

## Visions of Visions of Johanna\*

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Visions of Johanna, from the album “Blonde on Blonde,” represents, in my opinion, the apogee of Bob Dylan’s poetic achievement. “Blonde on Blonde” is the third of what is widely considered to be Dylan’s trilogy of most mature, lyrically complex, surrealistic and highly developed albums, following “Bringing it all Back Home,” and “Highway 61 Revisited.” What separates *Visions*, in my view, is the establishment of a multiplicity of profound themes, philosophies, structures and symbols, which all manage to seamlessly conjoin and read as a satisfyingly surreal, organic narrative. One of Dylan’s early poetic idols was Rimbaud, and it is in this poem, that he not only equals him, but also Rimbaud’s more obtusely erudite contemporary, Mallarme. In this essay, I will examine the verses with the attempt to, paraphrasing what Dylan said in “Gates of Eden,” “shovel a glimpse into the ditch of what each one means.”

The primary themes of *Visions* are the existential struggle of man for self-determination – freedom, if you will, and the struggle between the duality of *Geist und Natur*, the German terms for spirit and nature. Spirit represents the ideal inner world - the immortal Platonic ideal, and nature, the outer world with its attendant limitations of mortality. One thinks of Baudelaire’s paradox of “Spleen and Ideal,” where the natural world controls us, in fact seduces us with evil intent, while the ideal exists as romantically idealistic/nostalgic imagination, or perhaps as the divinely consecrated self. In any event, Dylan portrays the conflict in an understanding of the self, and one’s awareness of his inner and outer worlds.

As in all great art, it isn’t necessarily the originality of the themes that merit profundity, but rather the way they are expressed; the story they tell, and in this particular case, the way they simultaneously intertwine. What sets *Visions* apart is Dylan’s use of his own time and place in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and utilizing that particular vernacular in which he assumes the role, in effect, of a “Shakespeare as American hipster.” Since the poem appears in the form of a song, and it is sung and played on musical instruments, a third dimension is introduced. In addition to the duality of inner and outer, physical and spiritual, predestination and self-determination, and immortal vs mortal in poetic, written form, the hand and literal voice of the creator is objectively displayed as we encounter the work. The narrator is literally transmitting his work aurally, with inflections and specifically targeted phrasing, and since it is sung with his own musical accompaniment, we are provided with a more dramatically subjective vehicle with which to receive it; a multi-media presentation that transcends even a mere reading of one’s poem as poets in the manner as T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost and others have done in the past, or even the beat poets who read to the backdrop of jazz.

Allen Ginsberg\*\* acknowledged that Dylan, (among other, what he called “young minstrels,” such as Donovan), thought in words and music simultaneously, and generated poetic forms that “outwardly resemble antique verse including regular stanzas, refrains and rhymes.” Ginsberg elaborated on this, characterizing it as a “new ear....a living musician’s ear,” that “is not dead only for eye-page, it’s connected with a voice improvising, with hesitations aloud, a living musician’s ear.”

The structure of *Visions* is arranged in 5 stanzas, with the number of lines in each being 7,8,7,8 and 12. The rhyme scheme is AAA, BBBB, CC. Louis Morgan points out, “The effect

of the rhyme, especially the central one, which is the longest, is to lyricize the song, creating an ordered rhythm to it. The separate rhymes also determine demarcation points in the song. The stanzas can be seen as divided into three basic parts: the first part (the first three lines) constituting an exposition; the second part (the next four lines) forms the body of the stanza; the last part (the last two lines) not only concludes the stanzas, but also unites the parts of the poem into a whole with the repeated references to the 'visions of Johanna.'

The poem begins with a question, "*Ain't it just like the night to play tricks when you're trying to be so quiet?*" Right from the start, Dylan establishes an essential existential dilemma conveyed in the aforementioned "hipster" vernacular. The scene is set at night, when darkness obscures reality and meaning. Man's role in the universe is represented in the classic existential position of no importance, and having no control, as darkness far overwhelms one's ability to see, both in the literal visual sense, and in the sense of understanding. Perhaps the grimmest use of this symbol is Elie Wiesel's use of night as a metaphor for the Nazi concentration camps. Night also figures in the poem's subsequent use of other symbols of nature. "We sit here stranded, though we're all doin' our best to deny it." Perhaps it is Dylan's aim to, as I paraphrase Schoenberg, "transfigure" the night.

The existential theme continues, and mocks mankind's attempt to deny its position in the universe. No action man can take will get him out of this overwhelmingly helpless metaphysical position. Dylan has spoken of this in other works before such as in "It's Alright Ma" - "for them that think death's honesty won't fall upon them naturally..." being "Stuck inside of Mobile....;" the character of Mr. Jones in *Ballad of a Thin Man* - "Oh my god, am I here all alone?" One thinks of Beckett's stranded characters like Estragon and Vladimir, and Hamm and Clov, Albee's *Mommy and Daddy* in the "Sandbox," Sartre's character of Roquentin in "Nausea," who struggles with a world that is indifferent to his aspirations, or Dylan's own "tired horses in the sun," which prevent any riding to be done, ie, any will to power. In "Absolutely Sweet Marie," Dylan uses six white horses as a symbol for freedom - in that case from a penitentiary. But these there is no freedom delivered from these tired horses. Finally, in Dylan's earlier "Ballad in Plain D," he posed the question, "Are birds free from the chains of the skyway?" If you take that kind of reasoning to its logical conclusion, then all creatures, including man only have a role to play out in the world without any self-determination, however, many questions still remain. Birds and other animals may not possess the level of (self)consciousness that man does, and perhaps man can transcend at least some of these chains, literally through space travel and metaphorically through inner enlightenment and meditation. At any rate, it is a beautiful and powerful poetic image that initiates a meditation on the concept of freedom.

