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## Kierkegaard, Literature, and the Arts

Ziolkowski, Eric, Garff, Joakim, Jøthen, Peder, Rovira, James

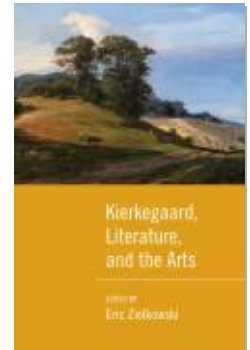
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## Kierkegaard, Dylan, and Masked and Anonymous Neighbor-Love

Jamie A. Lorentzen

Although the lyrics of Bob Dylan (b. 1941) offer evidence of his familiarity with many philosophers and poets, it is unclear if he has read any works by Søren Kierkegaard. Still, the two thinkers have more in common than thin legs, big hair, and an appreciation for the power of both sacred and profane music. Among other things, they are poets of mighty opposites, both dialectical and paradoxical. They are earnestly funny while simultaneously qualifying as unorthodox penitents. They also respect the other (the neighbor) in the development of each individual's full humanity—and they prefer to pay their respects in great part in disguise.

Regarding his respect for the neighbor, Dylan writes in 2004 about something he read in the early 1960s: “I came across one of [Arthur Rimbaud’s] letters called ‘Je est un autre’ [I is an other]. . . . When I read those words bells went off. It made perfect sense.”<sup>1</sup> Characteristically, Dylan does not elaborate on how the nineteenth-century French poet’s words made “perfect sense” to him then. He writes about it later in his career, however, like an epiphany, like a destiny that tolled for him: “Bells went off.”<sup>2</sup>

As a bell-ringing epiphany, “I is an other” calls home Dylan’s apparently disparate body of work, particularly the lion’s share of his songs that treat love in its many forms, especially romantic-erotic love, friendship, neighbor-love, and divine love. Just as Rimbaud’s “I is an other” offers some direction home to Dylan’s thought and vision, Kierkegaard’s sense about *I* and *other* (self and neighbor) helps pave the way: “The concept ‘neighbor’ is actually the redoubling of your own self; ‘the neighbor’ is what thinkers call ‘the other,’ that by which the selfishness in self-love is to be tested” (*SKS* 9:29 / *WL* 21). In this context, “I is an other” is what Kierkegaard would call the Archimedean point for Dylan, or that point at which individual genius may move the world (see, e.g., *SKS* 19:200, *Notesbog* 6:24, n.d. 1840 / *KJN* 3:196). “I is an other” informs Dylan’s corpus as a whole, bringing it all back home. The phrase alone allies seemingly antipathetic aspects of Dylan’s aesthetic, ethical, and religious personae in the same way Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Judge William sees how aesthetic, ethical, and religious aspects of a person must be allied to make life meaningful (*SKS* 3:145 / *EO* 2:147).

### Aesthetics and Poetic Freedom

Kierkegaard speaks through hundreds of imaginative constructions he conjures by his own masked and pseudonymous voices and characters. Of his formidable pseudonymity and poet-communication, he writes that they have “not had an *accidental* basis in my *person* . . . but an *essential* basis in the *production* itself.” Consequently, Kierkegaard is “impersonally or personally in the third person a *souffleur* [prompter] who has poetically produced the *authors*. . . . Thus in the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by me” (*SKS* 7:569–70 / *CUP* 1:625–26).

Similarly, “I is an other” offers Dylan aesthetic license to form narrative voices, characters, and stage personae that people his own mosaic of the world. With or without inlay of his own opinions, values, or beliefs, Dylan populates his world by first imaginatively walking in the shoes of one character or narrator after another. “I is an other” offers Dylan the means by which he may cast a kind of “infinite sweep of humanity” that he saw cast in the work of folk musician Woody Guthrie (1912–1967),<sup>3</sup> that is, the organizing principle to compose, with succinct words and phrases, hundreds of highly individualized characters.

With a gifted imagination and a powerful associative memory, Dylan’s own poet-communication engenders a vast progeny of human portraits and voices: a girl with a leopard-skin pillbox hat, a lone pilgrim, a one-eyed midget, a politician with jogging shoes, a lonesome organ grinder crying, Charles Darwin trapped out there on Highway 5, a guilty undertaker sighing, a tambourine man, Miss Lonelies, a dreamer of St. Augustine, a not-so-dear landlord, poor immigrants, lonesome hoboes, scores of babies and sweethearts and ladies and mommas and wanted men and minstrel boys—a seemingly never-ending tour of humanity. (The peripatetic Kierkegaard equally drew a vast and multifaceted portrait of so many human beings he acutely observed on his own virtually never-ending tour of humanity along the streets and side streets of Copenhagen.)

Nor would Dylan avoid responsibly claiming his villainous, saintly, innocent, experienced offspring. You may call him Terry, Timmy, Bobby, Jimmy, R.J., Ray, Jack Fate, Whiteface, and even Lucky or Boo Wilbury, just as you may unwittingly or surreptitiously call Kierkegaard by some sixteen or so pseudonyms. No matter what you say, the responsive, responsible Dylan is gonna have to serve somebody. It may be the devil of Faustian faces or it may be the Lord of poignantly human voices, but he’s gonna have to serve somebody. He knows it. He wrote the song (“Gotta Serve Somebody”).

### Aesthetics and Personhood

Masks also help protect Dylan from those attempting (to paraphrase from Dylan’s “To Ramona”) to hype him or type him or make him feel that he

must be exactly like them. In this context, Dylan is not only aesthetically but also existentially solid, a man masking his personal self to reveal the authentic literary-musical self that is his renown and legacy. Of the metaphysics of personhood and the fundamental roles that appearances and masks play, Kierkegaard scholar Howard Hong has song-and-dance men like Dylan in mind:

The Latin *persona* means a mask used by actors to identify the character represented and as an aid in projecting the voice. The word itself is derived from *per*, meaning “through” and *sonare*, “to sound.” Therefore a person is the one who sounds through the mask or the various masks seen by others. The person is not the mask of function, type, class, or social-economical-political relations but is the agent, the responder, the thinker, one who acts . . . one who bears the external mask or masks that others see. The mask is indeed the person’s mask but the person is not synonymous with the mask and is not exhausted by the aggregate of his masks.<sup>4</sup>

