

A Face like a Mask and a Voice that Croaks: An Integrated Poetics of Bob Dylan's Voice, Personae, and Lyrics

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This paper seeks to more closely examine the specific literary pleasures experienced by listeners of Bob Dylan's songs. In doing so, this analysis posits that such pleasure is a response to the concurrence of three literary activities: Dylan's poetic texts are first written and then performed; Dylan's poetry is rhythmically re-written by the voice; and Dylan uses the songs to *write* himself—in other words, to construct a series of numerous and competing personae. This essay argues that close reading of the lyrics must therefore be supplemented by a “poetics of the voice” and a detailed analysis of the theatricality of what might be called Dylan's “games of masks.” While a stylistic approach to Dylan's lyrics reveals a thrust towards *writerly* openness and new poetical idioms that fuse oral traditions with “high” poetry, the aesthetic and semantic uses Dylan makes of his voice are equally sophisticated. In this analysis, Dylan's voice will be approached from several angles: as an object of pleasure; as an instrument of writing that allows Dylan to create a form of oral free verse; and as a complex sign that the artist uses for pathos, self-parody, and/or to enhance his fatalistic and stoic vision of a fallen world in which “everything is broken.”

The study of Dylan's “masks” will show that the musician uses archetypal poetic identities (prophet, trickster, man of sorrow, and so forth) as fictional figurations of himself that he then offers to the audience. These lyrical personae can be approached as texts that may become objects of analysis in their own right. A persona is indeed an enclosed structure with an internal coherence, an artifact composed of signs, codes, and discourses. In Dylan's case, the *personae* emerge from the lyrics and interact with his public image, constantly ratifying or parodying it, thus enabling the artist to ceaselessly construct and deconstruct a fictional “Bob Dylan.” The songs thus eventually come to fictionalize his biography in a theater of identities that brings into play a participatory game: the audience is made to interrogate Dylan's postures and impostures and to construct apocryphal

versions of his life/lives, thus further enriching in fiction the many literary pleasures derived from the songs.

Today, the critical recognition of Bob Dylan stands at an all-time high. Yet his primary artistic medium, songwriting, is still largely spurned by mainstream literary studies. For many, it remains hard to conceive that an oral form that is hybrid by definition—and, in this case, popular—might turn out to be as artistically challenging and rewarding for the audience and the critic—in terms of intellectual and aesthetic pleasure—as the open forms advocated by the poetical avant-garde of the twentieth century. In the past fifty years in mainstream academia—especially in Europe—all dominant critical discourses have held the written word in higher regard than the oral; experimentation has been favored over tradition and the “impersonal” mode thought more worthy than the “lyrical” mode. More generally, academic opinion-makers have been partial to so-called “difficult” texts: the literary merits of a given literary work have been thought proportional to its resistance to reading, and the violence with which it attacked linguistic and artistic structure has been thought to be the ultimate test of poetical strength.

Within this ideology of the arts—an inheritance of modernism, no doubt—the song as an artistic form was obviously deemed of less than secondary importance. The three well-known faults of that musical medium for literary critics can be summarized as follows: first, the fact that the historical affinity with the lyrical mode makes songs the ideal vehicle for complacent, second-rate romantic poetry; second, that songs are not meant for the page and therefore, their literary potential is restrained by the corset of a traditional poetical system (stanza-rhyme-meter) that can be easily put to music; and finally, that as a performer, the songwriter establishes no clear barrier between “entertainment” and “art”—his potential audience is therefore far too extensive. As a result, songs are still often perceived as objects for mass consumption, the epitome of the standardized cultural product that is formally and ideologically closed and might generate little more than escapist satisfaction.

This adverse academic climate naturally fuels the interest of any literary critic who might wish to research Bob Dylan’s work. However inclined one might feel to rehabilitate the literary merits of songs, it will be well advised, nevertheless, to carry out this task within a methodological framework that acknowledges the specificity of the song form. The cultural context, aesthetic functioning, and actual mode of consumption of songs must be taken into account—not to mention the specificity of Bob Dylan’s particular use of the medium, which bears little in common with, say, that of Frank Sinatra.