The most salient invention man has created to deny the fact that we are alone and stranded, of course is God. Mankind, beginning in its earliest primitive state of awe, fabricated an imaginary being to help bring meaning to what he couldn't rationally understand; a being who loves us and created us in his image, and as the band the Animals facetiously wrote in the song, "Sky Pilot," "with God you're never alone," or Dylan himself - "For you don't count the dead, when God's on your side." When one, in modern times of rationality and science, has to create imaginary super beings, one is seriously in denial of the meaninglessness of (his position in) the universe. Perhaps by doing our best to deny our stranded position is the only way we can get through life, but by what means? Camus cites the myth of Sisyphus, where our lives are nothing more than a metaphor for rolling a rock up the side of a mountain over and over again. Dylan asks, in "Stuck Inside

of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again," what price do you have to pay to get out of going through all these things twice?" His existentially trapped character in that song is so isolated, that "the post office has been stolen and the mailbox is locked." Camus offers only the solution of trying to not be conscious of this meaningless dilemma. Sartre concludes that people are free to make their own meaning: a freedom that is also a responsibility, because without that commitment there will be no meaning. In "All Along the Watchtower," Dylan provides a pretty serviceable solution, as spoken by the character of the thief - "there are many here among us, who feel that life is but a joke." Humor may be the most sane course. It is no accident that Dylan, as a Jew, would recognize this, as humor has helped sustain the Jews through centuries of persecution. As alluded to earlier, in *Visions*, he provides several sets of contrasting dynamics - opposites that struggle for his soul.

The song continues, "*And Louise holds a handful of rain, tempting you to defy it.*" The first option is represented in the figure of Louise, who symbolizes *Natur*, the sensual, the physical. She holds a handful of rain, a symbol of nature that can be either gentle or harmful, as in his early song, "A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall," which rain symbolized nuclear destruction, "Percy's Song," - "Turn, turn to the rain and the wind," in which rain symbolizes a force that acts upon man that man cannot control - in essence, "nature." In "Just Like Tom Thumb Blues," he begins with "When you're lost in the rain in Juarez..." "If Not For You," - "My sky would fall, rain would gather too," "Sign on the Window" - "Looks like a-nothing but rain..." and of course there's "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35," where everybody must get stoned, in the sense of either or both getting high or pelted with stones in the biblical punishment sense of the phrase. Seth Rogovoy absurdly posits, that since Dylan's mother's maiden name was Stone, he is asserting his influence over everyone, assuming the identity of Robert Stone," although it is far too farfetched to buy into. In this case, the rain, like the tune by Louis Bonfa, "Gentle Rain," is the soft, sensual kind, the "life-giving waters" that Jimi Hendrix mentions, the sexual orgasmic wetness, the safety and warmth of the womb. We know how powerful a force sex is - it has to be in order to proliferate our species, and every advertiser knows that sex sells. So Louise is a powerful force, just daring him to defy her (it). Yet Baudelaire would ascribe pernicious characteristics to this physical manifestation, as will be illustrated later in the poem. And one thinks of the Greek mythological sirens, whose singing lures sailors to their deaths.

*"Lights flicker from the opposite loft; In this room the heat pipes just cough; The country music station plays soft, But there's nothing, really nothing to turn off."* The character, be it Dylan or all of us, or someone else is in the darkness, sees, or perhaps doesn't see lights flickering from somewhere in the distance - in this case, a loft, which implies an urban setting, in fact, an older building, like a pre-war New York City one (where Dylan was living when he wrote this song), in which old steam pipes are "coughing." The flickering lights imply an antiquated and dangerous electrical system with a short circuit, and perhaps bare light bulbs - an image and similar environment used in his earlier "Ballad in Plain D," where he wrote, "beneath a bare light bulb the plaster did pound." Philosophically, the character is situated; stranded, and helpless, as it were, in the darkness, and the flickering lights are coming from a different location - the "opposite loft." So nature, as represented by night, leaves man in ontological ignorance, trying to make sense of the nature of the world. The lights, which are man-made, reflect an epistemological achievement of learning/knowledge as to what man can do in his world. What kind of "will to power", to quote Nietzsche can he can take,? It's at least a step toward understanding his role in the world. Yet the lights are only flickering. There is only a glimmer of understanding, and it's coming from another place while observed from the

darkness. The light is coming from the *opposite* loft – the opposite of darkness. It is interesting to note that in this passage, Dylan conveys this action and existential ponderousness using the device of sensory symbols. Lights and darkness – vision; country music and heat pipes coughing – sound. Also of interest is how he anthropomorphizes inanimate objects in such a natural way, so as to make perfect sense – the night plays tricks, heat pipes cough. Conversely, is Louise an actual woman or possibly an inanimate symbol?

