

## In The Waste Land of Your Mind: High Modernism Out on Highway 61

White-hot summertime, 1988. Atlanta swelters. The Ritz-Carlton in Buckhead is far from Highway 61 and even farther from Desolation Row; it has a splendid outdoor pool, and I am in it. So is Kenny Aaronson. The midafternoon sun gleams hard off his soaring crest of black hair as he does a slow breaststroke up and down the pool. He does not put his head underwater. I'm a shy girl, back then, but finally I speak to him. "Hi, Kenny. We are going to hear you all tonight." He smiles, and says, "Thanks." No one else is in the pool, and it seems okay, private enough, to ask. "Hey, does Mr. Dylan swim?" He keeps smiling. "Sure, but he's not staying here. He's across the street at the Holiday Inn." The Holiday Inn instead of the Ritz: it's odd and believable, and of course, I ask why. "Because the windows here don't open. He has to have windows that open."

High Modernism, the major global literary and cultural movement of the early 20th century, is entirely devoid of open windows, escape hatches, and fresh air. It's full of entrapment, paralysis, heroes and heroines who try and try but are running in sand, passive verbs, the conditional ("as if," "would," "could"), qualifying adverbs, phrases and images "borrowed" from other writers and made new, many mythologies, modern technology, and an overall sense of uneasy, poisonous, impermanent calm between storms. This is entirely fitting, as the period occupied by Modernism came between two world wars. There hasn't been a time in literary history more enclosed and paranoid, yet: think of T.S. Eliot's shattered settings and narrators immobilized with fear and horror; Virginia Woolf's characters destroyed not during but in the psychological aftermath of The Great War; W.B. Yeats's apocalyptic imperatives; Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner and their varied nostalgias for an America just past (or, perhaps, never-was); or James Joyce's trapped Dubliners, going through the motions and ages of life without help or hope.

Bob Dylan has been linked to Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, William Blake, Shakespeare, and a whole heaven's worth of literary stars in the last fifty years. Too often critics make the easy call of Melville as an influence because of Captain Ahab, forgetting that Dylan also knows his William Hawthorne for a sense of moral and religious fear – or that, as indebted as he may be to Whitman (or to Whitman, and Blake, through the singular conduit of Allen Ginsberg) for his long lyrical lines, he knows the dark rhymer Emily Dickinson too. However, far less has been made of Dylan as connected to the generation of writers and artists who immediately preceded him in Modernism. And, for me, Highway 61 Revisited is one of the last successful High Modern works of art. Certainly, Dylan's naming of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot in "Desolation Row," and his mention of Scott Fitzgerald's books in "Ballad of A Thin Man," have made professors happy whether or not they should be, given the contexts – but his style on the whole album is thoroughly and thrillingly Modern, in a way that Dylan had not written before, and would not, consistently, thereafter.

Modern poets, particularly, suffer from a sense of entrapment in a sterile or destroyed world; the finest example, here, being Eliot's "The Waste Land" and what William Empson so perfectly called Eliot's poetic mode of "horrified concentration." Bob Dylan shares this hallmark, intensely, with Modern poets; he has always hated being caught in a trap,

metaphorically or by definitions people would force upon him or literally. Confinement and claustrophobia are curses in Dylan's songs: think of Rubin Carter in his tiny cell or the youngsters inside the walls of Red Wing; of the New York apartment rooms with coughing steam heat and girls like Louise, or of Hollis Brown's tiny tumbledown cabin, and the motorpsycho nightmare farmhouse; places where bedroom windows are made of bricks, where the singer sits in cold irons bound. Yet Dylan is also an escape artist, in his songs, in his life. He's been singing about breaking out, and taking flight, for a long time. With his many homes, hotel rooms, and touring vehicles, he's constantly getting into – and out of – some kind of enclosure. And he always likes to keep a view of freedom out the doorway, out the window – this prospect is one he describes not only in his songs, but in his paintings and drawings, too. This Juliet's-eye, pope's-eye view from the balcony, being inside but also outside, is one Dylan has carried into his paintings and drawings recently, too. His large acrylic "Vista From Balcony" shows a red metal openwork balcony imposing itself upon a green harbor full of tiny sails and one working ferryboat, with buildings on the far side blurring into the landscape. In Dylan's "Drawn Blank" series, many of the works are specifically from balconies or out of windows: a view of Amagansett; a bell tower in Stockholm; a South Dakota landscape. Many others, vertiginous and Escherish, are what the artist sees looking outside from an unspecified inside – down into a New Orleans street or Chicago back alley or at the Inland Pipe and Supply Company, even through a porthole (where the repeated view is not of an expected endless sea, but of various people).

