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Tangled Generation: Dylan, Kerouac, Petrarch, and the Poetics of Escape

Timothy Hampton

And I alone escaped to tell you.

—Job (1:15)

1. Tracks

“Demonstrators found our house and paraded up and down in front of it chanting and shouting, demanding for me to come out and lead them somewhere—stop shirking my duties as the conscience of a generation. . . . The neighbors hated us. To them it must have seemed like I was something out of a carnival show.”¹ So writes Bob Dylan in his memoirs about his life in the late 1960s. Having given up performing after a motorcycle accident in 1966, Dylan was in semiretirement, trying to raise a family. Yet, at the same time, in the larger public imagination, he was expected and assumed to be everywhere, including the famous Woodstock festival, which was associated with him because of his earlier residence in the village of Woodstock. Indeed, the more Dylan was absent in the late 1960s the more he was present. His existence in the popular imagination was precisely that of a specter.

Beyond the difficult personal consequences of this situation, Dylan’s description raises two related but distinct problems in cultural history. The first is what happens when an artist is overcome or threatened by his or her own popularity. Dylan’s fans called for him to return to public life because he had been pigeonholed as a particular kind of antiestablishment artist. In 1965, he had tried to recalibrate his approach to his public by turning from folk music to rock and roll. But the very speed with which popular music is produced, circulated, and consumed limited the extent to which he could evade audience expectation. And in this regard Dylan’s fate is not unlike that of any number of artists who have had to flee their publics; J. D. Salinger’s retirement from publishing novels seems to have been linked to his very success with publishing novels. Perhaps the classic instance of flight from one’s audience is the case of Romain Gary, who invented an

I would like to thank the students in my 2009 Berkeley comparative literature course on the sonnet for their enthusiasm and patience. Thanks as well to Kate van Orden, Diana Thow, Albert Ascoli, Rob Kaufman, and Seth Lerer for their generous and thoughtful responses to an earlier draft of this essay.

1. Bob Dylan, *Chronicles* (New York, 2004), p. 118.

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alter ego, Émile Ajar, under whose name he published four novels and won France's most prestigious literary award, the Prix Goncourt, in 1975. This prize could only come, Gary wrote later, because he had abandoned his identity and legacy. As Romain Gary, "I was an author who was classified, catalogued, taken for granted," he wrote later.² This process of classification by the public, he notes, is a recent phenomenon; we might locate it, I suggest, in the post-World War II era because it reflects the rise to dominance of quickly produced media such as the long-playing record and the paperback novel.

This brings us to the second problem faced by Dylan: his status as "the conscience of a generation." His association with the so-called 1960s generation (evoked above by his canny characterization of the fans outside his house as "demonstrators") poses the problem of what we might call a generational poetics and of how figures associated with particular generational moments in artistic history may break free from those moments. Certainly there is some evidence to suggest that Dylan was already struggling to escape the 1960s before they were even over. Much of his recorded work following his retirement from performing seemed deliberately minor in its ambition: a dismal album of covers, some country-inflected songs, and a small role in a film. These projects were followed by *Planet Waves*, an album recorded quickly with his former backing group, The Band, and then a tour in their company. Then came a creative renaissance. *Blood on the Tracks*, perhaps his strongest album, was recorded in 1974, the

2. Romain Gary, "Life and Death of Émile Ajar," *King Solomon*, trans. Barbara Wright (New York, 1983), p. 244. The literary-historical problem I am after here falls somewhere between the problem studied by Theodor Adorno in "Bach Defended against his Devotees," where an audience distorts an artist's work after his death, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the problem of a "late style" studied by Edward Said, where an artist tries to write against his own moment and own earlier work. Because both of these critics focus on the high cultural (and relatively slow moving) world of European classical music, their analyses, while suggestive, fail to grasp the problem of how an audience immediately appropriates and shapes artistic legacy. This is a problem that is central to popular cultural forms, and, historically, to the post-World War II period; see Theodor W. Adorno, "Bach Defended against his Devotees," *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, 1983), and Edward W. Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain* (New York, 2006).

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year of Watergate, and released in early 1975, the moment of the fall of Saigon. It is his elegy to and escape from the 1960s.

Blood on the Tracks poses the problem of a generational poetics as it works out solutions to the weight of the past and the expectations of the “demonstrators.” I will locate that record in the history, not of post-Woodstock nostalgia, but, rather, of a denser and more archaic literary tradition that informs its poetics. Through the carefully considered use of earlier writers, among them Jack Kerouac and Francesco Petrarca or Petrarch, Dylan works out both a break with the myth of the sixties and a stylistic transition in his own songwriting.

It is as both an escape and the record of a struggle that we might understand the ambiguity of the album’s title. The “tracks” may refer to some image of a train that has run someone down, the tracks of a fugitive whom the singer either incarnates or is seen to pursue, or the tracks—the songs—of the record itself. This density of allusion motivates the several levels on which the album works. On one level, it would seem to be an account of Dylan’s breakup with his first wife, Sara. Yet it is also a meditation on literary history and on the problem of poetry’s relationship to political upheaval. It offers a poetic and musical engagement with the problem of escape from the weight of the past—personally, politically, and artistically.

As an explicit reflection on the 1960s generation that Dylan had both inspired and fled the album evokes a whole series of earlier generational pronouncements in American literature, from Horace Greeley’s “go West,” to Ernest Hemingway’s “Lost Generation,” to Allen Ginsberg’s “best minds of my generation” at the outset of “Howl.”³ However it is also deeply indebted to a slightly different “generational” text that rose to canonical status as a meditation on American life just as Dylan was coming of age—a text that defined, as would Dylan’s own work, not merely a cultural/historical category (as had, for example, the Spanish literary Generation of 1927), but a new form of social identity. This text is Jack Kerouac’s “beat” novel *On the Road*, first published in 1955. *Blood on the Tracks* is Dylan’s rewriting of *On the Road*.⁴

Central to the poetics of *Blood on the Tracks* is an appropriation of the topography of *On the Road*. *Blood on the Tracks* offers a set of narratives of pursuit and loss across Kerouac’s version of the American landscape, evok-

3. Allen Ginsburg, “Howl,” in *“Howl” on Trial*, ed. Bill Morgan and Nancy J. Peters (San Francisco, 2006), p. 21.

4. For a useful account of Dylan’s various engagements with members of the Beat Generation, especially Allen Ginsberg, see Sean Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America* (New York, 2010), chap. 2. He notes that Dylan and Kerouac never met.

ing all four cardinal points and several well-known landmarks. It is significant that Dylan should have chosen Kerouac's map of America because it was that map—much more than, say, Woody Guthrie's—that shaped the cultural mythologies of the 1960s, the very period on which Dylan was offering commentary. The album's topography pointedly marks a break with Dylan's earlier evocations of landscape and territory. The Guthrie-like themes of rambling of the early albums gave way, in the middle years of the 1960s, to several collections of songs about being stuck in space. This is most powerful on *Blonde on Blonde* (1966) where we hear again and again about figures who cannot move: "Visions of Johanna" (initially titled "Seems Like a Freeze-out") with its characters who "sit here stranded"; the singer of "Absolutely Sweet Marie," who is in prison after having been caught in "the frozen traffic"; and, of course, the hero of "Stuck inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again," who is, well, stuck. At one level, this paralysis reflects the ubiquity of the long-playing record itself. You can't ramble away down the road if your own picture meets your gaze from every shop window. *John Wesley Harding* (1968), the first postaccident album, then retreats into an explicitly allegorical landscape, which in turn gives way to Tin Pan Alley clichés and nostalgia over several subsequent records.⁵

All this changes with *Blood on the Tracks*, where Dylan locates us in the fast-moving America of Kerouac. The album makes specific reference to the same literary terrain as *On the Road*. Dylan's closing lament on side one of the original LP, in "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go," that, "I'll look for you in old Honolulu, / San Francisco, Ashtabula,"⁶ recalls the numerous catalogues of American place names that lace *On the Road* (including the narrator Sal Paradise's song "Home in Missoula, / Home in Truckee, / Home in Opelousas, / Aint no Home for me").⁷ The album evokes the San Francisco where much of *On the Road* takes place, the Tangier where William S. Burroughs wrote *Naked Lunch*, as well as the somewhat surprising *lieu de mémoire* of Ashtabula, Ohio, which is mentioned by Sal as the first landmark on his westward journey ("countryfolk getting on at one Penn town after another, till we got on the plain of Ohio

5. Dylan, "Visions of Johanna" and "Absolutely Sweet Marie," *Lyrics 1962–2001* (New York, 2004), pp. 193, 206; see Dylan, "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again," *Lyrics*, pp. 198–200. I have also consulted *The Songs of Bob Dylan from 1966–1975* (New York, 1976). As commentators have often noticed, none of the "official" collections of Dylan lyrics seems to be authoritatively accurate when compared with the recordings. I have worked with the lyrics as sung and modified published transcriptions accordingly.