With heat pipes coughing, country music playing on a radio, and lights flickering, Dylan concludes that “there’s nothing, really nothing to turn off.” This affirms man’s helpless position in his universe, in which action attempted in altering what his senses perceive is fruitless. Either he can’t, or doing so won’t improve his condition, or perhaps he can’t trust his senses, and these perceptions are not real! At any rate, to paraphrase Louis Morgan, the flickering lights do not fully brighten the darkness, the soft music doesn’t fully fill the silence, the heat pipes do not overcome the cold. None of these external manmade devices improve the narrator’s condition, nor lessen his unhappiness. It’s a clue, early in the poem that profound change can only come from within.

The first stanza concludes with “*Just Louise, and her lover so entwined. And these visions, of Johanna, that conquer my mind.*” We’ve already been introduced to Louise, who is defiantly holding a handful of rain. Now who is this other woman, Johanna? We know she’s the object in the title of the song. Why is she described as appearing in a vision, while Louise isn’t? And why is she the one, and not Louise, who conquers his mind? Dylan plays a poetic game with us by feeding us these clues bit by bit until he gives us, literally and symbolically, the key to it all later in the poem.

The second stanza begins “*In the empty lot where the ladies play blindman’s bluff with the key chain*” The existential stage has shifted from a mysterious room to an empty lot, and the characters, who may be any ladies, or could possibly be Louise and Johanna, play blindman’s bluff with the key chain. Blindman’s bluff is another symbol for darkness/night and the meaninglessness of existence. Man searches for the answers to the meaning of his being, which is symbolized by the key chain – the key to unlock the mystery. Searching for the key to meaning proves to be a fruitless game of fumbling around in the dark.

The poem continues, “*And the all-night girls, they whisper of escapades out on the “D” train.*” This image, set on Manhattan’s primarily west side subway, is a metaphor for sensuality, another manifestation of Louise, as “all-night” girls would most likely be a way of describing working girls. Why the D train, specifically? While it could be arbitrarily chosen as a subway train, and this may be an interpretive stretch, it could also be, in this context, symbolic of death – the train leading us through life and ending in the subterranean realm of death. One thinks of Orpheus, like Dylan, a musician who travels to the underworld. The rapture of sensuality is but temporary and fleeting on the journey to this underworld. Even at its literal meaning, by specifying the D train, Dylan paints a vivid picture for the imagination – a sophisticated poetic device that is far more effective in garnering our interest than if he had merely said, “the subway.”

And next, “*We can hear the night watchman click his flashlight, ask himself if it’s him or them that’s insane.*” The night watchman’s query could, on one level, be referring to the cat and mouse games of sensuality played between the hookers and the johns, and the watchman himself, whose job it is to soberly maintain order. He obviously cannot be a

participant in this activity, and wonders whether remaining morally above or joining in with this activity is the sane, responsible way to act. But on another level, the night watchman could symbolize God, who said "Let there be light." The night watchman holds a flashlight and watches over the train. In a metaphysical sense, even God questions his own sanity while observing the activities of his creation. Dylan utilizes this symbol later on in other works, such as "All Along the Watchtower," and "Watching the River Flow."

Continuing, "*Louise, she's all right, she's just near/She's delicate and seems like the mirror/But she just makes it all too concise and too clear/That Johanna's not here.*" At this point, Dylan begins to establish the dichotomy between Louise and Johanna. Louise represents the sensual. She's delicate and easily obtainable, in fact, if necessary, she can be bought. That was established by the "all-night ladies." Dylan interjects the word "just" as to her whereabouts. This clues us into her position as lower on the pecking order of importance than Johanna. "Just" is another way of saying "only," or "merely." Alas, we should have already known that, since the work is entitled, "Visions of Johanna," not "Visions of Louise." There also may be substantial ground to theorize as to the use of the specific names, Louise and Johanna. Dylan was inevitably familiar with at least one of the many versions of the blues song "Louise, Louise," which has been attributed to, depending on the version, Big Bill Broonzy, Johnny Temple, Horace Malcom & Charlie McCoy, and Brownie McGhee, and performed by countless artists. It tells of a two-timing sensual female - "Louise, Louise, what you trying to do? Trying to love me gal, and love another man too." As for Johanna, the popular assumption is that he was referring to Joan Baez, who he had been dating around that time, yet was leaving for Sara Lownds, the "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands," who became his first wife. It would seem that Sara would fit the "Johanna" bill for him at this stage more than Joan, yet there is another reference that would relate - that of Joan of Arc. Dylan was enamored with historical figures, and made liberal use of them in his works. Joan of Arc was known to have had visions that she claimed came from God, and stood her ground for her spiritual beliefs, gaining her own entry into sainthood.