In his songs, Dylan is happiest to occupy the interstices, either inside looking out or in the margin between inside and out – emotionally, imaginatively, and physically. He hates to commit to being in one place when he can be in two, or four, or more – or in the same place, but seeing it from another angle. And when he is stuck, he'll get away any way he can, no silent sneaky drifter's escape but hot-footing it bare-naked out the window, somersaulting through that window at a hundred miles an hour. Even when it's an incomplete intention – a hallmark of Modern literature, where characters talk incessantly about departure, but, when push comes to shove, remain trapped of their own volition – Dylan makes it sound convincing, as if, though he hasn't yet left, he really will go his way while you go yours, that he really has got to be driftin' along. All of Dylan's albums have songs about getting stuck and getting out, in some sense or another, but one record is particularly claustrophobic. Its title invokes transit, and the hard-eyed young man in Daniel Kramer's photo on the album cover wears a Triumph motorcycles t-shirt, but "Highway 61 Revisited" is no collection of songs of the open road. Dylan isn't free at all, in the photo: he's sitting slumped on what looks like an empty stage (but is, says Kramer, the floor at Albert Grossman's New York place) with his touring companion and sidekick Bobby Neuwirth in the background, hovering, and holding an ubiquitous camera – something Dylan has been trying to evade, and use to control his own image, all his life.

Neither "Blonde On Blonde" nor "Blood on the Tracks" has such an intense no-exit feeling overall as does "Highway 61 Revisited"; and the irony of an album full of songs featuring roads and trains and cars that is also about being in captivity is certainly not lost on the singer, who tips it off in the careful ordering of the songs. From the first to the last tracks on the record, "Like a Rolling Stone" and "Desolation Row," the album is locked down in a circular progression, or perhaps regression, of entrapment and inescapability. "Like a Rolling Stone" bears false promises of motion and possibility, and "Desolation Row" is a glittering mosaic of

images, characters, times and places that you can't escape. At the end of the record, it's the singer who is free and clear, and his addressee – you – are the one who's unwittingly traded places with him. You're the one who's left in what W.B. Yeats called the desolation of reality. This particular album, from the passionate intensity of its confinement to the singer's escape while we're stuck in the end, makes of Dylan – following Yeats, Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, and Pound – the last great High Modernist.

"Highway 61 Revisited" was Dylan's second album of 1965, following "Bringing it All Back Home." It was recorded in mid-June and in early August, 1965, at Columbia's studios in New York. Dylan had just returned from his 1965 tour of England and a 24th-birthday vacation with Sara Lownds, and was preparing to go electric at Newport and keep in that vein on a year-ending tour with The Hawks. His appearance at Newport fell between the two recording sessions for "Highway 61 Revisited." The album was made in the way Dylan had begun to record by then. Musicians would assemble in a room. Dylan would take and re-take, compose lyrics and alter melodies, while the men waited, assisted, waited, improvised, re-took, recorded. (Men, I say, because Dylan's bands, in studios and onstage, have been all-male, with the exception of a few guest performers and backup singers who did not play instruments, for nearly fifty years.) Dylan did near-whole albums in one fell swoop. If a record didn't sound right when it was finished, Dylan would, as he did during the "Blonde On Blonde" sessions in Nashville, and the "Blood on the Tracks" sessions in Minnesota, assemble another or a new group of musicians, and have at it again, working in the same intense manner until he was happy with the result. It's a Sartrean way to record: lock the doors, put paper on the windows, and no one gets out of here alive until Bob says so. It's also an immensely effective way to record, and one that has brought out unsurpassed performances on the songs by individual musicians like Robbie Robertson, Kenny Buttrey, Al Kooper, Garth Hudson, Charlie McCoy, Rick Danko, Larry Campbell, G.E. Smith, and Dylan himself. Some of the musicians, including Kooper and McCoy, have spoken years later about what it was like to be there, but no one has yet to say he wouldn't have been there, if he could turn back time.