6. Dylan, "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go," *Lyrics*, p. 339; hereafter abbreviated "YG."

7. Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York, 1985), p. 208; hereafter abbreviated *OR*.

and really rolled, up by Ashtabula and straight across Indiana in the night" (*OR*, p. 13). The "diamond-mine" and "gambling hall" town of the shaggy-dog tale "Lily, Rosemary, and the Jack of Hearts" recall, if anything, an important location on the maps of both writers—the Colorado mining-town-turned-tourist-trap of Central City, where Sal Paradise, Dean Moriarty, and their friends spend a wild weekend early in *On the Road*, looking for the romance of the old West and finding only curio shops. By a nice coincidence Dylan's first professional singing job was in a honky-tonk in the same town, in the summer of 1960, just after his graduation from high school.⁸

Beyond this common geography, *Blood on the Tracks* draws explicitly on a central motif of *On the Road*, which is the impromptu auto journey of escape into adventure. The wild car journey followed by breakdown is central to *On the Road*. It appears most vividly toward the end of the novel, when Sal and Dean split up in Mexico City, leaving a landscape of wreckage, both emotional and mechanical, behind them. Dylan deploys this motif several times on *Blood on the Tracks*. It is evoked in its genesis in "Meet Me in the Morning," the first song on side two of the original LP, where the singer promises his love that "we could be in Kansas / By the time the snow begins to thaw."⁹ It is also evoked as a figure for doomed love in "Tangled up in Blue," the opening song on the album, where the singer steals his beloved away from her disapproving parents only to run things into the ground too quickly: "We drove that car as far as we could / Abandoned it out West / Split up on a dark sad night / Both agreeing it was best."¹⁰ The escape on the road brackets the narrative sweep of *Blood on the Tracks*. It is both the sign of promise and the sign of failure.¹¹

8. For background on Dylan's trip to Colorado, see Clinton Heylin, *Bob Dylan behind the Shades* (New York, 2000), pp. 43–45. In the Central City episode Sal names his absent friends Carlo Marx and Dean Moriarty as "rising from the underground, the sordid hipsters of America, a new beat generation that I was slowly joining" (*OR*, p. 46). A central city indeed.

9. Dylan, "Meet Me in the Morning," *Lyrics*, p. 340.

10. Dylan, "Tangled up in Blue," *Lyrics*, p. 331; hereafter abbreviated "TUB."

11. Dylan would return to the motif of the auto journey in the 1986 song "Brownsville Girl," which was cowritten with Sam Shepard and unfolds in a Kerouackian space. There is, for example, a visit to a "wrecking lot" owned by "Henry Porter," and his bitter, disaffected wife, Ruby, that resembles the visit to Bull Lee in *On the Road*. And, again, the journey functions as a kind of narrative unit that makes possible play with entries and exits from fiction (Dylan and Sam Shepard, "Brownsville Girl," *Lyrics*, p. 510). The relationship between fictional illusion and the world outside of art in "Brownsville Girl" is at issue. A brief account of the motif of the open road in popular culture may be found in Greil Marcus, "The Myth of the Open Road," *Bob Dylan: Writings 1968–2010* (New York, 2010), pp. 133–47. Marcus mentions Kerouac but offers a negative assessment of *On the Road*, which he says he has not read.

2. Trips

All of these journeys are marked by the dense relationship between literary allusion and self-mystification that informs the album. The journey of “Meet Me in the Morning” is to begin at “56th and Wabasha,” an intersection in Minneapolis, where Dylan briefly attended college before heading east to New York.¹² It thus turns his escape from the midwest, a solitary journey in the winter, into a promise of new life as “the snow begins to thaw.” Just as “Lily, Rosemary, and the Jack of Hearts” reinvests the touristy mining town with romance, these songs reinvent Dylan’s biography through Kerouac’s narrative scenography and geographical motifs.¹³

We can see this most clearly in the depiction of hitch-hiking, which prompts the departure from quotidian reality into the special magical world of adventure and travel. It is mentioned in “Tangled up in Blue,” where we hear of the singer “standing on the side of the road, / Rain fallin’ on my shoes / Heading out for the East Coast / Lord knows I’ve paid some dues / gettin’ through” (“TUB,” p. 331; transcription mod.). There is an autobiographical dimension to this reference; Dylan left college in Minnesota for fame in New York by hitch-hiking in the dead of winter.¹⁴ However, it also evokes the first journey of Kerouac’s hero Sal Paradise. Dylan escapes middle America by thumb to discover New York. Sal leaves New York by thumb to discover middle America. Dylan’s landscape on *Blood on the Tracks* is neither simple autobiography nor some “America” lost in the mists of time, but a self-conscious appropriation of the topography of another text, Kerouac’s text, that lends personal reference generational resonance.

Kerouac’s generational meditation is heavy with literary self-consciousness, too. *On the Road* opens with the narrator reflecting on his initial meeting with Dean Moriarty. This, he says, was not long after the

12. Dylan, “Meet Me in the Morning,” p. 340.

13. See Dylan, “Lily, Rosemary, and the Jack of Hearts,” *Lyrics*, pp. 341–43.

14. Dylan’s own account of this journey may be found in the factually vague but entertaining Dylan, *Chronicles*, pp. 257–58. Evidence of his deep knowledge of *On the Road* may be inferred from his recitation of a well-known key passage from the novel in *No Direction Home* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 2005). Wilentz quotes Ginsberg quoting Dylan to the effect that he knew Kerouac’s *Mexico City Blues* as early as 1959. “It blew my mind,” Dylan is supposed to have said. Here is Wilentz: “It was the first poetry he’d read that spoke his own American language, Dylan said—or so Ginsberg said he said” (Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*, p. 59). Wilentz’s skepticism is useful as it reminds us of the limits of a reading of Dylan that would limit him to the role of American bard, as if the floating signifier *America* were the only context relevant to an artist whose major influences in lyric writing include Bertolt Brecht, William Blake, John Keats, and Arthur Rimbaud. Obviously, it is against that tradition that I am writing here.

breakup of his marriage and his “feeling that everything was dead. With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road” (*OR*, p. 5). The opening evocation of *death* will contrast with a rebirth, his “*life* on the road.” There is an influential literary model for thinking about a journey that begins in death and passes back to life. This literary model is Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*, a text that we might assume is of some importance for a novel whose Italian-American narrator’s name would seem to be Salvatore Paradiso. It will be remembered that the *Divine Comedy* opens with an allegorical scene of retreat. Lost on the path (or road) of “our life,” stuck in a terrifying valley “that had pierced my heart with fear,” Dante seeks to ascend to the mountain of illumination. However he is repulsed by three allegorical beasts: a wolf, a lion, and a leopard. He then turns back and pursues his journey downward instead of upward, passing through Hell, Purgatory, and, eventually, Paradise.¹⁵

A similar failure of ascent marks Sal Paradise’s excited departure for the West, where he believes he will gain a new life after the dead time of his marital breakup. Sal sets out to hitch-hike to California. He heads north from New York City with the plan of catching Route 6, a road said to run from Cape Cod, via Ely, Nevada, to Los Angeles (the city of angels): “I’ll just stay on 6 all the way to Ely, I said to myself and confidently started. To get to 6 I had to go up to Bear Mountain” (*OR*, p. 12). But such is not to be, as, like Dylan’s protagonist hitching east, our hero gets caught in a massive rainstorm: “It began to rain in torrents when I was let off there. It was mountainous. Route 6 came over the river, wound around a traffic circle, and disappeared into the wilderness. . . . The rain came down in buckets and I had no shelter” (*OR*, p. 12). Indeed, this storm is more than a rainstorm. It is an allegorical deluge in which the landscape itself comes alive: “High up over my head the great hairy Bear Mountain sent down thunderclaps that put the fear of God in me. All I could see were smoky trees and dismal wilderness rising to the skies. ‘What the hell am I doing up here?’ I cursed, I cried for Chicago” (*OR*, pp. 12–13). Like Dante’s allegorical beasts on the mountain, Kerouac’s mountain becomes an allegorical

15. Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, vol. 1 of *The Divine Comedy*, trans. and ed. Robert M. Durling (Oxford, 1996–2011), 1.1, 14. The literary scenarios I evoke here are central to Dante’s work, and Kerouac would have known them, as a reader of Dante. As Gerald Nicosia shows throughout *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York, 1983), Kerouac’s reading was extremely broad. However, most accounts of Kerouac’s work pay little attention to the intertextual aspects of his work, beyond the usual suspects (Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Thomas Wolfe, and others). Indeed, given how much of Kerouac’s career was dominated by his struggles with form it would be irresponsible not to look carefully at his use of different generic registers and literary traditions.

beast in its own right, a “hairy Bear” whose threats to his progress leave him stuck in the valley of “dismal wilderness” until he wises up, returns to New York City, and, like Dante going down through Hell, takes the low road to the West—via the Holland Tunnel. The modulation to his new life then begins a few pages later as he wakes up in a hotel in Des Moines (the city of monks, or *moines*): “really I didn’t know who I was for about fifteen strange seconds. I wasn’t scared; I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost. I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future, and maybe that’s why it happened right there and then, that strange red afternoon” (*OR*, p. 16). “*Incipit vita nova*,” writes Dante in the story of his own conversion to love, “the new life begins.”¹⁶

