

AUTHOR MEETS CRITICS

*From Dickinson to Dylan: The
Philosophical Light in Literary
Masterworks*

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**From Dickinson to Dylan: Visions of Transcendence in
Modernist Literature**

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The pernicious danger with philosophers and political theorists who get hold of literature is that they so often aim to mine it for declarative theses, resolving its ambiguities with the clear light of theory. Such a *modus operandi*, while it may be mightily inspired by the literature, achieves its ends at the cost of losing everything that is literary about it. For literature has fundamentally to do with the ambiguities of experience and feeling, its narrative and verse inviting one to encounter, in both depth and immediacy, the concrete dilemmas and uncertainties of particular human experiences. Glenn Hughes's background shields him from such distorting temptations, in part because for him literature came first. He was raised by parents who were teachers of literature, his father a prolific playwright and interpreter of literary arts, the founder of the drama program at the University of Washington and the man who revived theater-in-the-round for modern audiences, his mother a charismatic high school literature teacher (mine, as it happens) who remains a legend among my peers. Well before he became a philosopher he was immersed in literature and was an accomplished

lyric poet and musician.¹ He knows the nature of the invitation into the worlds of literature and is careful to emphasize that the art form's communication occurs through possibilities, intimations, inclinations, and visions rather than theories and doctrines.

And yet *From Dickinson to Dylan* is also born of a philosophical conviction with political implications that is familiar to scholars of Eric Voegelin—that our existential situation is one of tension between mundane living and the mysterious ground of its origin and persistence, a ground symbolized traditionally in myths, rituals, and doctrines of the beginning and the beyond, but a ground that must be symbolized differently in modern times—when everything traditional is challenged and immanentist dogmas present themselves as obvious conclusions from the discoveries of natural science.² In such a time the inevitable pull of transcendent mystery must appear as a disruptive force, the reverberations of long traditions assuming a strangely countercultural role, the anguish of meaninglessness demanding either a recovery of the lost ground or an articulation in utterly new terms of the significance of our life lived between the known and the unknowable.

This combination of respect for the literary enterprise and sensitivity to the insistence of the human urge to transcendence gives Hughes's approach both an extraordinary depth and an extraordinary range. The range is illustrated by the way he is able to apply his notion of transcendence to such seemingly different authors—for example, both T. S. Eliot, with his weddedness to the symbols of Anglican Christianity, and Samuel Beckett, who seems to take his start from the apocalyptic destruction of all conventional sources of meaning. The depth is illustrated by the fact that Hughes is able to do this without watering down or overly generalizing his notion of transcendence. He is helped in this, of course, by Voegelin's insistence that all symbols derive their meaning from engendering experiences and that the search for experience, in the hermeneutic of the *metaxy*, is every bit as important as the analysis of articulated symbols.³

Thus we are seeking, in Eliot, in Hughes's eyes, not the doctrines of the faith so much as the inspirations and epiphanies

that pervade all forms of faith, breaking through every kind of mundane complacency with the surprising moment in the rose garden, where time and the timeless reveal their interwovenness, and the still point of the turning world is felt in the full depths of its implication. Eliot seeks spiritual meaning within the paradox of the modernist's relationship to tradition, which draws upon it, lamenting the loss of its depth of meaning, while yet being unable to simply absorb it. Eliot's search for that depth among the broken symbols of our time must be an individual, even idiosyncratic venture, yet by its intensely personal character it resonates more powerfully with us, the equally individualized moderns who encounter it in his works.⁴

Regarding Beckett, Hughes ingeniously expands on the distinction between despair and distress, where the former suggests a debilitating resignation to an absence of meaning and the latter the furious thirst for meaning that rages most forcefully in the harshest of deserts, a fury compounded by the conviction that the existence of such a desperate thirst seems to imply the existence—somehow, somewhere—of something like water. In his study of the play *Krapp's Last Tape*, as in other writings that he has done on Beckett, Hughes finds something much more than the inertia of forward momentum in the author's anguished cry, "I can't go on, I'll go on." The existential phenomenon at stake is the experience of being incessantly drawn forward—not simply to live, but to reveal this living through the light of consciousness, with an exploratory creativity that cannot help but reflect its uniqueness as a gift.⁵

Hughes has written in previous works about the nature of mystery and the symbol of transcendence in politics and history.⁶ In this book, as his literary loves come to the fore, one should recognize the thoroughness of his fidelity to the specific literary character of his subjects while yet never doubting that the whole of his long-established philosophical orientation guides the inquiry masterfully in the background.

