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The Same Distant Places: Bob Dylan's Poetics of Place and Displacement

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Abstract

This article explores the emphasis in Bob Dylan's work on memory, place and displacement. It rehearses some key issues raised by recent theorists who have been interested in the connections between these themes before proceeding to discuss tropes of displacement in Dylan's work. Topics covered include the importance of the city and its projection of the rural, the theme of moving-on and its association with accumulated experience, and the ability of Dylan to continually reinvent himself. The article closes with a reflection on the album Time Out Of Mind as a distillation of themes of place and displacement that can be found throughout Dylan's work and argues that the work presents a poetics of displacement that cannot shed the pull of place and the desire for homely permanence.

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Richard Elliott

Can I remember? Remember back to where I was this morning? St. Paul. Yes. The morning before? Bismarck, North Dakota. And the morning before that? Miles City, Montana. Week ago, I was a piano player in Seattle.

Who's this kid? Where's he from and where's he headed for? Will he be me when he grows up? Was I like him when I was just his size? Let me remember. Let me go back. Let me get up and walk back down the road I come. This old hard rambling and hard graveling. This old chuck-luck traveling. (Guthrie 36)

These words come at the end of the opening chapter of Woody Guthrie's autobiography *Bound for Glory* (1943), following a richly detailed account of a crowded boxcar in which Guthrie is travelling while looking for work. Guthrie uses the journey on the freight train as a framing device for his memoirs; looking out at the stormy night landscape passing by, he finds his mind drifting back to the past, allowing him to present his life chronologically in the chapters that follow and to close his account back in the freight car travelling towards an uncertain future. The use of the train also provides a key metaphor for Guthrie's life, shaped as it was by a constant sense of displacement and uncertainty. From a sense of abandonment experienced early in childhood to a feeling of unbelonging following the public recognition of his talent and the subsequent efforts of recording companies to market him, Guthrie places emphasis on the need for distancing throughout his life.

Guthrie's words provide a good example of Daniel Cooper's definition of memory as 'a choice one makes while flying fearlessly towards a future of unknowable change'. Cooper's observation is an allusion to the closing comments of another musician's autobiography, Merle Haggard's *Sing Me Back Home* (1982), which find the country star sitting on a plane, unable to see what lies ahead of him but clearly able to see 'a lot of the past' (liner notes to Haggard *Big City*). The sense of an uncertain future leading to a focus on the past is equally notable in the work of Bob Dylan, whose emphasis on memory, place and displacement I will explore in this article. Recent years have seen an explosion of such memory work, from Dylan's triptych of albums *Time Out Of Mind* (1997), "*Love And Theft*" (2001) and *Modern Times* (2006) through the publication of his autobiographical *Chronicles* (2004) to two major films projects, Martin Scorsese's documentary *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan* (2005) and Todd Haynes's fictional portrait *I'm Not There* (2006). Meanwhile, Dylan's reinvention of himself as a radio DJ for XM Satellite Radio has reinforced this memory work by allowing further access to the intersection of Dylan's musical memories with the collective memory stored in the recorded archive.

This body of work helps to fix Dylan's place in contemporary culture and, by exploring the myths which have grown around him, to question the possibility of any such fixity. In doing so, it remains faithful to, and retroactively provides constancy to, Dylan's previous work, which has always been characterized by a poetics of place and displacement. The poetics of place establishes itself through recourse to repeated mentions of real and imagined places, which seem to fix many of Dylan's texts in recognizable locations and which are therefore crucial to the ability of his audience to identify with the texts. These locations – whether actual or metaphorical – are fixed moments that the memory can focus

on even as it struggles to recall other features. To use a term from Lacanian psychoanalysis, they are *points de capiton*, or ‘quilting points’, that provisionally pin down an otherwise chaotic whole. The poetics of displacement, meanwhile, seeks to challenge and destabilize any sense of permanence even as it simultaneously relies on a set of quilted, temporary memory sites. This poetics is enacted via recourse to a kind of ‘memory theater’, peopled by real and fictitious characters representing a history of displacement. Characters that fulfill this function include Dylan’s musical precursors (Woody Guthrie, Robert Johnson, Charlie Patton, Hank Williams, and Jimmie Rodgers among them) whose work simultaneously provides more of the quilting points of his narrative. Dylan’s displacement techniques and refusal of a fixed identity threaten to unpick these quilting points but cannot escape the desire for stabilizing moments, enacted most clearly in his continued homage to the players in the memory theater.

This article will first rehearse some key issues raised by recent theorists who have been interested in the connections between place, displacement and memory. Having established these concepts as ingredients of postmodernity, it will proceed to discuss key tropes of displacement in Bob Dylan’s work while considering that work as an ongoing memory project involving both artists and audience. I will discuss the importance of the city and its projection of the rural, the theme of moving-on and its association with accumulated experience, and will close with a reflection on the album *Time Out Of Mind* as a distillation of themes of place and displacement that can be found throughout Dylan’s work. I will argue that the often-noted ability of Dylan to continually reinvent himself is part of a poetics of displacement that cannot shed the pull of place and the desire for homely permanence. As the

recent memory projects listed above have shown, Dylan is very much an artist who *does* look back.

The Migrational City

A number of theorists who have connected place and memory have been particularly drawn to the city as the site for witnessing the layering of history and the potential for the archaeological exploration of cultural memory. The connection is nicely captured in the title of a work by Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Huyssen Present), which also reminds us that memory is a process which always takes place in the present, whatever and whenever its desired goal may be. The notion of the city as somehow textual is also crucial to Michel de Certeau's famous account of 'Walking in the City' (1980). As de Certeau observes, the city's legibility changes with perspective. He opens his essay with a meditation on New York City as seen from the 110th floor of the World Trade Centre but quickly points out that this view was always a false one; while the 'God's eye' perspective of the high-rise, the satellite photo or the map may present the city as a kind of 'printed' text, this is not the way that citizens encounter the city on a day-to-day basis, even if they can access such views with increasing ease. The citizen as 'walker' writes the text without being able to see what they have written:

These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other's arms. The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many

others, elude legibility. It is as though the practices organizing a bustling city were characterized by their blindness. (de Certeau 93)

Yet there is a process somewhere between writing and reading, a kind of negotiation with the text that they are producing, that enables the citizens to use the city productively, and not only passively. Though caught in a story which has ‘neither author nor spectator’, a way of mastering space is nevertheless fashioned via ‘another spatiality’ (de Certeau takes this term from Maurice Merleau-Ponty), with the result that ‘a *migrational*, or metaphorical, city [...] slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city’ (de Certeau 93). The names given to these places inherit a magical quality in this process of migration:

[T]hese names [...] detach themselves from the places they were supposed to define and serve as imaginary meeting-points on itineraries which, as metaphors, they determine for reasons that are foreign to their original value but may be recognized or not by passers-by.