It is now generally accepted that Bob Dylan's songs cannot be approached with the tools and methods that are usefully applied to Keats' odes. Bob Dylan's audience usually does not actually *read* the lyrics, for example, although the script of the lyrics might be *consulted* by fans at some point and thus become an actual supplement to the original oral text. Many literary critics still subject Dylan's lyrics to New Criticism-type close readings, as though the words were fully autonomous from their music and performance. Such studies that focus on Bob Dylan's verbal abilities can be useful in the canonization of his work, but what those studies fail to understand is the specificity of the literary pleasures that are granted by a song. When the oral and hybrid qualities of those texts are ignored, the songs are relegated to domains of literature that are already fully mapped out; Dylan's work is then considered as poetry that just happens to be set to music and performed. Such an approach fails to rise to the challenge that Bob Dylan's songs send to the literary critics.

Within this context, a literary approach to Dylan's songs can prove both welcome and enlightening, provided it is remembered that the poet is a performer and much of the poetry lies in the performance and music. Critics should operate within a new poetics in which songs are not considered as poems set to music, but as complex forms where lyrics are never autonomous, but are in constant interaction with a series of non-verbal elements: the music, the voice of the performer,¹ and the *personae* (the fictional or semi-fictional identities that the artist constructs in the lyrics and in his public appearances). Indeed, lyrics, music, live voice, and persona are perceived simultaneously during the performance. As these elements interact, a complex and dynamic oral artistic form emerges: the performed song.

Bob Dylan's literary talent is not confined to the writing of lyrics, but extends to the way the lyrics are performed, which shows a fascination for a rhythmical language that is inherently literary. As well, the "fictions" of himself and the identity games that Dylan encodes within his songs are highly theatrical. Dylan writes lyrics that are inherently poetic, in other words, but also "writes" rhythm with his voice and uses his songs to "write himself" and create personae. The song, therefore, is a form where several inscriptive activities overlap and interact: it is a poetical form of writing that

¹ In itself, the voice of the performer is a complex element and requires its own "poetics of the voice" that would include not only an analysis of the actual qualities of the voice, but also an analysis of the voice's engagement with language (phrasing), the performing style, the negotiation between melody (*melos*) and language (*logos*), and the uses of the voice as sign.

operates within the formal constraints of songwriting (the stanza/meter/rhyme system) and often pushes that system to its limits; it is a rhythmical form of writing that uses the voice as an instrument to intervene in the text and that actually writes rhythm (gratuitously or to emphasize meaning); and, last but not least, the song is an auto-fictional form of writing that creates the series of “texts” known as Bob Dylan’s personae, which are central to Dylan’s art and without which many songs would be diminished in their potential significance.

This hypothesis of the song as a hyper-literary object is more daring than it seems. Nobody denies that Dylan’s art partakes of a form of oral poetry, as does the blues, for example; that the song itself is an object whose “literariness” outweighs the musicality, however, remains open to debate.

A Literary Genius: So What?

The first concern for a literary critic remains the inherent literary value of the lyrics, which hangs under the suspicion that songs belong to a paraliterary realm. Close readings of Dylan’s lyrics fully demonstrate that he produces full-fledged literary texts that are tightly woven and held together by the texture of a demanding and richly evocative *écriture* that manifests an extraordinary command of language. What is more, he does this within the constraints of the stanza/meter/rhyme system. To use a distinction developed by the French literary critic Roland Barthes, Dylan’s songs are more often than not *writerly* rather than just *readerly* (Barthes 1970:11).²

I would now like to examine the song, “It’s All Over, Now, Baby Blue” as an example of Dylan’s literary mastery. The song’s lyrics work as an exhortation for a great departure and introduce numerous wanderer-type figures and other social misfits. Using one of the most fundamental postures of the Dylan ethos, the song invites us to an open voyage and an open future, to a rupture with established values and forms. Aesthetically, it calls for the listener to accept the song as a space without narrative continuity or artistic

² Indeed, the semantic openness and sophisticated imagery in most Dylan songs, as well as the constant blending of poetic idioms of various origins, requires a great deal of hermeneutic activity on the part of any listener even remotely interested in the lyrics. This active engagement with meaning and with the poetic fabric of the words is what Barthes sees as a *writerly* activity that draws on the reader’s—or, in this case, the listener’s—creative faculties and imagination, thus empowering him and replacing the reassuring reading pleasure provided by closed forms with a more unsettling, though rewarding, literary bliss.

rules—to open up to the spontaneity of free association and discursive possibilities.

