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OF MENTORS AND MUSES AND INSPIRATION: HOMERIDAE, HESIOD & BOB DYLAN Ξυλωδεΐδης

*In 2020 Nobel-Prize-winning poet songster Bob Dylan (b. 1941) released the song "Mother of Muses." Here I argue that Dylan's call for divine assistance from the Musarum mater is genuine, not a literary trope. Dylan inserts himself among the "offspring of Homer" (Homeridae) in the long Western tradition of oral poetics that begins in the Mycenaean palatial period (15th century BCE). Dylan rightfully lays claim to Calliope, the muse of epic poetry. Like coeval songster-poet Leonard Cohen and like Hesiod (*Theogony *proem), Dylan views as a mystery where his songs come from. He now understands that his poetic gift requires 'heavenly aid' from Mnemosyne 'memory' in order to re-instantiate the eternally existent past and to use 'slant truth' to preserve the present through the "'materiality' of remembered history." The great editor of Homer Thomas W. Allen in 1907 emphasized the true kinship connection felt by oral poets who identified themselves by the patronymic Homeridae. Likewise Dylan is a 'son' of Woody Guthrie and chief Guthrie acolyte Ramblin' Jack Elliott views Dylan as his 'son'. We also explore in detail the how, when, where and why of Dylan's intensely special role, past and present, as a Ξυλωδεΐδης or 'son of Woody'.*

Key words: Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, Woody Guthrie, Hesiod, Homer, *Homeridae*, Huntington's Disease, Linear B, "Mother of Muses", Oral Tradition.

Too much rationalism and scientific reasoning can rob us of a sense of wonder that is needed to understand art forms that result from rather miraculous human practices.[1] Noteworthy for scholars of ancient Greek history and literature is Dylan's sincere 'calling upon' or invocation of the 'mother of Muses' during the song he composed recently "Mother of Muses" (https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/mother-of-muses/ accessed: 12 July 2023). It is track seven of his Covid-period release *Rough and Rowdy Ways* (June 19, 2020).

In calling for divine assistance, Dylan is clearly inserting himself among the 'offspring of Homer' (*Homeridae*) and indeed the entire Western tradition of oral poetics[2] that begins with song poems created in dactylic hexameter

1 It was an honor for me in 2018 to present at the University of Zagreb to students and colleagues of Marina Milićević Bradač thoughts that I still have and continue to develop on Bob Dylan and other oral poetic songsters, including, as an archetype in western culture, the major song poems (*Iliad* and *Odyssey*) and fragments of minor song poems attributed to the figure known as Homer.

2 Thomas 2020 discusses Dylan declaring himself inheritor of the epic tradition going back to Homer and Vergil and coming down through Milton and the significance of calling upon 'the

verse and that we can hypothesize as existing, judging from linguistically reconstructed lines, as far back as the 15th century BCE (Ruijgh 2004: 527, 530–531). We should note that Dylan appeals at the end of the first two stanzas to the mother of Muses that she "sing *for* me" (italics mine). This would seem to suggest that Dylan still retains a good measure of bewilderment about where some of his songs come from, as expressed in his famous interview (December 5, 2004) with Ed Bradley (https://www.cbsnews.com/news/60-minutes-bob-dylan-rare-interview-2004/ accessed: 12 July 2023). Discussing the poetics of "It's Alright Ma" (1965), Dylan says in that interview:

> "I don't know how I got to write those songs... Those early songs were almost like magically written – *darkness at the break of noon, shadows even the silver spoon, the hand-made blade, a child's balloon*. Well, try to sit down and write something like that. There's a magic to that and it's not Siegfried and Roy kind of magic, you know, it's a different kind of penetrating magic, and I did it at one time."

By saying "sing *for* me" and not, for example, "sing *through* me," Dylan is even going further than viewing himself as a conscious conduit for divinely created poetry. He is ceding control of his entire self as a poet songster to the preternatural essence of divine memory. Although the etymology of Μοῦσα (*Mousa*) is not entirely secure, the best idea about its root sense relies on the hard-to-dispute thought that "the Muses are connected with memory and remembrance, which is indeed the meaning of the I[ndo-]E[uropean] **men-*" (Beekes 2010: 972–973). Fellow songwriter and singer, Leonard Cohen remarked in October 2016 (https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/oct/14/leonard-cohen-giving-nobel-to-bob-dylan-like-pinning-medal-on-everest accessed: 12 July 2023) on how his and Dylan's songs come to be. Cohen emphasized that the songs, in contemporary terms, come from somewhere unknown and unknowable and that it is vital that the poet songster stays prepared to receive them, when they come:

> "I think that Bob Dylan knows this more than all of us: you don't write the songs anyhow. … So if you're lucky, you can keep the vehicle healthy and responsive over the years. If you're lucky, your own intentions have very little to do with this."

The *Musarum mater* was known to the ancient Greeks as Mnemosyne 'memory' (cf. μνῆμα *mnēma* 'memorial, monument, tomb'; μνήμη *mnēmē* 'remembrance, mention'; and even μνάομαι *mnaomai* 'to woo for one's bride, court' [Beekes 2010: 953–954] in the sense of 'to keep one's mind trained upon a particular potential marriage partner'). Mnemosyne magically and in psychologically and neurologically mysterious ways enables poet-singers, like Bob Dylan, like Leonard Cohen, like Homer and Hesiod, to re-instantiate and/or compose their songs and to give them form and substance appropriate to spe-

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mother of Muses' at the outset of the song and not her daughter Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry, for whom Dylan, in a creative twist, declares his love.

cific occasions of performance. This mnemonic act is also known as 'inspiration', with some unseen power literally 'breathing into' the poet songsters the immaterial essence they wish to get across to their audiences in the words and melodies of the songs they breathe out through their vocal cords and shape with their mouths, tongues, teeth and lips. The act of singing and the songs themselves then become sacred cultural items, or, if you will, artifacts.