The outtakes from "Highway 61 Revisited," bootlegged under a variety of titles and in various groupings, are a chronicling of thwarted, aborted, attempted escapes. They are great listening for what didn't make it onto the album, as well as the first versions of what did. The most takes survive from the June 15-16 sessions of "Like a Rolling Stone" and "It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry." The first take of the latter, only 40 seconds' worth, opens with a bleating harmonica and ends with Dylan dissolving in laughter after the sound turns tinny and the instruments jumble: "What the fuck I was doin with this song, man – it's not such a terrible song to do!" The song gets much faster as the recording goes along, with both bass and drums driving it, and the rocking, rippling organ complementing Dylan's voice. As his singing rises and falls, the organ tags along; Al Kooper, if it's he playing here (and, if not, it's a device he swiftly adopted) would do this again, and to much greater sonic and connecting effect, on "Blonde On Blonde" the following year. It's as if the organ is following, puppylike, his master's voice, and this sort of call-and-response still works beautifully for Dylan: a musical device that supports, and strengthens, his voice, and provides an echo for the lyrics just sung. On the next take the electric guitars sizzle and play, back and forth, fighting each other for the lead. Mike Bloomfield wins, as he will in most of the sonic contests on many of the album's fast-rocking songs. Dylan would return to "It Takes a Lot to Laugh" and get the version he wanted in July, with pared-

down lyrics and tighter sound, but from these first tries, you get the full effect of this doomed mail train, with the engineer tossed into the baggage car as it careers down the tracks into a racket of wheels and train whistles, then into fade-out and silence.

A barbed wire fence is a peculiarly painful dividing line to occupy if you're sitting on it. Women are, not surprisingly, involved in the pain. "She's makin' me into an old man and man I'm not even twenty-five," Dylan mourns. The woman takes his shoes so he can't get around; his "feet don't work so hot." Fragments and splinters of this song appear elsewhere on the album, like the line "Well I went to this Arabian doctor but he wouldn't tell me what it is I got," reworked for "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues." The harmonica does a lot of the singing for Dylan as the take ends, interspersed with a few "awrights" and a couple of giggles. Later takes are slower, with a spicier, long guitar line from Bloomfield. "Barbed-Wire Fence" begins to sound exhausted, already abandoned. The lyric at the last verse has changed to the self-indicting "Of course you're gonna think this song is a riff, I know you're gonna think this song's just a riff," and Dylan sings it like he thinks so, too. And here they leave it.

The star of the June sessions with Tom Wilson is Dylan's most famous song. Dylan is, like Yeats, a constant reviser – and, like Yeats, the revisions are almost always for the better. His work-in-progress on this song is wondrous to hear. The many takes of "Like a Rolling Stone" show its remarkable evolution from folk to rock; the first take of this song was almost a folk ballad, quiet and gentle – Tom Wilson slates it as "CO86446, Like a Rolling Stone, One," and with amazement you realize you're listening to a waltz. Wilson even counts it out, like a dancing master: one-two-three, two-two three. Bob's presence is there in a plaintive, sweet harmonica, and his voice never comes in with a lyric, just the question, "It didn't get lost?" and the take ends. The second begins with his voice, strong and barely accompanied with strumming strings, piano, and touches of harmonica and organ. Dylan begins his tale as tales all used to begin, with "Once upon a time." The words, though, are still in progress. There's no "complete unknown" – Dylan sings "sooooo unknown," before stopping the take coughing, and insisting, "my voice is gone, man. Wanna try it again?" The song rolls out, slowly. "Be aware, doll," not beware. "You used to make fun about everybody that was hangin' out." "To be out on your own, so unknown, like a rolling stone." No "no direction home." The take fades, and so does the folky sound, permanently.

Later, Wilson says gently, "Okay, Bob, we got everybody here, let's do one, and then I'll play it back to ya, and you can pick it apart." The song now slated as "Like a Rolling Stone, Remake, Take One," sounds like itself, from the clicky drum start shared by Kooper's rolling, billowing keyboards. The lyrics are more set – "when you're on your own, without a home, like a complete unknown, like a rolling stone." "Naw," says Dylan at the end of the first refrain, "we just gotta work that part out." They try again, but Bob has a false start, singing too softly. The only complete take kick-starts with the drum alone, organ (Al Kooper for sure, this time) and the rest of the band following. This is the version we know best: the Woodyesque, folky pronunciation – for instance, "stone" as "stawne" – the line "no direction home;" and, in the last refrain, the magnificent second of silence, after Bob's first "how does it feel?," between the crash of the drum and Kooper's replying organ line. It fades into a jungly drumbeat and guitars turning plunky, being picked, it sounds like, as if they're banjos.

Though this would be the album version, Dylan keeps on, with an edgier, snarkier version, slower; he punches out, and makes more nasal the “Now you don’ts,” almost speaking them as if he’s Rex Harrison, then stops abruptly. On the next take, Dylan has to laugh when he flubs a line, “threw the dumbs a dime, ha ha, let’s take it again.” The next time, they try it with a harmonica lead-in, and don’t go far with that. Wilson cuts off the next take because “there’s something wrong timewise.”

