

## Young Goodman Dylan: *Chronicles at the Crossroads*

Graley Herren, Xavier University

**Abstract:** Although usually categorized as a memoir, Bob Dylan's *Chronicles, Volume One*, is better understood as a work of autobiographical fiction. Like James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Dylan uses a fictional avatar (referred to here as Young Goodman Dylan) to explore key junctures in his development as an artist. In the "New Morning" chapter of *Chronicles*, Dylan draws heavily upon the literary and musical trope of selling one's soul to the Devil at the crossroads. Dylan the Chronicler depicts Young Goodman Dylan at a crossroads where he must choose between collaborating with Archibald MacLeish on the diabolical play *Scratch* or remaining out of the public spotlight to protect his family. On the surface, this conflict is depicted as a battle of darkness versus light, with the Everyman figure choosing the path of light and family over the path of darkness and public reengagement. However, Dylan the Chronicler complicates this moral dilemma by equating darkness with truth in this case, and light with an abnegation of artistic responsibility. Elderly Dylan's ambivalence toward his younger self's decisions is epitomized in his underwhelming assessment of the album *New Morning*.

**Keywords:** *Chronicles, Volume One*; crossroads; Devil; Dylan, Bob; MacLeish, Archibald; morality play; *Scratch*

Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize for Literature almost entirely for his work as a songwriter and performing artist. However, he is also the author of one great literary work of fiction—and no, I'm not talking about *Tarantula*. I am referring to *Chronicles, Volume One*. By labeling the work fiction, I do not mean to pass negative judgment on Dylan as a plagiarist, although it is well documented by now that he "borrowed" scenes and passages from dozens of unattributed sources in the book. Far from dismissing *Chronicles* as a fraud, I admire it as a deeply truthful fiction. The book is best approached not as memoir but as

*Künstlerroman*, an apprenticeship novel about the growth and development of an artist. The author Bob Dylan's relationship to the character Bob Dylan in *Chronicles* is similar to James Joyce's relationship to the character Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Both protagonists bear striking resemblances to their authors, and both writers draw generously from their own lives for raw material. But these are fictions: highly selective, substantially reimagined, aesthetically stylized, deftly veiled self-portraits. As Timothy Hampton asserts in *Bob Dylan's Poetics*, "To study Dylan's art and its combinatory power, we need to take into account the different ways in which he uses the 'I' who appears in his compositions. This 'I' is, of course, a fiction. . . . It is a character that Dylan invents anew for each song. Sometimes that character knows many things. Sometimes it knows little. Sometimes it thinks it knows more than it does. Sometimes it says more than it knows" (18). The same holds true for Dylan's depiction of "Dylan" in *Chronicles*.

One sign of the fictional status of *Chronicles* is the way in which Dylan bends his memories and molds his reconstructions to fit with preexisting myths, legends, archetypes, and literary tropes. A paradigm he uses to great effect in *Chronicles* is the crossroads. On multiple occasions, he stages life-altering encounters where the protagonist stakes his soul and must choose a path toward either salvation or damnation. The crossroads tradition has many variations and is centuries old. Perhaps the oldest example comes in *Oedipus Rex*, when Oedipus kills his father where three roads meet, sealing his fate before completing the prophecies down the road to Thebes. In medieval morality plays the trope involved an Everyman figure tempted toward Hell by figures of Vice, but ultimately choosing the pathway to Heaven pointed out by figures of Virtue. Later in the Renaissance, most famously in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, hubris leads Faustus to sell his soul to the Devil in exchange for secret knowledge and power. In early American literature the classic expression of the trope is Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," where a young Puritan is torn between staying at

home with his young wife or wandering into the dark woods with a distinctly American Devil associated with the young country's original sins. The most famous example from twentieth-century American literature is "The Devil and Daniel Webster" by Stephen Vincent Benét, where Jabez Stone of Cross Corners, New Hampshire, sells his soul to the Devil but then convinces famous orator and politician Daniel Webster to defend him. I don't know if Dylan has read or seen any of these works, but he has clearly absorbed the tradition from somewhere. Of course, we know that he was intimately familiar with the blues tradition of selling one's soul at the crossroads. Robert Johnson allegedly did so in exchange for superhuman musical gifts, inspiring songs like "Me and the Devil Blues," "Hellhound on My Trail," and "Cross Road Blues." Dylan's own most extensive and slyly subversive treatment of the crossroads theme occurs in the third chapter of *Chronicles* titled "New Morning."

