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Mythic Quest in Bob Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde*

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ABSTRACT

Blonde on Blonde epitomizes Bob Dylan's debts to the classics. The album depicts the mythic quest of a hipster-hero descending into the Underworld in pursuit of the Muse. The hero resembles Dylan but is augmented by the experiences of mythic figures like Orpheus and Odysseus. The singer encounters bizarre figures and wanders in exile through the "Lowlands" searching for the goddess—a figure inspired by Sara Dylan, but also a composite of the White Goddess, Persephone, Eurydice, and others. Dylan's mythic adaptations are also informed by the syncretic work of T.S. Eliot, Joseph Campbell, and Robert Graves.

KEYWORDS

Bob Dylan; *Blonde on Blonde*; hero; quest; myth

Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story.

— Opening line of Homer's *The Odyssey*
Closing line of Bob Dylan's Nobel Lecture

Immediately after Bob Dylan was announced as the 2016 recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, an interviewer asked Swedish Academy Permanent Secretary Sara Danius to defend the controversial choice. She compared Dylan's musical poetry to the work of Homer and Sappho, and she directed listeners to *Blonde on Blonde* for a prime example of his literary merit (Danius). Skeptics dismissed the comparison as misguided and overblown, but Dylan explicitly affirmed his classical influences several months later in his Nobel Lecture. There he reflected upon the books that most shaped his work and worldview, including *The Odyssey*, enumerating several ways in which he and his listeners identify with Homer's wandering hero:

In a lot of ways, some of these same things have happened to you. You too have had drugs dropped into your wine. You too have shared a bed with the wrong woman. You too have been spellbound by magical voices, sweet voices with strange melodies. You too have come so far and have been so far blown back. And you've had close calls as well. You have angered people you should not have. And you too have rambled this country all around. And you've also felt that ill wind, the one that blows you no good. And that's still not all of it. ("Nobel")

Long before the Nobel publicly validated his literary passport, Dylan had been on an artistic odyssey guided by classical literature and mythology. Isolated allusions can be found in various songs throughout his career, but his deepest and most sustained engagement with the classics comes on his 1966 double-album *Blonde on Blonde*.

The album depicts the mythic quest of a hipster-hero's descent into a distinctly Dylanesque Underworld in pursuit of the Muse. The protagonist of this song cycle is a beguiling but flawed picaresque hero who resembles Dylan, but who is augmented with traits of Orpheus, Odysseus, and others. The singer encounters bizarre figures, wanders lost through exotic locales, and faces numerous tests in search of union with a goddess—a woman certainly inspired by Dylan's new bride Sara, but also a composite of Persephone, Eurydice, and others. Dylan does not strictly adopt the perspective of the mythical heroes he invokes, however. Throughout the album he speaks in his own inimitable voice, taps into deeply personal experiences, and gives expression to his distinct artistic vision. Nonetheless, he recognizes that his experiences during this heady time are highly compatible with myths and archetypes, so he draws upon them repeatedly for inspiration, imagery, and narrative structure in *Blonde on Blonde*. Dylan had long absorbed older folk music and transformed it into original songs that are unmistakably his own while still resonating with echoes from his source material. He applies a similar approach to his mythical sources in *Blonde on Blonde*.

Dylan follows in the footsteps of mythical re-imaginations like T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. In "Ulysses, Order, and Myth" Eliot famously defined Joyce's "mythical method":

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. (177)

Similarly, Dylan uses myth to give shape and significance to the general chaos surrounding him in the mid-1960s. But his technique differs from that of Joyce, who used a single unifying source text (Homer's *Odyssey*) as structuring device throughout, and is more like Eliot's method in *The Waste Land*, where a variety of sources are referenced piecemeal for cumulative effect, shards and fragments shored against ruin.

Dylan also drew inspiration from a major work of comparative mythology, Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*.¹ In *Chronicles*, Dylan recalls,

I read *The White Goddess* by Robert Graves, too. Invoking the poetic muse was something I didn't know about yet. Didn't know enough to start trouble with it, anyway. In a few years' time I would meet Robert Graves himself in London. We went out for a brisk walk around Paddington Square. I wanted to ask him about some of the things in his book, but I couldn't remember much about it. (45)

This is typical Dylan hustling, revealing his card only to quickly withdraw it and shuffle it back into the deck. The disclaimer "I couldn't remember much about it" doesn't square with Hans Fried's account, reported to Michael Gray, that he ran into Dylan during that same 1962 London trip "with a copy of *The White Goddess* under his arm—which led to these two young Graves enthusiasts ... discussing Graves, life and the universe for close on three hours" (*Encyclopedia* 277). The evidence of Dylan's familiarity with Graves is on full display in *Blonde on Blonde*. Another *magnum opus* of comparative mythology, Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, is equally useful in understanding key components of Dylan's mythical method. But not all of his classical references come secondhand. Dylan reports in *Chronicles* that he gained at least passing familiarity during the early 1960s with "stuff that could make you bugged-eyed. Books like *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, *The Twelve Caesars*, Tacitus lectures, and

letters to Brutus. Pericles' *Ideal State of Democracy*, Thucydides' *The Athenian General*," as well as Dante's *Inferno* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (36–37). We also know that Dylan was in the Latin Club at Hibbing High. (Astounding as it is to consider, Dylan was less than seven years removed from high school when he recorded *Blonde on Blonde*.) Both Richard Thomas and Thomas Strunk have proven that Dylan was familiar enough with the classics to lift numerous lines from them in multiple songs (see Thomas; Strunk).

