

ARTICLES

“And I Crossed the Rubicon”: Another Classical Dylan

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Abstract: Continuing and updating the observations in the author's book *Why Dylan Matters* (2017), this article explores Bob Dylan's engagement with the classical world of the ancient Greeks and Romans in the songs of *Rough and Rowdy Ways*. Both in the songs which imply such engagement (“Mother of Muses,” “Crossing the Rubicon”) and elsewhere on the album, classical antiquity remains a rich resource for the intertextuality of the songwriter. The Homeric poems, and Virgil's *Aeneid*, are part of the fabric on which he weaves his own epic stories, which continue the process, begun on “*Love and Theft*”, weaving into the album the story of the Roman dictator Julius Caesar, his assassination, and the civil wars that followed his death on the Ides of March 44 BCE.

Keywords: Aeneas; *Aeneid*; Appian; assassination; Augustus Caesar; Caesar, Julius; Calliope; Cavafy, Constantine; Christ, Jesus; American Civil War; Roman civil war; classical world; Crassus, Marcus Licinius; cypress tree; Dante; Dawn; Dylan, Bob; Elysian Fields; *Frankenstein*; heroes; Homer; Ides of March; intertextuality; invocation of Muses; Johnson, Samuel; Kennedy, John Fitzgerald; Lincoln, Abraham; Latin Club, Hibbing High School; Lucan; McKinley, William; memory; Milton, John; Mnemosyne; morality; molten gold; Muses; Nobel Prize Medal; *Odyssey*; Ovid; Red River; Rome; *Rough and Rowdy Ways*; Rubicon River; Saga, Junichi; Shakespeare, William; Shelley, Mary; St. Jerome; stream of consciousness; Timrod, Henry; transfiguration; Trojan women; Troy; Virgil; Warmuth, Scott

In *Why Bob Dylan Matters* (Dey Street Books 2017), following up on my 2007 article “The Streets of Rome: The Classical Dylan” (*Oral Tradition* 22.1), I traced the ways Dylan's lyrics, particularly those since he engaged the epic of Virgil in “Lonesome Day Blues,” actively incorporated the works and words of ancient

Greek and Roman poetry. Specifically Virgil in that particular song, the Roman poet Ovid in *Modern Times* (2006), and Homeric epic, where western literature all comes from, in *Tempest* (2012). For convenience, and to remove any doubt, I here give a more extensive table than I included in the book, just for the song “Ain’t Talkin’,” the closer of *Modern Times*. Ovid’s lines are alongside the lines Dylan so brilliantly worked into the song from Peter Green’s 1994 Penguin translation of *Poems of Exile*:

| | |
|---|--|
| Bob Dylan, “Ain’t Talkin’” Every nook and cranny has its tears | Ovid, <i>Tristia</i> 1.3.24 every nook and corner had its tears |
| Bob Dylan, “Ain’t Talkin’” all my loyal and my much-loved companions | Ovid, <i>Tristia</i> 1.3.65 loyal and much loved companions |
| Bob Dylan, “Ain’t Talkin’” I’ll make the most of one last extra hour | Ovid, <i>Tristia</i> 1.3.68 let me make the most of one last extra hour |
| Bob Dylan, “Ain’t Talkin’” I practice a faith that’s been long abandoned | Ovid, <i>Tristia</i> 5.7.63-4 I practice / terms long abandoned |
| Bob Dylan, “Ain’t Talkin’” They will tear your mind away from contemplation | Ovid, <i>Tristia</i> 5.7.66 tear my mind from the contemplation of my woes |

Bob Dylan, "Ain't Talkin'"
They approve of me and share my
code

Ovid, *Black Sea Letters* 3.2.38
who approve, and share, your
code

Bob Dylan, "Ain't Talkin'"
Who says I can't get heavenly aid?

Ovid, *Tristia* 1.2.12-13
Who says *I* can't get heavenly
aid / when a god's angry with
me?

Bob Dylan, "Ain't Talkin'"
They will jump on your misfortune when
you're down

Ovid, *Tristia* 5.8.3-5
Why jump / on misfortunes that
you may well suffer yourself? /
I'm down

As I also hope to have shown, the engagement with Rome in particular goes back well into the twentieth century, as evidenced by the lyrics of his songs from the very beginning: "Long Ago, Far Away" (1962), "Goin' Back to Rome" (1963), possibly "My Back Pages" (1964, in draft titled "Ancient Memories")¹, above all "When I Paint My Masterpiece" (1971), and "Changing of the Guards" (1978).²

The current contribution is meant as an update to those two earlier studies. Dylan's astonishing new album shows that he has stayed with some of the ancients, drawing from them and from everything else in his arsenal in new ways in the process of producing an album that will take its place among the greatest he has given us. As with the book, here I explore just one part of his art, and *in no*

¹ I have long wondered whether the "corpse evangelists" of this song, for whom the girls are "memorizing politics of ancient history," along with the overly serious "self-ordained professor's tongue," not to mention the mongrel dogs who teach, might all have to do with a less-than-happy memory—by 1964 one of his "ancient memories"—of something actually experienced in a Minneapolis classroom four years earlier. Stranger things have happened.

² See Thomas, 2017, 80–84, on the presence of Virgil's fourth, messianic *Eclogue* in drafts of "Changing of the Guards."

way imply that Dylan is limited or bounded by his interest in antiquity. He contains multitudes; this album contains multitudes. That includes the classical world, evident in the lyrics of some of the new songs, so it may be useful to record my thoughts here.

There is an interesting quote in the last interview he gave, in 2015 with Robert Love, editor of *AARP The Magazine*:

Bob Dylan: His True Calling

If I had to do it all over again, I'd be a schoolteacher—probably teach Roman history or theology.³

That 2015 interview accompanied the release of the first of the five discs of American standards, the album *Shadows in the Night*. Dylan in the interviews can be cryptic. But he is generally careful with his words, and there is a lot of Roman history and a lot of theology on *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, so it is worth recalling that interview here. He has also often let out relevant oblique and cryptic information in the interviews or press conferences that immediately precede release of albums, and this has included hints about the classical tradition from which he has been drawing—especially since the Rome press conference of 2001, where he hinted at the presence of Virgil on the upcoming “*Love and Theft*”: “when you walk around a town like this, you know that people were here before you, and they were probably on a much higher, grander level than any of us are” (see Thomas 2017, 76).

