not in terms of some type of hierarchy of artistic movements or canons (Attic style, Art Deco style) but in the ways it brings different social worlds into contact with each other. In a poem or a novel, words from different contexts are woven together; speakers speak in their own voices, but they also report the language of other speakers or speak in clichés. The text is multivoiced, what Bakhtin's jargon termed "heteroglossic" (bits of language from different communities set in proximity) or "polyglossic" (multiple languages in the same text). Every text is caught up in a web of conversations with other texts, with other speakers, with other linguistic communities.⁹ This means that the style of a given text, as it melds together different textual elements, also gestures toward the diverse communities from which these elements come. As we shall see, this question of the multiplicity of languages at work in a specific text, be it linguistic or musical, is important for grasping Dylan's work.

Lyric—in both poetry and song—is about fragmentation, momentary flashes of insight, condensed expression. We could think of Dylan's work in this regard as a kind of "galaxy" or "constellation" of moments in which the combination of lyric, melody, and rhythm generates a force field. If literary art is, in Bakhtin's words,

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“many voiced,” it should be obvious that this concept—taken, as it is, from the world of sound itself—illuminates the construction of musical compositions. It does so nowhere more dramatically than in the realm of popular music, which constantly cites itself, draws on earlier genres and idioms, plays with pitch and rhythm, samples other recordings. In recorded productions, such citation and multivoicedness may be obvious and explicit, as in The Beatles’ many sonic experiments of mixing musical idioms and quoting diverse traditions—from Indian ragas to British music hall ditties—in their recordings. But they may also be implicit and “felt,” such as the ghostly presence of the Zydeco rhythm that underpins Hank Williams’s 1952 song “Jambalaya,” which both is “about” Zydeco culture in its lyric and ineluctably performs Zydeco in its meter, no matter how perverse (“countrified,” “sweetened,” “rock and roll,” etc.) an arrangement of the song may be. Our task will be to listen for these many pulses in Dylan’s work. For example, how do rhythm and lyric work together? How do alliteration and rhyme enhance (or undercut) moral message or erotic invitation? Why do some chord changes have a dramatic effect, while others bring the lyric to a happy resolution?¹⁰

One of the keys to Dylan’s achievement, I will suggest, lies not in an avant-garde attempt to refuse accepted styles, but in a much more strategic mixing of stylistic registers. This occurs at the level of sound and melody as well as lyric. Poetry is, among other things, language organized to generate rhythm and sound. It is, in its origins, closely linked to music. Much writing on Dylan ignores or skirts the question of his musical prowess, of his manipulation of melody and harmony. Too often he is dismissed as a musical “primitive” or simply ignored as a musician. But his “poetic making” also involves melodies and rhythms, and the forging of sense and sound together into something bigger than the sum of its parts. Thus, a study of the “multivoiced” character of the songs must, when possible, take into account the manipulation of sound, via melody and harmony, as well as the way sound and sense shape each other.

It is fair to say that Dylan’s work reveals a complexity and compaction not seen in the work of most other popular artists. That is, Dylan’s work feels “denser” or “deeper” (in an almost tactile sense, not necessarily in any philosophical sense) than that of most of his contemporaries. The American writer Ezra Pound emphasized that the poet is someone who makes language thick, who condenses

it—as the German word for poet, *Dichter*, comes from the word for “thicken.” As a master of citation, a combiner, a collagist, a paster, a thickener, Dylan is able to lend a new density to song.¹¹ His singing persona functions as a kind of medium or vehicle through which the listener can glimpse or hear the sonic landscape of some other moment or territory where “Bob Dylan,” the composer, seems to roam. This sense of density—what we might call the “Dylanesque” feature of his work—is achieved through a mastery of the art of combination or collage.