Kierkegaard, along with several of his pseudonyms, repeatedly cites the French statesman Talleyrand as allegedly having said “Man did not acquire speech in order to reveal his thoughts but in order to conceal them” (*SKS* 1:292 / *CI* 253; see also *SKS* 4:409–10 / *CA* 108; *SKS* 6:315 / *SLW* 339; *SKS* 18:208, *JJ*:212, n.d. 1844 / *KJN* 2:191; *Pap.* V B 115:2, n.d. 1844 / *JP* 3:2322; *SKS* 26:283, *NB33*:42, n.d. 1854 / *JP* 4:3870). Words and speech equally prove revelatory to listeners of Dylan’s characters and narrators. And understanding language is, according to Hong, “our best means to get behind the masks.”<sup>5</sup>

The artist formerly known as Robert Zimmerman thereby has, like everybody else (including the man in his “Man in the Long Black Coat”), “a face like a mask.” Dylan’s narrator in “Abandoned Love” makes this opacity transparent: “Everybody’s wearing a disguise / To hide what they’ve got left behind their eyes.” But his literary persona—Bob Dylan—is equally transparent: “But me, I can’t cover what I am / Wherever the children go I’ll follow them.”<sup>6</sup> Wherever, that is, the progeny of his fecund imagination (his songs) go, he will follow them, for Dylan finds “the religiosity and philosophy in the music” and nowhere else. “Songs like ‘Let Me Rest on a Peaceful Mountain’ or ‘I Saw the Light’—that’s my religion. I don’t adhere to rabbis, preachers, evangelists, all of that. I’ve learned more from the songs than I’ve learned from any of this kind of entity. The songs are my lexicon. I believe the songs.”<sup>7</sup>

At the 1964 Halloween Night Carnegie Hall concert, Dylan informed the audience that he was wearing his Bob Dylan mask. Before that, the young folk singer spun creation myths of being in places he had never been (like jail) and doing things he had never done (like joining the circus).<sup>8</sup> The title of his 2003 film, *Masked and Anonymous*, directed by Larry Charles, confirms

Dylan's reliance over time on not so much demonic concealment but what Kierkegaard would call "pious fraud." Along with Kierkegaard, Dylan can say, "In a sense I began my activity as an author with a falsum [deception] or with *pia fraus* [pious fraud]" (SKS 21:19, including 19*m*:1–2, NB6:21, n.d. 1848 / KJN 5:16, including 16*m*:1). Even back then he knew his back pages: that he "who sings with his tongue on fire" must always protect it from "the rat race choir" and "society's pliers" ("It's Alright, Ma [I'm Only Bleeding]"). Not only was Dylan older then, he was younger then, too, existing in a sort of Kierkegaardian second ignorance behind and beyond his rightful time (see, e.g., SKS 10:37–39 / CD 25–27).

There is, then, reason in the rhyme of Dylan's aesthetic foundation that Kierkegaard would endorse: "An author certainly must have his private personality as everyone has, but this must be his ἄδύτον [inner sanctum] . . . as the entrance to a house is barred by stationing two soldiers with crossed bayonets" (SKS 8:94 / TA 99). By not protecting an inwardness out of which black and bright truths in song may be sung, Dylan might not know his song well before he starts singing (see "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall"). His *falsum* or *pia fraus* installs footings of a healthy self-love that preserves a genius and founds a towering literary-musical edifice. Not preserving such privacy amid the world's "mixed-up confusion" could have killed at least the poet in him. "There's too many people and they're all too hard to please" ("Mixed-Up Confusion").

### Ethics and Social Justice

Born Jewish in a predominantly Christian American culture, Duluth native Robert Zimmerman was heavily influenced by American folk and gospel music and their Christian themes. The songs' messages likely lay the groundwork for his late-1970s conversion to Christianity. His 1962 debut album includes arrangements of two Christian gospel songs, "In My Time of Dying" and "Gospel Plow." Since then, scholars have inventoried and investigated hundreds of biblical references and Christian allusions in his canon.

The period that produced Dylan's evangelical albums (*Slow Train Coming*, 1979; *Saved*, 1980; and *Shot of Love*, 1981) shows him proclaiming Christianity and the need to love God. For a convert, this proclamation reasonably responds to the first of the two love commandments on which, according to Matthew 22:34–40, hang all laws and prophets. Along the line of Kierkegaard's indirect forms of communication, however, the more nuanced pathos of Dylan's religiosity, philosophy, and ethics takes stage before and after this period. These pre- and postevangelical sets spotlight the second love commandment (love your neighbor as yourself) through lyrical expressions of so many human actions that *lack* neighbor-love amid civil unrest, restless loves, and restive mobs.

Despite (or perhaps because of) his musical upbringing and conversion, Dylan learned early that humans regularly fall short of and are in need of voices with messages that run deeper than either the longing for requited romantic love or oaths of friendship in which most pop songs find their themes—voices with messages of neighbor-love that echo the civil rights, protest, and gospel songs of Woody Guthrie and other folk artist greats. Neighbor-love especially informs many of Dylan's love songs by subordinating romantic-erotic love and friendship. It also blows the whistle on unruly crowds.

"I is an other" subsequently takes on ethical qualifications, including a compassionate and egalitarian sense of social justice that enlists the self, the *I*, to move toward *the other*, the lowly, the needy, the down-trodden, the disenfranchised, the outcast. Here, "I is an other" neither appeals to quid pro quo nor offers much room for reciprocal-based romance and friendship (i.e., preferential, like-for-like, possessive, mine-thine relationships by which the selfishness in self-love is tested). Writes Kierkegaard:

Erotic love [*Elskov*] and friendship . . . contain no moral task. . . .

Erotic love is defined by the object; friendship is defined by the object; only love for the neighbor is defined by love [*Kjerlighed*]. . . .

*Love* [*Kjerlighed*] is a matter of conscience and thus is not a matter of [erotic] drives and inclination, or . . . feeling. (SKS 9:57, 73, 145 / WL 50–51, 66, 143, emphasis in original)

This is perhaps why, before abandoning a romantic love in "Abandoned Love," the narrator claims, "I march in the parade of liberty / But as long as I love you I'm not free." Such abandoned romantic-erotic love and friendship ennoble Dylan's neighbor-love message to inform songs of protest and social justice.