In this chapter the protagonist—let's think of him as Young Goodman Dylan—finds himself at the crossroads after his motorcycle accident, when he stopped touring and started focusing instead on his new marriage and family. The young husband and father saw the choices before him in stark moral terms of good and evil, the pathway of light splitting off sharply from the pathway of darkness. However, it is important to draw distinctions between the protagonist's perspective and that of his author. The older Dylan who writes *Chronicles* takes a longer view and has a fuller sense of where these divergent paths lead. His quasi-autobiographical younger self chooses a path away from celebrity and public engagement in favor of home, family, and some semblance of privacy. Old Dylan defends those decisions as right at the time; but he also foreshadows different decisions at crossroads farther down the road, leading him eventually back to the world stage.

Archibald MacLeish is a crucial figure in Dylan's crossroads morality play. Prior to the publication of *Chronicles*, most readers knew very little about the failed collaboration between the two, other than the fact that a few songs written

for MacLeish's play eventually made their way onto Dylan's next album *New Morning*. It was therefore a surprise when Dylan chose to feature MacLeish so prominently. Factual inaccuracies abound in Dylan's reconstruction of their encounters. He sets their first meeting in the summer of 1968, but Clinton Heylin shows that it couldn't possibly have happened before late 1969 or early 1970 (402). He gets important biographical information about MacLeish blatantly wrong, like identifying him as a West Point classmate of General MacArthur (that was actually Carl Sandburg). And he rips off lines from MacLeish's poetry and prose and falsely presents them as snatches of dialogue between the elder statesman and the upstart crow.<sup>1</sup> Dylan's depictions are completely inconsistent with contemporary accounts. In his letters, MacLeish insists that Dylan had lost focus and suffered from writer's block; and in his autobiography, producer Stuart Ostrow describes Dylan as drunk, rude, lazy, and duplicitous throughout the ill-fated collaboration.<sup>2</sup> In short, the account in *Chronicles* is unreliable in terms of factual accuracy. As a work of crossroads mythology, however, the chapter is tremendously effective and revealing.

Dylan's creative decision to roll back the initial meeting to 1968 has several effects. It locates the action in the most tumultuous year of Sixties unrest. Dylan describes this context in classic crossroads terminology as putting his soul at risk:

The events of the day, all the cultural mumbo jumbo were  
imprisoning my soul—nauseating me—civil rights and political  
leaders being gunned down, the mounting of the barricades,

---

<sup>1</sup> Scott Warmuth and Edward Cook have done more than any other investigators to discover and document the countless instances in *Chronicles* where Dylan alludes to, paraphrases, or outright plagiarizes passages from unacknowledged sources. For a distillation of Warmuth's findings, including references to the MacLeish scenes (74-75), see his article "Bob Charlatan: Deconstructing Dylan's *Chronicles*, Volume One," *New Haven Review* (January 2008): 70-83. For Cook's specific references to the "New Morning" chapter, see his blogpost "Bob Dylan, Carl Sandburg, and the 'Borrowing' Problem," *Ralph the Sacred River* (June 3, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> See Archibald MacLeish, Letter to Dorothy de Santillana (October 7, 1970), *Letters of Archibald MacLeish, 1907 to 1982*, ed. R. H. Winnick (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), 430; and Stuart Ostrow, *Present at the Creation, Leaping in the Dark, and Going Against the Grain* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2006), 59-62.

the government crackdowns, the student radicals and demonstrators versus the cops and the unions—the streets exploding, fire of anger boiling—the contra communes—the lying, noisy voices—the free love, the anti-money system movement—the whole shebang. (109)