The Modernist Question: Remarks
on Glenn Hughes's *From Dickinson
to Dylan: Visions of Transcendence
in Modernist Literature*

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Modernist Literature**

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From Dickinson to Dylan: Visions of Transcendence in Modernist Literature is a generous book. Glenn Hughes has clearly written it from the attentive, inquiring, intelligent, affirmative, and loving center of his own soul and, from that fecund center, offers to the reader a provocative and inviting commentary on six modernist authors. My remarks focus on two main themes discussed in the book's introduction, but these are themes that saturate the entirety of the book. The first is the pervasive theme of mystery, and the second is the equally pervasive but more muted theme of belonging.

Bodily Mediated Experiences of Mystery

This reviewer first read *From Dickinson to Dylan* on a porch in Maine that overlooks the ocean. Looking out over the ocean, I was confronted with the sights, sounds, and smells of a rural New England coastline in early summer. Given my location, it was easy to pivot between the sensuousness of my own experiences and those sensual images discussed by Hughes. I daresay that for many,

the incarnate situatedness of one's reading of the book will also become conspicuous. In detailing Marcel Proust's *impressions bienheureuses* (privileged, blissful moments of life that seem radiant with transcendent meaning), Hughes describes them as "sensorily drenched, and therefore drenched in time. In other words, they are moments of being *simultaneously in time and outside time*."⁷ *From Dickinson to Dylan* is a philosophical commentary on modernist literature, but the reader should be aware that it is also a book about the subtle mysteriousness of reality that is at once both transcendent and sensuous. That is, Hughes's discussion insightfully explores mystery as simultaneously emergent within, but also surplus to, space and time.

The introduction does the reader a tremendous service with a concise account of why mystery is not only real but also potentially the most revivifying experience of the real. We learn that the modernist writers are mediators of the real because unlike their Romanticist predecessors, they give voice to full range of its harrowing disjunctions, illogic, and opacity, as well as to the fleeting moments in which "the radical alterity of the sacred" is glimpsed.⁸ "True mysteries are *realities* in which we are involved, discerned at the border where they disappear beyond human capacities for insight."⁹ We are involved because, as Hughes points out, we—each of us—are able to out-question every available answer to the mystery of reality. He tells us that questioning is "formally unrestricted: that is, it is not satisfied with answers that do not completely explain why we ourselves or the universe exist, or that fail to settle our most intense yearning for moral coherence and justice."¹⁰ Our questioning potentially brings us to a notion of meaning that reaches beyond the astrophysical reality of the universe. We are entering an analogous territory beyond territory. Mystery, transcendence, and sacredness all prove to be names we give to the risky business of attending to the abiding tension of existence. It is risky and sometimes absurd, because what sense can be made of responding to the *transcendent* dimension of meaning that inheres in the *immanent* conditions of becoming and perishing? No doubt it is easier to contemplate sacred, transcendent

dimensions of meaning when—bodily—one enjoys health and well-being, and when—spiritually—one beholds beauty. Contemplation of the sacred is profoundly more difficult when one is in pain. Yet even in the case of pain, as Hughes writes of Eliot's Christianity, "[t]he symbol of Incarnation affirms that human suffering and death are not mere attrition and waste, but have a mysterious significance in the economy of human-eternal communion."¹¹ Surely what Hughes is drawing from Eliot is that the consolation of Christianity is not merely the redemption of souls but also the redemption of bodies that must nonetheless suffer in all their transcendent dignity and immanent wretchedness.

Belonging and the Risk of Faith

Hughes also writes in his introduction that mystery "must be real if existential and cosmic meaning are to be complete and make sense."¹² With mystery, it is not so much that we have our place in the cosmos but that the *cosmos has a place in each of us*. If the overriding Romanticist experience is one of *belonging within* a sublime cosmic order, then perhaps the modernist turn that is explored in the book is an inversion of this. If so, then the modernist emphasis is not so much on how we belong within the cosmos but on how each of us is already a cosmos. Nor does the strangeness end there: being a cosmos does not obviate the human need to seek the cosmos. The implications of this strangeness, however, are fraught.