Joseph Campbell observes with regret:

The outlines of myths and tales are subject to damage and obscurity. Archaic traits are generally eliminated or subdued. Imported materials are revised to fit local landscape, custom, or belief, and always suffer in the process. Furthermore, in the innumerable retellings of a traditional story, accidental or intentional dislocations are inevitable. (246)

Campbell characterizes departures from the monomyth as corruptions. However, viewed from a perspective which invests no faith in metanarratives of fundamental truth, Dylan's idiosyncratic revisions "to fit local landscape, custom or belief" and his "intentional dislocations" are actually the most interesting features of his reinvented mythic quest. Dylan does not merely recycle a prefabricated mythological blueprint in *Blonde on Blonde*. He demonstrates awareness of many myths, incorporates allusions to several mythic quests, and assimilates themes and structures from these sources. At the same time, he reshapes myths to suit his own purposes, drafting the past into crucial service but subordinating ancient myths to his modern voice, vision, experiences, and cultural moment.

Descent to the Underworld

No song could better initiate the listener into *Blonde on Blonde* than the raucous "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35."² One gets a contact buzz just from dropping the needle on this opening track: "But I would not feel so all alone / Everybody must get stoned" (5–6). Dylan was clearly not alone in the studio. The party atmosphere is accentuated by the voices of several other revelers, all seemingly wasted, and all audibly male. The album speaks in sexist riddles with the title "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35," an opaque allusion to Proverbs 27:15: "A continual dropping in a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike" (Heylin 310). The Biblical reference reminds us that "stoning" was a severe punishment for transgressions. Though "they" might stand for any number of persecutors, the title together with the distinctly boys-club atmosphere suggests that "they" who are doing the stoning are ceaselessly harping women, browbeating their partners for perceived shortcomings and offenses. At times, one suspects Dylan of harboring a serious Madonna/Shrew complex on this album, and certainly the singer's troubles with women have only just begun in *Blonde on Blonde*. Here, the solution to getting stoned in the painful way is to escape by getting stoned in the pleasant way.

Although some might dismiss the song as a mere novelty act, the opening track serves deliberately as an entrance portal into the album's mythical realm.³ The quest begins here, as it so often does in myth, with a descent into the Underworld. Campbell asserts that "the first work of the hero is to retreat from the world scene of secondary effects to those causal zones of the psyche where the difficulties really reside" (17). The Underworld is a dimension beneath surface reality where the dynamics underlying our world are laid bare. To enter the Underworld, one must separate from waking life, descending into the realm of the dead. Tellingly, in a song consisting of a catalogue of "They'll stone you when ..." examples, the final one is "They'll stone you when you are sent down in your grave" (29). Campbell

emphasizes that the hero's descent to the Underworld may be presented as a topographic journey, but at heart such quests always represent inner explorations: "The passage of the mythological hero may be overground, incidentally; fundamentally it is inward—into depths where obscure resistances are overcome, and long lost, forgotten powers are revived, to be made available for the transfiguration of the world" (29). Later, he states this relationship as a succinct equation: "the metaphysical realm = the unconscious" (Campbell 259). In equating descent into the Underworld with dredging the depths of self, it is worth pointing out, as so many listeners have noticed over the years, that the title *Blonde on Blonde*, while itself inscrutable, yields the initials *B.o.B.* The singer begins his descent into the Underworld, disappearing through the smoke rings of his mind, opening the doors of perception, embarking on a vision quest, and inviting the listener to follow.

Pursuit of the Muse

"My thesis," states Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*,

is that the language of poetic myth anciently current in the Mediterranean and Northern Europe was a magical language bound up with popular religious ceremonies in honour of the Moon-goddess, or Muse, some of them dating from the Old Stone Age, and that this remains the language of true poetry. (9–10)

Graves's erudite, eccentric study is not simply a historical overview of the way in which poetry and myth dovetail as a means of celebrating the Muse. Rather, he argues that all true poetry, then and now, is devoted to the Muse. "The function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse; its use is the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites" (14). The true Muse-poet requires no recruiting from Robert Graves. The poet (usually presumed male by Graves) is drawn to various women in whom the Goddess fleetingly resides. He claims that

the real, perpetually obsessed Muse-poet distinguishes between the Goddess as manifest in the supreme power, glory, wisdom and love of woman, and the individual woman whom the Goddess may make her instrument for a month, a year, seven years, or even more. The Goddess abides; and perhaps he will again have knowledge of her through his experience of another woman. (491)

My objective is certainly not to validate Graves's views, which at their extreme rationalize promiscuity as the necessary prerequisite for being a poet. The point is that Dylan was powerfully swayed by Graves's ecstatic manifesto about the calling of true poetry. The pursuit of the Muse is one of the guiding motifs of *Blonde on Blonde*.

Dylan's most reverent song pining for the Muse as Moon Goddess—and one of his greatest songs by any standard—is the sublime "Visions of Johanna." "Ain't it just like the night to play tricks when you're trying to be so quiet? / We sit here stranded, though we're all doing our best to deny it" (1–2). Dylan wrote the song shortly after his marriage to Sara Lownds, prompting Clinton Heylin to observe, "It is certainly one of the oddest songs ever written by a man who has just tied the knot and is enjoying a brief honeymoon in the city" (274). What raises Heylin's brow is the fact that the singer longs not for the woman won but the woman lost:

Louise, she's all right, she's just near
She's delicate and seems like the mirror
But she just makes it all too concise and too clear
That Johanna's not here. (13–16)

These nocturnal visions of an elusive woman both alluring and frightening provide a gorgeous evocation of the Muse. Many commentators identify the eponymous Johanna as a stand-in for Dylan's ex-lover Joan Baez. She certainly heard the song that way, and maybe that is how it started out.⁴ Real people and events definitely inspired songs on *Blonde on Blonde*. But these initial inspirations are ultimately displaced by subsequent artistic manipulation and repurposing. In fact, one of the reasons the deeper mythical motifs in *Blonde on Blonde* have gone largely unrecognized is that so many listeners have been too easily satisfied with biographical readings. An artist with a superabsorbent, synthesizing mind like Dylan intuitively connects people and situations he has experienced directly in life with comparable people and situations he has experienced vicariously through art. Starting from the personal, he adds layers of intertextual references—many of them conscious, but probably just as many unconscious—from various songs, poems, movies, stories, fairy tales, and myths.