So why does Dylan employ "visions?" Visions are ethereal, mysterious, unobtainable. They are supernatural and quite possibly imaginary. Louise, who is the embodiment (no pun intended) of the physical, is like the mirror. When we look into a mirror, of course we see ourselves. All we see is the physical - our egos examine and analyze what we look like, and in our vanity, hope to look good to others. We try to look outward but only see ourselves, and our inner problems. A satisfying province for the physical is the sensual. As Freud pointed out, it's the way we're hard-wired, and those kinds of drives early on contribute toward the establishment of who we are. Dylan once stated in an interview "The trick is to stay away from mirror images. The only true mirrors are puddles of water.....The image you see in a puddle of water is consumed by depth. An image you see when you look into a piece of glass has no depth or life-flutter movement. Of course, you may want to check your tie.....Vanity sells a lot of things." And you may not like what you see. One thinks of the myth of Narcissus whose self-worship of his reflected image led to his demise, and Dylan's scornful warning in "License to Kill," "Now he worships at an altar of a stagnant pool /And when he sees his reflection, he's fulfilled."

The next two lines are, in my view, tied with a couple upcoming lines in this poem for some of the greatest lines in the history of literature. "*The ghost of electricity howls in the bones of her face/Where these visions of Johanna, have now taken my place.*" Johanna is fully revealed to be the spiritual, incorporeal, eternal energy of the human being, as contrasted with Louise, the physical, sensual, and comparatively mundane. The imagery

of the “ghost of electricity” is itself, a complex juxtaposition of two powerfully intangible entities – “electricity” as an invisible physical force of energy that is one of the primal components of the universe, and “ghost,” as a mystical, mythical, incorporeal, yet eternal and universal archetype of the imagination. This awesome ghost of electricity, is spiritually, soulfully and forcefully “howling” in “the bones of her face,” which represents the physical, earthly tangible human manifestation. How can one argue that this image is not as profound as anything ever written? Like a sonata or symphony, Dylan employs what’s called a half cadence - chords that give a sense of semi-closure or ending in the last line, “*Oh, it’s so hard to get on/And these visions of Johanna, they kept me up past the dawn.*” The poem could have ended here, because we are given the scenario of the existential man struggling to understand his purpose in life, and eventually realizes there’s more to it, a greater spiritual, metaphysical power than just the mundane physical, and it culminates in this bold image of a skull with the ghost of electricity howling from within it. Yet Dylan has more to add and develop. Much more.

The third stanza reads, “*Now little boy lost, he takes himself so seriously/He brags of his misery, he likes to live dangerously.*” This line reminds me, in a Dylanesque self-referential sense, to his character of “Baby Blue,” from the song “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue.” Baby Blue, which one imagines to allude to Dylan’s own baby blue eyes (or Joan Baez calling them “bluer than robins’ eggs), is a naive, inexperienced child who is being tutored by the narrator to learn and move on in life. Little boy lost, seems to have self-consciously created a persona for himself of being a daredevil, heroic bad-boy figure. But in the symbolic narrative of this poem, he is the existentially lost child (or man) who has deluded himself into believing he has found the answers. Bragging about misery is a pathological posture; one demonstrating immaturity and foolishness. He has yet to learn the lesson described in his next album on the song “All Along the Watchtower,” where, as I previously pointed out, the character of the thief understands that “life is but a joke.” And prior to this, in “Desolation Row,” the very serious intellectuals Ezra Pound and T.S. Elliot are trumped out of their academic/ivory “captain’s tower” by calypso dancers and flower-holding fishermen who know how to *feel* and not just think. Dylan also illustrated the same point in “Ballad of a Thin Man,” where the protagonist Mr. Jones has been with professors and lawyers and read all of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s books, yet is befuddled as he is ridiculed and abused by a carnival geek, a sword swallower, and a one-eyed midget. As Neil Young pointed out in “On the Way Home,” “Though we rush ahead to save our time, we are only what we feel.” Dylan also instills the ultimate wisdom in his even earlier character of the ideal woman in “Love Minus Zero/No Limit,” referred to as “My love;” she is so wise that “she knows too much to argue or to judge.” My old Chinese Chan (Zen) Buddhism teacher used to say, “everybody right, everybody wrong.” This woman is obviously wise beyond her years.

Of course, the act of living dangerously is not entirely a negative trait. The saying, “no risk, no reward,” certainly supports this to a degree. One of Dylan’s favorite themes throughout his career has been the outlaw. Think of John Wesley Harding, a gunslinger who was “never known to make a foolish move,” his homages to such characters as incarcerated Black Panther George Jackson, convicted murderer Ruben “Hurricane” Carter, and murdered mafia gangster Joey Gallo. In the film “Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid,” Dylan played Alias, a knife-throwing outlaw in the wild west. When asked in an interview if he considers himself to be a poet, Dylan replied, “I don’t like the word. I’m a trapeze artist.” This is a brilliant statement, as it not only implies a cutting edge, risky creative force, but the very use of the word “trapeze artist” is a fitting poetic metaphor. Dylan isn’t just using labels and categorizations, but is demonstrating to the interviewer the process of poetry

in motion – the very act of creation. Once he wrote, “I accept chaos. I’m not sure it accepts me.” Thus, Dylan implies, that in order to achieve anything remarkable, the artist must take risks and thrive amidst chaos. Safety only produces mediocrity. We’ve seen this in all the arts. The trailblazers engender the most creative energy to their respective genre, and prove to be the most interesting, long lasting and least outdated over time. Compare the prolific cutting edge, history-making innovations of Miles Davis with the insipid, derivative music of Wynton Marsallis.