One way to deal with it, of course, is simply to dismiss it. Some modernist works depict existence as foundationless, as though we are all floating aimlessly in a cold, soulless vacuum. (Although not discussed in the book, Samuel Beckett's play *Not I* is surely one of the most haunting depictions of such existential loneliness.) The suspicion is that *there is no cosmos* that constitutes us, nor that holds us, nor that draws us to itself. As a result, existence is experienced as a horror, a grotesque, and life fails to rise above a dominating ennui, at best. If the absurd can become thematic in modernist literature, then at worst, modernism can further disintegrate into an attitude of nihilism. There is, however, another aspect

of the modernist attitude that Hughes explores. Rather than dismiss the strangeness of being a cosmos in search of a cosmos, it is to grapple with it. If the Romanticist glow of a cosmos that already holds us has become a shut door, as Emily Dickinson encountered in her rejection of transcendentalism, then the only alternative to horror or ennui is to wrestle, with the whole of one's life, with the disjointed experience of cosmos endlessly in search of cosmos. Modernism, it appears, can raise the question whether wrestling without end in the dark is, after all, worthwhile. Such a question is, perhaps, the essence of modernism.

Beckett seems to be a case in point. He is a modernist who is caught in a very pure tension between the tendency to fall into the absurd, on the one hand, and the longing for a final integration, on the other. As Hughes insists, Beckett is no absurdist, but his characters are haunted. In each of them, one might say that a cosmos is intimately present, perhaps present in a mode of absence. But absence is not emptiness. His characters long for what they seem to recall. The absent is present by way of memory or of anticipation. Hughes writes of the tragicomedy of Beckett's writings that every character seems to raise the "question of whether . . . a transcendent meaning might exist that could somehow justify and redeem the travails and sufferings of existence."¹³ Again he writes, "Humans long to establish themselves, somehow, in enduring and redemptive being, but this is a longing that cannot, in Beckett's view, be experientially fulfilled."¹⁴ Hughes details the ghost of Cartesian dualism that seems to infest Beckett's works, but also the abject failure of his characters to enter into communion with the transcendence of the innate God-idea. We are left to get on with it. To "go on," as Hughes writes, is to keep "telling one's story. . . . In this telling, each of us naturally wants our story to have a genuine purpose, a real, not illusory, meaning, . . . a desire that could be fulfilled only if the story of the self has a meaning that is lasting, non-erasable—only, that is, if it is lodged in the eternal."¹⁵ Beckett sees no lodging in the eternal. His characters are possessed by what is absent, but they are not lost in a meaningless vacuum. They are in limbo: they are neither at home nor without a home. They are

genuinely homesick. They have almost forgotten what it is to be homeward bound.

We might say that Beckett's soul is harrowed by the transcendence of transcendence, or by what Dickinson referred to as "Illocality,' or "Boundlessness."¹⁶ As Hughes writes of Dickinson, "[Divine transcendence] is . . . the mind's recognition of the *presence* in consciousness of the divine basis of its own existence, the presence of a transcendent reality that reaches into consciousness from a 'beyond' of consciousness, giving the human soul the ontological constitution of human-divine *co-presence*."¹⁷ Where is the cosmos? Where do we belong? How can we find a home for Beckett? For Dickinson, the cosmos is nowhere if it is not within. Giving her poetry a sometimes-jagged edge is the agonizing awareness that her own consciousness is a limited participation in a boundlessness of transcendent meaning.¹⁸ It is the frustration that comes of catching a glimpse that is never enough to reveal an answer, to provide a dwelling, to quell our questioning. Her fragmentary poetic expression is redolent for what it strains to say. As in Beckett's works, Dickinson's poetry communicates a longing to be at home, but unlike Beckett, she has caught a glimpse. Unlike Beckett, she looks in the direction of home, and by that look she is homeward bound. Among the many quotations, Hughes gives us this: "Of Paradise' existence, All we know, Is the uncertain certainty—But it's vicinity, infer, By it's Bisecting Messenger—."¹⁹