It was therefore of no small interest to be greeted, on the morning of June 12 of 2020, just over two weeks before the release of *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, by the first interview in five years, with historian Douglas Brinkley. Brinkley had given one of these album-connected interviews, printed in *Rolling Stone* on May 14, 2009, a couple of weeks after the release of *Together Through Life*. I had been particularly interested in that interview since it included some very specific

³ “A Man of Strong Opinions”: <https://www.aarp.org/entertainment/music/info-2015/bob-dylan-photos.html#slide13>

mentions of classical authors, unprompted by Brinkley, who tells how he decided “to push him on the importance of Christian Scripture in his life.” Unsurprisingly, he didn’t get far with that one, since Dylan skillfully shifted the topic, keeping it well away from anything personal, particularly the events of 1979:

“Well sure,” he says, “that and those other first books I read were really biblical stuff. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Ben-Hur*. Those were the books that I remembered reading and finding religion in. Later on, I started reading over and over again Plutarch and his *Roman Lives*. And the writers Cicero, Tacitus and Marcus Aurelius . . . I like the morality thing. People talk about it all the time. Some say you can’t legislate morality. Well, maybe not. But morality has gotten kind of a bad rap. In Roman thought, morality is broken down into basically four things. Wisdom, Justice, Moderation and Courage . . . I don’t look at morality as a religious thing.

To the disappointment of those like myself, Brinkley didn’t follow up on these pretty surprising words, or at least he didn’t do so in print, but they are in line with the aspirations he would note six years later in 2015, to teach “Roman history or theology.” And they make sense in the context of *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, where morality in those manifestations—wisdom, justice, moderation and courage—are on full display, along with their opposites.

At the close of the interview from June 2020, Brinkley asks, “How is your health holding up? You seem to be fit as a fiddle. How do you keep mind and body working together in unison?” Dylan’s response may seem like a cliché (how do you respond to such questions?), but it is more than that:

Oh, that’s the big question, isn’t it? How does anybody do it? Your mind and body go hand in hand. There has to be some kind of agreement. I like to think of the mind as spirit and the body as substance. How do you integrate those two things, I have no idea. I just try to go on a straight line and stay on it, stay on the level.

A few days later we would hear the penultimate verse of the brilliant “Mother of Muses” and the suggestion in that song that it is his muse who has taught him these things:

Mother of muses unleash your wrath
Things I can't see they're blocking my path
Show me your wisdom, tell me my fate
Put me upright, make me walk straight
Forge my identity from the inside out
You know what I'm talking about

The morality that Dylan is here talking about is something his muse taught him, what he read and listened to from his early years. Or as he put it in the Nobel Lecture, talking about his school years: “I had principles and sensibilities and an informed view of the world . . . typical grammar school reading that gave you a way of looking at life, an understanding of human nature, and a standard to measure things by” (pp. 5–6).

The 2009 interview was part of the context in which I came to the interview of June 12, 2020, particularly having myself explored Dylan's connections with Greece and Rome in the interim. The interview is among the most interesting that Dylan has given in advance of a new release, with broad-ranging questions on the upcoming album. My interest is in an exchange towards the end. For whatever reason Brinkley departs from the subject at hand and asks a question that, wherever it actually came from, seems to come from nowhere:

BRINKLEY: *Out of all your compositions, “When I Paint My Masterpiece” has grown on me over the years. What made you bring it back to the forefront of recent concerts?*

DYLAN: It's grown on me as well. I think this song has something to do with the classical world, something that's out of reach. Someplace you'd like to be beyond your experience. Something that is so supreme and first rate that you could never come back down from

the mountain. That you've achieved the unthinkable. That's what the song tries to say, and you'd have to put it in that context.

As in the 2009 interview, Brinkley shows no awareness of the classical material that Dylan himself brings up here—not the only lost opportunity in the interview—and, at least in what is printed from the actual two-hour interview, winds things up with a question about a bluegrass version of “Summer Days”⁴ and a final “How is your health holding up?” He might have noted the unusual language in the assertion that the song has “something to do with the classical world.” Bob Dylan brought “When I Paint My Masterpiece” back into his concert setlists on July 27, 2018. His reference to that world—“so supreme and first rate that you could never come back down from the mountain”—is not accidental. The song stayed there, almost always in sixth position for every regular concert he played between that night and, as of the current moment, his last concert at The Anthem in Washington, D.C., on December 8, 2019. Brinkley missed the reference, but Dylan knew those of us interested in the classical world would find bits of it in the album that was about to appear.

As noted, the classical world, the world of ancient Greece and Rome, is not the only world that Dylan enters into in *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, but it is fundamental to some songs on the album, and to its structure, as I showed it was in particular to many of the songs of *Modern Times* and *Tempest*. It is my intention here to update the findings of my book and to offer some guidance to that world in the hope of contributing to an understanding of this complex masterpiece. It is not the only world comprehended by the album, but it is one—of many—that may help in getting under the skin of what Dylan has given us.

⁴ This question seemed similarly random, and here too part of Dylan's response was tantalizing. After talking about why he and his band don't do bluegrass (as if they might!), he says, “I listen to Bill Monroe a lot, but I more or less stick to what I can do best.” Would that include Monroe's version of the song “White House Blues” (“McKinley hollered, McKinley squalled / Doc said, 'McKinley I can't find the cause'”) on the assassination of McKinley, with which “Key West” will begin?

Intertextuality and stream of consciousness

The intertextuality that has been a hallmark of Dylan's song composition since the 1990s continues on the new album, but things have changed. In those earlier works we encounter direct verbatim quotation of Junichi Saga's *Confessions of a Yakuza*, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Virgil's *Aeneid* ("Love and Theft" 2001), from Henry Timrod's poetry or the exile poems of Ovid (various songs on *Modern Times*, 2006), and from Homer's *Odyssey* (also on *Tempest*, 2012). For the songs on these albums I defined intertextuality as

the process by which poets, songwriters, composers, or artists of any genre create new meaning through the creative reuse of texts, images, or sound . . . the most powerful and evocative instances of intertextuality enrich a work precisely because, when the reader or listener notices the layered text and recognizes what the artist is reusing, that recognition activates the context of the stolen object, thereby deepening meaning in the new text.⁵

Those intertexts or references were contained on songs whose titles gave no hint of what was waiting within: "Lonesome Day Blues," "Workingman's Blues #2," "Ain't Talkin'," "Pay in Blood," "Scarlet Town," and the rest. In one case, "Early Roman Kings" looked from the title as if it would give us Romulus and Remus, but the Roman Kings famously turned out to be a Latino gang from 1960s New York—although the song did give us ancient Roman kings "distributing the corn," and Odysseus's taunting of the Cyclops he has just blinded in a verbatim quote from the Robert Fagles translation of the *Odyssey*.⁶

The new album parts company with this practice. The classical world to which Dylan referred in the Brinkley interview is there, particularly in the title of two of the songs, "Mother of Muses" and "Crossing the Rubicon." But the methodology has changed somewhat, with borrowing by direct quotation

⁵ Thomas, 2017, 131–32.