The poem continues, *“And when bringing her name up, he speaks of a farewell kiss to me.”* This is a most ambiguous line in terms of subject. Dylan doesn’t reference who “she” is, and states a new male character as “he.” This is the same strangely ambiguous subject reference he employs in another song on the same album, “Fourth Time Around,” where there is a first person “I” and a woman “she,” then out of nowhere, in the third verse appears a “you in your wheelchair.” And the ambiguity continues in the verse *“He’s sure got a lot of gall, to be so useless and all, muttering small talk at the wall, while I’m in the hall. How can I explain, oh it’s so hard to get on. And these visions of Johanna, they kept me up past the dawn.”* The most plausible explanation I can come up with is that both the newly introduced “he” and the aforementioned first person “me” and “I” are all the narrator, ie Dylan. One can view this as different aspects of his personality or being, much like Hindu gods are various manifestations of Brahman, or as Dylan later exhibits in his film “Renaldo and Clara,” where although he appears on screen, another actor (Ronnie Hawkins) is the one called “Bob Dylan.” In the song “I and I,” There is once again a split in his identity, which in this case, relates to the dichotomy between mortal man and the divine, paraphrasing Hashem’s decree to Moses, “no man sees my face and lives.” It is known that Dylan was familiar with Rimbaud’s work, including his well known proclamation of “je est un autre,” or “I am another.” The poet does not control what is expressed in him – art comes from a deep and mysterious place within one’s soul. As Rimbaud further elucidates, “I attend the birth of my thought: I watch, I listen ..” As a jazz musician improvises, his fingers lead the way, and his mind carefully follows. The state of being can best be described as “preconscious” – unconsciousness entering into consciousness, or what some refer to as “the zone.”

Dylan’s split subjects in this stanza are symbolic representations of this phenomena of being. He is simultaneously watching himself from out in the hall, and making judgments or evaluations of his “useless” behavior. One could equate this with “helpless” behavior, in an existential sense, and/or a negation of the romantic sense of self-seriousness that the character of “little boy lost” plays – the braggingly dangerous, serious, farewell kisser. The self-seriousness of this identity is but folly when observed from the existential objective vantage point of the hall. In “I and I,” mortal man’s nature “neither honors nor forgives,” yet the divine nature cannot be viewed, or known by man. Man is made in God’s image, yet can he ever know his divine self?

Dylan struggles with this dichotomy as he concludes, *“How can I explain? Oh it’s so hard to get on. And these visions of Johanna, they kept me up past the dawn.”* The parallel between “I and I” is easy to see – mortal man vs the divine, and in “Visions,” the physical vs the spiritual. Also of note, in stating that these visions kept him up past the dawn, the power of these spiritual revelations are such that they transcend time, as marked by the 24 hour cycle of day and night. By realizing them, one comes to an altered, higher level of consciousness, and even achieves an eternal awakening, such as nirvana, where the cycle of rebirths has finally ended.

The next stanza begins, *"Inside the museum, infinity goes up on trial. Voices echo this is what salvation must be like after a while. But Mona Lisa must have had the highway blues, you can tell by the way she smiles."* In my view, this poetic line, along with the previously referred to line, "The ghost of electricity..." are among the greatest lines of poetry in the English language. The very concept of infinity going up on trial is something to be reckoned with by any measure. My analysis of this profound statement and its ensuing lines are as follows: The infinity that Dylan refers to is not the purely objective use of the term, as it has been pretty much a forgone conclusion by astrophysicists and cosmologists that the human species is but a tiny, instantaneous insignificant blip in the overall timescale of the universe. What is significant, is the subjective measure of mankind to its development since its inception, and until its termination, whether it comes from warfare, disease, global warming or the sun's demise.

We look at the nearly 5000 year old Great Sphinx of Giza, Egypt, or the roughly 13,000 year old Venus of Willendorf figure, and see a record of mankind's achievements and thoughts, and through them, ponder the essence of our nature. In essence, everything we do can be possibly placed as a recorded bit of evidence regarding our existence, our nature, our behavior, our thoughts, our dreams, that can be quantifiably and quantitatively analyzed by future generations. This cultural continuum from the earliest appearance of man to the end of the species is what Dylan refers to as "infinity." It is the quantitative aspect that engenders the "going up on trial." Historians, psychologists, sociologists, artists, poets, philosophers, and the like will judge the actions and achievements of the past according to their own subjective agendas and, as Dylan once said, "draw conclusions on the wall." And these conclusions are themselves merely temporal events, as certain philosophic and aesthetic trends tend to go in and out of style over time.

Yet in this stanza, Dylan carefully chooses an iconic archetype - as close to a Platonic ideal as one could imagine, in Leonardo's painting of the "Mona Lisa," housed in the Louvre behind bulletproof glass. A Platonic ideal such as this painting certainly qualifies as "infinity" in the annals of Western culture. Yet Dylan puts it on trial. Since there is no absolute meaning in the existential life, and there is no God in it to judge, man alone must be the judge, and nothing is beyond reproach for questioning. In using the word "trial," one need remember what Joseph K encountered in Kafka's "The Trial." Reality can be quite the underestimated experience! This is a favorite theme of Dylan's. Man is always on trial by a judge - be it God or his own consciousness. In "Drifter's Escape," the judge says, "you fail to understand.....why must you even try?" In "Percy's Song," the judge spoke "out of the side of his mouth," and grimly states, "his sentence is passed and it cannot be repealed." In the "Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," the judge disingenuously pounds his gavel to show that "the ladder of the law has no top and no bottom." In "The Death of Emmett Till," the "trial was a mockery." In "Most Likely You Go Your Way," "The judge, he holds a grudge, he's gonna call on you." And in "I Shall be Released," is a man in a lonely crowd who's "crying out that he was framed."