“Like a Rolling Stone” is a song of simile and questioning, in a style that’s always reminded me of that of the Late Great Yeats. W.B. Yeats asked the same kind of irrefragable questions at the end of “The Second Coming,” “Leda and the Swan,” and “No Second Troy,” among many, and like him Dylan has always enjoyed being a riddler, leaving questions unanswered for you to grapple with. Here, the refrain asks directly, and repeatedly, how does it feel? The singer is challenging the “you” of the song, in this is a story of a princess turned pauper, Cinderella in reverse, if you take “Miss Lonely” to be the “you,” the “doll,” the “babe” addressed in all the verses. It all begins comfortingly enough with that kids’ bedtime story, folktale beginning on “once upon a time,” but veers quickly into the grim present. You haven’t got the freedom of a rolling stone, after all; you aren’t one, you’re only like one. Hangin’ out sounds pleasant, but does it become the same thing as scrounging your next meal? Living on the street? The glamor of homelessness runs thin pretty fast; for every Huck Finn, freewheeling down the river, naked on a raft, there are thousands of bums and mystery tramps, ex-Napoleons exiled from past glories, starving well-educated failures. Freedom is the nothing that you’ve got to lose in this song, and a curse of it is that people still remember who you are. You aren’t a complete unknown – you’re like one, but the singer of the song knows who you are, and so do you. It’s a song in which you’re trapped, as the addressee and auditor, like an ant: there are many different ways to run, but without direction home or to any place in particular; you’ve lost your path, if you ever had it back at that once-upon-a-time beginning. Those who can help you survive you never respected, can’t trust. It feels as if they might do you harm.

With one perfect song in the can, Dylan headed up to Newport. Al Kooper and Mike Bloomfield were among those who joined him onstage to play that new song in his electric set that began with “Maggie’s Farm.” He also served the restless audience “It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry” before bidding them hail with an old favorite, “Mr. Tambourine Man,” and fare thee well with “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue.” When Dylan came back to New York to finish the album, he must still have been feeling the aftereffects of Newport. No one was going to trap him into being a folkie, or anything else. Tom Wilson had been replaced by July 29 by Bob Johnston, who would oversee the rest of Dylan’s albums of the 1960s, and “Self Portrait” and “New Morning” in 1970. Dylan reentered the studio with a sheaf of new songs, fighting and biting, “Positively 4th Street” and “Ballad of a Thin Man” and “Desolation Row.” Some songs would be held back for later, but most would make it on. The thin, wild, mercury sound, metallic and bright gold, was well in the works already.

The album starts, chronologically, with “Like a Rolling Stone.” It ends with “Desolation Row.” From start to finish, we’re on a wild midnight ride that doesn’t free us at all; it just makes us feel more and more boxed in. The second track is one of those that Dylan came back with at the end of July, “Tombstone Blues.” Dylan has always been a bluesman, and a fan of the Wild, Wild West. Those loves often coincide, and do so here in a song too frantic to be a blues, but

sounding bluesy for its being, in Bloomfield's phrase, played on the black keys. Tombstone, Arizona was the worst town in the world after the Civil War. Silver mines made it appear in the late 1870s, and in 1881 it hosted the gunfight at the O.K. Corral. Movie buff Dylan might have had visions of Kirk Douglas as Doc Holliday, and Burt Lancaster as Wyatt Earp in his head, but other visions were awash there too. "Tombstone Blues" is the story of a small family: a Mama, a Daddy, and an I. There might be a Brother Bill, who would be happy as a movie star playing Samson, or some ill-fated heroic role. The song is a flurry of Tarantulan images, Biblical and historical moments, literary characters and real musicians, and excellent rhymes. You end up clinging to the refrains like a life ring to get you through to the end of the rush of phrases dealing with sex, business, old ballads, Jack the Ripper, penny arcades....what connects all this stuff?