Ethical bells ringing for justice chime, for instance, when "I is an other" tolls with compassion for the other in Dylan's "Chimes of Freedom." Here, "majestic bells" of lightning bolts strike "shadows in the sounds" that seem "to be the chimes of freedom flashing." Such bells toll for all, including

warriors whose strength is not to fight . . .

refugees on the unarmed road of flight

.....

the mistreated, mateless mother, the mistitled prostitute . . .

the misdemeanor outlaw, chased an' cheated by pursuit.

Elsewhere, in "Thunder on the Mountain," the narrator sings, "Gonna forget about myself for a while, gonna go out and see what others need." In "With God on Our Side," Dylan's song about religious self-righteousness that deigns to justify wars, the narrator's name, "it ain't nothing," and his age, "it means

less.” Focus is not on the needs of a singer but on the needy in the song, not on the messenger but on the message. Such narrators mold masks of anonymity from a solid ethical cast of actuality that Kierkegaard would humbly applaud: “Would that you in silence might forget yourself, what you yourself are called, your own name, the famous name, the wretched name, the insignificant name” (*SV*<sup>1</sup> 11:21 / *WA* 18–19).

### Ethics and Romantic-Erotic Love

Kierkegaard advises the multitudes who may see themselves as prima donnas, lovers, and friends who naturally and regularly try to upstage neighbor-love at every turn: “The love commandment . . . simply says, ‘You shall love your neighbor.’ Just as this commandment will teach everyone how to love oneself, so it also will teach erotic love and friendship genuine love; in loving yourself, *preserve love for the neighbor*; in erotic love and friendship, *preserve love for the neighbor*” (*SKS* 9:69 / *WL* 61–62, emphases added). Similarly, Dylan’s treatment of neighbor-love’s attention to the unknown and disenfranchised never loses sight of attending to the known beloved in romantic-erotic love or friend in friendship. Instead of actually disowning or abandoning romantic love and friendship to take up the banner of some righteous cause, Dylan (like Kierkegaard) relegates romantic love and friendship to second fiddle. Romantic-erotic love and friendship are not ejected from the band but are directed to back up the lead, which is neighbor-love.

For instance, as much as the enmeshed, overly dependent Babe in Dylan’s “It Ain’t Me, Babe” wants the narrator to “die for [her] *and more*” (emphasis added), the narrator knows that such love is not real, hence his answer: “It ain’t me, babe.” Or when the beloved in Dylan’s “Don’t Think Twice, It’s Alright” wants the lover’s soul, Dylan’s lover-narrator knows to give the beloved no more than his heart. By offering only his temporal romantic love and not his eternal being, Dylan’s poet-narrator instinctively knows what Kierkegaard knows, namely, that “lovers no doubt think that in erotic love they have the highest.” By knowing this, Dylan’s poet-narrators on the whole shed selfish masks of romantic-erotic love and don the ethical mask of neighbor-love, for, as Kierkegaard writes, “the [romantically inclined] poet promises the lovers immortality . . . but who then is the poet, what good is his vouching, he who cannot vouch for himself?” (*SKS* 9:68 / *WL* 61).

In other Dylan love songs,<sup>9</sup> relationships that could blossom into erotic love or friendship are instead “abandoned” for expressions of love that are more real, expressions that do not beg for something in return. Narrators speak not to curry romantic-erotic favor but to help others understand and see through the world’s deceptions and individuals’ self-deceptions, to help them become more inward, human, rounded, and less porcelain, dependent, and flat. In “Trust Yourself,” for instance, the narrator advises, “Don’t trust

me to show you love / When my love may only be lust / If you want somebody you can trust, trust yourself.”

That said, Dylan *has* written touchingly romantic-erotic love songs.<sup>10</sup> Most if not all of these kinds of songs, however, either admit to limits or failures of romantic love and friendship, or their narrators generally see the beloved as consenting adults instead of vulnerable prey.<sup>11</sup>

Other responses to vicissitudes of romantic-erotic love include “Love Sick,” in which the narrator is “sick of love” while concurrently under its spell (love sick). In “When the Deal Goes Down,” the narrator knows “transient joys . . . are not what they seem.” In two songs, Dylan hilariously de-romanticizes even Romeo and Juliet’s love affair, making the invocations serve as speed bumps to possessive, impatient backseat lovers:

In comes Romeo, he’s moaning  
 “You belong to me I believe”  
 And someone says, “You’re in the wrong place my friend  
 You better leave.” (“Desolation Row”)

Romeo, he said to Juliet, “You got a poor complexion  
 It doesn’t give your appearance a very youthful touch!”  
 Juliet said back to Romeo, “Why don’t you just shove off  
 If it bothers you so much.” (“Floater [Too Much to Ask]”)

(Kierkegaard, by the way, would cheer on Dylan’s sucker punches to starry-eyed romantic Romeo. According to Eric Ziolkowski, “Kierkegaard . . . suggests that these two lovers’ emotions belong on stage” because such romanticized emotions have “no place in ‘practical life’” [SKS 21:164, NB8:43, n.d. 1848 / *KJN* 5:171].)<sup>12</sup>

Then there are playful songs of romantic-erotic love on the brink of neighbor-love, where the beloved is loved despite obvious limitations and because of unseen possibilities. In Dylan’s “Ugliest Girl in the World,” the narrator does not know why he loves her, but he just can’t stop loving her. (The only physically attractive thing about her is her sweet breath—suggestive, of course, of inward beauty trumping outward imperfection.) On Dylan’s debut album, the first lines of his first song, “She’s No Good,” tell of a darkly funny romantic-love turned neighbor-love: “Well I don’t know why I love ya like I do / Nobody in the world can get along with you.” What arguably may be Dylan’s sweetest (least possessive) love song, “Love Minus Zero / No Limit” portrays a woman impervious to being hyped or typed:

She doesn’t have to say she’s faithful  
 Yet she’s true, like fire, like ice . . .  
 Valentines can’t buy her . . .  
 She knows too much to argue or to judge.



Yet even this extraordinary Love is no romanticized dovelike lovebird, but “like some raven / At my window with a broken wing.” “Humanly speaking,” Kierkegaard would add, “the truly loving one, the sacrificing, the self-giving one who loves, totally self-denying in all things, is . . . the injured one, the most injured of all . . . by continually giving [her]self” (*SKS* 9:267 / *WL* 268).