The opening line of infinity going up on trial sets up the next one, *"Voices echo this is what salvation must be like after a while."* The use of the word "echo," is perfect. You can see and hear the echo of voices in the massive halls of the Louvre in the middle of the night. The voices that echo can even be thought of as being spoken by the "ghosts of electricity." Yes, Leonardo has achieved salvation by virtue of having created the most famous painting in the history of mankind, yet it is hanging there, naked for all to see on



the wall. Lest we forget Marcel Duchamp's painting of the Mona Lisa with a mustache in 1919? And Leonardo himself has been long dead, buried in the ground in Italy, while a painting he made in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century hangs on a wall in a museum in Paris. This painting – nothing more than paint and lacquer on a poplar panel just sits up there in a climate-controlled atmosphere behind bulletproof glass, while hordes of tourists wait in line to pass by it for a glimpse, mostly to tell the folks back home that they've seen it. So this is salvation? Nu?

Dylan surmises that "Mona Lisa musta had the highway blues, you can tell by the way she smiles." This line is a brilliant juxtaposition of the high-toned metaphysical symbolist language he's been utilizing with the profane, earthy roots of his musical training, the blues. It beckons back to my characterisation of him as "Shakespeare as American hipster." Here he refers to the highway as a passage through time. The highway is a common metaphor in blues music, ("Key to the Highway," "61 Highway," "Highway Blues,") and Dylan's own "Highway 61," "51 Highway," "Down the Highway." The bluesman is a hard-living figure, drinking, womanizing, oppressed by the white man, and often characterized as traveling on the road, the highway, rambling, or hopping a freight train. Yet this metaphor has come to be figuratively understood as seeking something better, and in the poetic sense, seeking a truth. Dylan takes this high-cultural icon and in essence, humanizes her with an injection of down home Mississippi Delta blues. Why not? The "powers that be" have sequestered her into being this austere icon of invincible high culture, yet she was painted by a flesh and blood guy back in 1503, and she was an actual flesh and blood woman named Lisa Gherardini. Dylan's poetic imagination has her on trial and being judged down the highway of time over the past 500 years. And like Joseph K in Kafka's "The Trial," her smile may be the only way she has of coping with the absurdity of the meaninglessness of it all. Once again comes that line from *Watchtower*, "there are many here among us, who feel that life is but a joke."

In keeping with the basic theme of the poem/song, one shouldn't lose sight of the symbolism at play here. To have reached this exalted place in the highest palace of "infinite" human culture, the Louvre, Mona Lisa has to be considered to be an icon of the spiritual, of *geist*. Only icons of that magnitude get the privilege of being on trial in infinity. Yet on the other hand, she famously exhibits her little smile, a smile whose meaning has been fiercely debated for centuries. Is it one of enlightened knowing or a sign of the highway blues, as Dylan suggests? Naturally, it could realistically be neither, but for the sake of the symbolism of this poem, it opens the door for interpretation as to whether it symbolizes the physical nature of Louise or the spiritual nature of Johanna. Perhaps she is the embodiment of both – the yin and the yang.

The next stanza reads "*See the primitive wallflower freeze, when the jelly-faced women all sneeze, hear the one with the mustache say, 'Jeeze, I can't find my knees.'*" Dylan uses the spoken word, "freeze," but he could just have well spelled it "frieze." He's segueing from the museum, and a frieze is a bas-relief sculpture appearing on the surface of architecture. Perhaps it's just my visual art background, but I always had an image in my mind of a primitive wallflower *frieze* in the museum. Yet, it could also refer to the more conventional meaning of an old lady (or man), who is an observer of the "jelly-faced women" who are so fat, they can't find their knees. In any interpretation, it's an undeniably humorous image, and a poignant one at that. In a literal sense, it's a shrewd observation of the old bitties who frequent art museums with their friends after their luncheons and blab away about nothing – usually either what college their grandchild is going to or their "brilliant" insights into the artwork on display that they haven't a clue

about. Symbolically, you have the spiritually significant primitive wallflower, who is still alive – in fact, eternal, and the physical jelly-faced women who have aged poorly, losing all traces of femininity by sporting a mustache, and losing all sense of self, not being able to find her own knees.

The stanza ends, *“Oh, jewels and binoculars hang from the head of the mule. But these visions of Johanna, they make it all seem so cruel.”* This beautiful surreal and symbolist image, that would be at home in a Dali painting, can be interpreted as such: The jewels are the spiritual – “diamonds are forever” (Johanna), the mule is the mundane “animal instinct” physical (Louise), and the binoculars are the tool that facilitates one to see, or gain access to the visions of Johanna, which are beyond man’s ordinary senses. This image also reflects the dichotomy of man’s existence being no more important or meaningful than an animal’s, yet what sets him apart from the other animals is his ability to look beyond his immediate senses, to explore, and to seek what is precious or valuable. A point of interest is that the cover of the later Rolling Stones album “Get Yer Ya, Ya’s Out,” features a donkey (almost a mule) wearing binoculars – no doubt a wink to “his Bobness.” Cleverly, Dylan ends the verse by saying the visions make it all “seem so cruel.” That neatly ties the repeated chorus in each verse, (and these visions of Johanna....) into the image of Mona Lisa having the highway blues. She’s an immortal image, yet it hasn’t come easy, and she’s still got the blues.