The multilayered density of Dylan’s songs and the metamorphic energy of the lyrics brings us to yet another sense of style, which links up to the modern idea of “fashion” or “mode”—the conventions that dominate a particular moment but are soon set aside as “old-fashioned” and rejected. This dynamic is, of course, the dynamic of mass production and of the modern culture industry.¹² Dylan’s work consistently exploits the way fashion is transformed by the passage of time. He turns again and again to the relationship between the “now” and the “future,” on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the archaic, the premodern, the quaint. To a degree unrivaled by any modern popular artist Dylan is a miner of old forms, an expeditionary heading back into the hoary world of predigital models of expression—old songs, old sentences, old images, old chords.¹³

Dylan’s constant reflection on the “old” and the “new,” on what the poet Rimbaud called the “absolutely modern,” will help us to locate the songs in a history of forms. Dylan’s work takes shape in the post-World War II moment, the moment of television and the automobile. Thus, the most pertinent historical context for understanding his work may be less that of rock music, or of “the Sixties,” than of artistic modernism more generally. By “modernism,” I have in mind that current of artistic experimentation that expands from the French Impressionists in the nineteenth century through the “geniuses” of the early twentieth (Woolf, Stravinsky, Eliot, Eisenstein, Ellington, Picasso) and on to the emergence of a late “modernist” style after World War II (Pollock, Nabokov, Henry Moore, Charlie Parker, Orson Welles). Dylan comes of age at the moment at which “modernism” first becomes recognized as a kind of international style in art and at which it begins to reach a mass audience, spreading beyond the world of the avant-gardes. Yet, more pertinent than the history, for our purposes, are the technical discoveries of modernist

art: the focus on formal integrity as the response to historical chaos, the importation of “low” culture into “high” culture (and vice versa), the fragmentation of time and space, the continual vexed worrying about the past, about tradition and originality, the idea of culture as a ruin, the emphasis on artificial or invented objects and moments as bearers of peak or authentic experience within an increasingly unreal “real world.”¹⁴ Modernist art privileges the moment, an absolute contemporaneity that simultaneously seeks to break with history and take stock of its own relationship to what has been lost. It struggles to come to terms with a world that has been stripped of its religious magic by the logic of capitalism, what Max Weber called “the disenchantment of the world.” Dylan’s reformulation, “It’s easy to see without looking too far that not much is really sacred,” from 1964’s “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)” offers a later articulation of the same idea, written from within the swirl of postwar industrial expansion and 1960s media culture.¹⁵

Dylan differs from several of his contemporaries who went on to develop influential bodies of work as particularly “dense” or “poetic” songwriters. For example, Leonard Cohen’s voice and songs seem to come from a bounded place of unusual concentration — at the intersection of the erotic and the spiritual — out of which he generates powerful insights about desire and regret. It is no accident that this type of intensity requires a deep focus on the frailty of the self (which we might see paralleled, biographically, in Cohen’s interest in Buddhism and Jewish mysticism). It results in a closely circumscribed, though forceful, poetic vision. Or, to take another example, we could recall the work of Joni Mitchell, which generates much of its energy out of Mitchell’s self-dramatizing and romantic re-creations of her own adventures in love and art. This might be linked to her pioneering status, along with Laura Nyro, as one of the first great female singer-songwriters. Lacking the ready-made paradigms of desire and amorous conquest available to her male colleagues, she generated her own counterstories by showcasing her escapades, triumphs, and foibles. This is reflected in Mitchell’s insistence on herself as “original” and an “artist.”¹⁶ Dylan, by contrast, offered an album called *Self Portrait* that consisted of songs by other people. Quite unlike both Cohen and Mitchell, Dylan radiates outward in his work, and his interest lies in absorbing into his singing persona all of the material of the culture around him.

To study Dylan's art and its combinatory power, we need to take into account the different ways in which he uses the "I" who appears in his compositions. This "I" is, of course, a fiction, just as the "I" of Shakespeare's sonnets is a fiction and the "I" of Marty Robbins's 1959 border ballad "El Paso" is a fiction. It is a character that Dylan invents anew for each song. Sometimes that character knows many things. Sometimes it knows little. Sometimes it thinks it knows more than it does. Sometimes it says more than it knows. Moreover, like many self-invented artists, Dylan seems to locate his persona in relationship to various exemplary figures, both real and fictional (Woody Guthrie, Arthur Rimbaud, Jack Kerouac, Jay Gatsby, Billy the Kid, Rhett Butler, Jack London). Yet, what is important about these figures is not their role in the development of personal identity — they will change — but rather the literary and musical resources they free up. In what follows I will be speaking interchangeably of the "hero" or "protagonist" or "narrator" of Dylan's songs. Sometimes, for convenience, I will speak of the "singer," without, however, assuming that the singer caught up in the story is the biographical "Bob Dylan," whoever he may be.