Set against the general turmoil, Dylan also experienced a great personal loss with the death of his father in the summer of 1968. At the dawn of the “New Morning” chapter he recalls, “I had gone back to the town of my early years in a way I could never have imagined—to see my father laid to rest. Now there would be no way to say what I was never capable of saying before” (107). Abe Zimmerman’s untimely death at the age of 56 led his grieving son to conclude “that my father was the best man in the world and probably worth a hundred of me, but he didn’t understand me” (108). Dylan claims he returned home from the funeral to find an invitation letter waiting for him from MacLeish. This would have made Dylan 27 years old, the fateful year that claimed Brian Jones, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison and others; the same age when the Devil’s bill came due for Robert Johnson. With chaos and death as his harbingers, enter the Father of Night.

Dylan draws a sharp contrast between humble Abe Zimmerman and the celebrated patrician poet who invites him for an artistic collaboration:

MacLeish, Poet Laureate of America—one of them. Carl Sandburg, poet of the prairie and the city, and Robert Frost, the poet of dark meditations were the others. . . . These three, the Yeats, Browning, and Shelley of the New World, were gigantic figures, had defined the landscape of twentieth-century America. They put everything in perspective. Even if you didn’t know their poems, you knew their names. (107)

Dylan’s reverence may be sincere, but from a literary perspective he is also at pains to establish the morality play parameters of the encounter. He depicts

himself as an innocent, an amateur hack and overmatched schlemiel compared to MacLeish. There is doubtlessly a dimension of ethnic sensitivity and defensiveness on display here. Timothy Hampton recognizes this same dynamic at play in Chapter Two of *Chronicles*, "The Lost Land." Dylan recalls his awe and envy in the presence of folk singer Mike Seeger. He reflects, "What I had to work at, Mike already had in his genes, in his genetic makeup. Before he was even born, this music had to be in his blood" (71). According to Hampton,

Seeger's parents were distinguished musicologists and composers; his father was a Harvard professor. Dylan paints him as an aristocrat. Like a member of the nobility in some ancient kingdom, Seeger embodies his greatness and identity. The music is essential to his very being, 'in his blood.' A member of the WASP elite, he has been raised in the culture of left-wing folk music. He is tradition, in several senses of the word. For Dylan, a provincial and a Jew, such ease and familiarity seem beyond reach, no less than nobility is beyond the reach of the peasant. (26)

Hampton's interpretation is persuasive and applies equally well to Dylan's depiction of MacLeish. The young poet respects his elder for his artistic integrity and significant accomplishments, but he is also acutely aware of (and intimidated by) his host's aristocratic pedigree: "He had the aura of a governor, a ruler—every bit of him an officer—a gentleman of adventure who carried himself with the peculiar confidence of power bred of blood" (110).

Most of the elder poet's erudite references sail over Dylan's head, highlighting the chasm of wisdom and experience separating Dylan from his illustrious host. Young Goodman Dylan has lost his father and is seeking guidance from a mentor. He is the naïve and uninitiated Everyman. MacLeish possesses secret knowledge and power, and he uses it to lure Dylan down a potentially treacherous path, away from the storm shelter of family and back out into the

maelstrom of a sordid and rapacious world. By dubbing MacLeish “the Poet Laureate of America,” he installs his elder as the embodiment of a nation then overtaken by forces of darkness.

The signs are subtle at first. Dylan describes MacLeish as “the poet of night stones and the quick earth” (107) and “the man of godless sands” (109). These are images taken from MacLeish’s own poetry, so Dylan the Chronicler has clearly done some homework. It is telling that he plucks out lines that connote dark magic. MacLeish needs somber songs for his latest play, and he thinks Dylan is the right man for the job. He suggests some diabolical titles, including “Red Hands,” “Lower World,” and “Father of Night.” Like any good Mephistopheles, MacLeish flatters and cajoles his mark. He tells the young poet how much he admires his work and how compatible he finds their views: “MacLeish tells me that he considers me a serious poet and that my work would be a touchstone for generations after me, that I was a postwar Iron Age poet but that I had seemingly inherited something metaphysical from a bygone era. He appreciated my songs because they involved themselves with society, that we had many traits and associations in common and that I didn’t care for things the way he didn’t care for them” (111-12). It’s a match made in Hell. Young Goodman Dylan catches a whiff of brimstone at the crossroads and hesitates to choose the path leading toward *Scratch*.