The landscape of *On the Road* is both infernal and paradisaical, blending moments of bliss and scenes of torment. Indeed, that ambiguity is one of the characteristics of post-Dantean literature, as the great metaphysical system of medieval Catholicism that Dante draws upon gives way to less rigid and more semiotically varied literary landscapes. Yet if the *Inferno* provides a narrative substructure for the opening passages of *On the Road*, for Sal’s entry into the world of narrative adventure, Dante is no less important for the novel’s end and his exit from that same world. At the end of *Paradiso* Dante looks into the Godhead and is overcome by a vision that transcends his powers; his “high fantasy” or “alta fantasia” fails. This overcoming of the self is what makes possible the transformation of the pilgrim, the traveler whose adventures we have just been following, into the poet, who will write those adventures down.¹⁷ Kerouac rewrites this mo-

16. Dante, *Vita Nuova*, trans. Mark Musa (Indianapolis, 1973), p. 3. My parenthetical evocation of the French meaning of Des Moines is not idle. Kerouac was from a Quebecois family, thought of himself as “Ti-Jean” (Petit Jean), was bilingual in French, and, as noted, very widely read in French literature. It would be impossible for him not to have noticed the literal meaning of Des Moines as the location of Sal’s brief but powerful asceticism and conversary self-alienation. Kerouac’s journals suggest that this moment of alienation (located firmly in Des Moines) was one of the first bits he wrote of *On the Road*, in early 1950, in the form of the fragment titled “Gone on the Road: Chapter One: An Awkward Man”: “It all began when I came awake and a terrible, certainly most terribly beautiful thing was TAKING PLACE only for a few moments but enough to make the change in my life that led to the events I employ God to help arrange in my mind so I may bring them to light.” He goes on to describe this conversary moment in some detail, with the wish, “and may the Angels of the Eternal Dream bear witness” (Jack Kerouac, *Windblown World: The Journals of Jack Kerouac, 1947–1954*, ed. Douglas Brinkley [New York, 2004], p. 363).

17. See, Dante, *Paradiso*, vol. 3 of *The Divine Comedy*. Some circumstantial background: Paul Maher, Jr., notes that Kerouac began working seriously on *On the Road* in the summer of 1950, following the commercial and critical failure of his first novel, *The Town and the City* and his return from Mexico. This was a period during which he was most intensively in dialogue with Allen Ginsberg, who was at that time involved in a systematic study of Dante and Cezanne

ment of transcendent vision. “We had reached the approaches of the last plateau,” recounts Sal as they pull into Mexico City. “‘Man, man,’ I yelled to Dean, ‘wake up and see the shepherds, wake up and see the golden world that Jesus came from.’ . . . Now we were about to reach the end of the road” (OR, p. 246). And a moment later, as Dean and Sal prowl the streets of Mexico City, Sal acknowledges that the end has come: “This was the great and final wild uninhibited Fellahin-childlike city that we knew we would find at the end of the road. Dean walked through with his arms hanging zombie-like at his sides, his mouth open, his eyes gleaming, and conducted a ragged and holy tour that lasted til dawn in a field with a boy in a straw hat who laughed and chatted with us and wanted to play catch, for nothing ever ended” (OR, p. 248). Except that it does. The moment of vision with the boy-Christ breaks as Sal suddenly collapses in the very next sentence: “Then I got fever and became delirious and unconscious. Dysentery.” At which point Dean abandons him there: “‘Gotta get back to my life’” (OR, p. 249).

Dante’s overwhelming vision provides him with the vocation to turn around and place what he has just seen into art—Dante the pilgrim becoming Dante the poet. Similarly, on the way back home from Mexico after his collapse at the end of the road, Sal meets a mysterious pilgrimlike stranger who gives him a message that determines his literary vocation: “*Go moan for man*” (OR, p. 250). This cryptic message then provokes a change in Sal’s relationship to his travels and his friends—a change that involves literary genre as well as plot. A few pages later we see him walking down a street in New York: He “called up to the window of a loft where I thought my friends were having a party. But a pretty girl stuck her head out the window and said, ‘Yes? Who is it?’ ‘Sal Paradise,’ I said, and heard my name resound in the sad and empty street. ‘Come on up,’ she called. ‘I’m making hot chocolate.’ So I went up and there she was, the girl with the pure and innocent dear eyes that I had always searched for and for so long. We agreed to love each other madly” (OR, p. 250).

Salvatore Paradiso would appear to have reached paradise, leaving, for a cup of chocolate and a pretty girl, his Virgilian guide Dean back on the road. And the name of this ideal woman, not coincidentally, is Laura. That is, she carries the name of the beloved of Dante’s most direct literary heir, the greatest lyric poet of early modern Europe, Francesco Petrarca. Petrarch’s Laura is the girl Sal has always longed for. He can have her and the

(presumably in preparation for the infernal vision that would become “Howl,” a few years later). See Paul Maher, Jr., *Jack Kerouac: The Definitive Biography* (New York, 2004), p. 217.

spiritual/literary contentment he craves if he leaves the epic journey of life on the road.¹⁸ Like Romeo, William Shakespeare's greatest Petrarchan, all he has to do is call up to the balcony. Having escaped the inferno, Sal can now write about it in the book we are reading. We move from experience to writing in the spiral structure of the novel, as we move from Dante to Petrarch in literary history. Just as Petrarch opens his *Canzoniere* or *Scattered Rhymes* by looking back to the time "when I was in part another man from what I am now," so too does Sal put an end to "the part of my life you could call my life on the road."¹⁹

3. Verses

It is worth reflecting for a moment on Kerouac's evocation of a literary-historical shift from Dante to Petrarch. Through Petrarch, Sal escapes the world of the road into which he had entered on Bear Mountain. If that journey marked the beginning of his "life on the road," the turn to Laura marks the way out of it. In the very last pages Dean reappears, but Sal and Laura reject him, encouraged by their friend Remi Boncoeur, and as the

18. Obviously, one could present other versions of Laura as possible inspirations for Sal's beloved, perhaps not least the Gene Tierney character in *Laura* (dir. Otto Preminger, 1944). However, they all go back to Petrarch.

19. Petrarch, "Poem 1," *Petrarch's Lyric Poems: The "Rime sparse" and Other Lyrics*, trans. Durling (Cambridge, 1976), p. 36. The historical question of how Kerouac and Dylan read Petrarch, and through which editions and translations is, of course, open. Many inexpensive editions of selections of Petrarch's poetry in English circulated in the 1950s and 1960s. And of course translating Petrarch was a classic exercise for English poets in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One can certainly speculate that Ginsberg, a friend to both Kerouac and Dylan and a tireless ambassador for poetry, might have had a hand. Thus Ginsberg in a letter to Kerouac from 18 May 1948:

School is over and I have been reading Dante, which I have found very inspiring. I finished the *Divine Comedy* during the term, and am reading books including *The Vita Nuova*. . . . I think I am going to write a sonnet sequence. I want to read Petrarch and Shakespeare, Spencer and Sidney, etc. and learn about sonnets from beginning to end, and write a series on love, perfectly, newly conceived. I conceived the whole idea all at once seeing the first word in a title embedded in a page of the *Vita Nuova*.

(Ginsberg, letter to Jack Kerouac, [after 18 May 1948], in *Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg: The Letters*, ed. Morgan and David Stanford [New York, 2010], p. 36)

A complete bilingual version of Petrarch's *Canzoniere* was published in 1946; see Petrarch, *Sonnets and Songs*, trans. Anna Maria Armi (New York, 1946). In his notebooks from late 1949 and early 1950 Kerouac writes of his interest in Dante's use of numbers and includes Petrarch among those on his lists of books to read or "Sublimities to Learn" (Kerouac, *Windblown World*, p. 260). The journals during this period alternate between comments about his reading and thoughts about the soon-to-be written *On the Road*. See *ibid.*, pp. 233–60. Whether the onomastically sensitive Kerouac saw a pun on the *Beat Generation* in Dante's beloved, Beatrice, we will probably never know.

novel ends they drive off to listen to Duke Ellington, leaving Dean alone in the street, like Dante leaving Virgil at the end of *Purgatorio*. By becoming Petrarchan, Sal can leave the “spontaneous” action of the road and the visionary Dantean poetics that informs the journey and turn to the work of imposing narrative structure on his past.

Kerouac himself seems to have struggled to make a similar escape. For the very success of *On the Road* turned him, like Dylan a decade later, into a popular icon of a particular generational moment. As early as 1960 he wrote in a notebook, “Realized last night how truly sick I am of being a ‘writer’ and ‘beat’—it’s not me at all—yet everybody keeps hammering it into me. . . . They’re going to INSIST that I fit their preconceived notion of the ‘Beatnik Captain.’”²⁰ These lines prefigure the same tonality of regret and anger that informs the lines from Dylan’s memoirs with which I began this essay. Both artists were pigeonholed by their own adoring publics. Kerouac was consumed by this dynamic. He spent the 1960s struggling with a variety of writing projects, many of which were closely related to and informed by time on the road. The model of the writer as anticonformist pilgrim was both essential to Kerouac’s writing process and the machine that swallowed up his creativity.