Attending to mystery implicitly raises the question of belonging and, as mentioned, is risky. If we listen to Kierkegaard, *faith* is a risk. It is the infinite passion of stepping out into the darkness of doubt and objective uncertainty. Hughes clearly demonstrates the intensity of the deeply existential faith of most of his authors, but Beckett is another matter. He has entitled that chapter "Mystic without Faith." Yet, perhaps there is more to Beckett's faith than its absence, which, as mentioned, is not the same as emptiness. Could it be that since all of Beckett's characters are in the dark and that since it was Beckett who flung them into the dark, that Beckett may be, ironically, something of a modernist Abraham? In Kierkegaard's religious stage, Abraham earns his title "Father of Faith." He has

taken on the risk of faith. But to anyone regarding his actions from the stage of the ethical, Abraham is a murderous fool. With the intent to kill his own son, he is bent on a venture of the most nihilistic proportions. But Abraham, like Beckett, is haunted by a longing, by uncertainty, by the apparent absurdity of what his life has come to. Abraham's love—like Beckett's character Krapp—has brought him to an agonized realization of who he is at the end of his days. He is caught between love of God and love of Isaac. Even if Beckett is not like the Abraham who joyfully hears the command of God not to kill Isaac, there are parallels with the Abraham who trudged up the mountain with a broken heart full of uncertainty, and longing, who found himself preparing the altar of sacrifice and binding the prone body of his son. He is the very picture of distress, yet Abraham, in his own way, just gets on with it. Abraham's trust in God was not always a consolation; it was, rather, an archetypal case of risk. While Beckett's characters certainly have no faith in God, Beckett nonetheless has them waiting around in a situation that makes no sense. Why don't they give up? Why do they wait? Perhaps, with all their disdain and all their acrimony and mockery, they are waiting on Beckett's behalf; and perhaps their waiting is not meaningless after all. Perhaps Beckett has taken a Kierkegaardian leap of faith *through the surrogates* who are his characters. Could it be that instead of conceiving of Beckett as a mystic without faith, there may indeed be scope to think about Beckett as an irreverent mystic *with* faith?

Such are the kinds of questions that arise in the reading of *From Dickinson to Dylan*, and they might just be the kinds of questions that push past all available answers. But questioning—the very stuff of human living—is intrinsically meaningful. Hughes's commentary and judicious quotation of modernist authors will surely stoke worthy questions in every reader.

A Modernist Twist to Modernity: The Exploration of Normative Interiority

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From Dickinson to Dylan: Visions of Transcendence in Modernist Literature

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Glenn Hughes has presented a thesis that six poets, novelists, playwrights, and song-writers, all of whom we can designate as engaging in “artistic poesis”—creative artistry dealing with the highest of subject matters, human nature itself—and whose style and mode of expression fit the cultural appellation “modernism in literature,” have all, contrary to the convention of “modernism,” explored human nature as in its substance primordially oriented from the finitude, uncertainty, and anxiety of the human situation toward that which is beyond the finitude—that is, toward “transcendence.”

Hughes has offered a compelling case supporting his thesis. There is no need here to recount his careful, sensitive, insightful reading of key texts of each author, his judicious and erudite employment of secondary sources, and his lucid summaries of the explications on each author. And if he has, indeed, proved his case, then our task is to inquire into its significance for modern intellectual history and for contemporary culture.

We can start by considering in what sense these designated modernists are, in fact, modern. What is modern culture? Of course,

the *via moderna* was a term coined in the Late Middle Ages, and many currents from medieval times and the Renaissance flow into modernity—for example, the nominalist and voluntarist crisis, the appeal of hermeticism, and the Neoplatonic focus on an intermundane world soul. But, to simplify matters, let us tentatively consider two main candidates for modernity in its self-proclaimed mature form.

One is the attempt to apply the method of modern science that has seemed so successful in unveiling, for the first time, the inner workings of nature to the study of human nature, human society, and human history—with the hope of decisively improving or progressing human nature, human society, and human history. This is basically the project of the Enlightenment and its traditions of positivism and scientific reductionism. A second candidate for modernity comes from the analysis of Eric Voegelin, who sees modernity as the radical effort to transform fundamentally human nature, human society, and human history, fueled by millennialist, gnostic-like misplaced spiritual eschatological and utopian dreams—immanentizing salvation. These two versions of modernity can, of course, mix and reinforce each other, intermingled with such cultural movements as Romanticism.

Given this analysis, Hughes's "modernist" writers are decidedly anti-modern. Hughes consistently and resolutely portrays these writers as opposed to reductionist, secular, and materialist interpretations of the human condition. He shows them as equally adamant against any utopianism that would, say, forestall Emily Dickinson's agonizing or Samuel Beckett's waiting for Godot. T. S. Eliot's bird still says that "humankind cannot bear very much reality." There is to be no expectant apocalyptic conflagration to usher in a new world era. Instead, Eliot's "incandescent terror" of the choice of "pyre or pyre" concerns the choice of the individual soul in its spiritual battle betwixt time and the timeless.