Dylan mentions the name of the play in passing and notes that it was based on a Stephen Vincent Benét story (108). But he never mentions the fact that the name “Scratch” is an alias for Satan, or that the play is about a man who is trying to win back his soul after selling it to Scratch. Dylan adopts the playwriting maxim, “Show, don’t tell.” He never directly announces the theme of confronting the Devil at the crossroads, but he dramatizes precisely that in scenes with MacLeish, where he “felt like two parts of my self were beginning to battle” (129). Young Goodman Dylan is flattered at first by the elder poet’s offer to collaborate, but he soon recoils from the temptation. In a particularly vivid passage, Dylan describes the apocalyptic vision of *Scratch*:

This play was dark, painted a world of paranoia, guilt and fear—it was all blacked out and met the atomic age head on, reeked of foul play. . . . The play spelled death for society with humanity lying facedown in its own blood. MacLeish's play was delivering something beyond an apocalyptic message. Something like, man's mission is to destroy the earth. MacLeish was signaling something through the flames. (113)

Dylan's macabre distillation only tells half the story of *Scratch*. Yes, the Devil is given a platform in the play, and he lodges some scorching critiques of American hypocrisy, mendacity, violence, and ruthlessness. Old Scratch calls out Daniel Webster in particular, mocking him for selling out the abolitionist cause by accepting the Fugitive Slave Act as part of the Compromise of 1850. Scratch delights in driving a wedge between the founding principles of Liberty and Union. However, it is important to note that Webster actually defeats the Devil in MacLeish's play and wins back his client's soul and his own. The play endorses Webster's manifesto from the 1830 Webster-Hayne Debate: "Liberty *and* Union, now and forever, one and inseparable" (Webster 144).<sup>3</sup> These are principles that Dylan supports, too. He declares, "Being born and raised in America, the country of freedom and independence, I had always cherished the values and ideals of

---

<sup>3</sup> In his Foreword to the published script of *Scratch*, MacLeish proposes that the tension between Liberty and Union continued to animate civic crises in contemporary America:

By 1970, however, though the Union still survived and slavery had—ostensibly—disappeared, it was no longer certain that the contradiction at the heart was healed. There were indications that it might have become more cancerous than in Webster's day. Men on the contemporary left echoed the New England Abolitionists who put Liberty first and Union after, and were as ready as Abolitionists had ever been to bring the Republic down in the name of freedom. At the same time there were those on the contemporary right who repeated the Copperhead cries of Union first and Liberty nowhere, proposing to surrender human freedom itself to something they called law-and-order. (viii-ix)

These similarities inspired MacLeish to revisit his friend Stephen Vincent Benét's mythical Webster with an eye and ear toward re-historicizing him in ways that spoke to the issues tearing the country apart in the late Sixties and early Seventies.

equality and liberty. I was determined to raise my children with those ideals" (115). A fair reading of *Scratch* should place MacLeish and Dylan on the same side. So why does Young Goodman Dylan perceive MacLeish as an opponent and threat?