It is significant that the shift from Dante’s world to Petrarch’s world—from pursuit of beatitude to amorous passion—is a shift in genre, from narrative autobiography to lyric. Dante had the advantage of a fixed metaphysical system through which his characters could pass as they moved toward the revelation of truth. Kerouac’s poetics are based on the notion that the movements of his beat characters are spontaneous and always open to moments of visionary illumination. In literary terms this means that their actions are always threatening to disintegrate into aimless confusion—as any reader who tries to follow the plot of *On the Road* has noticed. However the discourse of the loosely organized autobiographical lyric sequence—Petrarch’s poetics—responds to that narrative pressure. Petrarch’s major collection of lyric poetry, the *Canzoniere*, offers an account—in the form of 366 sonnets, madrigals, and *canzoni*—of the poet’s obsessive love for Laura. The *Canzoniere* possesses something of the retrospective autobiographical structure of the *Divine Comedy*—the poet looks back in the first poem and reflects on his doomed and wayward

20. Quoted in Maher, *Kerouac*, p. 414. In 1968 a broken, drunken Kerouac would appear on William F. Buckley’s *Firing Line*, where he repudiated the hippie movement (and Ginsberg) that had partly been inspired by his own writing, asserting that the press had redefined as a “beat insurrection,” a movement that was originally about “order, tenderness, and piety.” “It was pure in my heart,” he concluded in response to Buckley’s prompting (Maher, *Kerouac*, p. 469). Kerouac died a year after this sad episode.

passion—but without the rigidity of allegorical narrative and with none of its visionary power. In place of Dante's model of a long journey through Hell toward his beloved Beatrice, Petrarch offers a series of sonnets and songs that describe the impact on him of a beautiful golden-haired woman who is both omnipresent and evanescent. The *Canzoniere* depicts the poet's first glimpse of Laura, the impact of her beauty on him and his devoted love, despite her coldness. When she dies part way through the collection, it expresses his grief and evokes the memory of her beauty. Petrarch's constant punning on her name, Laura, which is homonymic with the Italian word for "air," *l'aura*, shapes the tension between her presence and absence throughout the collection. Never glimpsed entire, evoked only through the description of her body parts, Laura is everywhere and nowhere. Petrarch's fragmentation of her person powers his poetic fragmentation of the great Dantean visionary poetic model. That fragmentation in turn celebrates the poet's own power to sing of the love that he creates in song. The collection is marked by startling descriptions of the power of love over the poet. These are matched by ironic depictions of the lover's self-deception and blindness to his own folly—depictions generated by the sonnet form itself, with its multiple moments and angles of perception set in juxtaposition. Petrarch's poetic example, which shaped and dominated the history of the sonnet up to at least the nineteenth century, offers a literary phenomenology of the relationship of desire and memory through a series of discrete but related moments of intense lyric experience. Petrarch's break with Dante's poetics also marks the first generational poetic rivalry in postclassical European literature.²¹

This is the literary form that Bob Dylan picks up from the end of *On the Road*. It breaks with the visionary poetics of Dante and of Kerouac, as well as with what Dylan called his own "vision music" of the 1960s.²² *Blood on the Tracks* is Dylan's evasive rewriting of Kerouac's visionary poetics through the form of Petrarchan lyric, but set in Kerouac's very own invented American landscape.²³ It is a song cycle, the most unified of all of

21. On the complex interplay of momentary intensity and narrative direction in the Petrarchan sonnet sequence, see Roland Greene, *Post-Petrarchism: Origins and Innovations of the Western Lyric Sequence* (Princeton, N.J., 1991), chap. 1. On the role of fragmentation in Petrarchan poetics as a response to Dante's poetics, see John Freccero, "The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Petrarch's Poetics," *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, ed. Patricia Parker and David Quint (Baltimore, 1986), pp. 20–32, as well as Durling's magisterial introduction to *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, pp. 1–33.

22. Dylan's description of his mid-1960s work as "vision music" may be found, among many other places, in the lengthy December 1965 press conference in San Francisco, with Ginsberg and Ralph J. Gleason in attendance ("Bob Dylan: San Francisco Press Conference [Dec. 1965] 1/6," www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcPoZZVm3Dk&list=PL463DE68A9789EC5A).

23. We need only think of the titles of Kerouac's many post-*On the Road* projects—*Visions*

Dylan's myriad albums.²⁴ It gives us a series of moments that appear to recount the genesis, flowering, and disintegration of a heterosexual love relationship between the singer and a woman with "red" or "crimson" hair. This affair corresponds, chronologically, to the 1960s. In the context of the larger cultural work done by the album, the question of whether or not it is an account of Dylan's marriage is of secondary importance.²⁵ What matters for us is that it is a modern Petrarchan lyric sequence, leading from the *innamoramento* or lightning-bolt falling-in-love scene of "Simple Twist of Fate," through the seductive promise of "Meet Me in the Morning," the bitter jealousy of "You're a Big Girl Now," the long, canzonelike political rant of "Idiot Wind" (with its denunciation of the fiasco of Vietnam), the mythography of "Shelter from the Storm" (where "shelter" offers a version of Laura's gift of hot chocolate to Sal, saving him from the "sad and empty street"), the self-deceptive lament of "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go," to the resigned irony of the closing blues, "Buckets of Rain." Dylan takes his distance from Kerouac by appropriating his landscape and recasting it, without embracing its visionary, Dantesque poetics.²⁶

This new poetic identity is signaled in "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go," where the singer evokes the homosexual poetic passion of Paul Verlaine and Rimbaud, whose Dantean *Season in Hell* was a major Dylan influence early on. Together they offer the literary prototypes for Kerouac's Dean and Sal, the brilliant delinquent Dean/Rimbaud, adored and immortalized by the more sedate literary Sal/Verlaine. "Situations have ended sad / Relationships have all gone bad," sings Dylan. "Mine have been like Verlaine's and Rimbaud." Now, however, he rejects

of Gerard, *Visions of Cody*, and so on—as well as Dylan's "Visions of Johanna" to evoke this tradition. It is thus not coincidental that Dylan's one earlier use of Kerouac had come in some phrases taken from *On the Road* and inserted into what is perhaps his most "visionary" song, "Desolation Row," of 1965; see Dylan, "Desolation Row," *Lyrics*, pp. 181–84. See also Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*, pp. 50–51.

24. Marcus is one of the few writers about the album to note its coherence, the fact that it is basically a group of fragments of the same story. See Marcus, "An Album of Wounds," *Bob Dylan*, pp. 63–65.

25. To read the album biographically and literally, in other words, makes no more sense than to read *On the Road* as if Sal Paradise were only Jack Kerouac and Dean Moriarty were Neal Cassady. The detail of the broken marriage is, however, of interest to the extent that it puts Dylan, at the time of the breakup, at the same juncture as Paradise, who takes to the road "not long after my wife and I split up" (*OR*, p. 5).

26. We might hear in "Shelter from the Storm" and "Buckets of Rain" echoes of Kerouac's description, quoted earlier, of Bear Mountain: "the rain came down in buckets and I had no shelter" (*OR*, p. 12). See Dylan, "Shelter from the Storm" and "Buckets of Rain," *Lyrics*, pp. 345–46, 347.

that paradigm: “But there’s no way I can compare / All those scenes to this affair / Yer gonna make me lonesome when you go” (“YG,” p. 339). The pairing of the two great symbolist seer poets gives way to a heterosexual passion of a Petrarchan poet who sees his love everywhere, “in the sky above, / in the tall grass, in the ones I love” (“YG,” p. 339). “Thus,” says Petrarch, “I go searching in others, Lady, as much as is possible, for your longed-for true form.”²⁷

The entire sequence of songs is overseen, as it were, by the powerful opening track, “Tangled up in Blue.” This song, one of Dylan’s major compositions, recounts the disjointed story of two lovers who come together, then break up, then come together, and break up again. The lyrics contain, *in nuce*, the entire scenography of the album. The narrative, however, is anything but chronological. It offers a series of moments or flashes of experience that, when taken together, give us a more or less coherent story. The characters pursue each other but become “tangled up” in the “blue” that may suggest the blues, as well as the “azur” that for symbolist poets like Verlaine and Rimbaud was the embodiment of the ideal.

But “Tangled up in Blue” resonates yet more deeply with the conventions of lyric in the Petrarchan mode. Most suggestive, for my purposes, is that the song contains an explicit reference to Petrarch. As the singer meets his lost love down in Louisiana, she gives him a book of poems, “written by an Italian poet from the thirteenth century.” Dylan’s chronology is, characteristically, a bit wobbly, since Petrarch died in 1374, and some listeners have taken this as a reference to Dante. However, when questioned later in an interview about the “Italian poet” Dylan slyly answered, “Plutarch. Is that his name?”²⁸ In any event, we are clearly in Petrarch’s emotional and psychological universe, not in Dante’s.

27. Petrarch, “Poem 16,” *Petrarch’s Lyric Poems*, p. 50. Of course what is at issue here is less some literal citation of Petrarch by Dylan than the general tradition of Petrarchist poetry and the history of the love sonnet that comes out of Petrarch: Thomas Wyatt, Philip Sidney, Shakespeare, up to at least Charles Baudelaire. The Petrarch quotation is chosen more or less at random since the trope of the lady’s presence scattered in nature (as air, as flower, and so on) is stock in Petrarchist poetry. On landscape, the female body, and Petrarchan desire, see Greene, *Post-Petrarchism*, chap. 5. In a work in progress I study in detail the dialogue between Dylan’s work and Rimbaud’s.