Bernard Lonergan, to whom Hughes appeals for philosophical insight, has named an explication of the genuine human pursuit of the true, the good, and the divine through the cognitive, moral, spiritual, and affective drive of inquiry toward an unrestricted goal

as a “position.” The “immanent” source of “transcendence” is the elemental matter of raising the further question. But the finite, immanent source and locus cannot rest with itself—it is oriented to, and simultaneously experiences “participation” in, the transcendent beyond. There is experienced a basic tension of limitation and transcendence at the heart of human being. The technical term “counterposition,” then, is some explication of the human situation, whether epistemological, metaphysical, or ethical, at odds with the basic performance expressed by the “position.” Two fundamental exigencies thus arise for intellectual culture, including artistic poesis: to reverse counterpositions and to develop positions. Let us consider both exigencies to locate the significance of Hughes’s thinkers.

Each of Hughes’s thinkers is involved, in various degrees and various genres, in “reversing the counterpositions” of modernity: scientism, reductionism, materialism, progressivism, utopianism, and radical revolution. In them, we witness an anamnestic venture of creative restoration. This is no mean feat, especially when, as Eliot says, the “times seem unpropitious.” In one sense, the task is a perpetual task of restoring what has been lost and found—again and again. To be sure, most of Hughes’s thinkers embrace a kind of ecumenical apprehension of the true wisdom of the world religious (roughly of Karl Jasper’s Axial Age). In the case of Marcel Proust, there is an appropriation of Platonic piety toward the Eternal Forms. And in the case of Ezra Pound, we have perhaps an almost Heideggerian-like entry into the pre-Socratic and undifferentiated sense of the sacred. But there remain the final, and perhaps most crucial, questions to our review: Do Hughes’s thinkers also “develop the position”? Can the effort of restoration—under conditions of modernity—also be an effort of development? If so, what is it?

We must take another glance at the achievements of modernity. Earlier we have identified “modernity” with what we can justly call movements of cultural decline. But in the complexities of human and historical life, decline can be mated with progress. The point is to be able to differentiate the two. The discovery of nature

in terms of the intelligible laws of cosmic process increasingly discerned by modern science is progress. The further discovery of historical process and historicity as discerned by modern historical scholarship is also progress. Without these two differentiations—of “nature” and of “history”—there would arise no need for a new appreciation of human reality as different from, but embedded in, nature and history so understood. These activities of differentiation lead to the focus on, and thematic treatment of, human consciousness. This exploration of consciousness does not abrogate classical and medieval ideas about the human psyche, the human soul, and the human substance. But the exploration of consciousness can add a precision, a fullness, and a verifiable experiential basis to the earlier reflections on the human situation, keeping in view the whole dimension. Just as modern science can lead to scientism but does not have to, and modern historical consciousness can lead to historicism but does not have to, so too the exploration of consciousness can lead to subjectivism but does not have to.

Hughes has provided abundant and compelling evidence that his thinkers have explored what Lonergan calls the “realm of interiority” and, in doing so, have developed the “position.” Using their own individual tools of language and styles, all these thinkers focus on consciousness, on the very flow of consciousness—indeed, on the normative direction of consciousness, which is the normative movement and direction of life precisely amid all the complexities and fragilities of life. And this orientation of consciousness, this *normative* orientation of consciousness, is the orientation toward transcendence, which gifts human life, in its agony and ecstasy, with meaning. Hence the exploration of subjectivity by these authors takes its mass and momentum. Hughes’s book offers proof for this phenomenon.

In conclusion, let me mention, by way of illustration, one author: Proust. All seven volumes of Proust’s great novel *Remembrance of Things Past* are devoted primarily to entering the flow and horizon of consciousness of the characters, even minor characters. To be sure, as Hughes eloquently points out, the “plot” of the novel is Marcel’s (the narrator) final self-appropriation as an

author essentially committed to portraying his extraordinary experiences of transcendence in a manner uniquely befitting those experiences. Still, the extensive entry into the interior world of almost all the characters over hundreds and hundreds of pages does not display some instrumental use of the characters and their interiority as a mere foil for Marcel's self-development. Yes, there is the mystery of Albertine, the character mentioned the most in the novel, but whose interior state is dramatically left unexplored. I suggest that here we embrace, by the sheer contrast with the treatment of the other characters, the *utter mystery* of Albertine's being. Hughes correctly points out that unlike the other authors, Proust does not join love with intimacy (perhaps reflecting the author's own problems with intimacy). But I suggest that here in Proust, too, there is a kind of love exhibited, however diffusely: a love of the being of the characters as simply conscious beings, the love of the conscious *subject as subjects*.