[...] They become liberated spaces that can be occupied. A rich indetermination gives them, by means of a semantic rarefaction, the function of articulating a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning. (de Certeau 104-5)

Memory and forgetting are intricately connected to our sense of place, as shown by numerous late twentieth century works (Nora; Samuel Theatres 1; Samuel Theatres 2; Huyssen Twilight; Huyssen Present; Boyer; Boym; Agacinski; Ricoeur). Raphael Samuel’s *Theatres of Memory* and Pierre Nora’s monumental *Lieux de Mémoire* both take their spatial

concepts from Frances Yates's *The Art of Memory*. Yates described the classical techniques of 'mnemotechnics' that relied on the fixing of memories in particular places, as described in Cicero and Quintilian. The 'memory theater' itself was a medieval inheritance of these techniques; both Samuel and Nora socialize the practice to reflect on the ways that physical and imagined social spaces have become stages upon which memory work is performed.

Dealing with a more recent period, Mark C. Taylor describes the flows of postmodernity in terms of the changes wrought upon the metropolis:

In the city, *place* is transformed into the *space* of anonymous flows. As technologies change first from steam and electricity and then to information, currents shift, but patterns tend to remain the same. Mobility, fluidity and speed intersect to effect repeated displacements in which everything becomes ephemeral, and nothing remains solid or stable. (Taylor and Lammerts 19)

Taylor points out the centrality of Baudelaire's work on modernity here and its combination of the ephemeral with the permanent. Baudelaire acts as exemplar for many theorists of modernity and its trappings (texts and palimpsests of various sorts: written, architectural, audio-visual), most notably perhaps Walter Benjamin, who takes Baudelaire's poetics of losing oneself in the urban crowd and updates them into his own philosophical mediations of getting lost in the city. Taylor notes how this fluidity in modernity is associated with the emphasis in philosophy on becoming over being:

The infatuation with becoming issues in the cult of the new, which defines both modernity and modernism. The cultivation of the new simultaneously reflects and reinforces the economic imperative of planned obsolescence. In the modern world, what is not of the moment, up to date, *au courant* is as useless as yesterday's newspaper. (Taylor and Lammerts 19)

Anthony Vidler, like Taylor, notes the centrality of Heidegger's work on becoming and dwelling, forging connections between the 'homelessness' that Heidegger spoke of, Freud's *unheimlich* and the work of Julia Kristeva and Tzvetan Todorov on 'real homelessness' and the figure of the stranger (Vidler 8-11), a connection that sits in harmony with Zygmunt Bauman's descriptions of 'tourists and vagabonds'. Bauman's account of the effects of postindustrial migratory flows emphasizes the distinctions between the comfort of the tourist, for whom this experience is 'lived through as postmodern freedom', and the discomfort of the migrant, for whom the experience 'may feel rather uncannily like the postmodern version of slavery' (Bauman 92).

Music, Place and Displacement

Vagabondage is connected to the long period of modernity and has long been the subject of popular songs, from the migrant blues through the dustbowl ballads of Woody Guthrie and spiritual numbers such as 'This World Is Not My Home' and 'I Don't Want To Get Adjusted (To This World)'. The role of music in negotiating issues of place, belonging and memory has been explored by a number of writers, from those interested in scenes, such as Sara Cohen, Ruth Finnegan and Barry Shank, to those, like George Lipsitz, more interested in the

‘poetics of place’. The writers on scenes have tended to concentrate on urban centers and have attempted to show how musicians and fans have used their location to explore issues of identity formation, community and career development. Other writers have discussed popular music as the ‘sound of the city’ or stressed the ways in which the music reflects the ‘metropolitan experience’, even in music that is often associated with non-metropolitan experience, such as country or folk, but which has required the city to act as both a differential foil and a site for recording, performing and broadcasting (Gillett; Chambers Urban; Chambers Metropolitan; Peterson; Boyes).

Perhaps the most obvious association between music and place is that associated with memory. As George Lipsitz writes:

Through music we learn about place and about displacement. Laments for lost places and narratives of exile and return often inform, inspire, and incite the production of popular music. Songs build engagement among audiences at least in part through references that tap memories and hopes about particular places. Intentionally and unintentionally, musicians use lyrics, musical forms, and specific styles of performance that evoke attachment to or alienation from particular places. (Lipsitz 4)

Lipsitz’s mention of intentionality allows us to consider the distinctions that Marcel Proust made between, on the one hand, the involuntary memory associated with the evocative power of the *petite madeleine*, and on the other the conscious act of recollection of time and place that is Proust’s memory project, *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Both forms of memory are present in the numerous references to music throughout the novel, including the

famous account of Vinteuil's sonata. Proust's character M. Swann is initially affected by the music a year before the events being narrated but does not recognize it and has no way of finding out what it is. The following year, at a *soiree*, Swann rediscovers the music and is this time affected not by the immediate perception of it, but by the memory of it. Yet, even on the first listen, memory was at work. As Proust describes the impossibility of capturing music due to its fleetingness, he describes memory, in a manner that utilizes an understanding of memory as place, as 'a labourer working to put down lasting foundations in the midst of the waves, by fabricating for us facsimiles of these fleeting phrases' (Proust 212). On Swann's rediscovery of the music, however, he is furnished with a better way of keeping hold of it: 'now he could ask the name of his stranger [...] he possessed it, he could have it in his house as often as he liked, try to learn its language and its secret' (214-5). Proust here combines music, place and memory in a number of ways: firstly, Swann's initial exposure to the music is described in terms of the fleetingness of spatial perception; secondly, his mind attempts to hold onto the music via the swift erection of memory places; thirdly, he is now able have the music 'in his house' where he can guard it and visit it as often as he likes.