The particular stylistic idiom that Dylan resorts to most often at this stage of his career used blends the concise stanzas of the ballad form and the oral turns of phrase and direct statements of the blues with striking bursts of imagery (“crying like a fire in the sun,” “reindeer armies,” and so on) that are reminiscent of symbolist and surrealist poetry. The intertexts range from the Gospels to Gene Vincent and Rimbaud, but the language is fully Dylanesque and bears the mark of his literary and rhetorical idiosyncracies: visions, clever epigrams, and direct addresses to the listener.

The great stylistic vigor of the text lies in the free alternation of three different speech-acts: invective, narration, and aphorism. The listener hears an unpredictable alternation of short narrative vignettes that appeal to the imagination—exhortations and invectives that rhetorically draw the listener into the song, as well as generic assertions and laconic epigrams that endow the song with an aura of wisdom. The last stanza, for instance, consists of two successive exhortations (“leave your stepping stones behind,” “forget the dead you’ve left”) with a hidden epigram (“[the dead] will not follow you”) and a striking vignette (“the vagabond who’s rapping at your door / is standing in the clothes that you once wore”), followed by one last exhortation (“strike another match, go start anew”) and the refrain, a reminder of the reality principle and an invitation to resignation (“and it’s all over now, Baby Blue”).

With these juxtapositions Dylan thus creates an “open structure” that conveys in the song a powerful textual dynamism that is reinforced by the quick succession of characters. One figure is dispelled by the next, from the rootless orphan in the first stanza to the homeless hobo in the last—not to mention the herd of migrating reindeer or the experimental artist without a paintbrush or canvas.

In spite of this onward thrust, the four stanzas thematically cohere around the motif of impermanence and instability: an end of games leads to new beginnings; stable structures (the floor, the sky) dissolve, distinctions (inside/outside, self/others) are blurred, and identities are subverted (the orphan—the ultimate victim figure—is armed, the sailors are sea-sick, the vagabond confronts the sedentary in the doorframe, like a mirror image). At the semantic core of the text, we find cracks (in the sky) that come to symbolize a disintegrating present, and gaps and vacancies (the empty hands, the empty room, the empty doorframe) that symbolize a future that remains to be invented, the most conclusive example of which is the blank sheet that the painter uses as a canvas.

Despite these well-established points of semantic anchorage, the lyrics are full of semantic tensions, ambiguities, and indeterminacies. The sheer juxtaposition of images is enough to create a subliminal tension and a feeling of danger, as when evocations of fire (“fire in the sun” and “strike another match”) surround visions of inflammable materials (the carpet, blanket, and sheets). Here one could also cite Christopher Ricks’ (2003:24) remarkable analysis of how, in the second stanza, the proximity of the semantic fields of gambling and that of voyage creates a semantic ambiguity that expands the meaning of words, transforming the turn of phrase “[you’d] better” into a “better/gambler” and invoking common “sense” as well as the American currency (“cents”) and “coins” in the next line:

The highway is for gamblers / better use your sense [cents] /
Take what you have gathered from coincidence. . .

What one is ultimately confronted with in the text of this song is how Dylan, with very simple literary means (the juxtaposition of apparently disconnected images), adds semantic layer over semantic layer, reaching an unprecedented wealth of evocation in a form that remains both fresh and direct.

Dylan’s best lyrics constitute a literary artifact in their own right. One might even add that, thanks to the use of plain statements and direct address to the audience, Dylan’s lyrics urgently call for a hermeneutic and imaginative response on the part of the listener (or reader) that is not unlike the work-in-reading activity (*lecture travail*) that Roland Barthes claims is the characteristic of *writerly* texts (1970:15). At any rate, the listener is no longer just a consumer, but is made a *producer* of the meaning of the text. However diverse the poetical projects that Dylan has launched in his career (preaching in songs, short-story songs, blues songs, symbolist songs, lyrical songs, and so on), his striking literary abilities have always led him into the realm of the *writerly*.