⁶ Thomas, 2017, 89–91.

replaced by a freer and less precise borrowing. The result is a riotous mixing of genres that gives many of the songs a sense of stream of consciousness. The mind of Bob Dylan, like that of Joyce in *Ulysses*, flits across a variety of cultural elements, including those from the worlds of the Greeks and Romans. This incongruous mixing is something that has always been in the art of Bob Dylan, sometimes for camouflage, sometimes just for the fun and poetry of it, Mack the Finger and Louie the King, John the Baptist and the Commander in Chief, Cain and Abel and the hunchback of Notre Dame. But incongruity and genre mixing seem to reach a higher pitch on *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, with Scarface Pacino, the Trojan Women and Julius Caesar together in a heap. "My Own Version of You" may be a special case, as we'll see.

For whatever reason the intertextuality of the new album has avoided much in the way of direct quotation, though the Shakespeare quotes are all generally direct. Otherwise, where direct quotation is found, it seems to have to do not so much with literary traditions as with musical ones. This mode of quotation is apparent in the album's title, a Jimmie Rodgers song, along with his photo on the CD cover; the opening words of "Key West" as borrowed from "White House Blues"; a "world so badly bent" in "Crossing the Rubicon," shared with "Dead Presidents" by Little Walter (1964); "the wings of a snow white dove" from "I've Made Up My Mind to Give Myself to You," previously sung by Robert Duvall in the 1983 movie *Tender Mercies* (these noted by Scott Warmuth). Even the direct quote of Roman poet Juvenal in "Black Rider" is modified slightly.

Whether Dylan finally tired of all the uninformed charges of plagiarism, I cannot say. What is true is that this more oblique process is in line with the intertextual process of poets like Milton, Blake, or Eliot, for whom poetic appropriation consists of rephrasing, rather than quotation. This is a huge topic and one I cannot pursue here, though I hope to take it up in the future. For now it stands as an assertion. Now for some song-by-song observations on the classical presences of the album.

I Contain Multitudes

In general, the opening and closing frames of the album seem to be lacking in classical references. That is particularly true of the latter, since Dylan's cultural focus in "Murder Most Foul," the album's closer, is exclusively on the music from around the time of the assassination. Or the songs that someone living then, someone like Bob Dylan, might have experienced, both at the time and in the years that followed. But the first song is a slight exception. The title of course comes from Walt Whitman ("Song of Myself" 51: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)") and Dylan quotes closely as he fleshes out the title in the penultimate refrain of the song:

I'm a man of contradictions

I'm a man of many moods

I contain multitudes

But the Homeric hero familiar from those songs of *Tempest* is also present in this part of the song. We don't need to go to the CliffsNotes to know that this verse describes Odysseus, there described as "a living series of contradictions, a much more complicated character than we would expect to find in the stereotypical epic hero." Dylan may also in the last year or two have picked up Emily Wilson's blockbuster 2018 translation of the *Odyssey* with its opening invitation to the Muse, "Tell me about a complicated man." Even before the song list came out, with "Mother of Muses" pointing back to the Nobel Lecture and beyond, the Homeric hero—the ultimate man of contradictions—was present in these lines of the opening song. The words of this first song of the album ("I'm a man of contradictions") look most immediately to Whitman's poem, but they also take us to Dylan's own words in that lecture, where he adopts the identity of the Homeric hero, clearly referring to himself after he sums up the experiences of Odysseus: "In a lot of ways, some of these same things have happened to you." And he had

already “become Odysseus” in 2012, by way of the intertextual lyrics of *Tempest* and in his rewriting in performance of “Workingman’s Blues #2.”⁷

False Prophet

The classical presences in “False Prophet” need to be contextualized with allusions going back to “*Love and Theft*”, whose “Lonesome Day Blues” gave us the quote from Virgil’s *Aeneid*:

I’m gonna spare the defeated—I’m gonna speak to the crowd
I’m gonna spare the defeated, boys, I’m going to speak to the crowd
I am goin’ to teach peace to the conquered
I’m gonna tame the proud

I have argued that these presences involved Julius Caesar, his adoptive son, Octavian—the future Augustus, first of the Roman emperors—and the Roman civil wars that brought about the transition from republic to empire:

- “I’ll establish my rule through civil war” (“Bye and Bye”)
- “I’m here to create the new imperial empire” (“Honest with Me”)
- “I’ll avenge my father’s death then I’ll step back” (“Ain’t Talkin’”)
- “Brother rose up against brother / In every circumstance / They fought and slaughtered each other / In a deadly dance” (“*Tempest*”)
- “In Scarlet Town you fight your father’s foes / Up on a hill a chilly wind blows” (“Scarlet Town”)

The tone also looks to the words of Augustus on his final will and record of his achievements, put up in bronze and marble throughout the empire:

Those who killed my father I drove into exile, by way of the courts, exacting vengeance for their crime . . . I did not accept permanent the consulship that was offered to me (*Augustus, Res Gestae* 2, 5)

⁷ Thomas, 2017, 254–68 “Dylan Becomes Odysseus

This claim of Augustus relates to his defeats of Antony and Cleopatra at the battle of Actium (31 BCE), and before that of Brutus and Cassius at the battle of Philippi (42 BCE), following their assassination of Julius Caesar on March 15, 44 BCE. From the perspective of Augustus, Actium and Philippi were acts of vengeance; from the perspective of Brutus, Cassius, Cicero and others, the battles spelled the final death throes of the Roman republic, as the young successor to Caesar established his rule through civil war. Vengeance is a common human phenomenon, but the vengeance of Augustus for the killing of his father is a theme already in Dylan, before this album which clearly continues the themes.