An important clue to the deeper resonances of the song appears in an outtake. In an alternate version of "Visions of Johanna," Dylan delivered a different final verse, including the following italicized line which does not appear in *Blonde on Blonde*:

The peddler, he steps to the road
Everything's gone which was owed
He examines the nightingale's code
Still written on the fish truck that loads
My conscience explodes. (7–11, n8)

Perhaps he suppressed this line because it "just makes it all too concise and too clear" what he is really up to in the song. Nigel Brooks uses this line as springboard into his analysis of Keats's influence on Dylan (39). Michael Gray goes a step further. Citing the famous lines from Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale"—"Already with thee! tender is the night, / And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne"—Gray perceptively glosses,

The moon too is the muse, and always has been. Keats' long work "Endymion," written shortly before the odes, is based on the legend of the Greek moon goddess; the heroine of Dylan's song "Isis" is a moon goddess; and the main thrust of Robert Graves' book *The White Goddess* (the importance of which as an influence on Bob Dylan has been widely stressed), is that the moon goddess inspires poetry endowed with a magical quality. (*Song* 490)

Gray is on the right track, but one can advance another step by examining the myth behind the nightingale. In Book Six of *Metamorphoses* Ovid tells the terrible story of the sisters Procne and Philomela. Procne married the lecherous Tereus and had a son by him named Itys. Tereus lusted after his wife's sister, abducted and imprisoned Philomela, and repeatedly raped her. When she threatened to reveal his crimes, he cut out her tongue, leaving her alive but mute. She wove the truth of his crimes into a coded tapestry and sent it to her sister. Procne freed Philomela and conspired with her sister to commit murder and cannibalism. They killed Itys, cooked his body parts, and fed them to Tereus. After they enacted this heinous plot and the full horror was revealed, all three mythical figures flew into such frenzy that they transformed into birds. Philomela became the nightingale.

This myth serves as a model for male lust and sexual betrayal, for female victimization and ceaseless mourning, and for women conspiring vengeance against a man who has done them both wrong. Eliot invokes the rape of Philomela multiple times in *The Waste Land* as an emblem of degraded, loveless sex. Eliot also applied the mythical method to the nightingale's code in his poem "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," linking the squalid modern life of Sweeney and two women vying for his attention with Agamemnon's murder at the hands

of his scorned wife Clytemnestra. Dylan borrows pages from Graves, Keats, Ovid, and Eliot in “Visions of Johanna.” He may well have identified on a personal level with the complications ensuing from liaisons with multiple women (primarily Joan Baez, Sara Lownds Dylan, and Edie Sedgwick). But what elevates the song from mere tabloid curiosity to great art is Dylan’s skill in moving beyond confessional autobiography to interweave his own mythic tapestry of allusions, lending shape and rich significance to his personal experiences.

Adventures in Eros and Thanatos

The singer’s adventures in the lurid Underworld of *Blonde on Blonde* include copious amounts of sex, drugs, rock and roll—and death. The album throbs with erotic desire, but the threat of catastrophe and the shadow of death always loom nearby. Dylan initially considered titling the album *I Want You*, and no one could have faulted him for such an accurate label describing the contents. The song “I Want You” presents the thesis as a plaintive declaration of desire: “I want you, I want you, / I want you so bad / Honey I want you” (9–11). Other songs express it less sweetly. Dylan is master of the put-down, but he displays equal mastery of the come-on. In the ironically titled “Absolutely Sweet Marie,” there is nothing at all sweet about the singer’s sexual urges for this Virgin Mary. He gropes for metaphors to describe his efforts to penetrate her defenses: “Well, your railroad gate, you know I just can’t jump it / Sometimes it gets so hard, you see” (1–2). Hard or not, there is no softening her resistance. Later he envisions going “to your house but I can’t unlock it / You see, you forgot to leave me with the key” (29–30). With her railway barred and her chastity belt locked, he must settle for more solitary pleasures. In the first verse, we discover him “just sitting here beating on my trumpet”; and later the urge heats up again: “Well, I got the fever down in my pockets” (27). Dylan leeringly delivers these double-entendres like a purring Cheshire Cat.

In a similar vein, the lilting music on “4th Time Around” gilds over some of the raunchier lyrics of carnal lust on the album. If, as Proverbs would have it, a contentious woman is like the steady drip of rain, then “she” of “4th Time Around” is more like a downpour. She opened by calling the singer a liar, she kicked him out of the house in verse three, and in verse four “She screamed till her face got so red then she fell on the floor” (31). However, the singer is strikingly nonplussed by her behavior. His cool demeanor suggests that he is willing to weather the storm of her hostility in exchange for the make-up sex sure to follow: “It was then that I got up to leave but she said, ‘Don’t forget / Everybody must give something back for something they get’” (7–8).

Reminding him in effect that “you’ve got to give some to get some” implies oral sex, innuendo reinforced by the suggestive lines that follow:

I stood there and hummed
I tapped on her drum
I asked her how come
And she buttoned her boot
And straightened her suit
Then she said, “Don’t get cute.” (9–14)

Tapping her drum sounds a lot like beating his trumpet. And the humming and cumming speak for themselves. Keeping in mind that “4th Time Around” is a coy reply to the Beatles’ “Norwegian Wood,” it is worth remembering that John Lennon based his Dylanesque lyric on an illicit extramarital affair.