Throughout the chapter, Dylan stresses his fierce commitment to his new family. He had spent much of his youth running away from home, reinventing himself, rejecting his roots, crafting a mercurial persona always in flux which owed nothing to the bourgeois values hammered into him in Hibbing. But getting married, having kids, kicking his rock-n-roll habits, and settling down to clean country living had radically altered his perspective. As Dylan concedes in *Chronicles*, "Having children changed my life and segregated me from just about everybody and everything that was going on. Outside of my family, nothing held any real interest for me" (114). Abe Zimmerman's death seemed to trigger an identity crisis in Dylan. Without his father around as embodiment of authority and model of assimilation, Dylan stopped rebelling and temporarily reinvented himself as his father's son. It is shocking to read Dylan proclaim: "I don't know what everybody else was fantasizing about but what I was fantasizing about was a nine-to-five existence, a house on a tree-lined block with a white picket fence, pink roses in the backyard. That would have been nice. That was my deepest dream" (117-18). How can the author of "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" suddenly buy into this vanilla suburban fantasy, sleepwalking through the consumerist WASP American Dream? It is so transparently banal, and so contrary to the values he endorses in his adult life up to this point, that Dylan the Chronicler may be satirizing Dylan the Character here.

Nevertheless, the moral stakes are high, and Young Goodman Dylan sees them in black and white absolutes. In one of the most revealing passages of the chapter, he declares, "I wasn't going to go deeper into the darkness for anybody. I was already living in the darkness. My family was my light and I was going to protect that light at all cost. That was where my dedication was, first, last and

everything in-between. What did I owe the rest of the world? Nothing. Not a damn thing" (123). The battle lines are drawn in stark terms: the family is light; the world is darkness; young Dylan embraces the light of family and rejects the darkness of the world. Simple. Way too simple. The 30-ish protagonist thinks he owes the world nothing, but his 60-ish chronicler knows better. MacLeish admired Dylan's early work, and he beckoned him back out of exile. But Young Goodman Dylan shunned this calling in 1970. He conflated MacLeish's offer with the pressures he felt from the public, the media, and fellow musicians to be their prophet and savior. He gave them his songs but they wanted his soul.

Or so the story goes. But even as Dylan delivers that narrative, he simultaneously undermines it. Take for instance the one time in *Chronicles* when Dylan quotes directly from *Scratch*. Having cast MacLeish in the role of the Devil trying to ensnare our young hero's soul, Dylan selects a passage commenting upon the nature of evil. According to Dylan,

Scratch utters the lines, "I know there is evil in the world—essential evil, not the opposite of good or the defective of good but something to which good itself is an irrelevance—a fantasy. No one can live as long as I have, hear what I have heard and not know that. I know too—more precisely—I am ready to believe that there may be something in the world, someone, if you prefer—that purposes evil, that intends it."

(124)

Although he makes some minor errors in the transcription, Dylan's quotation from the play is basically accurate (cf. *Scratch* 94-95), with one crucial exception: the lines he attributes to Scratch, the champion of darkness and despair, are in fact spoken by Daniel Webster, the defender of light and hope. This makes a big difference. The passage does not represent the Devil bragging about his evil stranglehold over the world; it is a rallying cry for the forces of light. But then Dylan inserts an ellipsis and continues on with the quotation: "' . . . powerful nations

suddenly, without occasion, without apparent cause . . . decay. Their children turn against them. Their women lose their sense of being women. Their families disintegrate'" (124). Remarkably, none of this second half of the quotation appears in the play *Scratch*. My research so far has uncovered no source. I frankly don't know where Dylan got this quotation. It smacks of the apocalyptic rhetoric of Hal Lindsey<sup>4</sup>, but the passage may be entirely fabricated. In any case, it doesn't come from *Scratch*. Why would Dylan insert this fake quotation? The invention is so egregious, and so easily detected by simply reading the play, I can only assume Dylan planted this false evidence knowing that it would be exposed as such. But to what end?

Dylan shares MacLeish's concerns about America's turmoil and what it may augur for the nation's future. But look at the other worries voiced via ventriloquism in this fake quote: children rebelling, women getting lost, families falling apart. Young Goodman Dylan straightforwardly associates his family with all that was light, good, and true. Accordingly, he associates all rivals to the family as dark, evil, and false. Old Dylan has the advantage of hindsight, however. He can look back and see that his crossroads dilemmas are far more complicated, nuanced, and ambivalent. Black-and-white becomes tangled up in gray.