The voice of Augustus is heard on “False Prophet” at a couple of points:

Well I'm the enemy of treason, the enemy of strife . . .
I'm first among equals, second to none
The last of the best, you can bury the rest
Bury 'em naked with their silver and gold
Put 'em six feet under and I pray for their souls

Augustus was proud of his claim to be “first among equals” which upheld the fiction that the system, effectively a monarchy, was still a republic—those are hard to hold onto, then as now.⁸ And this talk of burying 'em takes us back to “Pay in Blood,” its final verse with its allusion to Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, and the ominous and threatening tone brought back to life in “False Prophet”:

This is how I spend my days
I came to bury not to praise
I'll drink my fill and sleep alone
I pay in blood but not my own

That is what happened across twenty years of the Roman civil war, initiated when Caesar crossed the Rubicon in January of 49 BC: by the year 30, Augustus, “last

⁸ Augustus, *Res Gestae* 34.3: “I excelled everyone in influence, but I had no more power than my other colleagues in each office.”

of the best," buried Antony, as Antony and he buried Brutus and Cassius, they all buried Julius Caesar, and Caesar buried Pompey.

Elsewhere in "False Prophet," like Augustus, the singer has again come for vengeance:

I ain't no false prophet, I just said what I said

I'm just here to bring vengeance on somebody's head

Some have also seen in the song the particularly grisly death of Marcus Licinius Crassus:

Put out your hand, there's nothin' to hold

Open your mouth, I'll stuff it with gold

At least two Roman generals were reported to have died by having their mouths stuffed with gold. The "Choking on Gold" section of Tom Holland's popular book, *Rubicon*, tells of Manius Aquillius, the Roman general killed when Mithridates VI had molten gold poured down his throat in 88 BCE (Appian, *Roman History* 3.21.1). In 54 BCE, the defeated Marcus Licinius Crassus is said to have suffered a similar fate at the hands of the Parthians who, after they killed him, "poured molten gold into his mouth in mockery" of his obsession with wealth (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 40.27). Dylan may have met the rich man, Crassus (a.k.a. Laurence Olivier) back in 1960, the villain in Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus*.⁹

My Own Version of You

The singer is putting together his creation, with the components of the song reflecting the composite nature of his own version. A rather grisly opening suggestion of Mary Shelley's classic *Frankenstein*, with the singer looking for "limbs and livers and brains and hearts," and quoting Shakespeare ("Well, it must be 'the winter of my discontent'" and later "Can you tell me what it means, 'to be or not to be'") has the singer drawing from a broad range of literary contexts high, low, religious and secular. The creation he will jump-start to life by sticking a knife in its

⁹ See Thomas, 2017, 54 for the likelihood of this encounter.

ribs recalls not only the original rib-creation in Genesis, but also has bits of “Scarface Pacino and the Godfather Brando” (not the Godfather Pacino) and even *Gulliver’s Travels* (getting “gunpowder from ice”). Dylan’s new creation will be made to play piano like “Leon Russell, Liberace, and John the Apostle.” St. Peter and Jerome are there, though Jerome turns out to be Bo Diddley’s from the song “Bring it to Jerome”—written by his maracas player Jerome Green—rather than (or along with?) the fifth-century theologian and historian, Eusebius Sophronius Hieronymus, who would become St Jerome. Putting these two culturally distinct Jeromes together, like turning John the Apostle into a piano player, is vintage Dylan. That more ancient Jerome translated the Bible from Greek and Hebrew into Latin (the so-called “Vulgate”), before and after the year 400, long before the First Crusade of 1096–1099, making it accessible to the Latin-speaking West. Raphael Falco suggests that Jerome, addressing God, would have thought of his translation as “my own version of You.”

The song itself is a literary Frankenstein, a work made up through its references and allusions to some of the elements that have gone into Dylan’s songwriting. Others will identify many of these, including the line “I study Sanskrit and Arabic to improve my mind,” taken it seems from Mary Shelley’s actual novel.¹⁰ The line that follows in the song (“I want to do things for the benefit of all mankind”) draws attention to Dylan’s humanistic aims, which I have noted elsewhere, and to which I will return.¹¹ The song is hugely important in Dylan’s self-revelation on this album, by which of course I mean the revelation of what has gone into his art. But in keeping with the theme of this article I limit myself to a couple of references, having to do with Julius Caesar and Virgil, the general and the poet from the first century BC, 400 years before Jerome, so “Long before the first Crusade / Way back ‘fore England or America were made”—words that come right after quoting from Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Dylan makes it clear he is going

¹⁰ *Frankenstein*, Ch. 6 (“The Persian, Arabic, and Sanscrit languages engaged his attention”).

¹¹ See Thomas, 2017, 17.

back to the classical world, a world in which he can “see the history of the whole human race.” First Virgil, Rome’s greatest poet,

Stand over there by the Cypress tree

Where the Trojan women and children were sold into slavery

This allusion is well concealed, looking at first glimpse as if it is quoting the title of Euripides’ anti-war play of 415 BC, *The Trojan Women*. But that is an old Dylan trick; remember “Early Roman Kings.” In fact it is Virgil’s epic *Aeneid* that is here put in play. The second book of that poem is narrated by the defeated Trojan prince Aeneas, who instructs his family where to meet as they leave the burning Troy: “Nearby an ancient cypress stands.” Aeneas a little later sees “Trojan boys / and trembling women stand in a long line.” That is where Dylan’s cypress tree and Trojan woman and children point us, to the same poem he quoted from in “Lonesome Day Blues”—the epic poem that will be part of the backdrop of “Mother of Muses.”

Then there is the case of Julius Caesar, who for this song has an air of authority:

I pick a number between one and two

And ask myself what would Julius Caesar do

In a few songs we will find out what Julius Caesar would do: he would and did cross the Rubicon. But I don’t think I’m alone in thinking of a different “JC” here, as in “What would Jesus do?” This is just the beginning of the merging of the two figures. “Mother of Muses” will bring it back home to Virgil.

Such merging once had a different name—transfiguration—the term Dylan would use to describe intertextuality, so applying a metaphor having to do with becoming someone else through allusion.¹² And Julius Caesar was one of the characters he had in mind, back in one of his more interesting interviews:

Who knows who’s been transfigured and who has not? Who knows?
Maybe Aristotle? Maybe he was transfigured? I can’t say. Maybe

¹² See Thomas, 2017, 119–27, “The Transfiguration of Bob Dylan”; also 164–67

Julius Caesar was transfigured. I have no idea. Maybe Shakespeare. Maybe Dante. Maybe Napoleon. Maybe Winston Churchill. You just never know because it doesn't figure into the history books. That's all I'm saying.