The contemporary equivalent of Swann's experience might be the hearing of a piece of music on some form of broadcast media, a subsequent search for the source of the music and a final 'capturing' of it via the purchase of a CD or download of an MP3 file. Yet certain features of the experience remain unchanged, not least the necessity of distance between the initial experience and the position from which that experience can be 'fixed'. A similar observation can be found in the autobiography of the Brazilian singer-songwriter Caetano Veloso, who describes his experience of listening to Ray Charles's 'Georgia on My Mind' in

Salvador and missing his hometown of Santo Amaro. Veloso writes: ‘These were transcendental nostalgias, the beauty of the singing infusing memory with a life more intense than the moments as they were actually lived, allowing them to be relived more truthfully the second time.’ He then relates how he later found ‘this effect luminously described in Proust’ (Veloso 41). There is another aspect to place here, or rather to displacement, as Georgia comes to stand in for Santo Amaro in Veloso’s hearing of the song. An analogous process is discussed by Kaja Silverman in her account of the use of Vinteuil’s sonata in Proust’s novel, where she emphasizes the importance of displacement and metonymy as the music stands in for Odette and both stand in for Swann’s desire (Silverman 117-21).

Displacement, as Edward Casey explains, is a condition of humanity that can affect us even when we have not left home:

We can feel out of place even *in* the home, where *Unheimlichkeit* [...] may afflict us. Separation anxiety sets in early, by most accounts before twenty-four months of life. Thereafter, for the rest of our life we suffer from a series of separations, all of which involve aspects of place: separations from caring parents, from siblings and childhood friends, from a native region and its characteristic beliefs and dialect, from things we have done or witnessed. As Freud, Bachelard, and Proust all suggest, to re-find place – a place we have always already been losing – we may need to return, if not in actual fact then in memory or imagination, to the very earliest places we have known. (Casey x)

In The Wind: Dylan's Poetics of Place and Displacement

I now wish to reflect on Bob Dylan's work in the light of the issues raised so far. I will frame my comments around the notion of memory places and of the dialectic of home and the unhomely which, as Casey points out, are so intricately connected. Crucial to this endeavor is the notion of projection, of representation from a distance. Like the 'screen memories' formulated by Freud, the memorial representations in Dylan's work are confluences of memories and desires from different time periods. Given the focus above on the role of the city in contemporary thought, it is also necessary to bear in mind the projection of the country from the city which was so crucial to the folk movement with which Dylan was involved early in his career.

Jonathan Raban's *Soft City* (1974) attempts to deal with this question by presenting the city as something which becomes gradually 'legible' to the citizen. For Raban, the city is an 'emporium of styles' from which the initially confused 'greenhorn' (the newcomer to the city) learns to select. This notion of choice is expanded to include the playing of roles – city life for Raban is always performative and the city is as much a collection of stages as an emporium (Raban 67). If the city does impose its ideology, it has to be recognized in this formulation that, while the city is always at work on us we are always at work on the city too: this 'work' involving both the constant rebuilding of the city and the effort put into the performance of identity. This involves a physical and a mental building, the latter represented by Raban's suggestion that, as we reinvent ourselves, the city rebuilds itself around us.

David Harvey suggests that we should read Raban's book 'not as an anti-modernist argument but as a vital affirmation that the postmodernist moment has arrived' (Harvey 6).

This was a moment inhabited by the shape-shifting Bob Dylan and a number of his contemporaries, who allow us to posit a twist on Bauman's definition of 'postmodern freedom' by noting their ability to enjoy the freedom of 'tourists' while (or by) projecting the image of 'vagabonds'. With so much reinvention of tradition going on in Greenwich Village at the time, it is perhaps not surprising that Dylan was able to reinvent himself, arriving in the metropolis and settling into whichever rural image he wished to evoke at any given time. Dylan, from the start, was himself a projection and possessed the talent to make himself a screen on which other people could project their own idealized images. Given the fascination of Dylan as a character, we should not be surprised at our frequent desire to conflate art and biography. However, it is important to remember not only the correctives issued by the critics of such practice, who point out that the characters that people Dylan's texts are precisely characters, but also to remember that even the most overt attempt at personal expression via autobiography is prone to distortion by the very nature of the memory process. Important, too, is the fact that memory builds up over time as a kind of sedimentation of knowledge and experience. We should bear in mind Walter Benjamin's distinctions between the German terms *Erfahrung*, referring to 'experience over time', and *Erlebnis*, referring to 'the isolated experience of the moment' (Benjamin 345, n 11).

The importance of home and displacement in Dylan's work is clearly understood by the makers of the three best-known films about Dylan, which all take their titles from lines in Dylan's songs: *Dont Look Back* (D.A Pennebaker, 1967) quotes 'She Belongs To Me' from *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965); *No Direction Home* (Martin Scorsese, 2005) uses a line from one of Dylan's most famous songs, 'Like A Rolling Stone', from *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965); and *I'm Not There* (Todd Haynes, 2007) takes its name from the title of a song

recorded by Dylan with the Band in 1967 and, prior to the film's soundtrack, available only as a bootleg recording. All three films – or, as we might prefer to think of them, 'screen memories' – acknowledge the impossibility of capturing their subject even as they attempt to do so.¹ *No Direction Home* opens with Dylan speaking the following words:

I had ambitions to set out and find like an odyssey, going home somewhere. I set out to find this home that I'd left a while back and I couldn't remember exactly where it was but I was on my way there, and encountering what I encountered on the way was how I envisioned it all. I didn't really have any ambition at all [...] I was born very far from where I'm supposed to be and so I'm on my way home.

In a manner analogous to Guthrie's and Haggard's autobiographies, there is a conflation of the past and the present here, the latter situated as the site from which memory always issues. Scorsese immediately follows this with Dylan speaking about where he was born, allowing a sense of constancy to the life being recalled. In doing so he is faithful to Dylan's work, which has used such projections of home and the past from early on. We can find this in the song 'I Was Young When I Left Home', recorded by Dylan in late 1961 when the singer was twenty but not released at the time (it was available as a bootleg for many years and was officially released as a bonus track with certain copies of "*Love And Theft*" and again on the CD accompanying *No Direction Home*). The first verse of the song is:

¹ This is a practice we can also observe among the numerous books written about Dylan such as Robert Shelton's *No Direction Home*, Greil Marcus's *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* and *Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads*, and Howard Sounes's *Down the Highway*.