As Dylan says in *Chronicles, Volume One* (Dylan 2004: 18), "Most of the other performers tried to put themselves across, rather than the song, but I didn't care about doing that. With me, it was about putting the song across." This same reverence about the songs and their equally revered singers permeates each of the 101 hour-long broadcasts of Dylan's *Theme Time Radio Hour* (http://www.themetimeradio.com/all/ accessed: 12 July 2023) and indeed now the sixty-six popular songs upon which Dylan offers comments and observations in his recent *The Philosophy of Modern Song* (2022).

The Homeric poems put us notionally *in illo tempore* 'in that (mythic) time' in the late Greek Bronze Age (1600–1120 BCE) and situate Greek and Anatolian-Trojan heroes in the plains of Troy in the northwest corner of modern-day Turkey (*Iliad*) and during and after their returns from the unimaginably long, especially for a period when seasonal warfare was likely the norm, ten-year war to their various home territories (*Odyssey*) in Greece. The epics were composed of such adventures and misadventures, no doubt at first regionally focused and then eventually conglomerated to convey general truths about societies and human behaviors during and after wars were fought. The where and the when and the how of composition, performance and eventual canonical preservation of the chief Homeric epics as we now know them all together pose a complicated bundle of questions, like a ball of yarn played with by a kindle of young kittens, that will *never* have a definitive answer (see Bennet 2014 for a concise and thorough overview and analysis of the Homeric problem; Thomas 1992: 29–51 and Sickinger 1994: 273–278 are still very helpful; Whitley 2020 for a pragmatic view; and see Cosmopoulos 2025).

During the Mycenaean palatial period (ca. 1450–1170 BCE) – and therefore well before the limited social literacy that followed the introduction of the Greek alphabet (ca. 825–775 BCE), it is unlikely that late Bronze Age oral poets, who are (a) attested in images, (b) referred to in the syllabic script (Linear B) that was used in highly restricted ways, and (c) known to exist through the discovery of the remains of musical instruments (Younger 2007; 1998), had the ability, or indeed even the need, to write things down or read written texts. We have very secure grounds for positing oral poetic performance in the Mycenaean palatial world that would have taken place within "the framing iconography" of fresco representations and calling upon "bodily memory of tastes, smells, sights and sounds" (Bennet 2007: 14–15; and now, too, Palaima 2021, 389–394). These occasional pieces at ceremonial events would likely have been of shorter duration than the enormous lengths of the *Iliad* (15,693 lines) and *Odyssey* (12,109 lines) as presently constituted and could be 'stitched together' as in Telemachus's visits to Pylos and Sparta in consecutive books of the *Odyssey* (books 3–4) or Achilles' killing rampage in *Iliad* (books 19–22).

The act of producing and proclaiming song stories must have seemed divinely wondrous to the singers themselves and the audiences who witnessed and heard them. Their calling on the Muses for assistance was not a literary trope. It was a seriously felt necessary appeal for what Dylan elsewhere calls 'heavenly aid' ("Ain't Talkin").

One of the more famous ancient passages pertaining to oral poetic inspiration is Hesiod's description (*Theogony* 29–39) of how the Muses, as 'daughters of majestic Zeus' who are further identified as 'on-the-ready with epic song' (ἀρτιέπειαι), do two important things to him.

First, they bestow upon him the sacred symbol of supreme power and life force, a *skēptron* (cf. our related English word 'scepter' and Palaima 2016: 147–149 with end of discussion of *megaron*) that they have plucked from a bough of a vitally flourishing laurel tree (καί μοι σκῆπτρον ἔδον δάφνης ἐριθηλέος ὄζον / δρέψασαι). There is a link then between the spontaneous fertility of nature and the fertility or ingenuity of mind and cultivated talents necessary for oral songs figuratively to blossom. Then the Muses literally 'breathe into' Hesiod a godly voice (ἔνέπνευσαν δὲ μοι αὐδὴν / θέσπιν).

These two acts empower Hesiod as songster poet to make ever-famous through song 'the things that will be' (τά τ᾽ ἐσσόμενα) and 'the things that are in before-time' (πρό τ᾽ ἐόντα), especially 'the clan of always-being blessed entities' (μακάρων γένος αἰὲν ἐόντων), i.e., the gods themselves. Hesiod then encourages himself (τύνη: 'come, you') to celebrate the Muses who bring delight to the great mind of Zeus by speaking forth 'the things that are' and 'the things that will be' and 'the things that are before-time' (τά τ᾽ ἐόντα τά τ᾽ ἐσσόμενα πρό τ᾽ ἐόντα).