The transfiguration, with at least a few of these characters, continues on the new album, starting with Julius Caesar. That interview, "Bob Dylan Unleashed"¹³ also seems to take on a new life as Dylan sings, "Mother of Muses, unleash your wrath."

Black Rider

At one point I thought the song "Black Rider" had nothing to do with the classical world, and whatever it is about, that is still largely true. The song was also of interest because of the (for a Dylan song) unusual obscene line, "The size of your cock will get you nowhere." You have to go back to the *Basement Tapes* to find even an approximation of that, and even there innuendo, and Dylan's laughter, soften the effect: "Look, Missus Henry / There's only so much I can do / Why don't you look my way / An' pump me a few?" Carl Wilson, reviewing the new album for *Slate*, even tried—with what authority we are not told—to talk us out of hearing the line as it was clearly intended: "Although I do have to disappoint some listeners and say that I'm pretty sure the line here many advance reviewers have heard as 'the size of your cock will get you nowhere' actually refers to 'the size of your cockerel.'" What a cockerel would be doing in this song we are not told! The official lyrics remove any doubt. On June 22 Scott Warmuth showed us where this line of the song came from, the ninth satire of Juvenal (second century AD), the Lenny Bruce of the Roman world, who has the equivalent of a male prostitute,¹⁴ not getting much business, lament, "The

¹³ Mikal Gilmore, *Rolling Stone* September 27, 2012

¹⁴ Or, to quote Susanna Braund's description in the Loeb Classical Library Juvenal (p. 348), "The client in this poem is Naevolus ('Mr. Warty'), a man who has interpreted his duties rather broadly to include satisfying the patron's desire to be penetrated in anal intercourse, having sex with the patron's wife at the patron's request, and fathering the patron's children." This situation could also inform another striking line in "Black Rider," though the line does not seem specifically to come

fantastic size of your cock will get you precisely nowhere.” Translations again are important.¹⁵ Dylan found this line in Peter Green’s 1967 Penguin translation, the same translator whose Penguin translation of Ovid’s exile poems he had drawn from on *Modern Times*. Dylan had already used a line from Juvenal (“the pimp was already dismissing the girls”) in the song “Tempest” (“Davey the brothel keeper / Came out, dismissed his girls”). In another verse of that song the host was pouring brandy and “he stayed right to the end / He was the last to go”—just like Roman empress Messalina in Juvenal’s same poem, who stays on after the girls have been dismissed: “She stayed till the end, always the last to go.” So it is natural for Dylan to quote from Juvenal’s poem here, but worth noting that such verbatim quotation is an oddity for this album, whereas his other albums from this century all seemed to do so freely. The oddity also explains the unusual obscenity, reserved for the Black Rider, who is no friend of the singer.

Mother of Muses

In “The Lost Land,” the riveting second chapter of *Chronicles, Volume 1*, Dylan writes of the early 60s, “Invoking the poetic muse was something I didn’t know about yet” (45). That had changed well before he wrote “Mother of Muses,” but this song shows Dylan in full control of the epic tradition of which he is the greatest contemporary inheritor. This is hardly surprising: the opening words of this song, “Mother of Muses sing for me,” pick up where Dylan left off, with the last words he published before releasing the new album, the final sentence of his brilliant Nobel Lecture of June 12, 2017: “I return once again to Homer, who says ‘Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story.’” The opening verse of the song is also the introduction to the rest of the album, whose next three increasingly longer songs deliver their epic messages of assassination (“Crossing the Rubicon” 7:23; “Key West” 9:34; “Murder Most Foul” 16:55). Some have found “Murder Most

from Juvenal: “Go home to your wife, stop visiting mine.”

¹⁵ See Thomas 2017, 239, on the importance of the specific translation in activating intertextuality.

Foul” to be too long. I am not one of those, but here it is worth noting that is what epics do, they go on. As Samuel Johnson wrote in his *Life of Milton*, of *Paradise Lost*, greatest of English epic poems, “None ever wished it longer than it is.” And why “Mother of Muses” (Mnemosyne, or “Memory”) instead of one of the Muses, as in the Homeric poems and in the Nobel Lecture? Perhaps so he can keep the single Muse, Calliope (“beautiful voice”), muse of epic poetry, for the special role she plays in the second half of the song—where she is more than just a muse: “I’m in love with Calliope,” a brilliant touch that is pure Dylan in its mix of tradition and originality, a touch which turns the song into a love song, a song of longing for Calliope.

Calliope’s mother introduces the epic that characterizes this song’s first half and the three songs that close out the album. Her function is traditional: “Sing of honor and faith and glory be / Mother of Muses, sing for me . . . Sing of the heroes who stood alone / Whose names are engraved on tablets of stone.” The Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Virgil’s *Aeneid*, already put in play in “My Own Version of You,” provide examples of the invocation of the Muses as a prelude to memorializing the fighters of old. In the second book of the *Iliad*, the poet invokes the Muses for help in recalling the names of the Greek heroes who came to Troy: “Tell me now, you Muses, you who have your homes on Olympus . . . who were the leaders and lords of the Greeks” (2.484–7). And in Book 8 of the *Odyssey*, a number of whose lines ended up on the songs of *Tempest*, the bard Demodocus brings tears to Odysseus’ eyes by singing of the struggle at Troy so vivid in the hero’s memory: “the Muse inspired the bard / to sing the famous deeds of fighting heroes.”

Virgil, writing several centuries after Homer and in a different linguistic culture, adapted the Homeric catalog of ships to his Italian epic setting:

O goddesses (i.e. Muses), now open Helicon
And guide my song: what kings were spurred to war;
What squadrons filled the plain behind each chieftain;

With what heroes mothering Italy then flowered;
With what arms she caught fire. For goddesses,
You can remember and can recall; the slender
Breath of that fame can scarcely reach down to us

They can remember, because their mother, the mother of the Muses, is Mnemosyne, Greek for “Memory.” Virgil’s invocation underscores memory words (*meministis* “remember” . . . *memorare* “call to mind”). These are essential parts of poetry, as they are of song for Dylan—“memorize these lines, and remember these rhymes,” as the in-performance words of “Tangled Up in Blue” have it.