So Dylan *writes* touching romantic-erotic love songs, too, but his narrators generally remain weary of romantic-erotic love’s ephemeral qualities.

### Ethics and Friendship

As for friendship, Dylan’s narrator in “Buckets of Rain” says it straight: “Friends will arrive, friends will disappear.” Like romantic-erotic love, friendship traffics in partisanship, preference, reciprocity, quid pro quo—not pro bono, nonpreferential neighbor-love. Arguable exceptions in the playlist include the playful desire to want just to be “friends” with a lover in “All I Really Want to Do,”<sup>13</sup> or suffering loss of friends in songs like “Ballad for a Friend,” or the nearest thing to sentimentality in Dylan’s decidedly unsentimental songbook, “Bob Dylan’s Dream,” in which the narrator wishes “in vain . . . to sit . . . again” amid his “first few friends.”

Generally, however, friends are what Dylan’s narrator in “Gates of Eden” calls “other strangers,” who conceal more than reveal so as to take as much of whatever their “friends” have. Other examples include:

You do the work of the devil, you got a million friends  
They’ll be there when you got something,  
they’ll take it all in the end. (“You Changed My Life”)

My best friend, my doctor  
Won’t even say what it is I’ve got. (“Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues”)

You got a lotta nerve  
To say you are my friend  
When I was down  
You just stood there grinning. (“Positively 4th Street”)

Dylan even anticipates the worst fear of friends on Facebook and other social media:

Now I got a friend who spends his life  
Stabbing my picture with a bowie knife  
Dreams of strangling me with a scarf  
When my name comes up he pretends to barf  
I’ve got a million friends! (“I Shall Be Free No. 10”)

### Ethics and *They*

Dylan's and Kierkegaard's critiques of romantic-erotic love and friendship, however, pale before their relentless assaults upon that which Kierkegaard calls *the crowd* or *the rabble* and Dylan calls *They*, namely, the demonic legion from which so much of an individual's sorrow stems. More than lovers or friends, *They* makes one feel that one must be exactly like *Them*. Subsequently, Dylan's antipathies toward the machinations of the mob-like *They* throw into greatest relief his sympathies toward relationally integrated and concrete individuals (*I* and *you*) whom he, like Kierkegaard (and Jewish philosopher Martin Buber),<sup>14</sup> champions.

Despite a shared sense of egalitarianism, Dylan and Kierkegaard are ever skeptical of groups, members of which are forever compelled to be unreflective rank-and-file partisans. Seeking accountability for wrong action from *They* is difficult, however, because *They* is an oceanic abstraction into which individuals quickly dissolve. The concept of *They* also erodes individual consciences, compelling Kierkegaard to write, "If everyone in truth loved the neighbor as himself, then perfect equality would be achieved unconditionally. . . . Everyone who, even if he confesses, as I do, that his striving is weak and imperfect, is still aware that the task is to love the neighbor. . . . I have never read in Holy Scripture this commandment: You shall love the crowd" (SKS 16:91 / PV 111). Here, Kierkegaard describes the essentially egalitarian relationship between self and neighbor and reminds the reader that the egalitarian cannot forget from whence it came, namely, the personal—lest the egalitarian turn totalitarian. Which is why in "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)," Dylan's narrator notes that "even the president of the United States sometimes must have to stand naked." Similarly, in Dylan's "Masters of War," demonically masked war sponsors and purveyors are singled out as individuals for purposes of indictment:

You that hide behind walls  
 You that hide behind desks  
 I just want you to know  
 I can see through your masks.

Kierkegaard's and Dylan's critiques of *They* subsequently have their strongest foothold in the context of an at-large culture's conflict of *They* versus *I* (society versus the individual) more than in partisan politics' conflict of *They* versus *We* (*We* merely being another variant of *They*). "For it is only a great man who speaks, not a party," Kierkegaard writes. "It is only a solitary voice, not a party voice" (SKS 14:43 / Cor. 7). If individuals who make up *They* were honest with themselves, individuals in Dylan songs like "Who Killed Davey Moore?," "Only a Pawn in Their Game," and "The Lonesome Ballad of Hattie Carroll" would have reason to bury their faces in rags and cry, for

individuals know that *They* is manmade, man-killing, and *They* will stone you “when you’re tryin’ to be so good . . . / just a-like they said they would.” And then *They* will stone you

when you’re tryin’ to go home . . .  
 when you’re there all alone . . .  
 when you’re tryin’ to make a buck . . .  
 and then they’ll say, “good luck.”

And then *They* will stone you again “and they’ll say that it’s the end . . . / and then they’ll come back again . . . / and then say you are brave.” And then *They* will stone you “when you are set down in your grave” (“Rainy Day Women #12 & 35”). Despite the mayhem portrayed in what is one of Dylan’s most recognizable songs, however, the *second* line of the two-line refrain—“But I would not feel so all alone / *Everybody must get stoned*”—sucks all the oxygen out of the room, rendering the song the presumptive anthem of the drug culture.

But if *Everybody must get stoned* is the song’s essential message, it is also essential to recognize that the bulk of the song *critiques* the message. A casual inspection of the lyrics yields narrative concern for two dangers: the loneliness an individual faces if he or she does not give in to *They*’s daunting peer pressure, and the power wielded by *They* to make the individual be governed by an enforced insanity that incrementally and absolutely kills the song’s *You* and *I*.

Instead of the narrator abdicating because he feels so all alone, what listeners might hope the narrator would say is what Dylan’s narrator of “Standing in the Doorway” says: “I know I can’t win, / But my heart just won’t give in.” This assertion at least affirms innate goodness and bravery within the individual despite knowledge of a collective force’s ultimate usurpation. What listeners of “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35” instead hear, however, is the narrator’s sad surrender to the crowd by disclaiming the good and the brave by at least quoting if not internalizing *They*’s message: *Everybody must get stoned*. In addition, the refrain—presumably uttered affirmatively by *You* and *I*—seems mismanaged with great skill by *They*. If *You* or *I* object—for instance, at a Dylan concert—the objection would likely be drowned out by the crowd gleefully yelling en masse the only line that registers: *Everybody must get stoned*.