In one of the most telling passages of the "New Morning" chapter, Dylan admits that MacLeish was a truth teller. The elder poet was trying to communicate devastating truths, but the young family man was in no mood to hear them:

The play itself was conveying some devastating truth, but I was going to stay far away from that. Truth was the last thing on my mind, and even if there was such a thing, I didn't want it in my house. Oedipus went looking for the truth and when he found

---

<sup>4</sup> During Dylan's born-again Christian period, he was strongly influenced by the writings of Hal Lindsey. In *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (1970), Lindsey interprets the Biblical books of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelations as prophecies that the end of times and the second coming of Christ are close at hand. Lindsey followed up this surprising best-seller with *Satan Is Alive and Well on Planet Earth* (1972), where he identifies various infiltrations by the Father of Lies in contemporary society and proposes methods for combating the influence of the Devil.

it, it ruined him. It was a cruel horror of a joke. So much for the truth. I was gonna talk out of both sides of my mouth and what you heard depended on which side you were standing. If I ever did stumble on any truth, I was gonna sit on it and keep it down. (125-26)

The conventional binaries break down. MacLeish is on the side of darkness, but he is also on the side of truth. Dylan, on the other hand, stands in the light but sits on the truth. Oedipus pursued the truth no matter where it led, and it left him ruined. Young Goodman Dylan was determined not to make that same mistake, even if the cost was a temporary abdication of artistic responsibility by ignoring or suppressing the dark truths confronted in *Scratch*.

Dylan the Chronicler reinforces this view through his self-assessment of *New Morning*, a luminously titled album that signifies his choice of the light over the darkness but which he damns with faint praise. Dylan uses abandoned songs from the failed *Scratch* collaboration to form the nucleus of this 1970 album. He said no to MacLeish's calling, but when producer Bob Johnston called to ask if Dylan wanted to make a new record, he answered yes. Apparently Young Goodman Dylan doesn't see the outright contradiction here, but Old Dylan wants the reader to notice it: "Johnston asked over the phone if I was thinking about recording. Of course I was. As long as my records were still selling, why wouldn't I be thinking of recording?" (134) Why wouldn't he? Oh, yeah, because he's just spent the whole chapter telling us how he's trying to recede from the limelight into privacy and anonymity. Going back into the studio and releasing an album of original songs was an obvious stepping stone toward reengaging with the world. Either Dylan was too naïve at the time to see the gap between his rhetoric and his actions—or, what's more likely, he was already beginning to feel an inner tug to return to public consciousness by sharing his art with the world. He takes steps toward that other road, the one he rejected with MacLeish, even as he continues telling himself that he is just a simple country husband and father now.

*New Morning* was a critical and commercial success, but Dylan himself doesn't rate his effort so highly. These are modest songs, nothing as momentous and earth-shaking as his previous work, and he knows it. "Message songs? There weren't any. Anybody listening for them would have to be disappointed" (138). Having produced previous works of genius, Dylan knows *New Morning* falls well short of that standard. "Maybe there were good songs in the grooves and maybe there weren't—who knows? But they weren't the kind where you hear an awful roaring in your head. I knew what those kind of songs were like and these weren't them" (138). The album isn't bad, and at times it's pretty good. Something crucial is missing, though. As Paul Williams astutely observes, "*New Morning* is Bob Dylan pretending to be Bob Dylan, not in any obvious way . . . but in a very subtle way: he goes through all the motions and touches all the bases, but leaves out Ingredient X" (259-60). The first gentle breeze of inspiration may be stirring again, but Dylan admits that he is still a long way from the gale-force tempest: "It's not like I hadn't any talent, I just wasn't feeling the full force of the wind. No stellar explosions. I was leaning against the console and listening to the playbacks. It sounded okay" (138). What Dylan leaves unsaid is that he would not feel the full force of those creative winds again until the marriage, for which he had put his career largely on hold, was falling apart. It may be the responsibility of a family man to head toward the light. It's the responsibility of the artist, however, to descend into the darkness, navigate the lowlands of orphic mystery, confront inner demons and expose hard truths. Dylan isn't ready to do that yet when MacLeish asks, and he is only capable of sidelong glances into the depths on *New Morning*. Still, certain signs suggest that he is beginning to sense the future direction of his art, after his season in the sun ends.