Virgil’s invocation precedes not just the almost two-hundred line catalog of Italian warriors, but, like “Mother of Muses,” the entire second half of the epic that follows. For Virgil, five more bloody books showing what it cost to build Rome; for Dylan, three songs of assassination—Caesar, McKinley, Kennedy. Dylan’s lines too, like those of Virgil, are traditional and original at the same time, rooted in their Homeric and Virgilian precedents. No catalogue of the Greek generals here though, no Italian warriors whose job it would be to “teach peace to the conquered and tame the proud.” Instead, in an updating of Homer and Virgil, Dylan invokes the heroes of modern history: “Sing of the Heroes who stood alone / Whose names are engraved on tablets of stone.” The next verse includes a list of those generals who fought for the freedoms that America enjoys, in the wars against the Confederacy and Nazi Germany:

Sing of Sherman—Montgomery and Scott
And of Zhukov and Patton and the battles they fought
Who cleared the path for Presley to sing
Who carved out the path for Martin Luther King
Who did what they did and then went on their way
Man, I could tell their stories all day

That is Dylan’s vision in this song. Whether Montgomery is James Montgomery, the abolitionist friend of John Brown, who led a troop of Black soldiers in the Civil War,

or—more likely—Field Marshal Sir Bernard Law Montgomery, aka “Monty,” the British general of World War II (played by Michael Bates in the 1970 film *Patton*), we will never know. Those are the two wars of the song, though, the wars that let Elvis Presley sing the blues and Martin Luther King go to the mountain. Zhukov might seem an oddity, but Dylan is thinking not of the Cold War warrior of Stalin, but of the Russian general who fought the Germans at Leningrad and Stalingrad. As for the Civil War heroes, certainly it is welcome to see spelled out here some of the “names of the heroes I’s made to memorize,” as he put it almost sixty years ago in “With God on Our Side.” Mnemosyne did her job well! And now he’s with Calliope, who in the brilliant and haunting second half of this song has become his lover, joining him on his odyssey home, now much more than a muse, even if Dylan’s muses have always also been his lovers:

Take me to the river and release your charms
Let me lay down a while in your sweet lovin’ arms
Wake me—shake me—free me from sin
Make me invisible like the wind
Got a mind to ramble—got a mind to roam
I’m travelin’ light and I’m slow coming home

A final thought. The song that starts with Homer and his Muse, like the Nobel Lecture that the opening of this song also picks up on, seems to end, like the lecture, with its eye on Cavafy’s great poem, *Ithaca*.¹⁶ That poem tells us not to hurry home, but likewise to ramble and roam in the odyssey which for Cavafy as for Dylan becomes life itself:

Keep Ithaca always in your mind.
Arriving there is what has been ordained for you
But do not hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts many years¹⁷

Or as Dylan puts it, “I’m slow coming home.”

¹⁶ See Thomas, 2017, 262–63 for the echoes of Cavafy’s poem in Dylan’s lecture.

¹⁷ Cavafy, *Ithaca* (tr. Theoharis)

Crossing the Rubicon

Whatever the various other meanings inherent in “Mother of Muses,” it is surely here functioning as Dylan’s epic invocation to the three songs that follow. So he moves to the closing epic triad of the album, each founded on political assassination: Julius Caesar (44 BCE), William McKinley (1901) and John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1963). Of the first of these, Carl Wilson put it one way in his review in *Slate*:

“Crossing the Rubicon” is a diss-track/battle-rap/crawling-kingsnake number in which, like several times here, Dylan imagines himself as a strutting ancient Roman general, promising, “I’ll make your wife a widow / You’ll never see old age.

That is to tie down the stream of consciousness to one particular actor, though who the general would be is hard to say. Not Julius Caesar, since he was the one whose wife would be made a widow, five years after he crossed the Rubicon.

Everything about the slow blues, “Crossing the Rubicon,” catches the importance of that act, particularly the voice and drama of the refrain itself, along with the momentous lines that precede,¹⁸ together making it clear the act is not just difficult, but life-changing. In crossing the river in northeastern Italy that was the boundary south of which he was not, under republican rules, to lead his army, Caesar effectively declared war on Rome. His motive was to avoid prosecution at the hands of his enemies in Rome. As Holland put it:

He finally caught up with his troops on the banks of the Rubicon. There was a moment’s dreadful hesitation, and then he was crossing its swollen waters into Italy, towards Rome. No one could know at the time, but 460 years of the free Republic were being brought to an end.

¹⁸ These are worth isolating: “I painted my wagon, abandoned all hope”; “I prayed to the cross, I kissed the girls”; “I embraced my love, put down my hair”; “I pawned my watch, I paid my debts”; “I poured the cup, I passed it along”; “I stood between heaven and earth”; “I’ll strap my belt, I’ll button my coat”; “I turned the key and broke it off”; “I lit the torch, I looked to the east.” Each of them suggests a decisive situation, its drama only heightened by the final “And I crossed the Rubicon.”

The historian Appian, writing in Greek 200 years after the events, records an anecdote, beyond the familiar “the die is cast,” that catches the moment of the crossing. Caesar is said to have stopped before the stream going back and forth in his mind pondering the results of a crossing: “My friends, if I do not make this crossing, it will be the beginning of troubles for me; if I do make it, it will be the beginning of troubles for the whole world.” Then speaking like a man inspired, he surged across, uttering the familiar phrase, “Let the die be cast.” The singer seems to have things on his mind in the first of the epic poems he sings after seeking inspiration from the mother of the Muses:

The Rubicon is the Red River, going gently as she flows
Redder than your ruby lips and the blood that flows from the rose
Three miles north of purgatory—one step from the great beyond
I prayed to the cross and I kissed the girls and I crossed the Rubicon

Again, the mixing and stream of consciousness that is a mark of the album. Dylan seems aware of the lines of the Latin poet Lucan, forced by emperor Nero to commit suicide but not before writing a poem in which the Caesars, among whom Nero, in the century after Julius Caesar’s death, would be numbered:

The bright red river Rubicon flows from modest spring
through the bottom of a valley, valleys, dividing Gaul from Italian
lands (Lucan, *Pharsalia* 1.213–14)

Why a red river? Commentators on Lucan in antiquity have thought because of the red gravel in the river bed, but Lucan is a poet, and he is playing with etymologies, real or otherwise (in Latin *rubeo* = “be red”), pointing of the rivers of the Mediterranean world that will be turned red with the blood of civil war once the Rubicon is crossed, where through that etymology the Rubicon pays in blood. Dylan, who has I think read his Lucan, picks up on all of this: “redder than your ruby lips and the blood that flows from the rose.” You won’t find red rivers in Dylan without the memory of girls who come from their shores, and the official lyrics specify that that the “Rubicon is *the Red River*,” in caps, and not a red river or *the*

red river (all italics mine). Perhaps the singer still has Calliope on his mind even as he crosses the Rubicon, alluding in the process to “the one that I’ll always adore” from “Red River Shore,” the brilliant outtake from *Time Out of Mind*, to which the new album takes us back in so many ways. And finally there is the film *Red River*, which Bob Zimmerman probably saw as a boy, if not when it came out in 1948 then when it reran in one of the Hibbing theaters he regularly frequented.