My use of present tense here in English to refer to the past is a precisely literal translation of the Greek (πρό τ᾽ ἐόντα) in Hesiod's song and the existential meaning embedded in his phrases. The songster tradition of oral song poems now attributed to 'Hesiod' could have referred to past events as τὰ πρὸ γενόμενα (literally 'the things having come into being beforehand *or* having taken place beforehand') but it did not. Like Kurt Vonnegut's Tralfamadorians, songsters in the late Bronze Age and afterwards must have felt that the past was still there and accessible and sing-able in the present. The oral poetic songsters were 'telling' the story, at each 'telling', as it eternally exists and as they had acquired it right there in before-time. They were not re-telling it.

In this same way eighty years ago, Woody Guthrie could 'live' and convey the infamous 1914 Ludlow Massacre of the women and children of striking miners in Colorado. About his own songs like "Ludlow Massacre," Guthrie said: "I made up these [kinds of songs] like I was there on the spot, the day and the night it happened. This is the best way to make up a song like this. When you read the life work of Mother Ella Reeve Bloor *We Are Many*, you will see this story of the Ludlow Massacre, you will be there, you will live it." (Guthrie 1976 record pamphlet; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ludlow_Massacre_(song) accessed: 12 July 2023).

The early ancient Greek songsters were also not using rote memorization nor trying on their own to recite a memorized story *verbatim*. And they had

elements in their song-stories that scholars who study Homer and the cultural contexts for the Homeric tradition now call historical fossils, e.g., boars' tusks helmets. Boars' tusks helmets are amply attested in images and artifactually in the Bronze Age, but they are not used as war gear in the historical period (ca. 850 BCE onward) during which the major epics of Hesiod, Homer, Orpheus and Musaeus were made canonical in written forms that we still preserve in edited wholes or in collected fragments. The ancient Greek epic dactylic-hexametrical songsters retain and use such elements in order to re-call and present "material 'trace[s]' of a deep-seated relationship to history, change, and time" (Portelli 2022: 104).

It is worthwhile here to remember what Alessandro Portelli emphasizes (Portelli 2022: 103), quoting Emily Dickinson and Zygmunt Bauman:

> "Oral sources, whether in the form of a life story or a traditional ballad, "tell all the truth but tell it slant." … "[R]emembered history is the logic the actors inject into their strivings and which they employ to invest credibility into their hopes"; therefore, the "'materiality' of remembered history" does not rest on "'truth'" as understood by conventional historians."

The truth in the oral songs of Homer and Hesiod and in all the songs composed and/or performed by Bob Dylan is not 'historical truth'. It is essential truth, slant truth, things that are *a-lēthe(s)-a,* that *cannot* and *should not* 'escape our notice' or 'go hidden' about our lives as human beings within the cultures in which we live out our lives. These are truths that are revealed only through the new and previously unencountered thoughts and feelings that we have after taking in the idiosyncratic perspectives of the gifted and inspired poet songsters singing their songs.

What I want to do in the rest of this paper is to leave behind the Dylan who, in the ultra-modern 2020's when Artificial Intelligence composes for us computer-generated doggerel verses on any topic of our choosing, seems rightly to have come to believe that he communes – and has long communed – with the Muses and that he is entitled to make his own valid claim to Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry. She is seen here (Fig. 1) in a painting by Charles Meynier done in 1798. She is glancing obliquely back and up towards a heavenly pedestalled bust of Homer. Her right hand rests upon and secures a vellum manuscript (Fig. 2) with a heading ΟΜΗΡΟΥ ΙΛΙΑΣ. It hangs down upon a kind of easel panel propped by Calliope upon the beautiful garment that clothes her right thigh. On the vellum we may read the Greek for OF HOMER ILIAD. Beneath this title the beginning words of the opening lines of our *Iliad* can be made out on the un-scrolled vellum.

We will turn now to our great genius, our modern Homer, in his ephebic stage, when he is nineteen, twenty, twenty-one years old, and think about his relationship with the figure he has identified as his Mentor, Woody Guthrie. Lest we think that this has nothing to do with ancient Muses and sources of inspiration for those who sang Homeric songs and the mentors from whom they must have derived their own inspired talents, we should keep in mind that in ancient times those who could perform epic songs called themselves

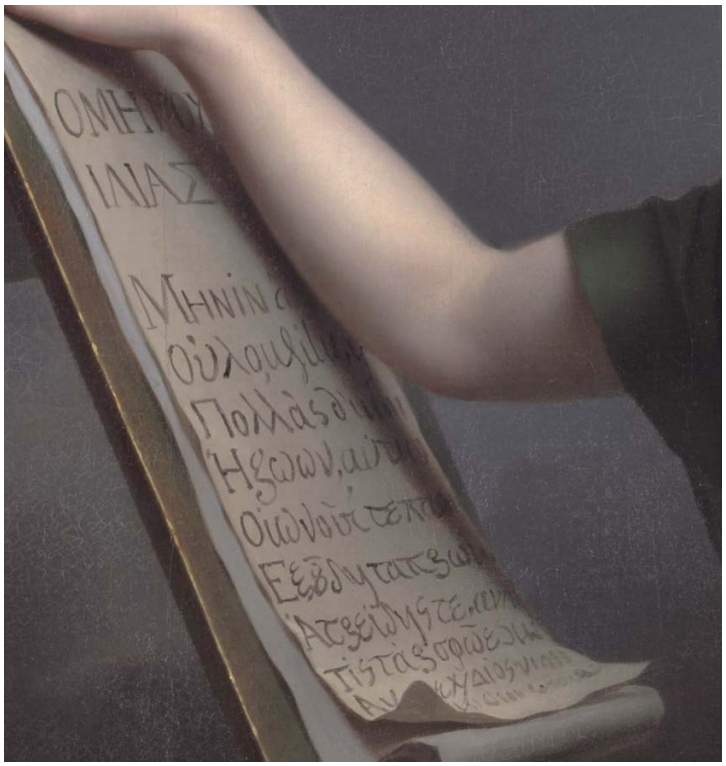

Fig. 1. Calliope, Muse of Epic Poetry, 1798. Charles Meynier. Oil on canvas; overall: 275 x 177 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Severance and Greta Millikin Purchase Fund 2003.6.4. https://clevelandart.org/art/2003.6.4 (accessed: 12 July 2023).