Nevertheless, as tempting as it may be for the literary critic, the manifold “literariness” of “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue” cannot be located solely in intricate and artful linguistic patterning and language manipulations. The song is, indeed, fully dependant on Dylan’s use of voice and “masks.” The wandering characters in the song (vagabond, orphan, empty-handed painter . . .) that appear and interact in the lyrics are given an added power of evocation when examined in the context of Dylan’s fabricated selves, and the singer’s strong vocal engagement with the song clearly highlights the song’s manifesto quality and its mood of exhortation.

The celebration of instability and new beginnings in “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue” finds its full significance only when it is related to the poetry of metamorphosis that underlies Dylan’s artistic project. The fundamental gesture behind Dylan’s *œuvre* is indeed the permanent construction and deconstruction of himself. Dylan, ever in search of a new “mask,” has successively been a (non-)protest singer, a beat-like symbolist poet, an absurdist rocker with a touch of the Shakespearian clown, a country-music everyman in a bucolic fiction, a wounded man and lyrical poet in the early seventies, a Christian preacher announcing the apocalypse, and again, an everyman, who carries the fate of mankind and our mortality in the persona of the vagrant blues artist, whose continuous touring, year after year, becomes more and more allegorical of our ontological rootlessness.³

At any rate, the instability in Dylan’s identity finds a further echo in the tonal instability of his singing voice. In “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue,” Dylan oscillates between scansion, a slight lilt, and actual singing. This deliberate hesitation, which comprises Dylan’s distinctive “singing” style, is a form of what modernist high-art calls *sprechgesang*. The singer purposely glides, in a continuing *portamento*, from one note to the next, spanning all intermediate notes, without ever “properly” hitting the actual notes that structure the melody. In “Baby Blue,” the elusive nature of his vocal technique—this ability to escape a precise tonality or a predictable rhythm—sonically reinforces the central motifs of a disintegrating world and of collapsing stabilities.

A Poetics of the Voice

Although it is a challenge to try and describe the intricacies of Dylan’s use of his voice, any attempt at a critical apprehension of Dylan’s songs requires a strong methodological poetics of the voice. His vocal art is threefold: the voice functions simultaneously as an object of pleasure and interpellation, as an instrument of rhythmical writing, and as a meaningful sign (insofar as Dylan uses the timbral qualities of his voice to add meaning to the song).

As in all forms of oral literature, the voice is an object of pleasure that plays a great part in the listener’s enjoyment of the song, and that strongly

³ I don’t mean to suggest that Dylan’s *œuvre* is carried forward by a conscious autobiographical thrust, but that, as is the case for all major lyrical artists, Dylan’s chief aim is to explore the issue of subjectivity, to explore what it means to be a “subject,” and to allow the audience to interrogate their own subjectivity through the lyrical identities the poet constructs.

contributes to the song's pragmatic efficiency. For example, the interpellations in "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" add an incalculable weight to the actual presence of a voice and therefore of a body. The voice interpellates us in a way that the written text cannot; even when listening to a recording, the living voice puts us in the presence of Dylan's absent body.

In addition to the functions of pleasure and interpellation, Dylan's voice is used as an instrument for writing that, through a series of interventions in the text, casts a secondary rhythmical structure onto the lyrics. The accelerations in delivery, the ruptures in rhythm and tonality, and the vocal painting that isolates certain words, indicate a strong resistance to the musicality of the song form and carry out an actual rhythmical re-writing of the text. With the pauses, accelerations, unexpected clusters of words and original re-shaping of connected speech thus generated, Dylan writes rhythm onto the score of the original lyrics.