28. “Italian Poet,” *Expecting Rain*, expectingrain.com/dok/who/who.html. See Dylan, interview with Chris MacGregor, in *Bob Dylan: A Retrospective*, ed. MacGregor (New York, 1990). The fact that Petrarch was obsessed with Plutarch makes the mistake especially lovely. It should be noted that “Tangled up in Blue” is one of the songs in his playlist that Dylan has performed most frequently and altered most dramatically in performance. In 1984 it was rerecorded on the *Real Live* album. The reference to Petrarch gets replaced by the Bible during his “Christian period” in the late 1970s, and many other revisions appear over time. It is illuminating that one of the most frequent has been to change the line as follows: “Written by Charles Baudelaire in the nineteenth century.” The substitution of Baudelaire, perhaps the

Yet even more important than the topical reference is the fact that “Tangled up in Blue” takes the form of a sequence of sonnets. It is built of seven stanzas, each of which consists of fourteen lines. Each stanza divides exactly after line 8—what in sonnet criticism is called the turn or *volta*. And each stanza operates through the contrastive perspectivism of the conventional sonnet, in which the octave sets forth a situation upon which the sestet then comments—with, in many cases, a move toward some type of dialectical resolution at the close. Thus, for example, the central stanza of “Tangled up in Blue” begins with a narrative slice. The narrator is in New Orleans, where he meets his old lover working in a “topless place” and picks her up:

She lit a burner on the stove
 And offered me a pipe.
 “I thought you’d never say hello,” she said
 “You look like the silent type”
 Then she opened up a book of poems,
 And handed it to me
 Written by an Italian poet
 From the thirteenth century

So much for the scene and the octave. No hot chocolate for this wanderer, only a pipe. This is then followed by a shift in perspective, with six lines describing the impact of that narrative moment on the singer:

And every one of them words rang true
 And glowed like burnin’ coal,
 Pourin’ off of every page,
 Like it was written in my soul
 from me to you,
 Tangled up in blue

[“TUB,” p. 332; transcription mod.]²⁹

greatest writer of sonnets in modern poetry, for Petrarch suggests that, wherever we are, we are in sonnetland here. Many of these variations, as well as a thoughtful account of the song’s evolution, can be found on Eyolf Øestrem, *Dylanchords*, www.dylanchords.info. The identification with Dante is made by Aiden Day in *Jokerman: Reading the Lyrics of Bob Dylan* (Oxford, 1988), p. 62. For a general account of the relationship between Petrarchan poetry and modern popular song, see Maria Rosa Menocal, *Shards of Love: Exile and the Origins of the Lyric* (Durham, N.C., 1994). Menocal only skirts the edges of Dylan’s work.

29. Many listeners, myself included, hear the line as “fifteenth century.” The original recording, included on Dylan’s *The Bootleg Series, Vols. 1–3: Rare and Unreleased, 1961–1991*,

This sonnet structure is repeated across every stanza, with a break after line 8 that changes the perspective (“She turned around to look at me”; “And later on as the crowd thinned out”; “but me, I’m still on the road”). The stanzaic scheme, with its alternating rhyming endings culminating in the couplet that ends the verse, perfectly articulates the movement of the sonnet form. This structure is probably mediated through the English tradition. Petrarch, whom Dylan wouldn’t have read in the original anyway, rarely uses rhyming couplets at the ends of his poems. But Shakespeare does. So do Wyatt, Edmund Spenser, and Sidney—the most “Petrarchan” of English poets—as well as Dante Gabriel Rossetti in his translations and adaptations of early Italian lyric.³⁰

This sonnetlike movement is also articulated in the musical structure of the stanza. The break at line 8 is musical as well as discursive. “Tangled up in Blue” is performed in A major. However, it opens with a powerful sequence of two-beat alternations between the tonic chord, A major, and the chord built on the flatted 7th, the G major chord. The slightly dissonant move from A down to G creates a sense of tonal instability. It is followed, in measure eight of the melody, by a shift to a D major chord. D is the IV chord in A major, but the pattern of A to G to D suggests that we might, in fact, not be in A major at all but rather in D major. The inclusion of a G natural in the melody (an accidental in A, but diatonic in D) underscores this impression. This tonal ambiguity, via the striking alternation between A major and G major, perfectly sets up the unstable mobility that is narrated in the lyrics; there is no point of rest. The opening eight lines of each stanza unfold across this wavering musical structure.³¹ Then, at the breaking point, midway through each stanza, the melody and the musical vocabulary shift. We move to the V chord of A, which is E major. However, instead of a simple cadence of resolution back from V to I (E back to

Columbia C3K 86572, 1991, CD, is clearer than the released version. In any event, there are no reasonable fifteenth-century alternatives. (Dylan as reader of Lorenzo de’ Medici? Boiardo?)

30. I note that the version of the lyric in *Lyrics* does not structure “Tangled up in Blue” as a sonnet sequence, but as a set of thirteen-line verses. However this distorts the rhyme scheme, which requires that the phrase “Tangled up in Blue” and the phrase before it be set apart as a couplet. In other words, it makes no sense to scan a line as “written in my soul from me to you,” as the editors of *Lyrics* do, when “soul” rhymes back to “coal” two lines earlier. Thus it should be: “written in my soul / from me to you / Tangled up in Blue,” which completes the stanza as a fourteen-line unit.

31. The jump from a triad based on the tonic to one based a step below on the flatted seventh is occasionally used to create drama in popular song, as, for example, by the Rolling Stones. See the opening riff to “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction” among many other examples. However these are passing chords, and it is rare indeed to set the exposition of an entire story over such a pattern.

A)—typical of thousands of popular songs and conventional in Dylan's work—we get something quite different. The V chord powers a two-measure phrase over the long lyric line (“And every one of them words rang true / And glowed like burnin’ coal”) that runs from V (E) to vi (f#m) to I (A) but then continues on up to IV (D), leaving the line musically unresolved. That IV chord leads, in traditional folk song fashion, back to the V or E major chord (a variation of the movement that is often called a ii-V), and we begin the long ascent again back up to D. The gesture of beginning the lyric phrase (“And every one of them words”) on the V chord or E major, together with the repetition of the movement, makes of the E major chord a temporary new tonic or tonal center, distinct from what preceded, with its own set of ascending chords. In this way the musical structure offers another “point of view,” to use Dylan’s phrase, on the basic pattern that structures the first half of each stanza. We now have a self-sufficient progression of chords, over the last six lines of verse, that leads from the V, to vi, to I, to IV, and back to V, a recursive movement that seems to circle, with no point of rest, like the characters of the song itself, as they wander the country from “the great north woods” to “New Orleans,” from “the East Coast” to “out West” (“TUB,” p. 331).

The harmonic resolution of this movement, bringing us back firmly to A major so we can move on to the next verse, only comes in the final phrase, which, like the closing rhyming couplet of the lyric, recalls the entire previous musical vocabulary of both halves of the stanza. The concluding refrain line, “Tangled up in Blue,” comes over a return to the dissonant A major-G major pairing that structures the first eight lines; only now it includes a passing chord on the fourth degree of the key of A, the D major that helps power the movement of the second half: “Tangled up in Blue,” G-D-A; and we are back to where we started.

Thus the chord sequences of the stanza offer a musical articulation of the dialectical movement of the Petrarchan sonnet. An opening narrative slice or setting of the scene is commented on by a different musical phrase, with a different chord sequence, and different discursive register, only to reach a dialectical resolution, musically and lyrically, in the final couplet. The song is, in effect, a condensed musical sonnet sequence.

This Petrarchan structure of conflicting perspectives in both lyric and music appears again in slightly less developed, though no less interesting, terms in the eighth song on the album, “If You See Her, Say Hello,” which is the song most closely linked, thematically, to “Tangled up in Blue.” Here we have a sequence of five eight-line stanzas divided equally between two four-line units of meaning. After an intro that echoes the beginning of “Tangled up in Blue” (alternation of A major and G major again, though

now we are firmly in D major), the first four lines offer a narrative context: “If you see her, say hello / she might be in Tangier / She left here last early spring, / is livin’ there I hear.”³² This is sung over a simple sequence of major chords (D-G-A), punctuated by a brief dip down to the dissonant C major chord, the exact same move into dissonance that opens “Tangled up in Blue” (and the only other place on the album where it occurs). The second four lines then expand and comment, shifting, in the same way as do the sonnetlike stanzas of the earlier song, from the viewpoint of one person to another: “Say for me that I’m alright / though things get kind of slow / She might think that I’ve forgotten her. / Don’t tell her it isn’t so” (“IY,” p. 344). The chords shift as well, to a minor chord on the sixth degree of the scale (here a B minor), and the melody changes. This musical break, while conventional, perfectly reflects the tension between the two halves of the stanza. For the second half is a statement marked by ironic self-delusion that contrasts with the straightforward longing of the first four lines. That is, if you are requested, in the last four lines, not to tell her that I haven’t forgotten her, why would you, in the first four lines, “say hello” in the first place and say that “I’m alright” since that very act would reveal that I haven’t, in fact, forgotten her. This tension between narrative romance and ironic contradiction, linked, moreover, to the act of communication itself, is repeated in every stanza of the song. Each verse ends with the singer mouthing a statement of deluded consolation that undermines the account of the events of the affair he has just offered. This ironic display of self-delusion is unprecedented in Dylan’s work. It is Dylan at his most Petrarchan.