Caesar also resembles Christ or some sort of Christ or Christian figure, both in the second verse (“I prayed to the cross and I kissed the girls and I crossed the Rubicon”), and in the sixth: “I stood between heaven and earth and I crossed the Rubicon.” By vote of the Senate, Julius Caesar will, after his death, become a god, the “divine Caesar.” Jesus on the cross is physically as in other ways between heaven and earth. Also in words from the fifth verse, “I poured the cup, I passed it along and I crossed the Rubicon,” it is hard not to hear the words of Jesus from Matthew 26:39, “My father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” But the cups poured in Gethsemane and at the Rubicon were not passed on. The genre-mixing that is effected by this loose and free form of intertextuality conflates Caesar and Christ, each headed home, for the “crooked knives” of political assassination and for the cross on Calvary.

The Ides of March

“Crossing the Rubicon” is one of those songs that begins, or more or less begins, with the naming of a day. “Murder Most Foul” would not name the 22nd, since everybody knows the day, but it was similar: “’Twas a dark day in Dallas, November ’63.” Elsewhere the date can be somewhat obscure, as at the beginning of “Isis”: “I married Isis on the fifth day of May.” This is a feature of ballad, which naturally enough situates things in time or place commemorating battles or other historical events. So what to do with the beginning of this song? “I crossed the Rubicon on the 14th day of the most dangerous month of the year.” Not very helpful, but as always with detail in Dylan, there is a reason, here making us

confront the puzzle. April was for T. S. Eliot the “cruellest” month, but it could also be the most dangerous, if you happened to be Calvin, Blake, or Wilson, or the rich man Mr. Astor, the characters who went down with the Titanic on that night to remember, as Dylan told us in the second verse of the epic “Tempest” from 2012:

'Twas the fourteen [sic] day of April
Over the waves she rode
Sailing into tomorrow
To a golden age foretold

So April 14 might seem like a good candidate, even more so since on the evening of that same day, April 14 of 1865, Abraham Lincoln was shot, dying the following day, on April 15. But the 14th of other months are also available. And if you were President McKinley, whom we meet at the beginning of the next song in Dylan’s adaptation of the old bluegrass “White House Blues” (“McKinley hollered, McKinley squalled / Doctor said ‘McKinley, death is on the wall’”), then September 14 was pretty dangerous, the day he died after being shot eight days earlier.

But the 14th was also the eve of what for Julius Caesar was emphatically the most dangerous month, March, whose Ides of course fell on the next day, his death day, as was the 15th of the month for Lincoln. That’s where we could imagine being in the non-linear world of the next lines of the poem:

I got up early so I could greet the goddess of the Dawn
I painted my wagon—I abandoned all hope and I crossed the
Rubicon

Getting up early and greeting the goddess of the Dawn (*Eōs* in Greek, *Aurora* in Latin) is something Caesar shares with Odysseus, for instance in *Odyssey* 5, the book that lends many lines to the songs of *Tempest*: “When young Dawn with her rose-red [those colors again] fingers shone once more / Odysseus quickly dressed himself.” This forms a frame to the song with the last line of the song, “I lit the torch and looked to the east and I crossed the Rubicon”—*Eōs* being the word both for

the east and dawn: “east where the Goddess Dawn, forever young, has her home” (*Odyssey* 12).

And as for “I abandoned all hope,” we had already met the fleet footed guides of the Underworld back in “False Prophet,” so no surprise here to meet the Italian poet from the thirteenth century. With him come the words, “abandoned all hope,” from the third line of the third verse of the third canto of the *Inferno*, first of the three works of the *Divine Comedy*, the words painted above the entrance to Dante’s “*Lasciate ogni speranza*” (“Abandon all hope you who enter here”). The mixing of Dante with reference to the 1951 Lerner and Loewe musical, *Paint Your Wagon*, best known from the 1969 Clint Eastwood movie of the same name, is par for the course on this album. The number three stays in the next line, since that is where Dylan’s Caesar crosses the Rubicon: “Three miles north of purgatory, one step from the great beyond”—a place that feels like Dante again.

Bob Dylan has had connections to Julius Caesar and his death on the Ides of March, 44 BCE, for a very long time, even from before he was Bob Dylan. The evening of Friday April 5, 1957, in the little Minnesota town of Hibbing found the Shadow Blasters, the band Bob Zimmerman had put together the previous fall, performing at a talent show at Hibbing High School, the first of his performances. Whether or not his vigorous, Little Richard-style piano playing broke a pedal on the instrument cannot be known for sure, but the sophomore certainly made his mark. The school paper, the *Hibbing Hi Times*, had reported a less spectacular event three weeks earlier:

Societas Latina members today published a paper to celebrate the death of Caesar on the Ides of March (March 15). The paper included Roman history, an original poem, cartoons, and many other items with a Roman background.

Dylan was a member of that Latin Club (*Societas Latina*), and whatever his contribution to the Ides of March celebration, we may safely assume that he knew from an early age why the day mattered. That was the consequence of Caesar’s crossing the Rubicon five years earlier.

Key West (Philosopher Pirate)

There is a lot of death in *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, particularly in the epic trilogy that closes it out. Death comes for Caesar by the assassins' knives, crooked or otherwise. Death appears on the wall for McKinley. And above all, death for President Kennedy—"led to the slaughter like a sacrificial lamb" as they "blew off his head," had him killed "like a human sacrifice" and "heading straight on into the afterlife"—in a song that makes us revisit it again and again, not quite the thirty-three times that the singer has watched Abraham Zapruder's filming of the event, but enough to bring the horror of that day back home to anyone old enough to remember it. And of course death is what epic traffics in. But the middle song of the three gives us a brighter glimpse of the afterlife, at least for those who make it to Key West, where death is not the end: "Key West is the place to be / If you're lookin' for immortality."