One of Dylan's favored techniques is stretching the line far beyond the meter used in the song by adding line after line (the first line of "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" is a good example). This technique adds a sense of urgency, vocal virtuosity, and danger to the performance and is much loved by fans. Also recurrently used are ruptures in the lines and a-grammatical cuttings of connected speech, which often create new, unexpected meanings or erase existing meanings (telling instances of these manipulations may be found in "Sugar Baby" or "Man in a Long Black Coat").

These techniques tamper with the musical regularity of the meter and stanzaic structure. In Dylan's songs, not all lines are equal; the artist alternates regular, rhythmically charged lines that provide the musical structure of the songs and more lightly stressed lines—sometimes almost floating lines—that seem independent from the overall rhythmical framework. This alternation and pitching of lighter lines against "heavier," more balanced ones allows Dylan to develop a form in song that is close to free verse in poetry. Dylan's vocal writing thus enables him to loosen the constraints of the stanza/meter/rhyme system while retaining the qualities of concision and tightness that the form provides.

Aside from the performer's delivery, the tonal quality of Dylan's voice intervenes in the construction of meaning in the songs. His timbre and the limitations of that timbre are part and parcel of his poetic project. The distinctive nasality of his voice, for instance, allows him to emphasize or distance the "dylanicity" of his performance, opening up innumerable possibilities of auto-pastiche. As well, the natural limits of his pitch-range make Dylan, as a singer, a heroic and poignant figure. Hit-and-miss notes in concert are moments of great poignancy and pathos and Dylan-the-performer knows how to make best use of them. His so-called "bad" voice is

a sonic echo of the recurring theme of human imperfection and of the motif of the fall of man (into sin, old age, or wretchedness). Dylan's more recent broken voice enables him to present a worldview at the sonic surface of the songs—this voice carries us across the landscape of a broken, fallen world. The anatomy of a broken world in "Everything is Broken" is but an example of how the thematic concern with all things broken is grounded in a concrete sonic reality. Again, the broken timbre is but a sign, an index of an ontological brokenness.

Thus the complexities of Dylan's use of his voice serve to please, interpellate, write rhythm, and add layers of meaning to the songs. In its quirky virtuosity, as well as in its exaggerations, in its outbursts of sincerity and its ability to obfuscate and mask, Dylan's voice also contributes to the construction of the personae. For the listener, this voice and its particular uses in a song conjure a strong vision of Bob Dylan.

A Theater of Identities: Method in Identity Madness

The third scriptural activity that can be located in the songs is Dylan's auto-fictional writing. Whenever Dylan uses the "I" pronoun—and even in the rarer cases when he doesn't—he is constructing alter-egos, highly elaborate fictional identities that mirror and distort his own identity and create an ambiguity (inherent in most lyricism between the "I" in the song and the author and performer). As a writer who is also a demiurge, Dylan doesn't just create a fictional universe that is fully his own; he also invests a great deal of his creative energy into the creation of a whole universe of identities—a personal palimpsest—where one Dylan hides another.

"Masking" games are indeed an integral part of Dylan's artistic project. His personae are works of art and fiction, even though Dylan's audience is invited to take part in the creation of his "masks." One might even argue that the masks constitute the center of the work. Dylan's personae amplify the pathos—or the irony—of some songs; they are also a major source of the literary and fictional pleasures that we take in the songs. In the progression of his artistic development, Dylan's fictional input is less and less invested in actual narratives within the songs and more and more in the construction of invented identities, which are small works of art in their own right. Indeed, one might, as Stephen Scobie (2004:26) invites us to do, analyze Dylan's personae as texts in their own right. Again, what we need in order to avoid empty rambling about Dylan's poetry of metamorphosis is both methodological rigor and a model for understanding how the personae

are constructed and how they function. For there is method in Dylan's (identity) madness.

The personae can be seen as emerging when a given "mask"—a conventional identity, most often based on a stereotypical lyrical figure (the prophet, the trickster, the forlorn lover, the man of constant sorrow, and so forth)—meets a given enunciative position. This process involves a specific way of calling on the listener. In "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue," for example, the use of invective, exhortation, and of generic truth enables Dylan to rhetorically construct a posture of authority, which—added to the motif in the lyrics of a quasi-apocalyptic disintegrating world—evokes the prophet. Every mask is thus inherently linked to a type of discourse; the mask of the prophet, or that of the "man of constant sorrow," are used as mouthpieces for a moral or lyrical discourse, even if the postures from which those discourses are articulated are later parodied or deconstructed.