4. Visions

I include these musical descriptions to make clear the care with which the great Petrarchan themes of loss, self-delusion, and fragmentation are inscribed into the very form of the songs, binding the articulation of the singer’s character to the performance that unfolds before us. Yet the formal tensions I have described within the lyric stanza—articulated most powerfully in “Tangled up in Blue”—have larger implications that will take us back to the questions of literary history and generational poetics with which I began. The movement of the sonnet form—and of Dylan’s stanzas—works through a logic of perspective. Conventional to the Petrarchan sonnet is a formula in which, for example, the poet speaks in his first eight lines of the happiness of others, before turning at the mid-point to his

32. Dylan, “If You See Her, Say Hello,” *Lyrics*, p. 344; transcription mod.; hereafter abbreviated “IY.”

own experience. Thus Sidney, after having listed the tired formulas used by his poetic rivals for eight lines, breaks off to say, "For me, in sooth, no muse but one I know," and goes on to claim the uniqueness of his relationship to his lady.³³ The sonnet is a form that works by juxtaposing clashing perspectives on the same experience.

This perspectival poetics underpins much of *Blood on the Tracks*, shaping both its temporality and its psychology. Thus "Tangled up in Blue" opens "early one mornin'," when "the sun was shinin'." We meet the singer "layin' in bed," "wond'rin' if she'd changed at all, / If her hair was still red" ("TUB," p. 331). Where are we? Is this the aftermath of the affair or its very outset? The singer seems to think he's wondering about the girl's heart (has she changed?), but in fact his main focus is her appearance and how to identify her visually. The love object seems to be the "crimson"-haired girl whom we will meet five songs later in "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go" ("purple clover, Queen Anne's lace / Crimson hair across your face" ["YG," p. 338]), the Petrarchan beauty who has replaced for the singer the unhappy loves of Verlaine and Rimbaud. Yet we don't even know if this lady was, or is, really a redhead. Is her hair still red? Perhaps she is like Lily in "Lily, Rosemary, and the Jack of Hearts," who after the show in the gambling hall takes "all of the dye out of her hair."³⁴ Now how will he find her? Petrarch's Laura vanishes in the wind, like her name. Dylan's lady takes a different tack. She dyes her hair. On the one hand, Dylan generates a cycle of lyric moments out of the encounter between his literary persona and a beautiful woman. On the other hand, that woman slips away by changing her hair color in the fourth line of the very first song on the album. No less striking is the temporal displacement. The song opens with the hero "layin' in bed." A second later we learn that "I was standing by the side of the road, / Rain fallin' on my shoes / Heading out for the East Coast." So much for the sunny morning. Yet when does this Kerouackian moment of meteorological unpleasantness occur? Are we at

33. Philip Sidney, "Astrophil and Stella," *Sir Philip Sydney: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford, 1989), l. 9, p. 154.

34. Dylan, "Lily, Rosemary, and the Jack of Hearts," *Lyrics*, p. 343. In the second edition of his biography of Dylan, Heylin quotes Ellen Bernstein, a Columbia Records employee with whom Dylan was spending time, to the effect that "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go" is about her. She lived in San Francisco, was planning a trip to Honolulu, and had been born in Ashtabula. See Heylin, *Behind the Shades Revisited*, p. 372. This detail extends the overlapping of biography and literary allusion that permeates the record. For, biographical or not, the motif of the lady's hair links this song to at least two other tracks on the album that are not about Bernstein and help form a larger narrative of love and loss. Poetic echo trumps biography.

the end of the sixties or at the beginning? Did we just get out of bed, or are we thinking back onto earlier deluges from the safety of the covers?³⁵

Dylan has stated that his technique in “Tangled up in Blue” was influenced by art lessons he took with Norman Raeben in New York in the early 1970s. However, as we have seen, such shifting perspective is no less central to the discourse of the Petrarchan sonnet.³⁶ Whether Dylan chose the sonnet as the form to express a new perspectival alternative to the “vision music” of the 1960s or whether the sonnet form imposed a new poetics on him is irrelevant. What is clear is that fragmentation and perspectivism, not Dantean or Rimbaldian vision, underpins these songs. And it is thematized. “Tangled up in Blue” closes with an axiomatic affirmation of the differences of perception that underpin both the sonnet and the generational experience that he evokes. The narrator recounts the great aspirations of the 1960s generation (“There was music in the cafes at night / And revolution in the air”). Then he registers their disappointment: “Then he started in to dealing with slaves / And something inside of him died / She had to sell everything she owned / and froze up inside.” The revolutionaries give up the cause and turn to less grand pursuits: “All the people we used to know / Are an illusion to me now. / Some are mathematicians, / Some are carpenters’ wives, / Don’t know how it all got started / I don’t know what they’re doin’ with their lives.” By contrast the singer is still travelling: “Me, I’m still on the road / Headin’ for another joint.” And he concludes with what appears to be a hard-won insight: “We always did feel the same, / We just saw it from / A different point / Of view / Tangled up in blue.” With this the song ends.³⁷

35. For a discussion of the narrative structure of the song, see Day, *Jokerman*, pp. 51–66. Day goes on to work through a number of alternative versions of the lyrics that have been used in subsequent performances, testing out their implications. This is interesting, but a bit outside of my concerns, which relate to the version on the album as it was released. See also Carrie Brownstein, “Blood on the Tracks (1975),” in *The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan*, ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 157–58, and Michael Gray’s critique of “poststructuralist” readers of Dylan in his *Song and Dance Man III: The Art of Bob Dylan* (London, 2000), chaps. 8–9.

36. For an account of Raeben’s influence, with quotations from Dylan, see Heylin, *Bob Dylan behind the Shades*, pp. 268–69.

37. The theme of difference in perspective is one that Dylan explored as early as his third album, with “you’re right from your side / I’m right from mine” (Dylan, “One Too Many Mornings,” *Lyrics*, p. 87). Here, however, that ethical statement becomes an ideological and formal principle. For a good discussion of “One Too Many Mornings,” see Christopher Ricks, *Dylan’s Visions of Sin* (New York, 2003), pp. 430–33. Ricks also has interesting things to say about Dylan’s use of form, though not with reference to the songs I study here, in the opening chapter of the same book. It is worth noting that the line “she . . . froze up inside” seems to evoke the “freeze-out” of “Visions of Johanna,” one of Dylan’s most powerful “visionary” songs, exemplary of the kind of poetics he is here rejecting. Thanks to Diana Thow for pointing out this echo to me.

Yet this concluding bit of wisdom, a distillation of the epistemology that has informed the song itself, is strangely tangled. For one thing, it comes at the only point where the metrical unfolding of the lyrics can't be made to fit with the rhythm of the melody. We get an awkward distortion of normal speech cadences: "We just *saw* it from / A different *point* / Of view." This rhythmic emphasis on the "a" in "a different point of view" is a rare, almost amateurish infelicity in the work of someone who is an acknowledged genius at creative phrasing. Dylan can evoke difference; he just seems unable—or unwilling—to fit the word "different" into his line. Not by accident does this uncomfortable gesture toward consolation and wisdom come in a line about sight. For the problem is that the concluding insight is backward. It is in fact not possible to say "we always did feel the same" unless you have access to the interiority of another person across time. And that knowledge is precisely what the singer does not possess, as the whole song has demonstrated. The line should read, "we saw the same set of phenomena, / we just ended up feeling differently about what we saw." As in the ironic verse structures of "If You See Her, Say Hello," we end with an assertion of limited awareness, of a fragmented vision of reality—presented at the very moment that wisdom would seem to be forthcoming.

The implications of this logical reversal shape the question I began with, the problem of Dylan's relationship to his generation and to the generational identity that earlier haunted Kerouac. For it is impossible to say for certain who "we" is in the lines just quoted—"we" who "always did feel the same." Is this about the lover and his lady and their busted affair? Or is this all of the characters just evoked from the 1960s, those who felt "revolution in the air" and for whom Dylan ended up being, for better or worse, the voice? Either way, the ironic gesture toward insight that ends the song suggests that the revolutionary dreams of the sixties are no more real than the illusory visions of the Petrarchan lover. The singer has control of the narrative, more or less, but he seems to be no less the dupe of history than anyone else.

We can understand more clearly the stakes of this tension between "we" as Petrarchan love dyad and "we" as generation by returning to the evocation of Petrarch at the center of "Tangled up in Blue." We recall again the moment at which the singer's beloved gives him a volume of Petrarch: "And every one of them words rang true / And glowed like burnin' coal / Pouring off of every page / Like it was written in my soul / From me to you, / Tangled up in Blue." The brilliant pairing of "From me to you, / Tangled up in Blue" brings the stanza to a rest, formally. But what is important is the way this concluding couplet effects a reversal of subject and object, of

giver and receiver, in the scenario being described. The poems of Petrarch, which are given *by* the lady *to* the singer, now become an emanation *of* the singer: not “written in *your* soul from you to me,” but “written in *my* soul / from me to you.” The singer, as reader of Petrarch, now takes on Petrarch’s voice, turning what he receives from the lady into his own song.