This question of the "I" poses interesting problems when we consider Dylan's own location in his songs. Just as he is often most "political" when least political, so may his hand be felt most clearly in songs that cannot be linked in any narrative way to "Bob Dylan." We can think, in this context, of a song like 1995's "Dignity." The song recounts the adventures of an "I" who appears to be a private detective, much in the mold of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, who crisscrosses a nocturnal cityscape that feels like Los Angeles, in search of someone, or something, called "Dignity." We watch as the hero goes from scene to scene: a tattoo parlor, a fancy party, a cheap bar, an abandoned apartment, "Asking the cops wherever I go, 'Have you seen Dignity?'" (p. 766). The literary trick of leaving the identity or nature of "Dignity" vague makes the song particularly powerful, as it yokes a seedy crime story to a grand philosophical quest. (Indeed, where can one find something like dignity at the end of the 1980s, the decade of arbitrageurs, Teflon presidents, and Spandex?)¹⁷

The main character of "Dignity" is a persistent but not particularly competent private eye who has his own problems ("So many dead ends / I'm at the edge of the lake"). Yet he does more than act in a series of misadventures. He cites. "Fat man lookin' in a blade of

steel,” begins the lyric. “Thin man lookin’ at his last meal / Hollow man lookin’ in a cotton field, for Dignity.” This particular narrator speaks in the language of T. S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men.” He also channels Walt Whitman, as he reveals a moment later with, “Wise man lookin’ at a blade of grass,” not to mention Saint Paul (“I heard the tongues of angels and the tongues of men / Wasn’t any difference to me”), Stendhal, the *Financial Times*, and the Book of Ezekiel (“I went into the red, went into the black / Into the valley of dry bone dreams”). This technique of citation is one aspect of the “density” of Dylan’s lyrics that I mentioned a moment ago.

But what is the status of these citations with regard to the fiction of the story? We might contrast this approach with the famous citations of Dante, Marvell, and the Greeks in T. S. Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” where the main character — a shy intellectual — is so neurotic that he can speak of love only by citing classical poetry. Eliot’s world and Prufrock’s world are the same world, a refined world where people would drop bits of Dante in casual conversation. Or, we could set “Dignity” against Raymond Chandler’s uneasy references to “high literature,” such as the moment in 1953’s *The Long Goodbye* when Marlowe is asked by an African American chauffeur what he thinks of Eliot’s phrase, “In the room the women come and go, talking of Michelangelo.” “It suggests to me that the guy didn’t know very much about women,” quips tough guy Marlowe.¹⁸

Dylan’s citations fit into neither of these patterns, the first of which makes “high” literature a seamless part of the fictional world, the second of which makes “high” (modernist) literature something to be commented on sarcastically to show that Eliot’s London is irrelevant to life in the mean streets of Los Angeles. Rather, Dylan’s citations are embedded in the fabric of the song, but not linked to its “plot.” They tell us nothing about the characters. It doesn’t matter, in other words, whether the hero has read Eliot. But the citations do tell us something about the *song* and its purpose. They suggest that the quest for Dignity is not just a mystery tale, as the narrator seems to think. It is a quest for meaning in a meaningless world, for goodness in a den of thieves. *Someone* connected to the song knows that Whitman and Saint Paul are hovering in the area, that they, too, are looking for Dignity. Yet given the fact that some of these allusions are less than obvious, it may not be the listener, either. Indeed, what is most important is that the literary allusions are only of limited

relevance to the listener's grasp of the song. They are about tone as much as they are about meaning. They provide the very flavor of the lyric, giving it its strangeness and stimulating our curiosity. "I heard the tongues of angels and the tongues of men / Wasn't any difference to me." What a striking idea! It conveys the alienation of the narrator, who says, in effect, "I have heard it all." Neither the narrator nor the casual listener needs to know that what is at play is Saint Paul's claim in 1 Corinthians 13 that, without charity, the voices of men and of angels are nothing but clanging gongs. Yet the images — the men, the angels — have the effect of marking the surface of the lyric. We sense that they come from somewhere, even if we know not where. And in this regard, in their capacity to make normal phrasing strange, they are the signature or footprint of the author's presence. They are how we know that this is a Bob Dylan song. They are the mark of the Dylanesque style, of a particular layering of intensity that structures an imaginary world at once "high" culture and "low" culture, recognizable (through the style of the film noir) yet unfamiliar, distorted, other.