What also cannot be denied is that *Everybody must get stoned* may be a masked and anonymous acoustical illusion by Dylan to show the force of *They* to the nameless faces of *They*, as if to channel to each individual face what the narrator in Dylan’s “Things Have Changed” knows: “All the truth in the world adds up to one big lie.” In the end, the refrain *Everybody must get stoned* exploits crowd madness that happily consigns everybody to the Final Solution: dehumanization before annihilation of the very goodness and

bravery with which all individuals are endowed. *Everybody must get stoned* is the mantra for a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde version of “I is an other”: out-of-body, mind-altered, lacking in deliberation and conscience. Commensurate with ethics to which Dylan subscribes throughout his canon, the twenty lines of the thirty-line “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35” that begin by essentially prosecuting *They* read like so many upbuilding Kierkegaardian thoughts that, by their indirection, ethically wound from behind (see, e.g., SKS 10:167–252 / CD 161–246). As masked and anonymous indirect communicator extraordinaire, in other words, Dylan knows that if you invite a listener to receive a message upon the message’s baseline aesthetic-sensuous-immediate level, then—after the listener begins *really to hear* the meaning of the message—the listener is confronted by its ethical or ethical-religious demands.<sup>15</sup> At that point the listener must *either* deny and reject the message’s deeper ethical meaning by yielding to the sensuous sway of the aesthetic *or* accept Dylan’s unorthodox art of helping the other that has just played out on a higher ethical level.

If, as Dylan’s narrator claims in “Gates of Eden,” “there are no truths outside [Eden’s] gates,” then all communication of truth, as Kierkegaard claims, must necessarily begin with an untruth. Such communication necessarily requires a mask. “Ethical communication in character always begins with placing a ‘deception’ in between,” Kierkegaard writes, “and the art consists in enduring everything *while remaining faithful to character in the deception and faithful to the ethical*” (SKS 27:411, Papir 368:10, n.d. 1847 / JP 1:653, p. 288, my emphasis)—which may be why the “Gates of Eden” narrator prefaces the above remark by noting, “At times I think there are no words / But these [read: masked, arcane, metaphorical words] to tell what’s true.”

### Ethics, *They*, and *Mundus vult decipi*

“What, then, does it mean ‘to deceive’ [into the truth]?” Kierkegaard asks. “It means that one does not begin *directly* with what one wishes to communicate but begins by taking the other’s delusion at face value” (SKS 16:36 / PV 54). Dylan, too, knows to begin by taking the crowd’s delusions at face value (in the present case, illicit drugs’ short-term value), then building up the individual listeners’ ethical or ethical-religious imagination. “If one is truly to succeed in leading a person to a specific place, one must first and foremost take care to find him where *he* is and begin there,” Kierkegaard writes. “This is the secret in the entire art of helping” (SKS 16:271 / PV 45).

That said, how is this song about getting stoned—of all songs—so ethically *good*?<sup>16</sup> Its original and most enduring aural version, after all, conjures up a carnival atmosphere in which both Dylan and his backup vocals sing amid toxic laughs. Then there is the problem of any performing artist’s, even Dylan’s, need to self-promote. One of Kierkegaard’s (unpublished) pseudonyms writes,

“Every juggler always and immediately makes a hit, because he simply wants to deceive; thus he wants what the times demand—*Mundus vult decipi* [the world wants to be deceived]” (*Pap.* VIII<sup>2</sup> B 12 59fn. / BA 171fn.).

Who can thereby blame the *world*? Is it not true that everybody, as Dylan’s narrator sings in “Quinn the Eskimo,” is “in despair, ev’ry girl and boy”? Is it also not true that, as Dylan’s narrator sings in “High Water (For Charlie Patton),” it is “tough out there . . . rough out there . . . bad out there. High water everywhere”? Even Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Frater Taciturnus seems sympathetic to the world (if not cynically, ironically so): “*Mundus vult decipi*; my relationship to the environment that I must call my world can hardly be more definitely expressed. In fact, I believe that in a wider sense it is the best that has been said about the world. Thus speculators should not cudgel their brains trying to fathom what the times demand, for it has been essentially the same since time immemorial: to be tricked and bamboozled. If one just says something silly and drinks . . . with humanity *en masse*, then one comes to be . . . loved and esteemed by the whole congregation” (*SKS* 6:316 / *SLW* 340). After the smoke clears, however, other masks of Dylan and Kierkegaard reveal themselves, masks that condemn *They* for prohibiting individuals from living deliberately, reflectively, compassionately, and empathetically, alone and together. In a discourse he entitles “Becoming Sober,” Kierkegaard writes, “The world *wants* to be deceived; not only is it deceived—ah, then the matter would not be so dangerous!—but it *wants* to be deceived. Intensely, more intensely, more passionately perhaps than any witness to the truth has fought for the truth, the world fights to be deceived; it most gratefully rewards with applause, money, and prestige anyone who complies with its wish to be deceived. And perhaps the world has never needed to become sober as much as it does today” (*SKS* 16:192–93 / *JFY* 139–40). Meanwhile, Dylan’s narrator in “Ain’t Talkin’” talks:

The world is filled with speculation  
 The whole wide world which people say is round  
 They will tear your mind away from contemplation  
 They will jump on your misfortune when you’re down.

An authentic self thus becomes, according to Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Anti-Climacus, “the last thing the world cares about and the most dangerous thing of all for a person to show signs of having” (*SV*<sup>1</sup> 11:148 / *SUD* 32)—dangerous because it is only within such a self that the ethical and the ethical-religious find a voice. “The good person,” Kierkegaard writes, “must get people separated as individuals. The same people, who as individuals are able to will the good in truth, are immediately corrupted as soon as they unite and become many, and therefore the good person will neither try to have a *crowd* for help in splitting up the *crowd* nor try to have a *crowd behind him* while he is splitting up the *crowd in front of him*” (*SKS* 8:200 / *UDVS* 96).

It is no wonder that action figures like Kierkegaard and Dylan come with masks. As with Superman, Batman, and the Lone Ranger, what more compelling means than masks do they have to “spare the defeated . . . speak to the crowd . . . preach peace to the conquered [and] tame the proud” (“Lonesome Day Blues”)?