There is a delicious irony to the fact that we see the Petrarchan lady offering a volume of Petrarch’s poems to her man so that he can become a Petrarchan. At one level, of course, his response is a gendered power play that should not surprise us too much. Dylan’s usual depiction of women is conventional, though he rarely silences them. More often than not he features his narrators in bantering dialogue with them. But here there is more at work than the simple seizure of authority. For the scene of reading Petrarch constitutes, in effect, the conversionary moment—the equivalent of Dante’s acknowledgment of his poetic vocation and of Sal Paradise’s realization that he must “go moan for man.” For it is after this moment in the song—after the reading of Petrarch, that is—that the singer finds his way. Up to now he has been haunted by a paralysing blend of desire and memory (“And I just grew / Tangled up in Blue”). But he now learns that he must continue his journey, regardless of what happens around him. So in the very next stanza, the penultimate, as the revolution fades and the “bottom [falls] out” of the 1960s, the singer learns to “keep on keepin’ on/ Like a bird that flew.” And then in the final stanza the singer describes himself as “still on the road, / Headin’ for another joint.” This bit of folk wisdom—keep on moving—is repeated in different forms several times across the album and is reprised in the final stanza of the last song, “Buckets of Rain”: “all ya can do is do what you must.”³⁸

5. Songs

The seizure of voice through the reading of Petrarch underpins the thematic emphasis on performance throughout the album. Despite all the journalistic hoopla about Dylan as troubadour in the 1960s, his dozens of lyrics from that time contain barely a handful of references to musical instruments or the act of performance. This is of course completely unlike troubadour song (or Petrarchan song), which is obsessed with its own

38. Dylan, “Buckets of Rain,” p. 347. This appropriation of the lyric voice is repeated (along with a transformation of the “bird that flew” image) in “You’re a Big Girl Now”: “Bird on the horizon, sittin’ on a fence / He’s singin’ his song for me at his own expense / And I’m just like that bird, oh, oh / Singin’ just for you” (Dylan, “You’re a Big Girl Now,” p. 335). For a more thematic, less structural approach to the question of conversion in Dylan, see the wide-ranging and insightful discussion in Rob Wilson, *Be Always Converting, Be Always Converted: An American Poetics* (Cambridge, 2009), chap. 6.

performative power. In *Blood on the Tracks*, however, that changes. Dylan stresses the power of his singers to perform. Many of the songs contain references to the singer as performer (“I’m just like that bird / singin’ just for you,” “headin’ for another joint,” “no one else could sing that tune”), and “Lily, Rosemary, and the Jack of Hearts” stages a honky tonk show.³⁹ As the last lines of the album assert, “All ya can do / is do what you must. / You do what you must do, / And you do it well. / I do it for you, / Honey, baby, can’t you tell?” We end with a staging of the act of performance in a one-on-one scenario of serenade. Not the voice of a generation, it would seem. Just a voice.

Dylan would seem to leave us, then, with a tension between two scenarios. On the one hand we have a formal insistence on fragmentation and limited vision that generates a series of figures who are caught in their own limits, self-deluded, confused, tangled. This self-irony includes the singer himself when he consoles himself about lost love or claims to speak for a generation by asserting “we always did feel the same.” On the other hand, we are given a thematic insistence on the power of performance, on the singer doing what he must and trying to “do it well.” At the intersection of these two axes we get a model of poetry and song that insists on its own aesthetic difference from the grand visions of vulgar activism symbolized by both the “revolution in the air” of “Tangled up in Blue” and the “demonstrators” outside Dylan’s front door. Through his use of Kerouac, Dylan grasps the problem of generational identity as a problem of collective illusion. Through his use of Petrarch he then turns that generational fiction against itself, revealing the emptiness of its revolutionary clichés. Yet through the theme of performance he affirms the power of his own song as a special type of illusion, as fragmented lyric insight, self-conscious, oblique, even difficult. In this regard we might recall Adorno’s description of lyric form: “Its universality is . . . not the universality of simply communicating what others are unable to communicate.” Rather, form elevates the poem to the level of universality “by making manifest something not distorted, not grasped, not yet subsumed.” For Adorno the modern lyric becomes the site at which language breaks free from the reification imposed on it by mass society and cliché precisely through acknowledgement of its own aesthetic difficulty and difference, “something in which what is

39. “No one else could play that tune” is the last line from “Up to Me,” a song recorded but left off of the album and released later on a compilation. It concludes with the most explicit of all of these scenes of performance: “If we never meet again, baby, remember me / How my lone guitar played sweet for you that old time melody / And the harmonica around my neck, I blew it for you, free / No one else could play that tune, you know it was up to me” (Dylan, “Up to Me,” *Lyrics*, p. 349).

possible transcends its own impossibility.”⁴⁰ *Blood on the Tracks* seems to project something like the special kind of mimesis Adorno evokes. The record renews song with a series of poems that know themselves to be illusory, alive for the moment of their ragged performance, holding at the very center of their language a response to the totalizing vision of the “demonstrators.”

6. Replay

Yet to evoke Dylan’s work in the same breath as Adorno’s is to court danger. Dylan’s very imbrication in the culture industry Adorno so famously despised would seem to relegate him to the subcultural trash heap, along with jazz, crooners, and Charlie Chaplin. Yet one of the challenges raised by Dylan’s engagement with the high cultural traditions of Petrarchan lyric (not to mention the avant-garde “beat” prose styles of midcentury) is that it makes Adorno’s descriptive account of the achievement of modern lyric look suspiciously prescriptive. Dylan had indeed been through the experience of “simply communicating what others are unable to communicate.” In the visionary tradition of Dante and Rimbaud, his “vision music” from the 1960s had charted new territory for popular song. The technical innovations that had emerged from that experience (streams of images, insider jargon, historical and cultural name checking, expansion of the length of the single track, and so on) had, by the early 1970s, become clichés. His response to cliché is to turn to older forms of representation that, by their very archaic quality, set him apart from what he has already done.

This pastiche of earlier styles raises the question of how late appropriation of earlier stylistic traditions may work to produce new poetic possibilities. As Max Horkheimer and Adorno remind us in their famous discussion in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “in every work of art, style is a promise.” It constitutes the element in aesthetic representation through which personal experience gives itself over to convention. “In being absorbed through style into the dominant form of universality, . . . what is expressed seeks to be reconciled with the idea of the true universal.” Thus the Petrarchan poet, for example, channels his personal experience through the contingencies of a style recognizable to a readership. Yet, for Adorno and Horkheimer, the dynamics of the culture industry are such that the stylistic nuances of the individual voice, potentially wayward and

40. Adorno, “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, 2 vols. (New York, 1991), 1:38, 50.

disruptive, are rendered powerless. “Having ceased to be anything but style, it reveals the latter’s secret: obedience to the social hierarchy.”⁴¹

For Dylan, the formal problem of linking political crisis to personal crisis is perhaps best emblemized by a moment in “Idiot Wind” when we hear of the “priest” who “wore black” and “sat stone-faced while the building burned.” Then the singer laments that he “waited for you on the running boards, near the cypress trees, while the springtime turned / Slowly into autumn.”⁴² The public disaster of Vietnam and private disappointment—here evoked as yet another failed car trip—are set in simple juxtaposition, with no mediation linking the two spheres of experience.

We can understand the poetic challenges posed by this juxtaposition if we turn to the material history of the record. Dylan recorded two versions of the album, one in New York, in September of 1974, and one in Minneapolis, a few weeks later. The second version, by and large, is what was released to the public. The first version contains a number of bitter, autobiographical references to Dylan’s marriage and his sinking career trajectory. Key among these is the first version of “Tangled up in Blue,” where, strikingly, the entire political context of the 1960s is absent. Instead, we have a picture of a failing marriage, haunted by an excess of “objects and material things,” where the husband is always “too busy or too stoned” and the wife denied the chance to pursue her interests.⁴³

This domestic scenario hints at the difficulties faced by many successful 1960s-era popular artists as the long decade ended. One career move involved shifting toward a more internalized “personal” form of expression—as evidenced by the (increasingly irrelevant) “domestic” music of, for example, Paul McCartney and John Lennon during this period.⁴⁴ *Blood on the Tracks* falls into this category, as a fable of domestic misery—until Dylan recasts the lyrics and rerecords it. When he does, he makes the singer’s personal disillusionment into generational disillusionment—in Adorno’s words, “the true universal.” In the process he invents, as it were, the 1960s generation with all of the cast of characters who are then immediately cast off as “an illusion to me now.”