Two things: the bordertown setting, that perfect setting for a Dylan song; and the rhymes. Bordertown is nowhere at all but on the margin, on the line. It is divided between two places, at least, and it doesn't have to commit to either. Dylan's Bordertown of the mind can be at the margin of the sea, that space between dry land and water (as in "Mr. Tambourine Man," the parent and original in many ways for "Tombstone Blues" and "Desolation Row," and itself the heir to "Chimes of Freedom"). It can be in a never-never-land Wild West, as here, as in "Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts" and in the songs he wrote for "Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid" and in "This Dream of You." It can be under the volcano and washed in the waters of Black Diamond Bay. The rhymes are crucial to so many Dylan songs, and particularly where, as here, the words come fast and thick and swept along with frenetic instruments. Tom Lehrer once joked that folk songs don't even gotta rhyme, and this is something that has always separated Dylan from being tagged as a folk singer: rhymes, at the end of lines and internally, matter as much to him as ever they did to Byron, Blake or any nameless balladeer. The pattern, and the patter, of the words – Dylan enunciates very carefully in this song to make sure you hear all the words, something he doesn't always do. These fragments aren't shored against any ruins: they are scattershot, making the ruins. And if Dylan's wishing he could write a melody to keep a dear lady from going insane, this one's not it. Useless and pointless knowledge, the same sort of bits and pieces, shards of human culture, that art and artist cobbled together to make The Waste Land or Guernica or "The Rite of Spring," complicates all the songs on the album, making us think and guess and get increasingly paranoid and worried about what's coming to pass. We will do so increasingly, until the needle lifts off at the end of side two, and leaves us adrift in the wake of "Desolation Row."

"It Takes a Lot to Laugh" is followed by "From a Buick 6," a backseat blues with traditional elements like a good woman who'll take care of you as you're dying, and far less traditional requests, like the dump truck to unload the singer's head. Trains, cars, trucks: forget 'em. These modern means of transportation can't get you out, any more than trains could take Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie away from herself, or a fancy car could bring Jay Gatsby the girl of his dreams (instead, dreamgirl Daisy ends up killing her husband's mistress, and signing Gatsby's death warrant, with that big yellow car).

"Ballad of a Thin Man" might be a Dylan response to reporters' questions, to the Newport crowd reaction, to anyone who wanted to pin him down as voice-of-a-generation and folk-protest-singer: hey, you guys want a ballad? I got a ballad for ya! And it ain't "Joe Hill" or "Barbara Allen!" The questions in this song can't be answered; neither we nor Mr. Jones know

what's happening here, in this Tod-Browning freakshow carnival world of one-eyed midgets and sword swallowers and geeks that gets more lyrical space than the "real" world of professors, lawyers, and tax-deductible charity organizations. Fellow Minnesotan Scott Fitzgerald, for my money the finest fiction writer of American Modernism, has a cameo here, as the two great Modern American poets T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound will do in "Desolation Row." The world of "Ballad of a Thin Man" is not one in which to be left alone, but you are, with all your senses stripped: your eyes in your pocket, your nose on the ground, needing earphones. The singer's mocking voice, knowing you can't figure it out, knowing you can't figure a way out, is the last thing you hear, along with that ominous bum-bum-be-bum beat sustaining the creepy B minor key.

Mr. Jones is succeeded by Queen Jane as the subject of the next track; Dylan deals out more songs to women than to men, though he's at his lyrical best when he is addressing no particular man or woman, as in "Desolation Row," or a collective audience. Jane's not Lady Jane Grey, or Jane Seymour (the Tudor one); to try to ascribe some Dylan character to a historical antecedent is ridiculous, unless he's clear who he means: Brigitte Bardot, Elizabeth Taylor, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce. Even then, you shouldn't try to say what folks mean when they do appear. The queen, in this song, is in a bad way: her family, her ladies, her children, her commissioned clowns (no, he does not say soldiers), advisers, even bandits have turned against her. What's Jane's solace? The singer's presence. He asks her to come, but puts it as a question in the negative; it's not the invitation of "come and see me," but "won't you come see me." By the end of the song, she hasn't come. Either she can't get out, or she won't, but the effect is the same. He is on the outside of wherever she is, inviting, and she can't even reply. This mute addressee, the silent woman, is someone Dylan shares with many poets: it's a lot easier to praise, to damn, and anything in between when she ain't talkin.'

The title track, with its promise of being on the road again, turns out to be a whole series of looping traps. And, at the endpoint of Highway 61, we veer on south of the border through Juarez, before we're dumped us into the ultimate border town, a place between the real and unreal, the living and the dead: Desolation Row. The litany of "where" questions lead to one place only, Highway 61. Murders, clothes, piles of junk appliances, patriotic shoestrings, random family members, and the next world war: that's what is waiting for you out on this photo-negative version of an open road. Inexorably, each stanza of the song ends up there, and Highway 61 is a place, ultimately, far worse than any behind closed doors. So much for the freedom of the outdoors, the lonesome highway: welcome to white line fever. The screaming warning of that sireny whistle paces the album version of the song; you still hear people blowing the alarm on little plastic whistles at Dylan's live shows, unwilling to let it go.