Indeed, the chief mechanism behind Dylan's "games of masks" is to put together enunciating postures that will be, once they are established as stereotypes in his work, revealed as impostures. This is how the prophet persona is pastiched and/or parodied in songs like "Quinn the Eskimo" or "Rainy Day Woman #12 & 35," just as the songs from the album *Time Out of Mind* set Dylan's persona of man of sorrow in situations of hyperbolic strife (a house in flames, a sinking boat, an accelerating physical degradation) that defuse the inherent pathos of that persona and thus establish a humorous version of the character beside the serious one. The result is a tonal ambiguity throughout the album, between pathos and irony and tragedy and comedy. Such configurations bring forth an actual ethical proposition on the part of Dylan the moralist.

In delving further into the intricacy of these identity games, we find that the lyrical identities constructed in the songs are also engaged in a playful dialogue with Bob Dylan's public persona—his image in the collective unconscious—either validating, invalidating, or parodying it so that the songs are partly used as a means for the artist to be constantly constructing or deconstructing Bob Dylan. Eventually, Dylan attains an elusive and protean identity in the practice of what could be named a palimpsest of identities, or personal palimpsest. Here, one might mention in passing the mischievous pleasure with which Dylan has been inverting his protest singer persona for more than thirty years.⁴

⁴ This attitude reaches a climax in songs like "Highlands" or "Things Have Changed." In the former song, the speaker appears totally disengaged from the outside world and lost in an inner landscape of his own making. The courage and conviction displayed in the so-called "protest" phase of Dylan's career is negated here when a

The ever-present sense of irony does not exclude the actual use of songs as a space of true lyrical or autobiographical confession. There is a constant tension between Dylan's trickster mood and his taste for intimate truth. Indeed, the constant biographical allusions are blurring strategies that convey the resonance of an actual confession in some songs; the fictions of himself that Dylan painfully constructs (and deconstructs) are as many potential self-portraits. As he seemingly avows,

You could not tell by the look of him / But he was famous long ago /
For playing the electric violin / On Desolation Row

In "Man in a Long Black Coat" (to examine one of the trickiest examples of actual confession through masks), Dylan uses a tonality that is reminiscent of a blues lament and a dramatic blueprint that is taken from the traditional ballad known as "The Carpenter's Wife." He lends his voice to a cuckold husband whose wife has been taken away by a mysterious and evil stranger. "The carpenter" from the original ballad (and the fallen trees of Dylan's lyrics) reminds us of the artist's real patronym—Zimmerman (the carpenter) and thus validates the use of the artist's biographical trajectory as an intertext to the song (Dylan is himself an abandoned husband, as is widely known), making it even more poignant.

This gray area between fictional and true (referential) identity takes on more complexity in the next three stanzas of the song, when Dylan introduces and confronts three characters that are as many potential versions of himself. The author indeed seems to project existing versions of his public personae onto the characters of the original ballad. The suffering abandoned husband, the man in the long black coat, and the fanatic preacher can be read—via a tight network of allusions—as stylized versions of, respectively, the aging and broken Dylan of post-seventies decaying fame ("broken idol," as he says himself elsewhere on the album), the mid-sixties amoral Dylan of *Don't Look Back*, and the God-fearing, relentless preacher of the Christian

decidedly cowardly speaker chooses to cross the street to avoid "a mangy dog" and when his powerful exhortations of yore become a rambling "monologue." The man that once raised his voice against corrupt judges and masters of war is now admonished in his turn when a social worker asks if he has "registered to vote," a clear and ironic inversion of his early sixties persona. In "Things Have Changed," the inversion is even more obvious: the speaker is a burned-out artist who dreams of selling out; the circle opened in "The Times They Are A-Changin'" is completed as Dylan playfully betrays the expectations of the last bunch of fans who still insist on seeing him as an apostle of social reforms: "I used to care," he concedes, "but things have changed." Mischievous pleasures indeed for an artist who raises the game of hide and seek to the level of art!

period. The song thus becomes the locus of a vast theater of identities where several versions of Dylan compete.