Blonde on Blonde is drenched in sexual sweat. Even the album's title sounds like it could have been lifted from an old Times Square marquee for porn. Despite the temporary euphoria offered by ubiquitous drugs and promiscuous sex, one gradually discerns that these lures are not paths to mystical union with the Goddess but rather obstacles to spiritual transcendence. The more one listens to *Blonde on Blonde* in relation to the quest motif, the more sexual permissiveness and mind-strangling drugs seem like shackles binding figures to the Underworld rather than keys to escape. Take for instance "Just Like a Woman." Most agree that the ingénue behind this song is Edie Sedgwick, the beautiful but perpetually strung-out model-actress from Andy Warhol's Factory with whom Dylan may have had a brief affair.⁵ "Nobody feels any pain" we are informed in the first line, situating the song in the comfortably numb haze that prevails throughout the album's Underworld journey. But that first line is soon exposed as a lie:

She takes just like a woman, yes, she does
 She makes love just like a woman, yes, she does
 And she aches just like a woman
 But she breaks
 Just like a little girl. (7–11)

She resorts to sex and drugs in an attempt to anesthetize her pain, but they turn out to be the cause rather than the cure for the hurt little girl she harbors inside.

That pain is mutually felt. When charges of misogyny are lodged against Dylan, "Just Like a Woman" is often Exhibit A for the prosecution.⁶ The chorus does sound awfully condescending. However, I am struck more by the singer's empathy for the woman's plight. Ultimately, he does not pontificate against her lifestyle. Like Homer's Odysseus, and like Joyce's modern Odysseus Leopold Bloom, the hero of Dylan's song cycle is no paragon of virtue. On the contrary, he is an incorrigible lothario driven by appetites, jealousies, and revenge. Though he was influenced by *The Waste Land*, Dylan did not share Eliot's preachy asceticism (not yet). Desire may be bad for you, but it's still just too damn desirable to resist. The songs make it easy to see the allure of this sex- and drug-fueled Odyssey. But we should also recognize that the singer and those around him have been sucked into a downward spiral. The songs show that there are prices to be paid for these epic fornications. The singer has to pay, too:

It was raining from the first
 And I was dying there of thirst
 So I came in here
 And your long-time curse
 Hurts
 But what's worse
 Is this pain in here. (23–29)

It is becoming clear, yes. *Everybody* here feels pain, the singer included. In this land of the living dead, he is even more lost than she is: "Please don't let on that you knew me when / I was hungry and it was your world" (37–38). The Underworld is presided over by Persephone, the death aspect of the Triple Goddess according to Graves. In her world and in her presence, the singer breaks just like a little boy.

In *The White Goddess*, Graves identifies death as a central concern of all Muse poetry:

The rediscovery of the lost rudiments of poetry may help to solve the question of theme: if they still have validity they confirm the intuition ... of "the single poetic theme of Life and Death—the question of what survives of the beloved" (20).

Attempting to answer the question of what survives of the beloved, some mythic heroes have pursued their dead lovers all the way to the Underworld. The most famous example is Orpheus. According to Graves in *The Greek Myths*, Orpheus

was the most famous poet and musician who ever lived. Apollo presented him with a lyre, and the Muses taught him its use, so that he not only enchanted wild beasts, but made the trees and rocks move from their places to follow the sound of his music. (111)

Once upon a time his wife Eurydice, fleeing from a man trying to seduce her, stepped on a viper and was killed by its poisonous bite. Unwilling to accept her death passively, Orpheus descended into the Underworld in pursuit of Eurydice. His music was so enthralling that he was granted access to the depths of Tartarus and permitted to bring Eurydice back to the living world above. However, Graves explains,

Hades made a single condition: that Orpheus might not look behind him until she was safely back under the light of the sun. Eurydice followed Orpheus up through the dark passage, guided by the sounds of his lyre, and it was only when he reached the sunlight again that he turned to see whether she were still behind him, and so lost her for ever. (112)

As arguably the most famous poet and musician of his day, Dylan had good cause to identify with Orpheus and his Muse-inspired lyre. Dylan's authorized biographer, Robert Shelton, makes several references to Orpheus in *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan*. He begins with an epigraph taken from George Steiner's "Silence and the Poet": "Because he is part Orpheus, the poet ... is architect of myth, magician over savagery, and pilgrim towards death" (11). Filmmaker D. A. Pennebaker may also have had Orpheus and Eurydice in mind when he titled his Dylan documentary *Dont Look Back*. This myth is one of the most important for the quest motif in *Blonde on Blonde*, not only for the hero's pursuit of his beloved into the Underworld, but also for his inability to return with her to waking life.

The song that establishes this theme most emphatically is the deceptively serene "I Want You." The up-tempo music and cooing vocals mask the fact that this song is a lamentation. The woman the singer wants is dead:

The guilty undertaker sighs
The lonesome organ grinder cries
The silver saxophones say I
Should refuse you
The cracked bells and washed-out horns
Blow into my face with scorn
But it's not that way, I wasn't born
To lose you. (1-8)

The sighing undertaker in the first line should give the game away, and the death knell of cracked mourning bells confirms it. This bird has flown to the Underworld. The catchy pop chorus of "I Want You" is a decoy for lyrics which owe less to the Beatles' "I Want to Hold Your Hand" than to the necrophilia of Edgar Allan Poe's "Annabel Lee." Like Orpheus, the singer is not willing to part with his dead lover. Other mourners counsel him to accept her loss, but he has other plans:

The drunken politician leaps
Upon the street where mothers weep
And the saviors who are fast asleep
They wait for you
And I wait for them to interrupt

Me drinking from my broken cup
 And ask me to open up
 The gate for you. (12–19)

What cup, and why broken? There could be some Grail imagery at work here, so central to Eliot's *The Waste Land*, with its embedded symbolism of feminine divinity. Or could it be a poisoned cup? Shakespeare lurks in the wings; he'll make his appearance up the alley of the next track, "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again." Like Romeo following his wife Juliet into death (or so he thought), and like Hamlet following his mother Gertrude into death, the Orphic singer seems prepared to drink poison to be with his beloved again. This poisoned cup also breathes new life (well, new death) into the otherwise innocuous "Pledging My Time":

I got a poison headache
 But I feel all right
 I'm pledging my time to you
 Hoping you'll come through, too. (3–6)

But Eurydice doesn't come through, because Orpheus looked back. He tries to open the gate separating life and death. But like the impenetrable railroad gate of "Absolutely Sweet Marie" and the Sad-Eyed Lady's gate of the Lowlands (read Underworld), the barrier enforcing this liminal threshold remains closed and seemingly insurmountable.