Which is where masked and anonymous *You* and *I* come in. For “the last thing I would surrender is my faith in individual human beings,” Kierkegaard writes. “And this is my faith, that however much confusion and evil and contemptibleness there can be in human beings as soon as they become the irresponsible and unrepentant ‘public,’ ‘crowd,’ etc.—there is just as much truth and goodness and loveliness in them when one can get them as single individuals” (*SV*<sup>1</sup> 13:499 / *PV* 10–11).

### Religiousness and *You* and *I*

In Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower,” a desperate “joker,” exasperated by feeling no relief from worldly chaos and a sense of worthlessness, confides in his friend—a consoling (if not humorously chastising) thief:

“No reason to get excited,” the thief he kindly spoke,  
 “There are many here among us who think that life is but a joke.  
 But you and I, we’ve been through that, and this is not our fate;  
 So let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late.”

The lines are not from the only hit song Dylan sings in apocalyptic terms.<sup>17</sup> Nor is it the only song in which its narrator implores the need to avoid talking falsely to oneself and others while seeking what Kierkegaard (invoking Socrates) calls an “honest distrust of oneself, to treat oneself as a suspicious character” (*SKS* 13:70 / *FSE* 44).<sup>18</sup>

An honest distrust of one’s self means coming clean—*becoming sober*—even in the eleventh hour. Here is where the *I* begins to see the other, the neighbor identified as *You*, as essential to becoming fully human: namely, becoming *itself*, the ethically self-loving *I*, the *relational phenomenon* striving ethically to relate itself to itself, to others, and to the power that established it (see *SKS* 11:129–30 / *SUD* 13–14). Here is where the *I* sees the neighbor as “the *other you* . . . the *first you*” (*SKS* 9:60, 64 / *WL* 53, 57). Here is where the *I*’s self-love sheds the thick skins of egoism and narcissism, metamorphosing into its better angel, one that presupposes better angels in others. Here is where the stage is *really* set—with love, according to Kierkegaard, being the only thing that presupposes itself: “The one who loves presupposes that love is in the other person’s heart and by this very presupposition builds up love in him” (*SKS* 9:219 / *WL* 216–17). Here is where the task of self-love is ethically “to be [critically] objective in relation to oneself and [sympathetically]

subjective in relation to all others” instead of being “subjective toward [one-self] and objective toward all others” (*SKS* 20:164, *NB2*:57, n.d. 1847 / *KJN* 4:162). Here is where the self’s meaningful relation with itself exists when the self is in an ethical relation with the other, the neighbor. Here is where moving to accept—even favor—eccentricities of the neighbor by altering one’s own eccentricities requires ever more inward self-love, love that moves toward (not away from) one’s better angels by routinely challenging (instead of being smugly satisfied with) one’s own eccentricities. Here is where becoming human becomes more difficult, yet, for all that, more meaningful.

Great difficulty arises because moving toward that which is not naturally preferred is anathema to romantic-erotic love and friendship, both of which lead a person to embrace only what is like or similar to that person. In this context, what Dostoevsky’s rational egoist Ivan Karamazov says about neighbor-love seems not so outlandish. “I must make an admission,” Ivan explains to his youngest brother. “I never could understand how it’s possible to love one’s neighbors. In my opinion, it is precisely one’s neighbors that one cannot possibly love. Perhaps if they weren’t so nigh.”<sup>19</sup> Natural instincts and acts of will based upon rational egoism to which Ivan aspires embrace only that which is like or similar to one’s own self. Ethics, on the other hand, generally indicates the *opposite* as counterweight to impulsive and unreflective tribal instincts. This is why Kierkegaard calls the neighbor “the *other you*,” compelling *You* to consider the neighbor as essentially more like than unlike *You*.

If becoming fully human has something to do with developing the self-as-relational-phenomenon, then becoming fully human has something to do with relating well with others, which implies ethically moving *toward* the other, the neighbor, the *other you*. Only by moving toward the neighbor (who may not be dear to *You* but who is nonetheless near to *You*) will *You* come to embody *You*. *You* must find *the other*, according to Kierkegaard, “lovable despite and with his weaknesses and defects and imperfections,” for “the task is not to develop one’s fastidiousness but to transform oneself and one’s taste” (*SKS* 9:158–59 / *WL* 158)—all for the love of the other. Here is where becoming human becomes meaningful: *You*, choosing to love the neighbor, may be the only way *You* can love itself, can live in and with itself well. Here is where *the other* is far more like *You* than unlike *You*, no matter what *You* might say. Which is perhaps why, in “What Good Am I?,” Dylan sings

What good am I if I’m like all the rest  
 If I just turn away, when I see how you’re dressed  
 If I shut myself off so I can’t hear you cry . . . ?

.....

What good am I then to others and me  
 If I’ve had every chance and yet still fail to see



If my hands are tied must I not wonder within  
Who tied them and why and where must I have been?

Here is where knowing the *neighbor* as *the other you* is “I is an other” at its best. It is where “I is an other” is the Archimedean point at which the self ethically moves itself in ways that may ethically move the neighbor, the *other*, the one whom *I* cannot choose, the one who may just as well be an enemy, because “The thing that scared me most was when the enemy came close / And I saw that his face looked just like mine” (“John Brown”). And if *You* can love the enemy from within and without, then here is where *You* can move the world, for here is where neighbor-love begins, where it is ultimately up to *You*. All that is left to do is don the mask with which *You* is fundamentally endowed: the responsive and responsible mask, the authentic *persona*, neither selfish nor childish—the genuine mask of *I* that befits the genuine mask of *You*, wherein “I is an other” ultimately makes perfect bell-ringing sense.

According to Kierkegaard,

It is a mark of childishness to say: *Me wants, me—me*; a mark of adolescence to say: *I—and I—and I*; the sign of maturity . . . is to will to understand that this *I* has no significance unless it becomes the *you* [in] . . . *you* shall, *you* shall, *you* shall. Youthfulness wants to be the only *I* in the whole world; maturity is to understand this *you* personally, even if it were not addressed to a single other person. *You* shall, *you* shall love the neighbor. O my listener, it is not *you* to whom *I* am speaking; it is *I* to whom eternity says: *You* shall. (SKS 9:95 / WL 90)

Likewise, Dylan knows that the perfect sense of “I is an other” is up to him—his mature, ethical *I*. Which is why, in his “Up to Me,” Dylan is the perfect master thief of love: “The old Rounder in the iron mask slipped me the master key / Somebody had to unlock your heart, he said it was up to me.”