The last stanza begins, *“The peddler now speaks to the countess who’s pretending to care for him, sayin’ ‘Name me someone that’s not a parasite and I’ll go out and say a prayer for him. But as Louise always says, ‘Ya can’t look at much, can you man?’ as she herself, prepares for him.”* Typical of Dylan’s high phase, as this work is representative, he introduces exotic surreal characters; in this case, a peddler and a countess. These figures, injected into the story/poem, immediately create a story within the story; vivid images of another time and place – possibly Paris or Germany or Russia or Italy where disheveled peddlers wandered the same streets as countesses. One could almost visualize a period piece film before one’s very eyes. And the power of this visualization, evoked with only two words! In the song “Absolutely Sweet Marie,” on the same album, “Blonde on Blonde,” in Dylan creates the same magic by introducing “the riverboat captain,” and “the Persian drunkard.”

Not only is the introduction of these two “exotic” characters evocative, but the action he instills in them is far more so. One would imagine a street peddler’s life never intersecting with that of a countess, who would only deal with the highest level of merchants. Yet here, not only do their lives intersect, but there is some kind of vaguely-defined intimate relationship! She’s “pretending to care for him.” Why would she do that? Why would she have to? Remember, we’re dealing with a surreal sequence where dreams are real and reality is a dream. Nothing need make sense. Yet surrealism is a device that Dylan uses to symbolically tease and enchant us with the profound thesis he has created for the delight of our minds. Unlike some of the great symbolist poets, whose brilliance stuns us once we unlock the mystery of their verse, Dylan’s reaches us on both the immediately literal as well as on the symbolic level. His imagery can stand on its own as titillating mysteries that draw us in for their own sake. In addition to being a great poet and tactical symbolist, Dylan is a master storyteller.

In this particular encounter between the peddler and the countess, she apparently has accused him of being “a parasite,” or something alluding to that. Perhaps this is due to the class difference – her looking down her nose at him. Yet she has engaged him enough

to be “pretending to care for him.” It seems the truth has been revealed, and he lets her have it, letting her know in no uncertain terms that she is no better than him. Everyone is a parasite in some way. We all need others for something. In “George Jackson,” Dylan wrote, “Some of us are prisoners, the rest of us are guards.” And the word “prayer” is a symbol for the spiritual, so even within the context of the mundane physical, and even in the mocking tone, the spiritual is placed above it.

Suddenly, Louise is brought back directly into the verse. Although it isn’t explicitly said who she is addressing, her words are a sarcastic rejoinder that Johanna, the spiritual, is unobtainable, and that one may as well be satisfied with engaging in the delights of the physical. Her spoken line and action here, (“Ya can’t look at much, can ya man?, as she herself prepares for him”) parallels the earlier reference to the “all night girls” whispering of escapades on the D train. The attitude expressed is one of a working girl – an emotionally vapid performance of the carnal. By this point, Dylan is giving shape to a value judgment in the comparison of the physical and spiritual. They are not merely opposites, but the spiritual is on a higher plane, because it is more difficult to obtain, and it is longer lasting. By inference, it is a more important part of the human condition.

The stanza continues, *“And Madonna, she still has not showed; We see this empty cage now corrode; Where her cape of the stage once had flowed.”* The Madonna, of course represents the virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, possibly the symbolic depiction in the Mona Lisa, and another guise for Johanna, the spiritual. But she is nowhere in sight. The attempt of man is to capture and hold the spiritual, yet the symbol of an empty cage says it all. The cage is corroded, and this once again evokes another time Dylan has used this metaphor, in the earlier work, “Gates of Eden,” where he writes, “With a time-rusted compass blade, Aladdin and his lamp; Sits with utopian hermit monks, side saddle on the golden calf.” This is a stunning surreal montage of the mythological protagonist of an old Arabian tale is sitting with holy men wannabees who search for utopia, yet are perched upon a golden calf, a symbol for a false god. They appear to be looking for god in all the wrong places! The assurance that they have lost their way is symbolized by the rusted compass blade. Yet they have been painted as archetypes, holy men stranded in the fabric of time.

Dylan continues, *“Where her cape of the stage once had flowed.”* The Madonna as traditionally depicted in paintings and sculptures wore long, cape-like robes, and was often seated on a throne, which was elevated like a stage. From the inception of Christianity until the 18<sup>th</sup> century Age of Enlightenment, the Madonna and other biblical figures unquestionably dominated the consciousness of mankind in the Western world, in visual art, music, philosophy, politics and most other aspects of life. She (the Madonna) was unquestionably the leading actress on the stage for over 1500 years, when the spiritual held precedence over the physical.