Fig. 2. Closeup of *Iliad* of Homer vellum scroll. Calliope, Muse of Epic Poetry, 1798. Charles Meynier. Oil on canvas; overall: 275 x 177 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Severance and Greta Millikin Purchase Fund 2003.6.4. https://clevelandart.org/art/2003.6.4 (accessed: 12 July 2023).

Ὁμηρίδαι (*Homeridae*) using the patronymic ending -ιδης. The main function of this name termination was to point directly at blood ties (or an intimate connection that is the equivalent of blood ties) between the rightful claimant to a patronymic name and the father or father figure within a kin group, a γένος *genos*, i.e., an extended family or clan or an equivalent association. We see such a pattern in names like English Peter*son*.

My own thinking has long been that in the late Greek Bronze Age practitioners of the main crafts for communication passed down their arts and skills and understanding within their kin groups (see, for tablet-writers, Palaima 2011: 125). In so doing, *aoidoi* (singers) or lyre players (*lurastai* attested in Linear B as *ru-ra-ta*-e on Thebes tablet Av 106.7) were behaving like those who practiced other essential crafts, trades or social activities. These communication specialists include clay-tablet-writers, seal-makers, wall-painters, pottery painters, and poetic songsters. I believe that they trained their sons and daughters or nephews and nieces or other blood kin, first and foremost, just as we have evidence in the Linear B tablets for practitioners of other skilled crafts (like potters; cloth makers MY Oe 106.2, Oe 112.2; KN Ap 629.1-2, Ap 637.2, Ap 639.4, Ap 5748.1; smiths PY Jn 431.6, Jn 725.8; and see -**65* in Aura Jorro *et al.* 2020: 420–422) teaching and guiding their children to follow in their footsteps. We should not forget that in Germanic culture, a dissertation supervisor or mentor is called a *Doktorvater.* Even as a now septuagenarian scholar, I still think of and feel for Emmett L. Bennett, Jr. as my second father.

Lest it be thought that I am projecting some kind of fantasy onto both Bob Dylan and the ancient Greek oral poetic tradition, it is salutary to be reminded, in his own words, what the great editor of Homer, T.W. Allen (1907: 135)

had to say about the *Homeridae* in a bygone time over a century ago before we completely lost the awe we should always feel in the presence of song:

> "The Homeridae bear the name of Homer, and should point a path by which we may climb to his personality. In antiquity they were known to be a *γένος*, a constituted family-corporation, though the accounts of the functions they fulfilled are scanty. Modern criticism, with its usual fluctuation, began by taking them at their apparent value; then adopted from a Roman grammarian a rationalistic explanation of them; invented other similar rationalistic explanations; and finally my lamented colleague Mr. Binning Monro robbed them of all significance by treating the word as an adjective, an equivalent of Ὁμηρικοί. *Men who are called Sons of Homer should not be lightly dismissed* [italics mine, for emphasis], and it may be worth while to go over the familiar evidence once more in the hope that this obvious avenue to Homer may not turn out a blind alley."

Allen understood what I stated at the outset of this paper: too much rationalism and scientific reasoning can rob us of a sense of wonder that is needed to understand art forms that result from rather miraculous human practices.

Dylan's own father was not a music-maker or songster. Dylan as a songster needed a father figure and he found one in Woody Guthrie. For three or so years (1959–1963) Dylan attached himself to the identity of Guthrie. Early in this span and months into his arrival in New York city, Dylan mimicked Guthrie with a mind-blowing zeal and full-force self-identification. He wore Guthrie's clothes. He used Guthrie's mannerisms in bodily gestures and in speaking. He talked and sang in Guthrie's voice (Dylan 2004: 246–248). And – almost as if Zeus were to have swallowed Kronos – Dylan focused in his songs on the same kinds of social ills related to wealth disparity, race, war-making, violence, education and miseducation, political and judicial corruption, greed, hatred, loneliness, the despoiling of nature and the general unmooring of human lives that preoccupied Guthrie. Or, as Dylan (2004: 20) sums it up in a triad, "social injustice, hunger and homelessness." Dylan (2004: 247–248) explains, "Folk songs automatically went up against the grain of all these things and Woody's songs even went up against that. In comparison everything else seemed one-dimensional. … [W]ith Guthrie's songs my heart and mind had been sent into another cosmological place of that culture entirely."