In "Bob Dylan: Aeneas Visits Key West," on the extensive and almost always interesting website "Untold Dylan," Larry Fyffe suggests¹⁹

the song is figuratively transformed into the Underworld of Greek/Roman mythology, and the singer/songwriter takes on the persona of Virgil's Aeneas:

Key West is under the sun, under the radar, under the gun
You stay to the left, and then you lean to the right
Feel the sun on your skin, and the healing virtues of the wind
Key West, Key West is the land of light

Some may find the evidence he adduces slight, in these lines and in the instructions his guide the Sibyl gives to Aeneas: "the regions to the left . . . punished the wicked for their misdeeds. But the road to the right led to the Elysian Field." However this detail and other aspects of the song indeed resonate with Virgil's account of Aeneas' journey to the Underworld in *Aeneid* 6, and ending up in the magical Elysium, where in Robert Fagles' translation,

¹⁹ <https://bob-dylan.org.uk/archives/15749>

They gained the land of joy, the fresh green fields,
The Fortunate Groves where the blessed make their homes.
Here a freer air, a dazzling radiance clothes the fields
And the spirits possess their own sun, their own stars[.]

As with the Elysian Fields, or the parallel ancient tradition of the Isles of the Blessed, likewise immune to the troubles of the world, Key West is a land the poetic imagination creates, to evade the strife and destiny of the mortal human condition, a place that is “fine and fair,” “truly blessed,” where “winter . . . is an unknown thing,” the road to “innocence and purity,” a “paradise divine,” to quote from throughout the song. It is where immortality is to be found, but only for some.

Back in “My Own Version of You” the singer had quoted Virgil’s Aeneas as he prepares to move his people out of the burning Troy: “Stand over there by the Cypress tree / Where the Trojan women and children were sold into slavery.” Some resisters may also want to put this down to coincidence, but Dylan’s intertextuality is clear, instructions to stand by a specific cypress tree, and the presence of Trojan women and children being sold into slavery. That is a non-Homeric moment that happens as Troy falls and only in the second book of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. “My Own Version of You” is a sort of glossary and concordance for the album, its Frankenstein elements, a.k.a. intertextualities, the “limbs and livers and brains and hearts” that are the “necessary body parts” he will graft onto a number of the album’s songs, “Key West” not least.

To return to the Elysian Fields, Bob Dylan has stayed here before, not quite a thousand nights ago, and he takes us back with deliberate allusivity. On April 1, 2017, where his guide was neither the Sibyl nor Mary Lou and Miss Pearl, those “fleet footed guides from the Underworld” of “False Prophet,” but the late Sara Danius, Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, who showed Dylan the image of the Nobel Prize Medal she and the other members of the Academy presented to him on that day. For almost six months this group, having announced

their righteous decision of October 13 of the previous year, had been buffeted by the winds of ignorance and limited vision. Now was the time for them to celebrate with their new laureate: *nunc est bibendum*. As she recalled, and as I have reported before:²⁰

Spirits were high. Champagne was had. Quite a bit of time was spent looking closely at the gold medal, in particular the beautifully crafted back, an image of a young man sitting under a laurel tree who listens to the Muse. Taken from Virgil's *Aeneid*, the inscription reads: *Inventas vitam iuvat excoluisse per artes*, loosely translated as “And they who bettered life on earth by their newly found artistry.”

That Virgilian line, the one on the medal—the only illustration in my book, I note—comes from the same description of the poets now in the Elysian Fields, described in the line that follows as “those we remember well for the good they did mankind.” Or in the words of Dylan learning Sanskrit and Arabic (not Greek and Latin?) in the same “My Own Version of You”: “I want to do things for the benefit of all mankind.”

Virgil was himself something of a philosopher pirate, or at least a pirate philosopher. For his Elysian Fields, he raided the eschatological thinking he found in Platonic philosophy, Eleusinian, Orphic, and Jewish mystery writings, all available to him in Greek. Christianity would provide a different solution, but the mind of Virgil, who died in 19 BCE, created its own possibilities, its own intertextually created version of the afterlife. In his account, the souls of the dead will revisit the world after a thousand years, years which “cleanse our hard, inveterate stains and leave us clear / ethereal sense, the eternal breath of fire purged and pure” (6.863–640). Dylan the philosopher pirate has in turn stolen these ideas and put them into his own version, the land he creates in “Key West”, the “gateway key / To innocence and purity.”

²⁰ Thomas, 2017, 12.

The song, already taking its place as a masterpiece among the very greatest he has written, is a testament to Dylan's immortality, with Ginsberg, Corso and Kerouac, to be sure, but also with Homer, Virgil and Dante, with a final nod to Milton. So "If you're lookin' for immortality / Key West is paradise divine." *Paradise Lost* and the *Divine Comedy*, both in that phrase. Once upon a time, 40 years ago, Bob Dylan struggled with perfecting another masterpiece, now available as more than one masterpiece in bootlegged and official versions. In "Caribbean Wind," set somewhere where that wind blows "from Nassau to Mexico" and not so far from the real Key West, Dylan was "playing a show in Miami in the theater of divine comedy." Milton was there with Dante, by way of the elusive "rose of Sharon from *Paradise Lost*." They have joined the classical poets in the mind of Bob Dylan. Paradise lost or paradise regained, on the horizon line of Key West, it doesn't much matter. "If you lost your mind you'll find it there." So ends a song that starts with a 1901 presidential assassination—"McKinley hollered – McKinley squalled"—an old, though not-so-old folk song, recorded by Charlie Poole in 1926, and rewritten and recorded by bluegrass artist Bill Monroe in 1954. Old, new, high, low, all meaningless terms for an art that refuses to be tied down: "Don't make a bit of difference, don't see why it should."

"Something that is so supreme and first rate that you could never come back down from the mountain." So said Dylan to Douglas Brinkley of the classical world that he saw behind "When I Paint My Masterpiece," the song he wrote 50 years ago. The Muses live on mountains, and that is where you get inspiration, whether you are Moses, Milton, or Martin Luther King. The Muses live on Mt Helicon, sometimes on Parnassus, and that is where the Greeks and Romans visited them. It is good to see Bob Dylan still spends time on those particular mountains, to hear how he has brought down from them new songs, handed to him by Calliope and her mother, and transfigured with much else into this remarkable new album.

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