The implications for authorship of this technique are worth considering. Dylan has always been interested in having it both ways. That is, he has wanted to be taken seriously by his listeners and by the press, but not too seriously. He has wanted to be famous, but to keep his privacy. He has wanted to be popular, but not mainstream. He has wanted to express himself through song, but not to be on display in ways that will lead listeners to pin his compositions to his biography. The poetic technique of "Dignity" shows how Dylan can be "in" his songs *both* as an actor, as the performing "I" who speaks, *and* as the clever commentator who sews the lyric with citations that suggest some larger meaning. He is in his songs, but not of them.

The evasive boundedness of Dylan's lyrics and lyric/sound combinations is strengthened by his musical accompaniments, which are mostly steady and monochromatic compared with the lyrics. In contrast, say, to The Beatles, who in their most experimental period manipulated the sound of every track to follow the lyric (here comes the clarinet . . . oops, there it goes again, and here comes the sitar), Dylan sets his multivalent lyrics against solid, often unvarying, sonic tracks. He rarely slows down or speeds up. Dynamics rarely modulate. This lends him authority over what is happening, as he dips in and out of the worlds in which his characters move. The

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accompaniment functions as a drone, or a control against which variations can be explored. It keeps the focus on the voice, which is also one of the reasons why listeners who find that voice unappealing often struggle to understand the attraction of Dylan's work. Thus, it is important, as we work through this material, not to focus on the fact that "Bob Dylan" is singing. What is important is the persona he creates at any given moment. Some of these songs could be sung by anybody—and have been. Others are simply unimaginable apart from the raspy voice that puts them over on record.

Song is a particularly powerful art form because it envelops the listener. There is no period of "settling into" it as one settles into a novel, or of sitting quietly in front of it as one does with a painting. Song is simply there—around you and in your head. In some contexts, where songs are performed for communities as part of their shared history, the moment of performance is a moment of transformation, as the singer, shaman, or griot is inspired and listeners are transported to another time and space. When song is recorded electronically and played back, the power of transformation is multiplied exponentially and imposed violently. From the very moment of some of Dylan's most recognizable beginnings—the snare drum beat that opens "Like a Rolling Stone," the steel guitar that begins "Lay, Lady, Lay," the humming chorus of "Knocking on Heaven's Door," the booming piano chords of "Ballad of a Thin Man"—we are outside quotidian reality. This violence visited on our nervous systems hobbles the critical faculty. The overload of sonic and intellectual information makes it difficult to listen and think about listening at the same time. To slow down this process, my own discussion will begin with the lyrics, which are the feature of song to which one can return and that one can analyze spatially, as it were, on the page. Dylan begins his own apprenticeship by writing lyrics to melodies by other composers, not by writing new melodies to lyrics by other poets. Thus, it seems safest to begin with the lyric and move from there to questions of harmony, melody, performance, and sound.

To a degree unparalleled in American popular culture, Bob Dylan has been a shape-shifter. I don't mean that in any type of existential or philosophical sense—that would be, yet again, to make him into myth—but simply in a technical sense. At one point in his career he writes one type of song. At another point, he writes songs that are quite different. How are they different? And can we discern how he

gets from one point to the other? To attribute these shifts and developments to something as vague as “inspiration,” or to the vagaries of biography, or to politics — or simply to neglect them — inevitably fails to account fully for how the songs work, and for how some songs work differently from other songs.

To engage with the variety of Dylan’s output, we must focus on a set of problems faced by any artist who changes direction: How do old forms continue to weigh on new forms? How can we see new forms as offering a set of “solutions” to problems or limitations in older forms? What is the relationship between the “I” who sings and the listener? Who is that listener? How is her community or situation implied in the song? What is the role of different forms of language (repetitions, questions, exclamations, proverbs, curses), of different rhetorical tropes (metaphor, simile, allegory)? Are there points where Dylan seems to be working with models from other writers, or to be in dialogue with them? If so, how does their presence shape what we are listening to? What work does the stanza do, or the chorus? How are different generic conventions in both music and poetry (the blues, the sonnet, the ballad) deployed? How do shifts in harmony and cadence, no less than in lyric, work within or against those conventions?