I was young when I left home
And I been out ramblin' round
And I never wrote a letter to my home
To my home
Lord, to my home
And I never wrote a letter to my home

The voice Dylan uses to sing this lyric is the heavily-inflected 'Okie' accent he had adopted during his recent stay in New York, where he projected himself as a hobo traveler modeled on his hero Woody Guthrie. The husky voice belied his age and gave his singing a grain of authenticity crucial to audience identification. The sense of having been 'out there' and gained experience that only a traveler could gain is emphasized in later verses by reference to the wind, a metaphor Dylan would return to many times in his songwriting:

Used to tell my ma sometimes
When I see them ridin' blind
Gonna make me a home out in the wind
In the wind,
Lord, in the wind
Make me a home out in the wind

I don't like it in the wind
Wanna go back home again

But I can't go home this a-way

This a-way

Lord Lord Lord

And I can't go home this a-way

The sense of displacement is strong, especially in the dichotomy of the romantic lure of travelling when at home alongside the call of home when faced with the hardships of travelling. Accompanying this is a good deal of uncertainty, reflected in the unpredictability of the wind (a similar uncertainty would be reflected in 'Blowing in the Wind' the following year) and in the inability of the song lyrics to properly fill their musical frame.

Despite this uncertainty, there remains a strong sense of place to the song. This might be due to the process outlined by Frederick Bartlett in his study *Remembering*, in which ambiguous details are filled out via an 'effort after meaning', often focused around a 'governing idea' (see Fentress and Wickham 32-6). The governing idea here is 'experience', summoned by reference to 'place'. The spaces, places and displacement referred to in Dylan's work are far too numerous to list here but a brief survey might include song titles such as 'Rambler Gambler', 'Highway 51', 'Freight Train Blues', 'Girl From The North Country', 'Down The Highway', 'North Country Blues', 'Outlaw Blues', 'Restless Farewell', 'Like A Rolling Stone', 'Tombstone Blues', 'Highway 61 Revisited', 'Desolation Row', 'Drifter's Escape', 'Romance In Durango', 'Black Diamond Bay', and 'Where Are You Tonight?'

These references, along with others in the lyrics of so many Dylan songs, focus our attention on place, movement and displacement and also remind us of similar references in

other songs, not least those from the folk, country and blues music to which Dylan has always been attracted and which has influenced his work profoundly. The world of country music is notably geocentric though there can be found a series of engagements with both city and rural life within country texts, belying the assumption that it is a music rooted only in the (southern US) hills, valleys and plains. As with blues (and, more recently, rap), there is a tendency in country to treat the world as though it begins and ends at the national boundaries, although there is also a significant body of work that seeks romance south of the border. Mexico acts as both a place of refuge and an invitation to recklessness in country songs (a tradition that has also been fed by Western films), where characters can escape and become somehow invisible, impervious to the laws that bind them further north.² Performers such as Jimmie Rodgers, Robert Johnson, Charlie Patton, Woody Guthrie, Hank Williams and Bill Monroe – all touchstones for Dylan – continued and helped create an American mythology of place that could serve as backdrop for future performances in these theaters of memory. The sense of identification with this imagined America is made explicit in a memorable section of Dylan's *Chronicles*, where he aligns himself with one of his country music contemporaries, the fiddler and bandleader Charlie Daniels: 'I felt I had a lot in common with Charlie [...] Felt like we had dreamed the same dream with all the same distant places' (Dylan Chronicles 136).

As suggested earlier, Dylan's mythology of place is strengthened through its connection to a sense of experience. It is not enough to merely list places in a ritualistic way; for their evocation to be effective, a sense of having inhabited them is crucial. Here Dylan's

² Similarly, there is otherworldliness to the bleak North evoked in a number of Dylan's songs and in the music of the Canadians Ian and Sylvia, to which he was particularly drawn. 'Mozambique', from *Desire*, is a rare example of a song seemingly centered on a non-American place. Dylan claims at one point that it is a fantasized place, and elsewhere, discussing his musical style, suggests that he is not much influenced by styles from outside the North American continent. See the conversations collected in Cott (2006).

work can again be connected to the strategies of country, folk and blues musicians, not least in its use of verb tenses commonly used to express life experience, or *Erfahrung*. In ‘Pretty Peggy-O’, from his first album, Dylan sings ‘I been around this whole country’, both a claim on experience and an echo of earlier songs (the phrase, like so many in Dylan’s work is a ‘floating’ phrase that resurfaces in various folk, blues and country songs). In the aural road movie ‘Señor’ (from the 1976 album *Desire*), the line ‘feel like I been down this road before’ both echoes its country precursors (Hank Williams’s ‘I’ve Been Down That Road Before’ from 1951³) and his own earlier work. Later still, ‘Driftin’ Too Far from Shore’ on Dylan’s *Knocked Out Loaded* (1986) borrows its title, if little else, from Bill Monroe’s ‘Drifting Too Far from the Shore’ (1936).

The use of the present perfect tense has often lent songs a sense of experience, as, for example, in Jimmie Rodgers’s and Elsie McWilliams’s ‘I’ve Ranged, I’ve Roamed, I’ve Traveled’ (1929) and this seems to be something Dylan is very aware of in songs such as ‘A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall’. The song uses a wide variety of present perfect and past simple structures to list its protagonist’s experience (‘I’ve stumbled...’, ‘I’ve slept...’, ‘I’ve been...’, ‘I saw...’, ‘I heard...’, ‘I met...’), before closing with a combination of future tenses to suggest, in a Tom Joad-like monologue, that there is still agency here, and hope. There is a similar combination of past and future in ‘Restless Farewell’ (the closing track from 1964’s *The Times They Are A-Changin’*), one of Dylan’s exemplary early songs of displacement, described by Paul Williams as ‘a portrait of the artist in motion at the end of the evening, end of the album, end of the present myth of Bob Dylan and off into the dark towards a new one’

³ The song was released under the name of Williams’s alter-ego Luke the Drifter. Dylan and the Band recorded another Luke the Drifter song, ‘Stones That You Throw’, as part of the Basement Tapes sessions, with Dylan emulating Luke’s trademark spoken delivery. The group also recorded Williams’s ‘You Win Again’ during the same sessions.