For a time when first in New York City, Dylan piously took the place of Guthrie, almost without trying, in the circle centered upon Izzy Young's Folklore Center (Young 2013: xx–xxvii, 3–9, 205–209; Dylan 2004: 18–21) and the sacred folk music performance *temenos* New York's Town Hall. As Dylan (2004: 250–254) tells us in *Chronicles, Volume 1,* he was advised that Guthrie already had a disciple who had absorbed and perfected Guthrie's style and song repertory and who had accompanied Guthrie on the road: Ramblin' Jack Elliott (Cohen & Donaldson 2014: 59–60, 72–73). Undeterred, Dylan through his sincerity became a 'son' of Elliott, too. As Elliott recalled in 2009:

> "I met Bob when Woody was in the hospital. He was this funny little kid. He told me he had all my recordings. He rattled off the names of all the songs I did on those albums. I didn't remember them myself. He was kinda weird, and a lot of people were making noises about what a

> terrible voice he had. He did have kind of a screechy voice. But *he was like a son to me*" (italics mine)." (Browne 2009)

It was from the hallowed stage of the Town Hall, almost incredibly, that Dylan also bade farewell to Guthrie on April 12, 1963, twenty-six months after he wrote "Song to Woody" two weeks or so after meeting with Guthrie face to face for the first time. His farewell was not in sung and instrumentally accompanied song. That might have struck him and his zealous audience of folk devotees as ironically impious. Instead he used a poem in spoken verse of a length that itself burst the container of the standard-length folk ballad (https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/last-thoughts-woody-guthrie/ accessed: 12 July 2023).

As Dylan tells the story in *Chronicles, Volume 1* (Dylan 2004: 4, 8–9), in late January 1961, mid-winter, Dylan had traveled by car – he gives the impression that he was the sole passenger "dozing, making small talk" on a 24-hour ride – to New York city on a pilgrimage to stand in the presence of Woody Guthrie. Continuing in the *Chronicles* version, Dylan arrived and was dropped off all by his lonesome – "I didn't know a single soul in this dark freezing metropolis but that was all about to change" – on the New York City side of the George Washington Bridge with snow falling and wind howling like a hammer on January 24. In the traditional narrative (cf. Heylin 2021: 25–29; Bell 2012, 57–59; Scaduto 1971, 51–54 for alternatives), it was five days later, on Sunday Jan. 29, 1961, that Bob Dylan, 19 years old and again traveling solo, took a bus to Greystone Park Hospital in Morris Plains, New Jersey. Continuing the traditional narrative, there and then Dylan met for the first time the figure who had been become his idol and inspiration during his time around the University of Minnesota beginning in September 1959. Within two weeks he wrote "Song to Woody," a song homage that summed up the 'hagiographized' icon derived from Woody's identification with the poor and suffering, mistreated and forgotten people of the United States.

The powerful myth of Woody and his music, as such things go, is 'real' and 'vibrant' and 'inspiring'. There is no reason to doubt the depths that it seeped into Dylan's soul and inspired him. But the reality of the person who was Guthrie, both in his irresponsible behaviors, affected surely by Huntington's Disease, and his own socioeconomic background, was a different matter, as even Dylan recognized early on. Fully following in Woody's footsteps would have been a trap. So much so that another early Dylan mentor in Greenwich Village, Dave van Ronk, is reported to have shouted at Dylan: "Guthrie's dying, and his generation is dead. You can't keep rewriting the songs they wrote. Do your own songs. Their songs are for the history books." (Scaduto 1971: 113). Ramblin' Jack Elliott *did* fall into the trap (Scaduto 1971: 115):

> "Here I imitated Woody and learned from him and picked like him and I got hooked on the Ramblin' Jack Elliott image, and just never imagined someone like Dylan could come along and then turn around and write stuff for *today*. But Bobby was always very aggressive. He knew what he wanted, he had a goal and he shot for it. He was a well-disciplined person, as crazy as he seems. … He had a very strong

drive, and he just went into these songs because his drive made him build it all up."

Nowadays we would call this constructing a professional identity or making a mark. With Dylan, it is not romanticizing to say that he was following his very own Muses. The very timing of Dylan's first meeting with Guthrie and the details that have him dropped off at a famous bridge in New York as a lone and unsophisticated young hero in the cold and uninviting big city have now been cast into permanent doubt.

A cache of three autograph postcards (and one autograph letter) written by Dylan, postmarked Gary, Indiana and New York City and the postcards dating January 25, January 26 and February 12, 1961 were auctioned at Sotheby's in 2022. The Sotheby's description outlines what likely happened (https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2022/fine-books-and-manuscripts-including-americana/dylan-bob-i-know-woody-i-know-woody-he-says-i-sing accessed: 12 July 2023) (general information in square-bracketed insertions mine): Dylan likely did *not* go to New York City first [or get left off alone], but rather … the car full of Guthrie acolytes went straight to Greystone [hospital in New Jersey] to see their hero. The postcard [postmarked January 26 6:30 PM] is a deeply moving and exuberant exclamation from the young artist [Bob Dylan]: "I KNOW WOODY | I KNOW WOODY | He says I sing right–Sunday I'm getting together with him & Jack Eliot (*sic*) & Cisco Houston & Will Geer & Logan English & the Gleasons – I'm staying at Diana Solomon's house in Greenwich Village. I KNOW him And met him & saw him and sang to him I know Woody–Goddamn." That he could have met Guthrie and sent another postcard dated within *a day* of the previous postmark [sent en route and postmarked Gary, Indiana January 25 10:30 AM] suggests that a pilgrimage was in fact the first order of business, before making his way to the city."

[Palaima note: It is reasonable that Dylan did not wait four days until Sunday January 29 to meet Woody for the first time. He is exuberant about having met Woody in a postcard postmarked early evening of January 26. And he did not arrive all on his own in the cold and intimidating megalopolis that New York city, *mutatis mutandis*, was even at the start of the John F. Kennedy presidency, as Dylan himself reveals below.]