Exile and Imprisonment

The recurring locked gate imagery also suggests a prison. Exile and imprisonment are prominent motifs in *Blonde on Blonde*, as they are in several myths from which Dylan draws. The album's most overt prison references appear in "Absolutely Sweet Marie," where the singer is apparently separated from Marie because he is incarcerated in the penitentiary:

Well, six white horses that you did promise
 Were finally delivered down to the penitentiary
 But to live outside the law, you must be honest
 I know you always say that you agree
 All right so where are you tonight, sweet Marie? (16–20)

"To live outside the law, you must be honest." If that honor code had been upheld, however, then the singer should not have ended up in the penitentiary. The song implies that the not-so-sweet Marie has been dishonest. This Bonnie apparently abandoned her Clyde in verse two, leaving him stranded at the scene of a crime:

Well, I waited for you when I was half sick
 Yes, I waited for you when you hated me
 Well, I waited for you inside of the frozen traffic
 When you knew I had some other place to be
 Now, where are you tonight, sweet Marie? (6–10)

The singer is tortured with thoughts of what she might be doing and who she might be doing it with. If only this Eurydice had been a little sweeter or a little swifter, following Orpheus like she was supposed to, they never would have been separated in the first place. Instead he can do nothing but continually look back, languishing between recrimination and masturbation, staring like the singer in Johnny Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues" at a railroad he indelibly associates with escape from a sentence of solitary confinement.

Homer's *Odyssey* depicts Odysseus imprisoned multiple times during his journey home from the Trojan War. He spends seven years captive as lover of the nymph Calypso and another year with Circe the sorceress. Circe uses magic potions to transform men into docile animals. Odysseus is forewarned by Hermes how to counteract her powerful spells. Nevertheless, he and his men are entranced with more traditional bait—food, wine, and sex—to remain a full year on her island. Odysseus serves his time stuck in Circe's mansion with the Ithaca blues again. Dylan perfectly captures this same spirit of decadent ennui mixed with desire to escape in "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again." The singer finds himself stranded in a bizarre limbo world, his quest stalled indefinitely.

And the ladies treat me kindly
 And they furnish me with tape
 But deep inside my heart
 I know I can't escape
 Oh, Mama, can this really be the end
 To be stuck inside of Mobile
 With the Memphis blues again. (5–11)

Because Circe was a sorceress who used mesmerizing charms, Joyce chose the modus operandi of the dream for his shape-shifting Circe chapter in *Ulysses*. That same hallucinatory dreamscape prevails throughout Dylan's song and album, where strange occurrences are accepted as commonplace and figures like those from a nightmare keep mutating forms.⁷

Like the damned in Dante's *Inferno*, the residents of Mobile are condemned to repeat the same lifeless routines over and over. These routines fall into patterns of distraction through sex and drugs: Shakespeare hitting on a French girl, railroad men drinking blood like wine, the rainman mixing up a mind-strangling concoction of Texas medicine and railroad gin, and Ruthie seducing the singer with a dance in her honky-tonk lagoon. Everyone wanders aimlessly in a daze. Like the entranced Odysseus and his crew, the singer feels powerless to escape:

An' here I sit so patiently
 Waiting to find out what price
 You have to pay to get out of
 Going through all these things twice. (93–96)

When Odysseus finally musters up the resilience to request parole from Circe and return home, she informs him that he must first pass through the Underworld:

Odysseus, master mariner and soldier,
 you shall not stay here longer against your will;
 but home you may not go
 unless you take a strange way round and come
 to the cold homes of Death and pale Perséphonê. (180)

In other words, he must pass through the Lowlands to confront the goddess of Death.

Encountering the Goddess

"Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" is singled out for distinction by occupying the entire fourth side of the double-album. Shortly after recording the song, Dylan described it to Shelton as "the best song I ever wrote" (324). The macabre waltz music and the sincere yearning of Dylan's vocals make it the most solemn invocation of the Muse on *Blonde on Blonde*. No one doubts the biographical inspiration behind this song. On November 22, 1965, Bob Dylan

married Sara Lownds, who was seven months pregnant with their first child. Trying (unsuccessfully) to save his marriage a decade later, Dylan looked back to his newlywed days in the song “Sara,” where he recalled “Stayin’ up for days in the Chelsea Hotel / Writin’ ‘Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands’ for you” (27–28).⁸ As many listeners have noticed, the name Sara Lownds is practically embedded within the title “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands,” and specific references to “your sheet-metal memory” (53) [her father ran a metal scrapyard] and “your magazine-husband who one day just had to go” (54) [she left her husband, a magazine photographer, for Dylan] provide unmistakable gestures toward his personal Muse. Dylan’s adoration of Sara at this stage seems more than poetic affectation. He told Shelton, “I know two saintly people. ... I know just two holy people. Allen Ginsberg is one. The other, for lack of a better term I just want to call ‘this person named Sara’” (353). Shelton asked how Sara was holy. Dylan replied, “I don’t want to put her in this book. I want to keep her out of this. I don’t want to call her ‘a girl.’ I know, it’s very corny, but the only thing I can think of is, more or less, ‘madonna-like’” (353). Maybe he wanted to keep her out of his biography, but he certainly didn’t keep her out of his art.