(Williams Performing 1960 95). Each verse of the song ends with a promise to say farewell and Dylan declares at one point, ‘my feet are now fast/and point away from the past’. Yet the effectiveness of this moving-on song is undermined to some extent by the repeated use of the present perfect and the clear importance to the singer of memory and experience: ‘every girl that ever I’ve touched/hurt’, ‘every foe that ever I’ve faced’, ‘every cause that ever I’ve fought’, and ‘every thought that strung a knot in my mind’. We are witnessing a lived life and there is a strong sense of looking back. From where is this ‘I have’ being projected if not the stability of the speaking subject ‘at home’ enough to reflect on past experience? The singer’s feet may ‘point away from the past’ but it is not so clear his mind does. Indeed, there is guilt here, stealing away in the night, justification (finding reasons why he can’t stay – it’s closing time, it’s healthy to move on), and stubbornness (‘I’ll [...] not give a damn’). He is trying to convince himself that moving on is the right thing to do. The vow that seals this conviction (‘I’ll [...] remain as I am’) suggests constancy but what will be constant is the inconstant. A similar hesitancy can be found in ‘One Too Many Mornings’ on the same album:

From the crossroads of my doorstep my eyes start to fade
And I turn my head back to the room where my love and I have laid
And I gaze back to the street, the sidewalk and the sign
And I’m one too many mornings and a thousand miles behind

The hesitancy in tracks such as these (heard also in the indeterminacy of ‘I Was Young When I Left Home’) suggests a conflict taking place within the narrator of the texts, a

narrator who we may as well call ‘Bob Dylan’. The conflict of this young-old figure is highlighted again in ‘Bob Dylan’s Dream’, where the singer looks back on what he has left behind and the friends he has lost from the perspective of ‘a train heading west’. As many have noted, Dylan sounded like an old man from early in his career (Williams Performing 1960 75; Marcus Rolling Stone 21), although Dylan himself would express doubt as to whether he could inhabit the material he was performing. Referring to his performance of ‘Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right’ on *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* (1963), he said, ‘It’s a hard song to sing. I can sing it sometimes, but I ain’t that good yet. I don’t carry myself yet the way that Big Joe Williams, Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly and Lightnin’ Hopkins have carried themselves. I hope to be able to someday, but they’re older people’ (liner notes to *Dylan Freewheelin’*).

Dylan, of course, would mock his earlier pretensions in the 1964 song ‘My Back Pages’, with the claim that ‘I was so much older then/I’m younger than that now’. Four decades later, in *Chronicles*, he would joke about the annoyance caused when people wanted him to be more like ‘the old him’, by which they invariably meant the younger him, the ‘folk poet’ and ‘voice of a generation’ that so many had projected onto him (Dylan Chronicles 138).⁴ For Mark Polizzotti, it was only on the classic trio of mid-1960s albums, particularly *Highway 61 Revisited*, that Dylan sounded youthful: ‘Earlier, Dylan had claimed to be “younger than that now,” but the age-old weariness persisted, not really dissipating until he found his way back to his R&B roots’ (Polizzotti 20). Yet for all the youthful fire and modernist challenge, these albums maintained a representation of a remembered and imagined landscape that could only have come as a projection of the past. This was

⁴ This different use of the word ‘old’ only confuses the issue further, suggesting that the ‘young him’ was the ‘old him’!

particularly notable in the title of the middle album, *Highway 61 Revisited*. Recalling the significance of this particular highway in *Chronicles*, Dylan writes:

Highway 61, the main thoroughfare of the country blues, begins about where I came from...Duluth to be exact. I always felt like I'd started on it, always had been on it and could go anywhere from it, even down into the deep Delta country. It was the same road, full of the same contradictions, the same one-horse towns, the same spiritual ancestors. The Mississippi River, the bloodstream of the blues, also starts up from my neck of the woods. I was never too far away from it. It was my place in the universe, always felt like it was in my blood. (Dylan Chronicles 240-1)

Polizzotti quotes Dylan's account and makes much of *Highway 61 Revisited* as an album steeped in this mythology of place and autobiography, noting the highway's connection to the migration of jazz, blues and early rock 'n' roll:

The road trip of *Highway 61 Revisited* encompasses all of these registers, musical, mythical and autobiographical. It is a circular journey, striking out for new territory only to loop back and reconnect with old roots. It takes us from top to bottom and back again, from the frenzied urban rock of Minneapolis (en route to New York) to the midnight blues of Clarksdale, from Great Northern pretension to South of the Border dissolution. (Polizzotti 25)

When Dylan speaks about Robert Johnson in *Chronicles*, he mentions ‘Highway 61 Revisited’ as an example of his trying to claim the mythological sense of place he heard in the work of the great blues player (Dylan Chronicles 288). Intriguingly, he also picks this moment to mention the effect that Arthur Rimbaud had on him, not least a key phrase of identity displacement he found in one of the poet’s letters, ‘Je est un autre’. Rimbaud is added to Johnson, Guthrie and Brecht in Dylan’s list of influences: ‘[Rimbaud’s words] went right along with Johnson’s dark night of the soul and Woody’s hopped-up union meeting sermons and the “Pirate Jenny” framework. Everything was in transition and I was standing in the gateway’ (Dylan Chronicles 288). This mixture no doubt helps explain some of the range of references we find in Dylan’s song texts, peopling the mythological landscape in which the narratives take place. Of ‘Tombstone Blues’, Polizzotti observes: ‘A mix of historical, fictional, mythical, and musical figures, the protagonists of “Tombstone Blues” intermingle to form a world at once recognizable and wholly alien, an outsized American landscape made up not only of our daily reality, but also of our myths, dreams, cultural archetypes, and barely formed nightmares’ (Polizzotti 74).