All these authors, then, I argue, on the basis of Hughes's book, display what Lonergan calls a change in intellectual culture from object as object, to subject as object, to subject as subject. Their exploration of subject as subject as normative is their great achievement—both as reversal and as development. In this interpretation, these “modernist” authors give a new and profound meaning to “modern.” This is the overriding significance of Hughes's pioneering book.

Mystery and Transcendence: The Timeless Art of Bob Dylan

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From Dickinson to Dylan: Visions of Transcendence in Modernist Literature

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Introduction

This short article was originally presented in a fashion all-too-familiar in pandemic times: via screen. When our fine panel on Glenn “Chip” Hughes’s book *From Dickinson to Dylan* took place, at the Eric Voegelin Society annual meeting in 2021, travel across the Atlantic for anything but urgent purposes was simply disallowed. While those of us discussing this remarkable book consider the topics it raises both urgent and crucial, it seems the relevant visa and health authorities respectfully thought otherwise.

I was consoled by the fact that a roundtable on transcendence and literature certainly allows for less-than-physical presence. What we are discussing goes beyond what happens in one conference room at one hotel on a given day during a conference. The symbolism, while simple, is apt: the dialogue in which we partake goes beyond both time and physical space. So, even if not physically, I was certainly there: in voice, image, and spirit, to the utmost of my spiritual abilities, as well as in that sense of generosity and friendship that the author of the book under discussion as well as my fellow panelists so admirably and unfailingly represent.

My theme in this essay centers on expressions of timelessness and transcendence in literary works that are also very much of their time.

Timely and Timeless

Let me begin with the following claim: literary and other artistic expressions that have lasting impact and importance are typically characterized by being timely and timeless simultaneously. Henrik Ibsen's or Anton Chekhov's plays say something crucial and typical about Norway and Russia of the late nineteenth century. We gain unique insights into the history and culture of that time by reading or otherwise experiencing their seminal works. They are, in short, brilliant time and period pieces. Yet, they encapsulate themes that are relatable and deeply significant at any point in time: the breaking up of human relationships, the pains of change, the sense of guilt, the haunting of the past, or the one against the many. This is part of—or really key to—what makes them great and not least enduring.

In popular music, the lasting popularity of the Beatles attests to that exact same element. The particular events of the 1960s *and* ever-present themes of youth in particular and human life in general stand side by side. Famously poignant is “She’s Leaving Home” of 1967, a tale of breaking up and revolt against parental authority. The song almost screams 1967: the summer of love, the yearning to break loose, and the almost total lack of communication between a staid adult culture and a youth culture in the full bloom of protest and anarchy. Yet, the emotions and relationships expressed in that song’s lyrics—arguably, even in its music—are recognizable for any parent or child across cultures and times, even if written in the idiom and stamped with the idiosyncrasies of the 1960s. It is a tale of that time, and a tale of and for all times.²⁰

Hughes, in his remarkable book on visions of transcendence in modernist literature—remarkable in both its scholarly excellence and its originality—builds on but also goes beyond this encounter between the timely and the timeless by exploring how several key modernist writers, in spite of their many internal differences, are

united in their exploration of the relationship between the concrete human being in time, on the one hand, and the “beyond” of meaning indicated by the word “transcendence,” on the other. This is not only the “timeless,” “transcendent,” or “beyond” in the sense of truly enduring human problems and topics. Here we come face to face with meaning *beyond all time*. Where modernism shatters conventions and oftentimes leads us into encounters with the absurd, the unknown, and the totally empty, it also—or for that very reason—effectively formulates, according to Hughes, the human encounter with the mystery of meaning and the beyond.

Empathic Mimicry

Let me explore, however briefly, how Hughes unveils this in his perceptive reading of Bob Dylan’s lyrics and music—or, we might say, in Bob Dylan’s performative art.