Dylan has recently performed the title track frequently in concert, and his arrangements of the title track have been menacing, clearly spoken-and-sung, with the "Hiiiiii-ghway Six-tee-one" drawn out above George Recile's hard-pounded drums. However, one memorable evening in Moncton, Canada, in 2008, while the band was honky-tonkin' through "Beyond the Horizon," something made them all start laughing. Apart from the humor value in the song itself, and its the lounge-lizard delivery, the crowd had no idea what it could be. However, Donnie Herron entirely cracked up Dylan before the next number, which was "Highway 61 Revisited." Between Howard pointing with his gun and Louie the king, Dylan stepped back from his keyboard and

had a good solid guffaw during the instrumental break. The crowd was delighted to see him delighted, and suddenly the song turned into an absurd, whirling carousel of scary things that wouldn't happen tonight – magical, comforting, and exclusive to the moment.

Maybe things will be better across the border. Let's leave Highway 61 where it ends in New Orleans, and swing through Texas and keep heading south. Juarez is, however, far worse than any place on Highway 61 – after all, the next world war on the highway is just prospective, the bleachers being set up. It's not actually come, yet. The gig may be canceled, or so we hope and pray. In Juarez, it's love, not war, that does you in, and if you're surprised by this, you're a fool or liar. Dylan loves it down in Mexico, as a songwriter. He uses Mexico as a place beyond his Wild Wild West, just as it worked for American outlaws after the Civil War, and Americans living outside the law up to today. Remember the Paul Muni – Bette Davis movie "Juarez" (1939), where he plays the hero and she's the mad Carlotta? Now recall an earlier vehicle for the two stars, "Bordertown" (1935), where failed lawyer Johnny Ramirez (Muni) ends up in a border-town casino, the obsession of his boss's wife (Davis). She murders her husband to be with him, and then goes mad. The society girl Johnny loves in L.A. flirts with him happily, but is so horrified by the idea of marrying him that she runs in the path of a car and dies. There's no one-on-one correspondence with the characters in "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues," but I always feel the lust-full, ugly plot of "Bordertown" when I'm listening to this song.

Once upon a time, W.B. Yeats wrote an Easter poem. T.S. Eliot wrote a few. So did John Milton, Amy Clampitt, John Donne, George Herbert, and Joyce Kilmer, but Dylan's blues has most in common with Yeats's angry, elegant elegy. Thematically, they are nothing alike: Yeats's is about the Easter Rising of 1916, in which the "terrible beauty" leading to the Republic of Ireland was set in motion. The terrible beauty in Dylan's Eastertime song belongs to Saint Annie and Sweet Melinda, living in their whorehouse and committing, if not murders, acts that can kill you, down on Edgar Allan Poe's Rue Morgue Avenue. Dylan has always had an intense sense of history, particularly for the American South and south of the border, and of the inevitability of historical cycles – Yeats called them gyres, spinning out from flashpoint moments in human cultures. In both poems, the speaker realizes that his entire world has changed, and not necessarily for the better – and that there is nothing he can do about it but memorialize the names, places, and events in his lines. Perhaps both, but certainly Dylan's, is a song of failure; at the end of "Tom Thumb's Blues" the singer intends to get away from this rotten town and go back to New York. Yet he hasn't left; he's only announced an intention to leave.

This arrested departure is something rife in Modern fiction and poetry alike: it has a hurry-up-and-wait feeling, and leaves you stuck on a beach wondering about rolling your pants up, if you're J. Alfred Prufrock, and still on the banks of the Liffey, if you're Stephen Dedalus at the conclusion of "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man." Speech acts are the great cheap non-exit from Modernist literature: those who can't do, say, and then pretend that to say it is as good as to do it. You announce your intentions, but you're all talk, no action. In many ways "Tom Thumb's Blues," naming itself for a music form of the 1920s, full of images of sickness and broken society, fragmented lives, disappointment, and an expatriate's intended return to the de facto capital of America, is Dylan's most succinct Modernist lyric.



“Desolation Row” is not succinct – the song clocks in at over eleven minutes. This is, however, about the only thing it is not. One could argue that it’s about anything, everything – and such has been argued, in articles and books and blogs and online debates, for forty-five years. These same sorts of arguments have been made about “The Waste Land,” and, for me, “Desolation Row” is surely Dylan’s Waste Land.