“Man in a Long Black Coat” is but one example of how, with his manifold “masks,” Dylan comes to develop a personal mythology—a mythology of the person, or a mythology within the person, within the “I”—that conveys theatrical and literary pleasures to his audience. The plausible or larger-than-life versions of himself that Dylan creates in the songs—as stereotypical as they may be—are deliberate and full-fledged fictions and are to be enjoyed as such. As fans, we follow the evolution of the personae in the course of his “games of masks,” as we would the developments of a saga that is at once biographical and purely imaginary. We enjoy the fabrications, the mystification, and the built-in mythomania as the distinctive pleasures of auto-fiction.

Dylan’s audience thus become spectators of the imaginary biographies that Dylan unfolds throughout his career for entertainment value, but also for real metaphysical and moral purposes. For this theater of identities is also participatory, in that the artist invites us to crack his biographical code, to unearth the true from the false, and to construct apocryphal versions of the artist’s life. We have already mentioned that the song lyrics are *writerly*; it seems that Dylan’s biography is also *writerly*. Each listener who chooses to get involved with the whole of Dylan’s *œuvre* is confronted with the personae and auto-fictional games of the artist and is thus compelled to construct a version of Dylan’s biography—a fictional, apocryphal biography—adjusting and modifying biographical data according to Dylan’s own perception of his identity games. Dylan’s writing of himself therefore invites us to “write him” in turn, and eventually, to write ourselves with the personal fictions and potential biographies to be found in Dylan’s work. As in all forms of lyricism, the presence of a “subject”—of a voice or a mask—is a proposal presented to the reader/listener to explore his own subjectivity. Just as the “I” pronoun of lyrical poetry is necessarily re-uttered by the reader when he or she reads a lyrical poem, making the reader endorse the subjectivity that this “I” carries, Dylan’s personae and masks are, ultimately, spaces where our identity and that of the artist might meet and coalesce.

Dylan can thus be inscribed in the contemporary reflection on identity as a *construct*. Alongside many contemporary artists, pop artists, and writers, he produces fiction using his identity and his life as basic material. In the process, identity is defined as a symbolical and participatory “game of masks.” As fictional, theatrical, and lyrical pleasures, Dylan’s “masks” convey pleasures that fully literary approaches—and any other type of approach to Dylan’s work that does not take his auto-fictional games into account—would largely miss.

The guidelines presented here for further study into the nature of Dylan's art attempt to eradicate all prejudice against the song form, so that the song can be understood as an aesthetic object of great value and of high literary interest. Songs can be used as an outlet for multi-layered inscriptive activities. Dylan's songs, for example, have manifold textuality—they contain literary texts, which are actualized in performance and become vocal texts that exist in connection with that other text, the persona (itself only partly verbal). Despite this complex functioning, the popular status of Dylan's art is not at stake; the songs are multiply-coded and can be appreciated in an initial listening and enjoyed in the arena of a live performance. Despite such spontaneous reactions, Dylan's lyrics also sustain further and deeper aesthetic and linguistic probing. And, as we have seen, they quite often necessitate intricate listener involvement to reveal their full significance.

Even though the manifold pleasures conveyed by Dylan's songs can certainly not be boiled down to literary pleasure alone, Dylan—alongside many of the other folksong revival musicians and poets of the '50s and '60s—redefines lyricism as a mode that explores all forms of tension: his lyricism is thrust towards the listener with the sheer power of Dylan's voice and interpellation; it is strained in the inner workings of a problematic subjectivity; and it provides an infinitely enjoyable tonal tension, caught as it is between irony and pathos.

Even more interesting is that Dylan redefines the literary experience itself. His songs remind us that a "literary" experience necessarily implies a form of writing, an *écriture*, but that the experience of reading as we know it is not the *ultimate* literary experience. Dylan's artistry places song back into a position where the poetic impulse emerges with new urgency, worlds apart from the fetishist love of the page or of the book as an object.

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