In the end, Dylan and Kierkegaard accept the varied masks they wear outside Eden’s gates, masks that emit sounds and illumine visions that lure us toward the kind of self-love that neighbor-love presupposes. Through these ethically derived and Janus-like masks, they show life forward by looking back to some forgotten home (back to the soul’s gate behind and beyond which essential *Being* resides) rather than, homesick and blue, looking away and down so many lonesome roads again.

### Coda: Kierkegaard on Dylan’s Music (A Thought Experiment)

As mentioned at the outset, Dylan and Kierkegaard share an appreciation for the power of both sacred and profane music. Had Kierkegaard heard Dylan,



how might the former (for whom music was so important to convey various dimensions of the spirit) respond to the latter's musical, compositional, and performing skills? At the least, how might a Kierkegaardian ear regard Dylan's music?<sup>20</sup>

In the paean to Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or I* ("The Immediate Erotic Stages or the Musical-Erotic"), pseudonym "A" does not claim musical expertise: "I am well aware that I do not understand music; I readily admit that I am a layman. I do not hide the fact that I do not belong to the chosen tribe of music experts, that at most I stand in the doorway as a gentile convert drawn from afar to this place by a strange, irresistible impulse—but no further" (*SV* 1:48 / *EO* 1:65). Here, "A's" disclaimer may comport with Kierkegaard's own understanding of music, although Kierkegaard might broaden his own sphere of ignorance beyond the musicological to the philosophical.<sup>21</sup> On the title page of his *Either/Or I* chapter on Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, for instance, Kierkegaard writes, "What Homer says of music is true: οἷον ἀκούομεν, οὐδέ τι ἴδμεν [we only hear, we know nothing]. *Iliad*, II, 468. One hears it, but he does not know it, does not understand it" (*Pap.* IV A 222, n.d., 1843 / *JP* 1:147). That said, Kierkegaard's extraordinary expositions of music, lyrical-musical voice, and the ethics of music and voice read like a fitting critique of Dylan.

Writing about the overture to *Don Giovanni*, for instance, "A" offers a compact aesthetic description of the kind of music toward which Dylan aspires: "It is powerful like a god's idea, turbulent like a world's life, harrowing in its earnestness, palpitating in its desire, crushing in its terrible wrath, animating in its full-blooded joy; it is hollow-toned in its judgment, shrill in its lust; it is ponderous, ceremonious in its awe-inspiring dignity; it is stirring, flaring, dancing in its delight" (*SKS* 2:129 / *EO* 1:127). And earlier:

If you cannot get an idea of Don Giovanni by hearing him, then you never will. . . . Just as the lightning is discharged from the darkness of the thunderclouds, so he bursts out of the abyss of earnestness, swifter than the lightning's flash, more capricious than lightning and yet just as measured. Hear how he plunges down into the multiplicity of life, how he breaks against its solid embankment. Hear these light, dancing . . . notes, hear the intimation of joy, hear the jubilation of delight, hear the festive bliss of enjoyment. Hear his wild flight; he speeds past himself, ever faster, never pausing. Hear the unrestrained craving of passion, hear the sighing of erotic love, hear the whisper of temptation, hear the vortex of seduction, hear the stillness of the moment—hear, hear, hear. (*SKS* 2:106–7 / *EO* 1:103)

In an ethical context, Kierkegaard's abiding fascination with the medieval troubadour speaks not only to Kierkegaard's intent to shape a lyrical-ethical voice for himself but also to Dylan's own musical-ethical intent to serve as

a performing artist qua modern troubadour.<sup>22</sup> In reading notes he made of Friedrich Diez's 1829 *Die Poesie der Troubadours* (*The Poetry of Troubadours*) under the heading "The Sirvente" (the moral or religious song of the Provençal troubadours satirizing social vices), Kierkegaard writes, "With this genre the troubd. began to influence life, making some impact upon the princes and the powerful. . . . Troubd. sang the exploits of the well-born but undertook also to reprove them for their faults" (*SKS* 17:72, *BB*:2, April 22, 1836 / *KJN* 1:66). Many of Dylan's musical scores speak to the song of the Sirvente that troubadours of yore sang.

In a religious context, a journal entry of October 30, 1838, by Kierkegaard may offer a critique of Dylan's ethical and ethical-religious music and musical performances, especially of concerts given during his evangelical period. In the entry, Kierkegaard imaginatively addresses "D.L." ("devout listeners" of, presumably, the sermon he sketches out in the entry), and he considers what seers and hearers of John the Baptist preaching in the desert might expect to hear and see versus what John actually offers them: "My talk shall be like wild honey—its clothing like the woolen shirt J. the Baptist wore, rough and sharp, perhaps to many a severe talk" (*SKS* 17:268*m*:22–26, *DD*:164 / *KJN* 1:259*m*:10–14). Here, Kierkegaard essentially claims an unvarnished if not prophetic voice that Dylan himself appropriates throughout his career, especially in so many of his ethical and ethical-religious songs. (Kierkegaard's words might also go so far as to justify what many of Dylan's more musicological sophisticates maintain as Dylan's "rough and sharp" singing voice—words that also warn that attention to the accident of physical voice should never eclipse the spirit in which the song is delivered and its lyrical meaning. Kierkegaard writes elsewhere that "everything that is said and sung in church should be true, not that it should be beautiful, great, glorious, ravishing, etc." (*SKS* 27:558, *Papir* 452, n.d., 1853–54 / *JP* 1:829).

In the end, what Kierkegaard's "A" says of Mozart's music might also be Kierkegaard's last word on Dylan's music (one that, in addition, may comport with most earnest and flippant Dylan fans' last words): "A" "usually passes the time humming something I do not understand" (*SKS* 2:56 / *EO* 1:49). Nevertheless, "A" knows "that if Mozart ever became entirely comprehensible to me, he would then become completely incomprehensible to me" (*SKS* 2:68 / *EO* 1:61). With Dylan's music, the same.