The third postcard, postmarked 12 February 1961 from New York City, shows Dylan overcome with his new life and the fact that he knows his hero. It begins in homage, "This card kills fascists | I been drunk once, sunk twice," and continues, "I see Woody 4 times a week – I am learning his old songs from Marge, Harlow, Jodie and Jack Eliott [*sic*] – Jack is the wildest, … funniest, guitar playingest, … southernest, Brooklynest, Jewishest, next to me – I play my guitar and harmonica at the Commons place on Macdougal and people clap for me – Woody likes me – he tells me to sing for him – he's the greatest, holiest, godliest, one in the world. ... Dylan". It is a poignant note, with profound sincerity and elation at these life-changing events.

Within a few weeks, by Feb. 14, 1961, Dylan had already written his hallmark tribute to his chosen mentor figure "Song to Woody" and had given a signed copy of the lyrics to Bob and Sidsel Gleason, the couple who were

friends with and looked after Guthrie, bringing him to their own home on weekends.

Almost five years earlier in May of 1956, Woody Guthrie, 44 years of age, had been 'involuntarily checked into' Greystone Park Hospital with advanced Huntington's chorea. In 1952, his symptoms went misdiagnosed as alcoholism and schizophrenia and finally, linked to his family history, "an examining physician [in Brooklyn State Hospital] alluded to Huntington's disease but did not seem convinced of the diagnosis" (Ringman 2007: 242). In January 1952, Guthrie was already so ravaged by the degenerative disease that the producer Milt Gabler, who recorded two songs by Guthrie on January 7, 1952, Guthrie's last studio recordings (https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/mastertalent/detail/102548/Guthrie_Woody accessed: 12 July 2023), said in 1999 that if he had known how ill Guthrie was, he never would have scheduled the session. For further context on Guthrie's precipitous decline and sudden disappearance from the folk scene, an April 1955 article on Greenwich Village-1955 in *Cosmopolitan* magazine made "no mention of Ramblin' Jack Elliott working with Woodie Guthrie, probably because Guthrie was now an obscure figure in a local hospital" (Cohen & Donaldson 2014: 73, see also 59–60, 69, 72, 92).

On April 12, 1963, at New York's Town Hall, before 900 people, Dylan, stunningly, recited a poem of five pages in typescript, "Last Thoughts on Woody Guthrie." Guthrie would live four and a half more years after Dylan had publicly recited his "last thoughts" about Guthrie. Dylan is still active and performing over sixty years later, now mainly on piano (realizing his teenage aspiration to be Little Richard who had – according to an early tape of Dylan singing and playing piano as a teenager – "some kind of expression": Attwood 2020). Upon receiving news of Little Richard's death on May 10, 2020, Dylan wrote on social media: "He was my shining star and guiding light back when I was only a little boy. His was the original spirit that moved me to do everything I would do." This only goes to show that Dylan from the very beginning had broadly eclectic tastes and was aware that 'music' in its many forms encompassed the entirety of our human experience. He had no interest in permanently putting on any strait jackets regarding genres or themes. Nor did he aspire to becoming a second Woody acolyte like Jack Elliott.

In order to appreciate fully the remarkable effect that Guthrie–the legendary figure in his prime and his iconic songs, not the Huntington's ravaged 48-year-old man Dylan encountered in late January, 1961 in wintry New Jersey–had on Dylan and Dylan's equally remarkable decision not to continue walking along Woody's road, it is good briefly to consider Guthrie's timeline when Dylan (b. May 24, 1941) was coming of age.

Guthrie was born July 14, 1912 in Okemah, Oklahoma. He himself had early memories that his father Charley and mother Nora would "sing apart and together on hymns, spiritual songs, songs about how to save your lost and homeless soul and self. The color of the songs was the Red Man, the Black Man, and the White folks." This kind of universal compassion seeped as deeply into Guthrie's soul as "lust for the lure of the mines" "forms like a habit" in the hearts and souls of coal miners in the traditional classic "Dark

as a Dungeon" (https://dylanchords.info/00_misc/dark_as_a_dungeon.htm accessed: 12 July 2023) that Dylan performed in concert in 1975 and again in 1999–2000.

In 1952, when Guthrie was forty years old and had become, for fifteen some years, an established Hesiodic icon of those who were poor and misused by society in general and who were effectively imprisoned in their places, or worse, by those who held the greatest wealth and power, Guthrie was, as we have mentioned, finally tentatively diagnosed with the degenerative neurological disorder Huntington's chorea that he had inherited from his mother. Violent impulses, loss of control over thoughts and verbal expressions, erratic moods, rages, restless energies and breaking of social rules of behavior–in particular, regarding sexual *mores*, and falling into 'a sort of trance, and no one could reach him' (Bell 2012: 58 and n. 15) are symptoms of Huntington's chorea. These symptoms and worse were exhibited by Woody Guthrie's mother Nora and by Guthrie as detailed in the already cited superb succinct study by John M. Ringman, M.D. (Ringman 2007).