The dark linings can occasionally be glimpsed behind the silver-clouded songs on *New Morning*. A good example is "Time Passes Slowly." Heylin cites this song as one of three (along with "New Morning" and "Father of Night") which Dylan began composing for *Scratch* before withdrawing from the project (402).

In its initial incarnation for the play, perhaps it was intended for Jabez Stone, the New Hampshire farmer who enjoys seven years of prosperity before Scratch returns to collect his soul. Within the context of *New Morning*, however, the song sounds like self-commentary on Dylan's own rural exile and prolonged sabbatical from his artistic vocation. Everything seems idyllic at first:

Time passes slowly up here in the mountains  
We sit beside bridges and walk beside fountains  
Catch the wild fishes that float through the stream  
Time passes slowly when you're lost in a dream

Pretty and peaceful, right? Yet the line about being "lost in a dream" hints at the illusory, ephemeral quality of such a life. It soon becomes clear that the wild fish isn't the only one who has been captured, removed from the flow, suspended in time. How does it feel to be a stone that has stopped rolling? How does it feel to have found a home, no longer on your own, and yet still have no direction? It feels like this:

Ain't no reason to go in a wagon to town  
Ain't no reason to go to the fair  
Ain't no reason to go up, ain't no reason to go down  
Ain't no reason to go anywhere

Sure, the singer has sloughed off the yoke of unwanted obligations; he no longer works on Maggie's farm. But the idyllic is devolving into the merely idle, and Dylan knows that "Too much of nothing / Can make a man ill at ease." In *Dylan's Visions of Sin*, Christopher Ricks uses "Time Passes Slowly" to represent the deadly sin of sloth. He comments on the verse above: "This is obdurate, blockish, an evocation of a dangerous state of mind. Indifference can harden, before long, into something damnable" (126). Morality play conventions dictate that, in choosing the light over the darkness, Dylan selected the path toward salvation. However, this song sounds more like a seductively placid off-brand of damnation.

Dylan's foreboding imagery is most insidious in the final verse, where the emphasis shifts from torpor to the inevitable passage of light into darkness and life into death:

Time passes slowly up here in the daylight  
We stare straight ahead and try so hard to stay right  
Like the red rose of summer that blooms in the day  
Time passes slowly and fades away

The singer must try awfully hard to remain on the so-called right path and to convince himself that he is happy with his new life. Summer isn't over and the sun hasn't set, but that emblematic rose at the end will not stay forever young. Laura Tenschert, host of the *Definitely Dylan* radio show and podcast, provocatively asks: "Is it time that's fading like a wilting flower—or is it the singer, who somewhere in his subconscious might be feeling like he should be something else, maybe something more?" (Tenschert). In the alternate ending to an earlier version of "Time Passes Slowly" [included on *Another Self Portrait (Bootleg Series Vol. 10)*], Dylan paints his growing self-doubts in signature hues of light and darkness: "Like a cloud drifting over that covers the day / Time passes slowly then fades away." As Tenschert perceptively observes of this conclusion, "He is literally throwing shade on the sunny disposition of the previous two verses" (Tenschert). The dissonant, contradictory, ambivalent undertone of "Time Passes Slowly" is representative of a subterranean current running throughout the album, troubling its deceptively bright tranquility. *New Morning* is not dark yet, but it's getting there. The next intersection is already faintly visible on the horizon where Dylan will find himself again at the crossroads, forced to choose between staying or going, between devotion to family or sharing his unfettered art on the stages of the world.