For Polizzotti, Dylan’s music frequently evokes place; the long songs of the mid-1960s are like ‘a road stretching infinitely ahead’, while the harmonica on ‘It Takes A Lot To Laugh...’, ‘[adds] strokes of its own to the landscape rolling by, stretching like the plains or whipping like a sudden crosswind’ (Polizzotti 55, 86). I would further suggest that there is a ‘freight train-like’ quality to ‘Most Likely You Go Your Way And I’ll Go Mine’ on *Blonde on Blonde*, where the instrumental blasts between some verses have a similar effect to that described by Polizzotti; here, too, Al Kooper’s organ gives a sense of the eerie expanse of the plains. There are paradoxes too: in ‘Desolation Row’, for example, are we hearing the

city or the countryside? Looking back from the perspective of November 1969, having recorded the rural-sounding *John Wesley Harding* (1968) and country-inflected *Nashville Skyline* (1969), Dylan could describe ‘Desolation Row’ as a ‘city song’, coming from ‘that kind of New York period when all the songs were just “city songs”’. This was possibly due to the influence of Allen Ginsberg: ‘His poetry is city poetry. Sounds like the city’ (Cott 148). Polizzotti, for his part, claims that ‘Desolation Row’ presents ‘a city of the mind’, but one nevertheless recognizable as New York (Polizzotti 133). However, the sound is not nearly so ‘urban’, the track being notable for its lack of electric instruments or urban blues form. Rather, the Spanish guitar accompanying Dylan’s piano and vocal, recalls the Mexico referenced in the previous song on the album, ‘Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues’. Polizzotti:

‘Desolation Row’ is the soundtrack to an imaginary western, with its sepia tones, flimsy prop saloons, and corpses in the dust [...] In [it] Dylan dredges up all the haunting visions and ghosts of childhood and adulthood, the monsters that once lived in his closet and now populated his dreams. By setting it to a musical motif so rich in resonance for those who, like him, grew up with the cowboy myths, he found a sound to match his night terrors. (Polizzotti 140)

Perhaps these were those ‘same distant places’ that Dylan was to hear in Charlie Daniels’s music, or the ‘old weird America’ or ‘undiscovered country’ that Greil Marcus would write about in *Invisible Republic* (Marcus *Invisible* xviii).

Marcus notes the mixture of familiarity and unfamiliarity in *The Basement Tapes*:

The music carried an aura of familiarity, of unwritten traditions, and as deep a sense of self-recognition, the recognition of a self – the singer’s? the listener’s? – that was both historical and sui generis. The music was funny and comforting; at the same time it was strange, and somehow incomplete. Out of some odd displacement of art and time, the music seemed both transparent and inexplicable. (xv)

Hearing the whole of the tapes, Marcus suggests, is like discovering a map: ‘but if they are a map, what country, what lost mine, is it that they center and fix?’ (xv). Marcus is keenly attuned to the idea of positing memories in this landscape as a device for recalling the past. He makes much of the influence of Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music* on the folk imaginary of the time and notes the influence on his own work of Robert Cantwell’s essay, ‘Smith’s Memory Theater’ (Marcus *Invisible* 113; Cantwell). At the same time, Marcus seems suspicious of nostalgia and wants to rescue Dylan’s *Basement Tapes* and early 1990s albums from any such accusations (xviii, 70), emphasizing the uncanny nature of the world Dylan looks back to. Marcus’s use of the term seems to understand nostalgia as a yearning for a *comfortable* home, which is only partly the case. Another type of nostalgia, which Svetlana Boym terms ‘reflective nostalgia’ and that I have written about elsewhere as ‘critical nostalgia’ or ‘critical fidelity’, is the type that connects itself to what Slavoj Žižek would call ‘the lost cause’ (Boym xvi; Žižek 271). It seems to be heralded when Marcus, in the transition from Kenneth Rexroth’s ‘old free America’ to his own ‘old weird America’, speaks of ‘the inevitable betrayals that stem from the infinite idealism of American democracy’ (89): there, too, in the ‘infamy on the landscape’ that Dylan mentions in the liner notes to *World Gone Wrong* (1993).

It is also useful to consider the bewilderment of time and place that can be found in Dylan's projects between the *Basement Tapes* sessions and the solo albums of the 1990s, especially in the confessional memory projects of the mid-1970s, *Blood on the Tracks* (1975), *Desire* (1976) and *Street Legal* (1978). Speaking in 1978, Dylan proffered the opinion that *Blood on the Tracks* differs from earlier work in that 'there's a code in the lyrics and also there's no sense of time. There's no respect for it: you've got yesterday, today and tomorrow all in the same room, and there's very little that you can't imagine not happening' (Cott 260). We could shift the axes of this temporal/spatial conflation to say that here, there and everywhere are taking place at the same time. The opening song, 'Tangled up in Blue', sets the tone by roaming across time and place, suggesting that any attempt to sort the tangle of memories the singer finds himself afflicted by can only ever be provisional and temporary. The lack of fixity is emphasized by the changing personal pronouns of the verses and the tendency for Dylan to rewrite the lyrics in subsequent performances. The personal pronouns shift again in the second track of the album, 'Simple Twist of Fate', as the protagonist changes from 'he' to 'I'. The anguished cry of 'I've never gotten *used to it*' in 'If You See Her Say Hello' stresses the involuntary memory while 'I replay the past' focuses on the voluntary memory work in a manner reminiscent of the double nature of the Proustian project whereby the unexpected flash of the past summons a desire to take control of one's history in the hope of taming the power of such flashbacks. 'Shelter from the Storm' imagines 'a place where it's always safe and warm', an appeal to the homely that contrasts with the displacement enacted elsewhere. 'Isis', from *Desire*, describes a mystical place not locatable on any particular map. 'One More Cup of Coffee' hangs its refrain around a mysterious valley, a floating device that again corresponds to no specific geography.

Discussing the song, Dylan claimed that it ‘wasn’t about anything, so this “valley below” thing became the fixture to hang it on. But “valley below” could mean anything’ (Cott 387). There is an even more mystical geography evoked in the songs of *Street Legal*, which also fixes itself around floating phrases. Interviewing Dylan shortly after the release of the album, Jonathan Cott quoted a lyric from the closing song ‘Where Are You Tonight?’ – ‘sacrifice is the code of the road’ – and made an analogy with Dylan’s performance practice: ‘To die before dying, shedding your skin, making new songs out of old ones’. Dylan responded by quoting an earlier song of his: ‘That’s my mission in life....“He not busy being born is busy dying”’ (Cott 264). The Dylan speaking here seems to be the subject of ‘She Belongs to Me’, the artist who ‘don’t look back’.