It would be selling the song and album short, however, to identify “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands” solely with Sara. The song contains multiple layers of resonance and culminates the mythic quest of *Blonde on Blonde*. Campbell asserts,

The ultimate adventure, when all the barriers and ogres have been overcome, is commonly represented as a mystical marriage ... of the triumphant hero-soul with the Queen Goddess of the World. This is the crisis at the nadir, the zenith, or at the uttermost edge of the earth, at the central point of the cosmos, in the tabernacle of the temple, or within the darkness of the deepest chamber of the heart. (109)

Graves refers to her as the Triple Goddess, the guiding Muse of poetry who encompasses the divine powers of Diana (earth), Luna (sky), and Persephone (hell). He contends that the ultimate aim of all true poetry and the final measure of a poet’s gift is his depiction of this Goddess:

I cannot think of any true poet from Homer onwards who has not independently recorded his experience of her. The test of a poet’s vision, one might say, is the accuracy of his portrayal of the White Goddess and of the island over which she rules. The reason why the hairs stand on end, the eyes water, the throat is constricted, the skin crawls and a shiver runs down the spine when one writes or reads a true poem is that a true poem is necessarily an invocation of the White Goddess, or Muse, the Mother of All Living, the ancient power of fright and lust—the female spider or the queen-bee whose embrace is death. (24)

“Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands” is the most crucial song on *Blonde on Blonde* with respect to the singer’s quest, but it is also a “true poem” by Graves’s lofty standard. It stamps Dylan’s credentials as a Muse-poet long before the Nobel committee placed its laurels on his head.

One sure sign that “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands” is not based solely upon Sara Dylan is that this Queen of the Underworld, like the lost beloved in “I Want You,” is dead from the start. More precisely, the Sad-Eyed Lady dwells in the world of the dead, the Lowlands. The first four lines describe her with images from funereal rites:

With your mercury mouth in the missionary times
And your eyes like smoke and your prayers like rhymes
And your silver cross, and your voice like chimes
Oh, who do they think could bury you? (1–4)

The song has just begun, and already the Sad-Eyed Lady is wrapped in a shroud. Dylan’s vision is inspired by Sara, true, but traces of Persephone, Eurydice, La Belle Dame Sans Merci,

even Snow White and Sleeping Beauty are likewise evident. She is a figure of heart-racing beauty and desire, but she is also a heart-stopping specter of Life-in-Death and Death-in-Life.

Among the many mythic women who lie behind Dylan's composite Sad-Eyed Lady, one of the more intriguing is Penelope. Odysseus's journey finally leads home to Ithaca, where his long-suffering wife Penelope has been waiting, chastely, twenty years for his return. In his absence, a pack of suitors have descended upon Ithaca, feeding on his estate and vying to replace Odysseus (long presumed dead) as the next patriarch of the house. The "I" of the song is the singer, and the "you" is the Sad-Eyed Lady, but the intrusive, misguided "they" bear a strong resemblance to these suitors. By turns they try to bury, carry, outguess, impress, kiss, resist, mistake, persuade, employ, and destroy the Sad-Eyed Lady. They represent crass exploitation and philistinism. Sad-eyed Penelope, forever mourning Odysseus while surrounded by craven suitors, is surely one of the mythical figures informing Dylan's depiction of the Sad-Eyed Lady.

A particular episode featuring Penelope is especially relevant in this context. In Book Nineteen of Homer's *Odyssey*, the wandering Odysseus returns home. Before revealing his true identity, however, he is determined to rid his household of all the suitors. So he first approaches home in the guise of a stranger. Penelope welcomes him in and eventually confides a recent dream. She dreamt that her house was surrounded by twenty fat geese. A giant mountain eagle swooped down upon the gaggle and killed them all. Disguised Odysseus interprets the dream as a good omen that her missing husband will return and kill the suitors (which he soon does). But she is reluctant to get her hopes up. She knows that some dreams are truthful premonitions, while others are deceptive fantasies. She provides a memorable taxonomy for the two types of dreams:

Two gates for ghostly dreams there are: one gateway
of honest horn, and one of ivory.
Issuing by the ivory gate are dreams
of glimmering illusion, fantasies,
but those that come through the solid polished horn
may be borne out, if mortals only know them.
I doubt it came by horn, my fearful dream—
too good to be true, that, for my son and me. (371)

The two gates of dream: true visions pass through the Gate of Horn, and false hallucinations pass through the Gate of Ivory. Perhaps the gate separating the singer from his Muse in "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" doubles as the gate separating life from death and the gate separating dreams from waking life:

My warehouse eyes, my Arabian drums
Should I leave them by your gate
Or, sad-eyed lady, should I wait? (11–13)

But which gate is it: the deceptive Gate of Ivory or the portal of revelation, the Gate of Horn?

Bob Dylan passed through the Gate of Horn. The Gate of Horn was the name of a popular folk-music venue in Chicago owned by Albert Grossman, who eventually became Dylan's manager. All the big names of the era played there. The club has been made famous once again by the Coen Brothers, who feature it as the destination of a failed audition for the long-suffering folk musician/wandering hero of *Inside Llewyn Davis*. One of Dylan's major

folk influences, Odetta, released an album in 1957 called *At the Gate of Horn*. One song on that album is titled “Lowlands.” It tells the story of a sailor returning home after a long time at sea. Another song is titled “Lass of the Low Country.” It tells the story of a girl, now dead, who fell in love with a lord passing by on his white steed (perhaps one of the six white horses Marie had sent to the penitentiary?). “Lass of the Low Country” contains the warning: “If ye be a lass of the low country / Don’t love a lord of high degree / He ain’t got no heart and no sympathy.” Alas, the sad-eyed lady of the song failed to heed that lesson:

Sing sorrow, sing sorrow
For she sleeps in the valley where the wild flowers nod
And nobody knows she loved him
Save herself and God.