Chapter Three of *Chronicles* ends by contrasting the fates of Dylan's album and MacLeish's play. The chronicler notes of *New Morning*, "All this was in what critics would later refer to as my 'middle period' and in many camps this record

was referred to as a comeback album—and it was. It would be the first of many” (141). On the other hand, the play which first inspired those songs was ignored: “The MacLeish play *Scratch* opened on Broadway at the St. James Theatre on May 6, 1971, and closed two days later on May 8” (141). A blues aficionado like Dylan surely knows that May 8<sup>th</sup> is Robert Johnson’s birthday, and that the patron saint of crossroads would have turned 60 the same day *Scratch* closed. The first time I read *Chronicles* as a memoir, this chapter’s conclusion felt like Dylan rubbing it in, as if to say, “See, Archie, my approach worked better than yours.” After coming to appreciate the “New Morning” chapter as a milestone in crossroads fiction, however, I now see my initial reaction was wrong. The salient point is that Dylan wasn’t ready to face dark truths and neither was the majority of the American public. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Dylan’s uplifting music was praised while MacLeish’s solemn play was panned. The relative success of *New Morning* compared to *Scratch* may constitute a minor victory of the light over the darkness, but that’s little consolation in the topsy-turvy moral universe of this chapter, since the victory of light goes hand in hand with the defeat of truth. Dylan the Chronicler might well feel embarrassed that a comparatively lightweight work like *New Morning* would be deemed successful while a mature work of devastatingly dark truths like *Scratch* folded within a week and was forgotten. Well, it had been forgotten, until Dylan situated it at the juncture of his own crossroads morality.

Works Cited

- Cook, Edward M. "Bob Dylan, Carl Sandburg, and the 'Borrowing' Problem." *Ralph the Sacred River* (June 3, 2010). Web. <http://ralphriver.blogspot.com/2010/06/bob-dylan-carl-sandburg-and-problem.html>. Accessed May 23, 2019.
- Dylan, Bob. *Another Self Portrait (1969-1971): The Bootleg Series, Vol. 10*. Columbia Records, 2013.
- . *Chronicles, Volume One*. Simon & Schuster, 2004.
- . *New Morning*. Columbia Records, 1970.
- . "Time Passes Slowly." 1970. Web. <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/time-passes-slowly/>. Accessed May 23, 2019.
- . "Too Much of Nothing." 1967. Web. <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/time-passes-slowly/>. Accessed May 24, 2019.
- Hampton, Timothy. *Bob Dylan's Poetics: How the Songs Work*. Zone Books, 2019.
- Heylin, Clinton. *Revolution in the Air: The Songs of Bob Dylan, 1957-1973*. Chicago Review Press, 2009.
- Lindsey, Hal. *The Late, Great Planet Earth*. Zondervan, 1970.
- . *Satan Is Alive and Well on Planet Earth*. Zondervan, 1972.
- MacLeish, Archibald. *Letters of Archibald MacLeish, 1907 to 1982*. Ed. R. H. Winnick. Houghton Mifflin, 1983.
- . *Scratch*. Houghton Mifflin, 1971.
- Ostrow, Stuart. *Present at the Creation, Leaping in the Dark, and Going Against the Grain*. Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2006.
- Ricks, Christopher. *Dylan's Visions of Sin*. Ecco, 2003.
- Tenschert, Laura. "Episode 11: Songs from the Threshold." *Definitely Dylan*. Web. Accessed <https://www.definitelydylan.com/listen/2018/3/25/episode-11-songs-from-the-threshold>. April 25, 2019.
- Warmuth, Scott. "Bob Charlatan: Deconstructing Dylan's *Chronicles, Volume One*." *New Haven Review* (January 2008): 70-83.

Webster, Daniel. Speech of Mr. Webster, of Massachusetts [January 26 and 27, 1830]. *The Webster-Hayne Debate on the Nature of the Constitution: Selected Documents [1830]*. Ed. Herman Belz. Liberty Fund, 2000.

Williams, Paul. *Bob Dylan, Performing Artist: The Early Years (1960-1973)*. Omnibus Press, 1990.