*“The fiddler, he now steps to the road. He writes ‘everything’s been returned which was owed, on the back of the fish truck that loads, while my conscience explodes.”* The figure of the fiddler brings to mind the emperor Nero fiddling while Rome burns, Marc Chagall’s Jewish fiddler on the roofs of the Russian *shtetls*, as well as Dylan’s own powerful image in “Desolation Row” of Einstein playing electric violin. Coincidentally, the aforementioned Nero also appears in Desolation Row (“Praise be to Nero’s Neptune”). This poem is, after all, a song as well, so the fiddler acts as a kind of Greek chorus here, or a minstrel, or griot. He is summarizing the story for us, on the road, which can be looked at as the

storyline, or the road to knowledge. Another word for road is highway, and remember, Mona Lisa had the highway blues!

At this juncture, Dylan brings closure to the story, as he introduces the final image of the "fish truck." The fish is a Christian symbol for baptism – a spiritual transformation. Parallel examples of the truck/head symbol can be seen in the earlier song "From a Buick 6" in which he states, "I need a dump truck mama, to unload my head," and in the later, "Day of the Locusts," where "trucks were unloading.....the man standing next to me, his head was exploding." For Dylan, the truck is a vehicle for his thoughts, for processing and evaluating them. In declaring "Everything's been returned which was owed," there is finally a renunciation of the physical – of Louise, being swapped for the spiritual of Johanna. Louise prepares herself sexually for the narrator, who decides to pass her by and instead, give his self to the Madonna. This final revelation, after a period of building up throughout the entire poem, comes to a dynamic, dramatic conclusion, in the manner of a Buddhist gaining satori, as he writes, "While my conscience explodes." The brilliance of this can also be seen in the formal structure of the poem, where, up until the couplet that ends each stanza, there is a strict, symmetrical number of lines. The first four stanzas have lines that number 7, 8, 7, 8. The final one cannot be constrained by those numbers as the clues rapidly gain momentum toward their conclusion, and 12 lines pour out, finishing with Dylan's self-conscious awareness, or even awakening that his conscience is exploding!

Finally, now that his conscience has exploded, he has entered into a higher consciousness where he can see the fictional story as well as his own real-time telling of it. He states, "*The harmonicas play, the skeleton keys and the rain. And these visions of Johanna, are now all that remain.*" Dylan is bringing into the written poem the objective consciousness of his own harmonica playing while singing the song, as well as the skeleton keys – the clues to unlock all the symbols in the song. At the end of "Desolation Row," he states, "All these people that you mention, yes I know them, they're quite lame. I had to rearrange their faces, and give them all another name." Dylan provides clues throughout the work in the form of symbols – people, some of which are historical figures, engaged in various acts. At the end, he reveals that they are, indeed symbols and to understand them, it takes an act of analyzing their hidden meaning (rearranging faces and giving them different names). In *Visions*, the skeleton keys provide this, well, key to the poem, as does the aforementioned sound of his voice and harmonica.

The rain, symbol for sensuality, will always be a part of man's inner nature and outer social universe, but at last, the narrator has attained the spiritual, or whatever you want to call it - eternal bliss, the cosmic consciousness, the soul, nirvana; or at least he's come to terms with what's really important in life – the "meaning of life," if you will, and has found peace and enlightenment. Given the bleak beginning of the poem, and statement of man's existential condition, Dylan has crafted a brilliant journey for us in what Rimbaud termed, a "drunken boat," and through wrestling with such profound metaphysical issues in verse, has safely landed on the idyllic shores of the absolute. He's come to terms with his own subjective satisfaction, which has established meaning for him, and in effect, has viably formulated one answer to the existential issue at hand. By sharing this journey with his readers/listeners, perhaps we may come to understand and share his revelation, which will hopefully enrich our own lives.

*\* The inspiration for this essay was an essay written by Louis Morgan entitled, "Visions of Johanna: Dylan's Romantic Dilemma." It appeared in a collection of Dylan writings called "Dylan, a Commemoration," edited by Stephen Pickering, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, published in July of 1971. These were the early years of Dylan scholarship - kind of an underground intellectual movement where people could pick up these broadsides in hip, countercultural bookstores, and discuss the philosophy inside. It was at Kent State University in the early 70's that I discovered it, and I remember that my kindred spirit in discussing Dylan's lyrics was fellow artist Steve Wright, who was in my "Poetry Since 1945" class. We used to swap books by Camus and Sartre and talk about what Dylan's lyrics meant. Ah, those heady college days, before kids started just blankly staring into their cell phones for hours. Nowadays, Dylan scholarship is fairly mainstream. Aside from having won numerous awards, met with presidents, having lyrics quoted in newspapers and magazines more than possibly anyone, including Shakespeare, and having hundreds of books written about him, top literary scholars like Christopher Ricks, and others at Oxford, Princeton (where Dylan received an honorary doctorate degree), and universities throughout the world have written serious studies on his work, and have taught courses on his poetry. At any rate, getting back to Mr. Morgan's essay, I was greatly moved by it back then, and have looked over it a few times over the past 37 years, but did not read it prior to writing this essay. I wanted to write directly from my "kishkas" and after finishing, re-read his essay and compare. After all, it's just a guess but I assume I'm now much older than he was when he wrote his essay. But then again, I'm younger than that now.*

\*\* "Some Metamorphoses of Personal Prosody." By Allen Ginsberg.