But shedding skin is a painful business and there is never any guarantee that the old life will not continue to haunt the new. This is exemplified at the close of *Desire*, when, after an album of wandering gypsy music and songs that imagine faraway places, we find that what is furthest away and most impossible to reach is the lure of the past. ‘Sara’, Dylan’s hymn of loss to his ex-wife, is an extended piece of memory work taking in shared experiences and imbuing the traveling life with a sense of constancy built around the family. The longing for home and company is strong here and quite different from the sentiments of the deliberately displaced loner. In *Chronicles*, Dylan remembers a time at the end of the 1960s where his attempts to live the quiet family life were constantly being interrupted by the expectations his fame brought with it and he felt forced to escape from his fans. ‘It was tough moving around – like the Merle Haggard song, “I’m on the run, the highway is my home.” I don’t know if Haggard ever had to get his family out with him, but I know I did. It’s a little different when you have to do that. The landscape burned behind us’ (Dylan

Chronicles 120). The song Dylan is quoting is Haggard's 'I'm A Lonesome Fugitive' (from the 1967 album of the same name) and suggests that this particular form of displacement is a necessarily lonesome business: 'I'd like to settle down but they won't let me/A fugitive must be a rolling stone', and 'he who travels fastest goes alone'. With sacrifice the 'code of the road', the desired freedom of displacement leads inevitably to a longing for place. As in Townes Van Zandt's 'Pancho & Lefty', a song Dylan would occasionally perform on tour, the road's promise can turn out to be a betrayal as the accumulated experience of displacement hardens into resignation:

Living on the road my friend
Was going to keep you free and clean
Now you wear your skin like iron
And your breath's as hard as kerosene (Van Zandt)

The Highway of Regret: Time Out Of Mind

Time Out Of Mind distills the points raised so far in a manner hitherto unseen in Dylan's work. This is partly because the album comes to us at a late stage in Dylan's career, where the *Erfahrung*, or accumulated data, of his experience and that of his audience cannot fail to flavor the songs with certain meanings. But it is also due to its emphasis on memory places, displacement, references to earlier work, haunting and the need to escape from ghosts, and even, in the album's epic closing song 'Highlands', the refusal of memory. A number of the memory places are listed in the following table:

Love Sick	streets that are dead, the meadow, the window, the road
Dirt Road Blues	that dirt road, the room, one room country shack, up above
Standing in the Doorway	no place (left to turn), the doorway, this place, the stars, under a midnight moon, the church bells, the yard, the dark land of the sun
Million Miles	a million miles from you, out in the cold
Tryin' to Get to Heaven	the skies, the high muddy water, the middle of nowhere, Heaven, Missouri, that lonesome valley, (down) the road, (down) the river, New Orleans, Baltimore, (all around) the world, the parlor, Sugartown
Not Dark Yet	London, Paris, the river, the sea, eyes, here
Make You Feel My Love	the rolling sea, the highway of regret, the ends of the Earth
Can't Wait	the lonely graveyard of my mind, somewhere back there along the line
Highlands	the Highlands, Aberdeen waters, the same old cage, home, beautiful lake, Boston, restaurant, the busy street, the border country, far from the towns, the park, over the hills and far away

As suggested earlier, the effect of naming so many places relies on a sense of the narrator having inhabited them and this is something Dylan achieves very successfully on *Time Out Of Mind*. In Greil Marcus's words, these are 'newly composed songs that [...] can sound older than Bob Dylan or the person listening will ever be' (Marcus Invisible 21). Remembering Dylan's own comments about 'the old him', it is worth considering to what extent the young-old Dylan of the early recordings has returned here, now able to carry himself in the way he earlier desired when discussing 'Don't Think Twice It's Alright'. Again, Dylan relies on the floating signifiers of experience that linger as spectral remains of earlier songs, both his and others'. In 'Tryin' to Get to Heaven', he employs the lines 'been around the world' and 'train don't carry no gamblers', the latter coming from Woody Guthrie's 'This Train'. The 'highway of regret' in 'To Make You Feel My Love' not only conflates memory with place, but also sets up a contrast with the claim to move 'down the road and not give a damn' on the earlier 'Restless Farewell'. It also chimes with the revisited Highway 61 of the 1965 album and the 'lost highway' of Hank Williams's mournful 1949 song. Paul Williams centers his justification of *Time Out Of Mind* as song cycle on the emphasis on movement and distance. He points out the references to walking in a number of the songs, to being left behind or lost in others. The folk and blues songs Dylan quotes rely on similar notions and construct a world of movement. As Williams observes, 'It's like he's living in a garden built of folksong lyrics' (Williams Performing 1986 314). Mikal Gilmore also uses a spatial metaphor when suggesting that *Time out of Mind* is 'a trek through the unmapped frontier that lies beyond loss and disillusion' (Cott 412).

Experience is also evoked by the sense of haunting that many of the songs carry, from the musically and lyrically stark 'Love Sick' through the claim, in 'Til I Fell in Love

with You’, that ‘I’ve seen too much’. In ‘Standing in the Doorway’ the singer notes that ‘the ghost of our old love has not gone away’ and the song is haunted by fragments of past songs (‘in the doorway crying’, ‘I’ll eat when I’m hungry/drink when I’m dry’). In ‘Tryin’ to Get to Heaven’ a different note is sounded: ‘every day your memory grows dimmer/it don’t haunt me like it did before’. But the song is still haunted by a history given away by the lyrics: ‘walkin’ that lonesome valley’, ‘going’ down the road feelin’ bad’, ‘goin’ down the river’, ‘been all around the world, boys’, ‘some trains don’t pull no gamblers/no midnight rambler’, ‘been to Sugartown’. The overall effect is of a weariness brought on by over-experience, hence, perhaps, why he is no longer haunted: to mourn is to be alive. In ‘Not Dark Yet’, shadows are falling and time is running away: ‘there’s not even room enough to be anywhere’. Again, experience is claimed (‘been to London, been to gay Pa-ree’), but lessons have not been learned: ‘I can’t even remember what it was I came here to get away from’. As Jon Pareles noted on the release of the album, ‘The voice of a generation has become a voice of experience, telling us that experience hasn’t taught him anything he needs.’ While the folk and blues artists to whom Dylan looked for inspiration ‘offered their survival as reassurance’, on this album Dylan ‘refuses listeners that solace’ (Cott 398).