Many Modern poets loved music, and tried to set their poems to it in some fashion. Eliot, like Dylan a fan of the music hall and of vaudeville, worked that Shakespeare-he-rian rag and kicky little bits like Mrs. Porter and her daughter, who wash their feet in soda water, into “The Waste Land”; and F. Scott Fitzgerald, who wrote musicals as an undergraduate at Princeton, often used bits of jazz and popular songs in his novels and short stories. The most devout about the use of music as accompaniment to his words – the words were written first, the music came later, which is the reverse of Dylan’s creative process as we see him at work in “Dont Look Back” – was Yeats. He chanted out his verses as he wrote them, and experimented with popular and archaic arrangements and instruments alike, without much popular or even critical success. (One of my favorite Yeats titles is “Words for Music Perhaps,” at which point he seemed to have decided that the words were his forte, and that any music might join them later – or might not.)

If you scan “Desolation Row,” a debatable thing to do to a song not designed as a poem, it runs in a long-short line pattern, with perfect little phrases of iambic trimeter (the circus is in town, on Desolation Row) regularizing the rhythm. Rhymed lines are separated by those that aren’t. In recent concert performances of “Desolation Row,” the musical arrangement hits hard on a one-two-three beat, chimed out between the sung lines, that emphasizes the trimeters – and also, to me, harkens back to the original waltz beat of a slowed-down “Like a Rolling Stone.” There are many other reminders of the first song: a narrator in a position of omniscience and authority, overseeing the scene, reporting on the activities of others. In “Like a Rolling Stone,” the “you” of the song is on the firing line; here, mercifully, you’re not there – until the coup-de-grace of the last stanza. You are standing next to the singer, and Lady (woman? dog? you? what you will), as he reels out what is coming to pass, with everything laced together by the thin ribbon of Charlie McCoy’s magical Mexican guitar.

The Row isn’t entirely confined to, as Dylan said long ago, “someplace in Mexico,” nor is it the New York city that the singer at the end of “Thin Man” has announced he’s going back to. We start out in a carnival town, overlooking a dusty old fairground that’s at once a main street, where festival is combined with hanging day – historically accurate, and still current, this human need to commemorate and celebrate crime punished. The “they” of “Desolation Row” are scary from the start: who are “they,” and why do they sell postcards of hangings, put the blind commissioner in a trance, nail the curtains, spoonfeed Casanova (originally “with the boiled guts of birds”) to kill him, and round up everyone that knows more than they do? Desolation Row is a police state full of surveillance but, paradoxically, full of lawlessness too. It’s a bit like John Steinbeck’s Cannery Row, that pre-hippie California community populated by Chinese shopkeepers, bums, prostitutes, a mysterious doctor, Greeks, ice-pick suicides, hound dogs, and married couples who live in an abandoned boiler. However, Cannery Row in the end is a safer and more pleasant place to be, redeemed by the sea.

The characters in “Desolation Row” have been parsed and considered relentlessly: people with names from the Bible, from Shakespeare, from real life. None of them are in a setting, or even in a character, we can particularly recognize. For example, Romeo is here, but instead of courting Juliet he is moaning a song recorded in 1952 by Patti Page and later (though it didn’t make it onto *Good as I Been to You*, the album for which it was destined) by Bob Dylan. Lon Chaney isn’t named, but his Hunchback of Notre Dame and Phantom of the Opera are the two of his thousand faces in the song: in his interview with Bill Flanagan for *Together Through Life*, Dylan did name Chaney as a favorite actor. I won’t reach for Chaney’s chilling performance as Alonzo in “The Unknown” (1927) to argue him as a complete unknown, though it’s a movie worth seeing, if you haven’t, for Chaney’s turn as a criminal turned circus freak pretending (at first) he has no arms, and a very young Joan Crawford as the beauty he loves, and who cannot stand (at first) to be touched by a man’s hands. Albert Einstein is here, along with his violin: he once turned down the gift of a Guarnerius, though he enjoyed playing Bach’s partitas and Mozart’s sonatas on the violin he did have, and once opined to Yeats’s friend the Indian poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, in 1930, that “really good music...cannot be analyzed.” T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound appear, at the end of the song, fighting in the captain’s tower of the doomed Titanic as people shout “which side are you on,” perhaps less a reminder of the protest song than that cabins on the port side out, starboard home mean you’re posh. In an image reminiscent of the close of Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” completed when Eliot, too, was still in his twenties, lovely mermaids flow in the windows of the sea – but Eliot’s mermaids are sirens, singing to drown you. Dylan doesn’t let the end of his song float off into supernatural control: he brings it back, as does Eliot, to human voices.