Odetta’s song emanates from the Gate of Horn, but it sounds like the heartless lord in “Lass of the Low Country” has passed instead through the Gate of Ivory.

As these far-ranging allusions show, the Gates of Horn and Ivory had many connotations for Dylan, and he galvanized them all in “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands” to bring closure to *Blonde on Blonde*’s mythic quest. In the dreamscape of this hallucinatory Underworld, the singer finally arrives at the gate of his Muse, but also at the crossroads of its doorstep. Will the gate remain closed, or will it be opened? Does the gate lead to truth, light, and salvation? Or to deception, darkness, and damnation? “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands” is an utterly compelling, if deeply cryptic, song by a young man who has just become a husband and is about to become a father. Dylan’s art is refracted through various intertextual prisms, but the song’s roots are urgently personal. What had he gotten himself into, getting tied down to such a sad, wounded, beautiful, mystical, captivating woman? For that matter, what had she gotten herself into, marrying a globe-trotting troubadour whose affections wander as restlessly as his boot heels? Could this work? Or would her medicine and his railroad gin make a toxic combination? Throughout *Blonde on Blonde*, Dylan looks back on the tangled journey that led him to this point and recognizes that things are about to change radically, that he is passing across a liminal threshold into alien territory. The album chronicles how he got there while borrowing generously from other sagas about transformative, epoch-making journeys.

If there are correct answers to the choices the singer faces, the Sad-Eyed Lady declines to reveal them. She is the epitome of mystery. Much of the song is devoted to describing her features, yet by the end of this eleven-minute dirge neither the singer nor the listener is any closer to understanding her, no closer to penetrating her dark obscurity to arrive at her essence. It is revealing that the song is delivered entirely in the interrogative mode: three four-line questions per verse. The Sad-Eyed Lady never speaks; she remains a sphinx whose riddles go unanswered. Her silence could indicate that she is incapable of speech, recalling mute Philomela. Or her silence could indicate renunciation: the hero has failed in his quest; his sacrifice is deemed unworthy. He doesn’t know, and she isn’t. He remains poised forever between staying and going, between moving forward and turning back.

Dylan resists tidy resolutions and proselytizing platitudes. By album’s end the hero has neither conquered all his demons, nor united completely with his beloved, nor rejuvenated his barren land. The Sad-Eyed Lady’s silence says it all. Campbell declares,

Myth is the revelation of a plenum of silence within and around every atom of existence. Myth is a directing of the mind and heart, by means of profoundly informed figurations, to that ultimate mystery which fills and surrounds all existences. (267)

Dylan ratifies this profound understanding of silence. As he observed in “Love Minus Zero/No Limit,” one of his first songs for Sara, “My love she speaks like silence / Without ideals or violence, / She doesn’t have to say she’s faithful yet she’s true like ice, like fire” (1–3). Rather than reading her silence as mute rejection, it is better understood as an eloquent assertion of mystery untranslatable into any language that could express it more clearly. Dylan makes a similar appeal to let silence speak for itself in “Gates of Eden,” which might just as well be set at the Gate the Horn:

At dawn my lover comes to me
And tells me of her dreams
With no attempts to shovel the glimpse
Into the ditch of what each one means
At times I think there are no words
But these to tell what’s true
And there are no truths outside the Gates of Eden. (57–63)

Return

The term *katabasis* refers to a hero’s descent into the Underworld. In her study *Hell in Contemporary Literature: Western Descent Narratives since 1945*, Rachel Falconer observes,

In classical katabasis, the descent to Dis or Hades is about coming to know the self, regaining something or someone lost, or acquiring superhuman powers or knowledge. The descent requires the hero to undergo a series of tests and degradations, culminating in the collapse or dissolution of the hero’s sense of selfhood. In the midst of this dissolution comes the infernal revelation, or the sought after power, or the spectre of the beloved. The hero then returns to the overworld, in some cases succeeding, in other cases failing to bring back this buried wisdom, love or power from the underworld. (3)

Blonde on Blonde is a contemporary descent narrative that reiterates the classical model of katabasis. The singer takes drugs at the beginning as a means of descending into the subterranean depths of the self. He encounters strange creatures, wrestles with his own best and worst impulses, and wanders lost in exile, all the while in search of his Muse. The album ends with the singer finally arriving at the gate of his spectral beloved. But rather than opening the gate and revealing her identity, rather than uniting the Hero and the Muse in perfect union and speeding them back to happily-ever-after in the bright world above, Dylan leaves the couple suspended in time and space at the threshold of decision and discovery. Within the world of the album, there is no return: the singer remains stuck in the Lowlands.⁹

And yet, counter to the evidence within that final song, there is the ineluctable evidence of our ears: the listener’s experience of *Blonde on Blonde*. Dylan ends his Nobel Lecture on a note of return through song: “I return once again to Homer, who says, ‘Sing in me, oh Muse, and through me tell the story’” (“Nobel”). The Hero and Muse wait in the Underworld on opposite sides of the Gate—but the song the Muse inspired in the poet survives, an expression of eternal renewal and return. Dylan essentially has it both ways, much as Eliot does in his other great poem of descent into the modern wasteland, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” The poem begins with an epigraph from Dante’s *Inferno*, where one of the damned remarks,

If I believed that my reply were made
to one who would ever climb to the world again,
this flame would shake no more. But since no shade

ever returned—if what I am told is true—
from this blind world into the living light,
without fear of dishonor I answer you. (Eliot 13; Alighieri 212)

The damned soul feels confident that Dante will never return to the land of the living, and Eliot's epigraph implies that neither will Prufrock. Indeed, by poem's end, Prufrock seems to have spiritually drowned. For both Eliot and Dylan, however, what survives the death of the flawed hero is art, the chronicle of his epic journey. "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands"—as it were "The Love Song of R. Allen Zimmerman"—may end with the singer still trapped in the Underworld, but his testimony has somehow outlived his season in hell and made it onto the listener's turntable. With the vinyl disc spinning into silence as complete as that of the Sad-Eyed Lady, the best the listener can do is pick up the needle, return to the beginning, and start the journey all over again. Millions of us have been doing just that for more than half a century, following in the footsteps of *Blonde on Blonde's* mythic quest.