‘Highlands’ echoes a number of these themes while also presenting a kind of refusal of memory. The narrator is ‘drifting from scene to scene’, seeing ‘big white clouds/like chariots that swing down low’, and feeling ‘further away than ever before’: ‘the party’s over/and there’s less and less to say/I’ve got new eyes/Everything looks far away’. Greil Marcus compares the song to ‘Like A Rolling Stone’ and *Highway 61 Revisited*, suggesting that it reflects the loss of the territory that that album mapped (Marcus Rolling Stone 199-201) and describing its overall mood as ‘spectral’ (232). Displacement here is more to do

with escaping from ghosts than witnessing them. In 'House of Memories' (1967), Merle Haggard narrates a tale of loss following the break-up of a relationship. He is constantly reminded of the past and describes his house as 'a prison' in which 'there's no place to hide/where your memory won't find me' (Haggard Fugitive). Subjected to the tortuous repetition of involuntary memories, Haggard cannot help but sound abject, not least in the pleasure he seems to find in relating this tale. The spatial metaphor is one of stasis here, with agency displaced by melancholia. If home in *Time Out Of Mind* is similarly associated with memories and a lack of agency, 'Highlands' is notable for its refusal of homecoming, venturing further and further out, not unlike the outward-spiraling story emanating from the inability to remember in 'Brownsville Girl' (from Dylan's 1986 album *Knocked Out Loaded*). Yet, 'Highlands' is as contradictory as any Dylan text; in its narrator's claim not to 'do sketches from memory' even as he is providing one, it is nothing less than a refusal to be where one already is.

Conclusion: Take Me Disappearing...

What I have tried to stress is not the connection to any particular place but the sense of place and displacement more generally throughout Bob Dylan's work, enacted sometimes by an insistence on moving on and restlessness, at other times by the projection of place from another, removed but stable place. This is what seems to connect the references to highways of regret, down the highway, lost highways, the possibility of not of going back home, the world gone wrong, overstaying one's time. Even as the places are evoked, so distance from them is affirmed, hence 'all those distant places'.

The sense of displacement extends to Dylan's response to his fame and to the expectations that come with it. Again, refusal seems to be the defining strategy: distancing himself from the folk music scene he helped to define, distancing himself from the role of 'visionary' and from any particular political stance, distancing himself from his own work and legacy through a constant reinterpretation of his songs. Like his character Alias in Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid*, he is always somewhere and someone else (see Scobie). As Greil Marcus writes of Dylan's turn to electric music in the mid-1960s, 'Dylan's performance now seemed to mean that he had never truly been where he had appeared to be only a year before, reaching for that democratic oasis of the heart – and that if he had never been there, those who had felt themselves there with him had not been there' (Marcus Invisible 31). David Brackett, in discussing the paradox of Hank Williams as simultaneous 'man of the people' and country star, notes the ways Williams was able to mediate between these positions in performance:

Williams *did* become a 'voice of the people,' but only through introducing new elements, rearranging old ones, and, in short, by setting himself apart from 'the people' through the expression of a unique world view. This point only illustrates that he functioned as a star in much the same fashion as other stars function in mass culture: by becoming an object of fantasy and identification for millions of people through the projection of difference. (Brackett 106)

This 'setting himself apart' is something Dylan would identify with too. Writing about Jimmie Rodgers, he said that 'he stood over there far apart', while he noted of other blues

singers: ‘they were able to state all the problems they had; but at the same time, they were standing outside of them and could look at them. And in that way, they had them beat’ (liner notes to Freewheelin’).

It is worthwhile also to enquire if there is something of this distancing in Dylan’s famous ‘wild mercury sound’, the sense that any attempt to capture the sound is doomed. More generally, what might it mean to speak of ‘musical displacement’ in the work? We might refer to losing one’s place in the music, something both performer and audience can fall prey to. There are any number of examples of left-in ‘mistakes’, fudged or changed words, over-wordiness, seemingly infinite alliteration, ‘wrongness’ of voice, unexpected vocal intonation, disorienting performance strategies, changes in musical styles, and, overriding all, a stubborn willfulness on the part of the artist not to repeat the past. As Marcus noted of the difficulty of mapping the ‘undiscovered country’ or ‘invisible republic’ of the *Basement Tapes*, and as Gilmore said of the ‘unmapped frontier’ explored in *Time Out of Mind*, the possibility of fixing is forever being deferred. Gilmore notes the importance of continual creation and inventiveness in Dylan’s performance practice:

Dylan [...] seems to have adopted a viewpoint similar to the one favored by jazz trumpeter and bandleader Miles Davis for most of his career: namely, that the truest vital experience of music resides in the moment of its performance, in the living act of its formation and the spontaneous yet hard-earned discoveries that those acts of creation yield. The next time the musicians play the same song, it is not really the same song. It is a new moment and creation, a new possibility, a newfound place on the map, soon to be left behind for the next place. (Cott 412-3)

To put it in the terms of one of Dylan's most wandering songs, 'Mr Tambourine Man', his audience have had to 'take [him] disappearing [...] with all memory and fate driven deep beneath the waves'. In that song, Dylan wanted to 'forget about today until tomorrow'. Just after these lines are sounded in Scorsese's film, we hear Dylan make the following claim: 'An artist has got to be careful never really to arrive at a place where he thinks he's at somewhere. You always have to realize that you're constantly in a state of becoming.'

At the same time, these are popular songs and there is plenty of 'homecoming' in them. Dylan's numerous refrains really do bring it all back home and provide a 'round trip' that is part of the geographical quality to the songs. Blues structures suggest their resolutions right from the start, while folk ballads circle infinitely around refrains. Dylan's phrasing also brings a sense of stability even as he is 'displacing' linguistic commonplaces; examples include the role of 'idiot' in 'Idiot Wind', or feel/own/home/stone in 'Like A Rolling Stone', or, earlier still, 'pawn' in 'Only A Pawn In Their Game'. Blues is a recurring real, a music that 'always returns to the same place', that brings the real back home we might say and reminds us of the lost causes of the past (Žižek 271). Home is the pull here, and even though one's feet point away from the past, this says nothing about the temptation to turn around and look behind. Displacement derives its power from the pull of place and the two shed light on each other. As Dylan said of *Time out of Mind*: 'I try to live within that line between despondency and hope. I'm suited to walk that line, right between the fire...I see the album straight down the middle of the line, really' (Cott 399).

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