When Guthrie visited his mother in 1928 when she was forty years of age, she was unable to recognize him. About Woody's own creativity, Ringman (2007: 24) sums it up well: "Though it is difficult to say when or where Woody first wrote, heard, plagiarized, and recorded many of his songs, many of them were produced during World War II, in the 5 years [1941–46] preceding the unequivocal emergence of symptoms of HD." Guthrie's own Huntington's symptoms can be recognized with the power of hindsight even during his service in the Merchant Marine during WW II. One key symptom was noted by Woody's daughter Nora: Woody never played the same song the same way twice (quoted in Ringman 2007: 242), a characteristic of Dylan's own performance history.

Dylan went to New York City in January 1961 to see one person, a writer and singer of national renown who wrote and sang highly distinctive and warmly regarded songs about common people. In Dylan's own telling, the name Woody Guthrie had meant little to him until one day in the previous winter of 1959–60. In his later telling (Dylan 2004: 242–254), Dylan is sitting at the counter of Gray's drugstore in Minneapolis talking to Flo Castner "an aspiring thespian, odd looking but beautiful in a whacky way." She asks him if he has ever heard of Woody Guthrie. He says he has heard Guthrie only on some Stinson records where Guthrie performs along with the blind blues harp player and singer Sonny Terry and singer guitar player Cisco Houston. He has never heard Guthrie play straight, no chaser, solo, song after song. She takes him to her attorney brother's house and brings out "a Woody Guthrie set of about twelve double sided 78 records." He describes what happened next:

> "I put one on the turntable and when the needle dropped, I was stunned – didn't know whether I was stoned or straight. What I heard was Woody singing a whole lot of his own compositions all by himself. . . . songs like "Ludlow Massacre," "1913 Massacre," "Jesus Christ," "Pretty Boy Floyd," "Hard Travelin'," "Jackhammer John," "Grand Coulee

> Dam," "Pastures of Plenty," "Talkin' Dust Bowl Blues," "This Land Is Your Land."
>
> All these songs together, one after another made my head spin. It made me want to gasp. It was like the land parted. I had heard Guthrie before but mainly just a song here and there – mostly things that he sang with other artists. I hadn't actually heard him, not in this earth shattering kind of way. I couldn't believe it. Guthrie had such a grip on things. He was so poetic and tough and rhythmic. There was so much intensity, and his voice was like a stiletto…. The songs themselves, his repertoire, were really beyond category. They had the infinite sweep of humanity in them…. Woody Guthrie tore everything in his path to pieces. For me it was an epiphany, like some heavy anchor had just plunged into the waters of the harbor.
>
> That day I listened all afternoon to Guthrie as if in a trance and I felt like I had discovered some essence of self-command, that I was in the internal pocket of the system feeling more like myself than ever before…. A great curiosity respecting the man also seized me and I had to find out who Woody Guthrie was."

Elsewhere Dylan (2004: 229) sums up in one crowning metaphor the impact of hearing Guthrie sing his songs solo: "When I first heard him it was like a million-megaton bomb had dropped."

Dylan tells us that after his Guthrie vinyl epiphany, he went through Woody Guthrie's autobiography *Bound for Glory* "from cover to cover, like a hurricane, totally focused on every word, and the book sang out to me like the radio." "The songs made everything else come to a halt." Through Woody's songs, Dylan's "view of the world was coming sharply into focus." He listened again and again to Guthrie's records. He sang nothing but Guthrie songs "at house parties, in the coffee-houses, street singing, with [folk-blues singer Spider John] Koerner, not with Koerner – if I had a shower I would have sung them there, too."

Most remarkably, in light of our discussion of the fraternity of ancient Greek oral epic songsters known as the *Homeridae* or 'sons of Homer', is that Dylan (2004: 246) asserts that at the outset of his Guthrie-phase:

> "I said to myself I was going to be Guthrie's greatest disciple. It seemed like a worthy thing. *I even seemed to be related to him*. Even from a distance and having never met the man, I could perceive his face with a clearness. *He looks not unlike my father in my father's early days*. I knew little about Woody.
>
> One by one I began singing them all, felt connected to these songs on every level. They were cosmic. One thing for sure, Woody Guthrie had never seen nor heard of me, but it felt like he was saying, "I'll be going away, but I'm leaving this job in your hands. I know I can count on you." [Italics mine.]".

A decade ago (in 2013–2014), when I was first looking seriously at the profound sense of quasi-filial piety Dylan feels towards Guthrie, I tried to imagine what it would have been like for the zealous and energetic and talented Ξυλωδεΐδης, or 'son of Woody', who was the nineteen-year-old Bob Dylan to

travel halfway across the country in the wintry cold and make his way on buses four days later to a mental hospital in New Jersey and there meet his songster father. We now think we know, from the Sotheby's postcards discussed above, that Dylan did so immediately upon his arrival and caught Woody apparently on a good day and received his 'blessing' on Dylan's singing.

Early songs that we have of Dylan captured singing on tape in May and December 1961, his meeting-Guthrie year, are entirely traditional folk and blues songs. Of the fifty-one (51) songs, *sixteen* (16) are Guthrie songs, including four (4) songs about venereal disease from Woody's Huntington's Disease phase of strong preoccupation with sex, one of the symptoms of his neurological disorder. Only two songs are Dylan's compositions. Of these two, the masterful – I consider it incomparable – "I Was Young When I Left Home" (official lyrics https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/i-was-young-when-i-left-home/ accessed: 12 July 2023; official audio https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6scwWSgFvo accessed: 12 July 2023) is based in melody and in its wistfully nostalgic feeling upon Guthrie's "900 Miles," yet somehow surpassing it in depth of imaginative sympathy (Palaima 2012: 10–12). Dylan's twenty-year-old voice sounds worn out from care and work and disconnection from loved ones. He is able to channel the inner pain and soulful regret of the song's anonymous down-forever working man whose "mother is dead and gone and baby sister all gone wrong."