In what follows, I will argue that Dylan’s work unfolds through a shifting set of innovations and discoveries — different “poetics,” if you will — that often involve engagement with other types of writing or singing. In Chapters 1 and 2, I show that Dylan learns to write by practicing a “poetics of adaptation” that both transforms earlier models — in the spirit of his hero Woody Guthrie — and remains in dialogue with them. I will show how he draws on different invented versions of American English and American space as a way of creating an identity and claiming authority for his singing persona. Later, he will be interested in exploring the nature of meaning and the limits of the senses. Here, my account of his rise to eminence will be attentive to his encounters with the works of the great modernist writers Bertolt Brecht and Arthur Rimbaud (Chapter 3). This is not to say that Rimbaud was more important for Dylan than, say, Muddy Waters, but it is to say that by being attentive to Dylan as Rimbaudian modernist we can learn something about his work that we wouldn’t if we only listened to Muddy Waters. Somewhat later, when Dylan shifts directions again, changing his sound and persona in the mid-1970s, his approach

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to structure, language, and harmony will change as well. He will push past the impasses of some of his expansive 1960s work to focus on tightly constructed stories of escape and evasion, travel and memory. This I discuss in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 will look at Dylan's engagement with evangelical Christianity at the end of the 1970s, stressing the changing positions of singer and listener within a dynamic of conversion. From there, my argument will touch only at moments on Dylan's work during the long 1980s, since his obvious groping for direction and his many collaborations during that period make it difficult to offer even a moderately coherent account. However, in Chapter 6, "A Wisp of Startled Air," I will turn to Dylan's reinvention of his approach in the mid-1990s and point to some of the features of his more recent work. Each of these moments in Dylan's poetic trajectory, I will suggest, is defined and shaped by particular poetic and musical strategies — ways of using figural language, ways of depicting the self, harmonic tics, ways of evoking the audience, and so forth.

New sounds and new approaches require new poetics. The project of the book is to describe these poetics. I will be looking as closely as I can at the versions of Dylan's songs presented on his officially released recordings. The corpus is vast, with multiple versions of some songs, live outtakes, and pirated versions in wide circulation. Dylan himself seems to have only limited patience with the recording process and has often stated that the best versions of his songs may well be in live performance. Fair enough. However, I am not interested in playing the sleuth or archivist, or in tracking down hidden versions or obscure outtakes. The hope is that my discussion can illuminate those versions of the songs that average listeners can access without too much difficulty — for it is those versions that have had such a powerful impact on popular music and world musical culture over the past half century. As will become clear, for the most part I do not pad my close analysis of songs with references to Dylan's interviews or other writings. This is partly because I am not particularly interested in "Bob Dylan," whoever he may be, or in what he thinks about cabbages or kings. Our attention should be on the songs. But it is also because the constant glossing of Dylan's songs with his comments in interviews runs the risk of leveling out the work, reducing it to biography or to a set of documents of cultural history. When appropriate, I will turn to his 2004 memoir, *Chronicles: Volume One*, to help locate the discussion.

The arc of the book will be built on a loose chronology, but it makes no pretense to offer a comprehensive account of Dylan's corpus. There would never be world enough and time to talk about each song. I have attempted to engage seriously with a broad swath of Dylan's most influential work, touching, often in some detail, on most of his signal compositions. Some areas, albums, and periods necessarily receive less attention than others. For example, the songs on the famous *Basement Tapes*, made with The Band in the late 1960s, get only a glance here, simply because, though they seem to mark a renewed dialogue with tradition on Dylan's part, they don't result in major shifts in his songwriting that would break with his officially released material during these years.¹⁹ In other words, I am not interested in the biographical conditions shaping these songs, but in the songs. My focus is on analyzing tendencies in Dylan's compositional strategies, in tracing how these tendencies shift across time. Certain preoccupations will emerge and then disappear. Some songs will be seen in dialogue with each other. Certain rhetorical tropes will be deployed and discarded. Certain forms of character, or techniques of citation, will modulate. Many great songs will not be discussed in any detail, simply for lack of space. My project, in what follows, then, will be to describe some of the nuanced effects of Dylan's art, to see how, in part, it is made, and what that making can teach us.²⁰

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