The last stanza is a direct address to “you,” and it’s suddenly as if the whole song has been a response to this letter. The people you mention in the letter have had to undergo a metamorphosis so they’re less a bunch of lame losers: “I had to rearrange their faces/ And give them all another name.” This rearrangement and renaming has, perhaps, just been accomplished in the foregoing stanzas – are all these the people mentioned in the letter we don’t get to read? Have we just met them, with their new faces and names, on Desolation Row? The singer announces his intention only to receive letters if you mail them from Desolation Row, and you’re left with the horrible question: if you want to contact him, in his free vantage point outside it all, do you really want to go there for the postmark? Or, worse, is he letting you know that you’re already there? Eliot’s unreal cities have nothing on this lost, not found, border town.

Despite those swimming mermaids, “Desolation Row” is more a Waste Land than a Love Song, of J. Alfred Prufrock’s or anyone else’s. Many critics have invoked Ezra Pound’s famous injunction to “make it new” to rationalize or excuse Modernism’s recycling, to put it mildly, of earlier writers’ words and phrases. Eliot suffered most from charges of plagiarism after “The Waste Land” was published, so much so that he added footnotes, which he later regretted, to some lines in the poem. Dylan has been similarly charged, early and often, most recently by a Joni Mitchell who seemed to have forgotten her own roots as a folk singer. In his last New York appearance, at NYU in March 2009, Liam Clancy remembered the whole world of folk singing as people sharing, trading, teaching and learning from each other. Modern poets, rather, wove lines into their work that they thought, or assumed, everyone should know. If you look at the original draft of “The Waste Land,” with Pound’s corrections, in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library, you see the line “these fragments I have spelt into my ruins” changed into

"these fragments I have shored against my ruins." That's the whole point of what I'll call play-giarism: these fragments.

The word that best describes Modernism is mosaic. It's more than a collage, a pastiche – the finest art and music and literature of the period between the wars, in any country I can think of, is like a mosaic: bright bits that catch the light on their own, but come together into a masterpiece. Modern poetry – and art, and music – contain a sometimes dramatic, sometimes playful, and always referential reworking of celebrated cultural moments, details, and artifacts for one's own artistic purposes. Eliot referred famously to this as a conjunction of tradition and the individual talent. I think of it as renewing: Giacometti using African folk carvings to inspire his sculptures; Copland and Schoenberg using earlier songs and compositions in their own; Picasso doing his rich strange versions of Old Masters portraits and El Greco paintings; and Yeats working with the Cuchulain myth and Ovid and Blake. His acknowledged influences and sampling of what he likes in what's come before help to make of Dylan not only (to swipe the title and mantle from Yeats) the last Romantic – Lord Byron Dylan indeed, as once upon a time the young Dylan signed himself to Suze Rotolo – but also the last High Modern poet. However, when Dylan obeys Pound's injunction to make it new, these days, he is, most often, not recycling the work of others but his own. He is renewing himself, revising or re-envisioning his own images and symbols: circuses, chosen moments from U.S. history, southwestern towns and people, wandering troubadours, broken desolate streets, hotel rooms, particular blues riffs, so many more recurring moments and motifs. Yeats referred to his symbols and images as circus animals in one of his best late poems: this is also a fine way to think of the things that matter to Bob Dylan in his songs.

Modernism was bracketed by, shaped and driven by, two world wars. Dylan sings on this album of the next world war, but, praise be, it has not come. Does this mean, though, that all the tags of post-Modern and contemporary naming are false – that we are, rather, in a time more aptly called neoModern? Modernism has had a long, long reach through all aspects of 20th-century artistic culture, just as Romanticism retained its reach throughout the 19th century and Victorian convention into the 20th. Yeats tried to claim for himself, and his friends, that title of "the last Romantics," but he failed, we now know. When Dylan sings his rambling, looking-over-the-shoulder, claustrophobic songs he is a Byronic hero, youthful and hard like Childe Harold, or cynical and avuncular like the narrator of Don Juan. When he sings of being forever young, he tips his Stetson to John Keats. Most of all, though, Dylan has in his head – in 1965, writing the songs of "Highway 61 Revisited" – the literary movement into which he was born. Largely forgotten American poets of this time, like Robert Service, whose collection "Rhymes of a Rolling Stone" stuck in the head of a boy in Hibbing already fond of couplets and ballads that told a truly good tale, and those paid lip service to but not studied, like Carl Sandburg, inform Dylan's rhymes and his sense of historical drama. The cosmic imagists like Yeats are a model for painting pictures with words the way Dylan did in 1965 and 1966. And Eliot, with his mode of horrified concentration, his literary allusions, his use of American places as everywhere, and his universal disgust and intense fascination with modern times, would, I think, very much have enjoyed listening to "Highway 61 Revisited." Alas, he hadn't the chance, for he died in January of 1965 – just too soon.