Notes

1. In *Bob Dylan's Words—A Critical Dictionary and Commentary*, Richard David Wissolik and Scott McGrath assert the importance of archetypes to Dylan's work. They claim, "Indeed, it is safe to say that Dylan's work cannot be completely understood without good knowledge of the tenets found in the *I Ching*. Neither can one fully understand Dylan's work without an adequate familiarity with Robert Graves's work especially his *White Goddess*" (xi). Wissolik and McGrath devote an entire section of their book to identifying and defining "Archetypes, Motifs, and Symbols" relevant to the Dylan canon, many distilled from *The White Goddess* (55–81). I am grateful for their groundbreaking work in this area. However, neither they nor their contributors develop these theories into a full-length mythical analysis as I do here with *Blonde on Blonde*.
2. All song quotations are from Bob Dylan, *The Lyrics*, edited by Ricks, Nemrow, and Nemrow.
3. In 2017, interviewer Bill Flanagan observed, "I noticed that if you had an odd song that didn't seem to fit with the rest of the album, you put it first," listing "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35" as a prime example. Dylan conceded that Flanagan might have a point with respect to certain songs, but not with "Rainy Day Women." He characterized that opening track instead as "a bell tower announcement of what was to come" on the album (Flanagan).
4. Joan Baez told biographer Anthony Scaduto, "He'd just written 'Visions of Johanna' which sounded very suspicious to me, as though it had images of me in it. I mean, I can't ever say that publicly. ... First of all he had never performed it before, and [Bob] Neuwirth told him I was there that night and he performed it [4 December 1965 at Berkeley Community Theatre]. And that was very odd. I was listening to the song and sort of inwardly wanting to feel flattered, but wondering whether—you know, I mean, everybody in the world think Bobby's written songs about them, and I consider myself in the same bag. But I would never claim a song. But certain images in there did sound very strange" (280). Clinton Heylin reckons it more likely that Dylan played the song to impress his poetic mentor Allen Ginsberg, who was also in the audience that night (275).
5. In the most famous song allegedly inspired by Edie Sedgwick, "Like a Rolling Stone" from the *Highway 61 Revisited* album, Dylan had warned "Beware doll, you're bound to fall" (3). She did fall in 1971, the victim of a drug overdose at the age of 28. In her elegy "Edie Sedgwick (1948–1971)," Patti Smith wrote: "Everyone / knew she was the real heroine of / *Blonde on Blonde*" [from *Seventh Heaven* (1972); qtd. in Gray, *Encyclopedia* 613]. Along with "Just Like a Woman," most Dylanologists consider Sedgwick the subject of jealous mockery in "Leopard-Skill Pill-Box Hat."
6. For example, Marion Meade wrote of "Just Like a Woman" that "there's no more complete catalogue of sexist slurs," where Dylan "defines women's natural traits as greed, hypocrisy, whining and hysteria." In reviewing his body of work to date, she concluded that he "tended to regard nearly every female as a bitch."

7. Among the shape-shifting figures in *Blonde on Blonde*'s dreamscape are several possible transvestites. In "Temporary Like Achilles," Achilles is described as "hungry, like a man in drag" (29). According to legend the epic warrior Achilles did in fact disguise himself as a woman before the Trojan War in an attempt to avoid conscription. [Graves references Achilles hiding among the women on the first page of his Foreword to *The White Goddess* (9).] The object of the singer's affection in "Temporary Like Achilles" is apparently a tumescent transvestite; thus the singer asks, "You know I want your loving / Honey, why are you so hard?" (6–7). The whole song reminds me of Leopold Bloom's surreal encounter with Bella/Bello Cohen, the Circe-inspired bordello madam in Joyce's *Ulysses*. Turnabout is fair play: the 15 jugglers and five believers of "Obviously Five Believers" may be women in drag since they are described as "All dressed like men" (236). Meanwhile Queen Mary in "Just Like a Woman"—"Queen Mary, she's my friend / Yes, I believe I'll go see her again" (12–13)—could be a regal nickname, or a marijuana reference (i.e. Mary Jane), but she could also be a drag queen. For that matter, even the principle subject Baby could be a transvestite; that is, just *like* a woman, but really a man. Dylan would have known plenty of transvestites from Warhol's Factory scene, as Lou Reed candidly memorializes in "Walk on the Wild Side."
8. The newlyweds did reside for a time in the notorious Chelsea Hotel, where they lived when their first son Jesse was born. The song was strongly inspired by this period in their early marriage. Nevertheless, Dylan later confirmed that the majority of "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" was written during a long break at the Nashville recording studio (Wenner 158).
9. Dylan dramatizes a similar moment near the end of his Nobel Lecture, this time invoking the encounter between Odysseus and Achilles in the Underworld: "When Odysseus in *The Odyssey* visits the famed warrior Achilles in the underworld—Achilles, who traded a long life full of peace and contentment for a short one full of honor and glory—tells Odysseus it was all a mistake. 'I just died, that's all.' There was no honor. No immortality. And that if he could, he would choose to go back and be a lowly slave to a tenant farmer on Earth rather than be what he is—a king in the land of the dead—that whatever his struggles of life were, they were preferable to being here in this dead place" ("Nobel").

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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