But by 1962 we have the following mix on bootlegs. None of the songs are by Woody Guthrie:

Finjan Club Montreal, Canada July 2, 1962.

Dylan songs: Death Of Emmett Till; Blowin' In The Wind; He Was A Friend of Mine (traditional copyrighted by Bob Dylan); Let Me Die In My Footsteps; Quit Your Lowdown Ways (Dylan under many influences).

Traditional: Rocks and Gravel (Brownie McGhee 1915–1996); Two Trains Runnin' (McKinley Morganfield = Muddy Waters 1915–83); Ramblin' On My Mind (Robert Johnson 1911–1938); Muleskinner Blues (Jimmie Rodgers 1897–1933).

Gaslight Tapes October 1962

Dylan songs: John Brown; Ballad of Hollis Brown; A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall; Don't Think Twice, It's All Right.

Traditional: Rocks and Gravel (Brownie McGhee 1915–1996); No More Auction Block; Barbara Allen; Moonshine Blues; Motherless Children; Handsome Molly; Cocaine; Cuckoo Is a Pretty Bird; West Texas; Kindhearted Woman Blues (Robert Johnson); See That My Grave Is Kept Clean (Blind Lemon Jefferson 1893–1929); Ain't No More Cane on the Brazos (Leadbelly also known as Huddie William Leadbetter 1885–1949).

On his officially released albums from these two years, we also see Dylan walking away from Guthrie's road. I italicize songs that are *not by Dylan*. There are no songs by Guthrie. And Dylan's own "Song for Woody" can be seen in its way as a song version of "Last Thoughts on Woody Guthrie."

Bob Dylan (1962) released March 19, 1962: *You're No Good*; Talkin' New York; *In My Time Of Dyin'*; *Man Of Constant Sorrow*; *Fixin' To Die*; *Pretty Peg-*

gy-O; *Highway 51*; *Gospel Plow*; *Baby, Let Me Follow You Down*; *House Of The Risin' Sun*; *Freight Train Blues*; Song To Woody; *See That My Grave Is Kept Clean*;

The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan (1963) released May 27, 1963: Blowin' in The Wind; Girl From The North Country; Masters Of War; Down The Highway; Bob Dylan's Blues; A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall; Don't Think Twice, It's All Right; Bob Dylan's Dream; Oxford Town; Talking World War III Blues; *Corrina, Corrina*; *Honey, Just Allow Me One More Chance* (trad. "unknown Texas singer named 'Henry'"); I Shall Be Free.

This brings us to the question towards which this entire paper has been pointing. How did Bob Dylan feel when he came face-to-face with the Woody Guthrie who was ravaged by Huntington's chorea for nine diagnosed years and probably, deducing from Guthrie's behaviors, had suffered its symptoms for another decade before that? Even forewarned that Guthrie was ill, Dylan must have felt, when he wrote that he visited Woody four times a week, at times a shocking contrast between the physically broke-down-engine of a man who could not play an instrument and could rarely speak intelligibly and the mental and spiritual image Dylan carried in his mind of a vibrant father figure who was dynamic and courageous and a widely celebrated champion of the downtrodden and made the world know in plain terms in his songs that greed and lust for power continued to destroy human beings who just want to have families and raise them decently through their own hard work.

The Guthrie Dylan knew face-to-face in Greystone Hospital he revered and still reveres. Folk songs, Woody's and those from Homer and Hesiod onward, prepare us for life's grim realities. Dylan (2004: 99) pulls no punches about Woody in Greystone: "The scene was frightful, but Woody Guthrie was oblivious to all of it. A male nurse would usually bring him out to see me and then after I'd been there a while, would lead him away. The experience was sobering and psychologically draining."

Typical of Bob Dylan, he took all this in. He wrote "Song to Woody," which famously on the Studs Terkel radio interview in May 1963, weeks after reading "Last Thoughts on Woody Guthrie" at the Town Hall Concert, he flatly refused to play (Scaduto 1971: 98–99). Dylan then charted his own path in continuing to sing truths about the powers that control human lives and to explore the mysteries that pervade the lives we live. He did this from his first official recording session onwards. In singing truth about the things that are and will be and 'are before' with his own being, Dylan needs the mother of Muses more than ever; and he still carries inside him the spirit of his own special *Doktorvater* as a true Ξυλωδεΐδης or son of Woody Guthrie.

Woody Guthrie died in Brooklyn State Hospital on October 3, 1967.

AFTERWORD

More than two years after incorporating the Sotheby postcards material into my thoughts here, I heard Anna Canoni, granddaughter of Woody Guthrie, deliver a keynote lecture at the World of Bob Dylan 2025 conference in Tulsa (Canoni 2025) on the topic of Bob Dylan's first meetings with Woody Guthrie.

I spoke with Anna after her talk to get things straight.

It is clear that Bob Dylan upon arrival in New York went to visit Guthrie's wife Marge with her family (including son Arlo) first thing and then, according to Marge, "he compassionately took time out to visit with her husband, Woody Guthrie, who was seriously ailing in a hospital." (Sanders 2016) This would have been on January 24 or 25, early enough to have Bob's next mailing back home postmarked January 26.

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