## Notes

1. Bob Dylan, *Chronicles* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 1:288.

2. Rimbaud of course is no religionist with theological designs. That said, the overall thesis and argument of the present essay entertain how Rimbaud's famous assertion influenced Dylan, both in theological and nontheological ways—no matter if Dylan properly read or misread what Rimbaud was attempting to mean in a nontheological context.

3. Dylan, *Chronicles*, 244.

4. Howard V. Hong, "Trying to Do the Right Thing," *Reece Report* (Northfield, Minn.) 7, no. 1 (1992): 18.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Quotations from Dylan's songs are identified by song titles within the text and are either from his lyrics located online at [bobdylan.com](http://bobdylan.com) or from *Bob Dylan: Lyrics, 1962–2001* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

7. David Gates, "Dylan Revisited," *Newsweek*, October 7, 1997. As much as Kierkegaard loved singing hymns, the New Testament was clearly his lexicon, and he insisted that, as quoted in the closing coda to this essay, "everything that is said and sung in church should be true." That said, Kierkegaard himself (like Dylan) found it increasingly difficult to adhere to so many preachers' words, especially in Denmark's state church—an institution that became, in his increasingly strident opinion, ever more accommodating and diluted over time. See especially Kierkegaard's late writings for his brutal critique of what Dylan would call the "watered-down love" of the Church.

8. See, e.g., "My Life in a Stolen Moment" in *Studio A: The Bob Dylan Reader*, ed. Benjamin Hedin (New York: Norton, 2004), 3–7.

9. For example, "Queen Jane Approximately," "Like a Rolling Stone," "Just Like a Woman," "Trust Yourself," "Most Likely You Go Your Way and I'll Go Mine," "I'll Keep It with Mine," "She Belongs to Me," and "Abandoned Love."

10. For example, "Feel My Love," "Lay Lady Lay," "I Want You," "If Not for You," "Tomorrow Is a Long Time," "To Ramona," "Buckets of Rain," "You Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go," "Simple Twist of Fate," and "Girl from the North Country."

11. One exception is "Belle Isle," from Dylan's *Self-Portrait* album, although it is a Newfoundland folk song, not written by Dylan. The song highlights a pleasure-seeker crossing paths with a young maid pining for a long-lost love; the young man tells her that he is her beloved returned . . . in disguise!

12. Eric Ziolkowski, *The Literary Kierkegaard* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 191–92.

13. It is hard to imagine, however, that Kierkegaard would think this song very "playful" vis-à-vis his complicated relationship with Regine Olsen—the lyrics of which include "I don't want to straight-face you / Race or chase you, track or trace you / Or disgrace you or displace you / Or define you or confine you."

14. For Buber, just as for Kierkegaard and the Jewish-born Dylan, a self is a *relational* phenomenon that recognizes the necessity of but is not limited in a strictly binary way to dual structures of the self. In addition, all three authors recognize that distinctions are to be made even as relationships are to be acknowledged between such words as *I*, *it*, *me*, *he*, *she*, *you* (the human *thou*, the divine *Thou*), *we*, *they*, *the world*, and *the eternal*. (Throughout the remainder of this essay, by the way, I increasingly use variant grammatical constructs that occur in Kierkegaard's and especially Buber's own lyrical thinking.) Given the limited size and scope of the present essay, it is with a special regret that I have chosen not to incorporate Buber and Judaism in a more plenary way. What follows are a few brief passages from Buber's *I and Thou* as they relate to this essay: "Primary words do not signify things, but they intimate relations. . . . There is no *I* taken in itself. . . . Every *It* is bounded by others. *It* exists only by being bounded by

others. . . . *Thou* [on the other hand] has no bounds. . . . As experience, the world belongs to the primary word *I-It*. The primary word *I-Thou* establishes the world of relation. . . . For *Thou* is more than *It* realizes. . . . I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*. All real living is meeting. . . . In the beginning is relation. . . . Spirit is not in the *I*, but between *I* and *Thou*.” Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, Scribner Classics (New York: Charles Scribner, 2000), 19, 20, 21, 24, 26, 27.

15. Refrains of “Watered-Down Love” and “Property of Jesus” offer other examples.

16. To counter so many critics who have maintained over the years that the song’s theme is more suspect of decadence than deserving of ethics’ respect, Dylan laconically puts the matter to rest in a 2012 *Rolling Stone* interview. Interviewer: “Do you ever worry that people interpreted your work in misguided ways? For example, some people still see ‘Rainy Day Women’ as coded about getting high.” Dylan: “It doesn’t surprise me that some people would see it that way. But these are people that aren’t familiar with the Book of Acts.” Mikal Gilmore, “Bob Dylan: The Rolling Stone Interview,” *Rolling Stone*, September 27, 2012, 45.

17. Others include “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door,” “I Shall Be Released,” “Tryin’ to Get to Heaven,” “Up to Me,” “Dark Eyes,” “Caribbean Wind,” “It’s Not Dark Yet,” “Highlands,” and “Sugar Baby.”

18. Others include “Abandoned Love,” “To Ramona,” “Every Grain of Sand,” “Up to Me,” “What Good Am I?,” “Most of the Time,” “Ain’t No Man Righteous, No Not One,” “The Disease of Conceit,” and “Mississippi.”

19. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, pt. 2, book 5 (“Pro and Contra”), chap. 4 (“Rebellion”), trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Quartet Books, 1990), 236.

20. A few pairs of Kierkegaardian ears have made a performance artist’s attempt to answer this question in their own way. A 2015 album, *Mother Tongue*, by Jonathan Byrd, in collaboration with a Danish folk-rock trio, The Sentimentals, contains songs inspired by Kierkegaard and Dylan. (The album’s cover art alone—which offers, side by side, the left half of perhaps the most iconic frontal head portrait of Kierkegaard and the right half of perhaps the most iconic frontal head portrait of Dylan—is compelling.)

21. Compare the suggestion made by Nils Holger Petersen in his own essay in this volume, “that the music philosophy of ‘A’ collapses if one takes it seriously in detail.”—Ed.

22. In their own essays elsewhere in this volume, George Pattison likewise comments on Kierkegaard’s fascination with the medieval troubadours, and Marcia C. Robinson ascribes to Kierkegaard “the role of a Socratic troubadour.”—Ed.