This gesture sets the drama of the album on a broader stage. And it is carried out through the evocation of yet another great Petrarchan theme, the insistence on fidelity in love, despite the contingencies of time and

41. Max Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford, Calif., 2004), p. 103.

42. Dylan, “Idiot Wind,” *Lyrics*, p. 337.

43. See Øestrem, *Dylanchords* for these lyrics.

44. See, for example—or, perhaps better, avoid—Paul McCartney’s “Lovely Linda” (1971) or John Lennon’s “Oh Yoko” (1972). Dylan’s previous studio album, *Planet Waves* (Asylum 1003, 1974, LP), had edged in this direction, with songs to his children, his wife, and evocations of his childhood in Minnesota.

space. Central to the poetics of Petrarchan style is the persona of a poet who is haunted by love. “With every step is born a new thought of my lady,” writes Petrarch in his great canzone “Di pensier in pensier, di monte in monte,” “and as long as I can hold my yearning mind fixed on the first thought . . . my soul is satisfied by its own deception.”⁴⁵ In Dylan’s songs people come and go, but the singer cannot forget his lost love, any more than Petrarch can forget Laura. Technically, this coherence of vision—the sense of being haunted—is evoked through the repetition of motifs and hooks from song to song. Thus we are treated to images that reappear in vastly different contexts (the bird, Italy, the dyed hair, the rain, the sense of lateness), chord sequences that reappear, stressed, in multiple songs, echoes of guitar lines, and so on. You can even sing the lyrics of several of the songs over the melodies of several others, as if they were interchangeable, the same song sung again. This technique of repetition across the songs lends them a loose stylistic unity.⁴⁶

The shift to a language of memory and erotic obsession marks yet another break in Dylan’s work. By the 1970s he had written dozens of “love songs.” Most were put down (“Don’t Think Twice”) or expressions of short-term desire (“I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight”). Now we are given a vision of a love that is both broken and grand precisely because it is indistinguishable from the narrative of political disarray at the end of the 1960s. The mediation that holds personal crisis and political crisis together is the Petrarchan theme of fidelity across time through memory. Dylan’s singer is haunted. Like Petrarch’s lover, obsessed with the memory of the dead Laura, Dylan’s singer cannot escape from the image of the woman he has loved and lost. “Though our separating / pierced me to the heart,” he sings in “If You See Her, Say Hello,” “she still lives inside of me” (“IY,” p. 344; transcription mod.). Whereas the great dream of political renewal that

45. Petrarch, “Poem 129,” *Petrarch’s Lyric Poems*, p. 264.

46. The lyrics of “If You See Her, Say Hello” fit perfectly over the melody of “Tangled up in Blue,” the song with which, as I noted earlier, it is most closely related thematically. Metrically, they are the same song; see “IY” and “TUB,” pp. 344, 331–33. The middle section of each verse of “Idiot Wind” (“They say I shot a man named Gray and took his wife to Italy”) is replayed in “Lily, Rosemary, and the Jack of Hearts” (“The curfew had been lifted and the gamblin’ wheel shut down”) (Dylan, “Idiot Wind” and “Lily, Rosemary, and the Jack of Hearts,” pp. 336, 341). “Buckets of Rain” replays “You’re a Big Girl Now”; see Dylan, “Buckets of Rain” and “You’re a Big Girl Now,” pp. 347, 335. Moreover, the lyrical motifs that unify the album are matched by recurring musical motifs or gestures. Thus measure eleven of “Simple Twist of Fate” features a powerfully strummed chord progression, leading to the climax of the verse, of I-V-IV. The same figure appears in measure eight, at the climax, of each verse of “You’re a Big Girl Now” and, implicitly, figured by the melody, in measures twelve and thirteen of “If You See Her, Say Hello.” When expanded to two beats per chord it forms the entire chordal pattern of “Shelter from the Storm.” Dylan, *The Songs of Bob Dylan*, p. 246, gets the chords (arranged by Ronnie Ball) to “Shelter from the Storm” wrong; however Øestrem, *Dylan Chords* nails them.

Dylan evokes in his references to the 1960s was a bust, love perdures. Dylan's character may give himself over to wandering, yet like Petrarch (and unlike Sal Paradise, who endures a series of crushes before he meets his own Laura), he is really in the same place all along. The stylistic tic of repetition across songs gives form to the Petrarchan theme of erotic obsession.

This claim of continuity through memory links the content of the songs to the material and commercial history of the album itself. *Blood on the Tracks* is not simply the response to the collapse of political idealism and the breakup of the artist's domestic life. It is the response to a break in Dylan's own career. Not only were the projects directly preceding this one, as noted earlier, minor in nature, but he had left his record label, Columbia, for an ill-fated dalliance with Asylum Records that had recently ended. Now he returns to his first love, as it were. This sense of a return that is also an expression of fidelity is staged and thematized in the packaging of the recording, which features a lengthy essay by Pete Hamill, reminding the listeners that, throughout the 1960s, Dylan had, as it were, been there all along, waiting on the running boards. Chaos had come and gone, but, as Hamill puts it, "he had remained . . . and remained true."⁴⁷ Even as Dylan's lyric voice is turning away from a 1960s that evaporates into "illusion," his long memory sutures together public and private experience. His memory is of a love, but also of an earlier moment that, through his rejection of it, he calls into being as generation and shares with his listeners. Those who are "an illusion to me now" are still, one presumes, record buyers. The conventional circular relationship that links Petrarch's expressions of amorous obsession to his claims to artistic immortality is here played out in the dynamism of the long-playing record itself, as both an account of love through time and the material proof of the artist's unchanging commercial relevance. Through the material reproduction of the LP, Dylan's appropriation of the Petrarchan themes of memory and constancy is subsumed into brand loyalty.

Thus when taken up by the quickly digested form of the popular song the high-literary tradition of Petrarchan lyric discourse enables a fictional mediation between personal crisis and political upheaval. Dylan deploys the Petrarchan poetics of perspective and fragment to generate a loose dialectics of memory and visionary experience that transcends the limitations of Kerouac's beatnik vision. Yet at the same time, precisely because of

47. Pete Hamill, liner notes, *Blood on the Tracks* (Columbia 33235, 1975, LP). It is worth noting that this is the only time, since his first album, that Dylan had included a laudatory or interpretive essay by another hand as part of the package. Clearly, a professional relaunch was felt to be needed.

its absorption into the dynamics of popular stardom, that same Petrarchan poetic degenerates into a parody of its own mediating fiction, as the poet “singin’ just for you” bleeds from troubadour lament into marketing ploy.

7. Spin

“O Generation keep on working!” wrote Ginsberg as the concluding exhortation in the notes he penned for *Desire*, the album Bob Dylan released a year after *Blood on the Tracks*.⁴⁸ Ginsberg was a bit out of touch or behind the times when he wrote this nostalgic call to arms. Dylan had already bundled up the 1960s generation and moved on. However he had only been able to do so, I have shown, through his deep and insightful reading of an earlier generational text, Kerouac’s *On the Road*. Moreover, through his engagement with the seemingly archaic literary tradition of the Petrarchan love sonnet, which Kerouac alludes to at the end of his own visionary fiction, Dylan was able to turn Kerouac’s topography to his own purposes, marking out the poetic discourse that enabled him to leave the cliché of the 1960s in the past as one more “point of view,” like a bad love affair. All of the extraneous noise of the sixties—the revolution, the fellow travelers, the betrayal of idealism—turn to smoke, “an illusion to me now,” what Petrarch called “a brief dream.”⁴⁹ What dominates the present is a lyric performance that points forward, beyond the generational poetics of Ginsberg and the Beats, even as it is subsumed into the dynamics of commercial rebirth. Visionary schemes give way to a poetics of fragmentation and performance in which insight comes in shards and always imperfectly, thereby requiring yet another spin of the disk. The Petrarchan lyric tradition emerges as a discourse that stands in dialectical relationship to the poetry of vision—from Dante to Rimbaud. In Dylan’s case, from here on in his literary engagements would become less explicit, but ever more specific.⁵⁰ Whether the artistic breakthrough of

48. Ginsberg, “Songs of Redemption” (1975), liner notes for *Desire* (Columbia 33893, 1976, LP).

49. Petrarch, “Poem 1,” p. 36. This is the end of the first sonnet, where Petrarch acknowledges that he has too long been “the talk of the crowd.”

50. Dylan’s engagement with specific literary or cultural subtexts has grown in precision and sophistication since his name-dropping early days. One might mention, for example, the album *Street Legal* (Columbia 354353, 1978, CD), which follows *Blood on the Tracks* by several years and is deeply imbued with references to the tarot; the mid-1980s album *Under the Red Sky* (Columbia 46794, 1990, CD), which, as Gray has shown, is organized as a series of variations on a collection of children’s tales; *Love and Theft* (Columbia 85975, 2001, CD), which takes its title and many themes from Eric Lott’s exploration of early twentieth-century blues (see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* [Oxford, 1993]); or the tunes on *Modern Times* (Columbia 87606, 2006, CD), which cite verbatim poems from the nineteenth-century “Confederate poet” Henry Timrod. On a smaller scale, *Time out of Mind*

Blood on the Tracks offered personal consolation for the misery inflicted on Dylan by the “demonstrators” outside his door, we cannot know. What we can say is that a critical engagement with the resources of literary form helped free him, at least momentarily, in song, from the smoky visions of his contemporaries.

(Columbia 68556, 1997, CD) contains a song, “Tryin’ to Get to Heaven,” which is built almost entirely out of phrases copped from the songs collected in one book, Alan Lomax’s *Folk Songs of North America*, as if Dylan were raiding the anthology and pasting his own song together out of it; see Dylan, “Tryin’ to Get to Heaven,” *Lyrics*, p. 564. This would make the song a *cento*, a poem built out of lines from predecessor poets. It is a form deployed with great subtlety in “Poem 70” in the *Canzoniere*, where Petrarch constructs an entire genealogy of his own poetry and its relationship to the Italian and troubadour tradition; see Petrarch, “Poem 70,” *Petrarch’s Lyric Poems*, pp. 151–53. On Dylan’s sources for *Under the Red Sky* and “Tryin’ to Get to Heaven,” see Gray, *Song and Dance Man III*, chaps. 16 and 19, esp. pp. 826–28.