Dylan’s voice, literally and figuratively, is a perfect point of departure. Often laughed at or ridiculed by the uninitiated, it has that quality of sounding “as if he were from any historical time and place in America,” as Hughes puts it.²¹ He goes on to call this quality “empathic mimicry” (151): the ability to channel the experiences of the most diverse human beings and make them his own—and the listener’s—in a personal and poetic act of empathy.²²

As Hughes reads him, Dylan’s deep-seated expressions of indignation and anger due to suffering and injustice are closely intertwined with “intimations of an ultimate and mysterious moral and spiritual redemption.”²³ As I understand Hughes, and hear Dylan, this connection is made not least through the idea of *judgment*, not in the here and now, but in the tension between the injustice of this world and a transcendent realm (or we could say possibility) of justice. There is suffering and injustice present in this world that call for judgment beyond the confines of human power and law. This judgment is cast upon human beings at all times: for their indifference, their cruelty, their self-absorption. And it can be expressed and experienced not least through the empathic presence we can come to have with suffering human beings of all times, at all places, and in all cultures.

Limitations, Suffering, and Experience

One of Dylan's main insights, as conveyed so powerfully through his lyrics and music, resides in the bond that exists between human beings at the most diverse of times and circumstances. This is, in so many of Dylan's songs, portrayed in terms of human limitations and suffering, which issue in a yearning for a beyond that offers reconciliation and redemption in the face of both conflict and human folly. The "beyond" is a mystery, but it is also in its own way the object of experience; otherwise, we would be hard put to find human descriptions of it—even poetically or in song—that could evoke it. In an interesting 1985 interview conducted shortly after what is often referred to as his Christian period, Dylan is explicitly asked about what he has taken and learned from religious experience(s) in his own life.²⁴ In his answer, he delves right into the importance of experience as a precondition for understanding. Being attuned and open to the mystery of existence, as attested to by myth and revelation, is a precondition for understanding both the limits and the transcendence of human experience. I do believe this is a fair understanding of Dylan's point. And he is explicitly grateful that he actually possesses at least some such understanding.

As Hughes expertly displays in his book, Dylan repeatedly returns to the timelessness and the intimations of transcendence found in human encounters and experiences, expressed sometimes through events placed in his own time, but more often in different historical times or outside any concrete time. Hughes's use of "I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine" from 1967, with its "suggestion of time intersecting with the timeless" (166), is well taken to exemplify this; the same could be illustrated by "Shelter from the Storm" from 1975, one of Dylan's most moving songs.²⁵ As we follow one (or more?) travelers through agonies and hardships—of toil and blood, of existence in foreign lands, of imprisonment, and of death—each verse ends with the comforting, soothing words "Come in, she said, I'll give ya shelter from the storm."²⁶

The travails of life in "Shelter from the Storm" are placed both inside and outside of historical time, all at once. The mystical "she"

of the lyric, reminiscent almost of Dante's Beatrice or Ibsen's Solveig, in the end stands side by side with God. We find ourselves in another (or another's?) lifetime—not simply in another time—and we are in a foreign country. But the longing remains the same throughout the song and throughout time: for shelter from the storm through the mystery of the one who can provide such shelter. Wishing and praying for that elusive shelter, and then finding it in the form of a life-saving invitation at the time of greatest distress, epitomizes a longing for transcendence: a safe harbor that calls on us across—and exists beyond—time and space.

Tension and Presence

As one of our foremost Eric Voegelin scholars, Hughes fittingly ensures that the philosophy and philosophical terminology of Voegelin—certainly alongside that of Bernard Lonergan—is present in his book. It is therefore apt to add to these brief remarks a reference to Eric Voegelin. When the latter at several junctures returns to the symbol of the *theotes*, found in the Epistle to the Colossians, he translates it with “the fullness of God.” This conveys the presence of God found in the metaxic structure of reality by human beings open to the mystery of divine presence. Taken fully and seriously, and building on exactly this passage from Colossians, Voegelin famously says that if the presence of Christ implies a *theotes* that exists beyond historical time, we must also be able to make intelligible “the presence of Christ in a Babylonian hymn, or a Taoist speculation, or a Platonic dialogue, just as much as in a Gospel.”²⁷ Voegelin insists that this presence and intelligibility across time does not represent in any way a break with Christian doctrine but rather serves as its only possible conclusion, not least given the radical transcendence—the beyond—of the divine mystery, toward which we human beings live in a tension and which is revealed through the mystery of the Christ.

Hughes's core claim in his book is that some of the best of modernist literature, including the songs of Bob Dylan, evokes the same tension toward mystery that Voegelin expresses in his philosophical idiom and through his historical and political science.

Dylan is no philosopher, historian, or political scientist, nor in the strict sense a poet. He is a songwriter and an artist. But he has a unique sensitivity to the mystery of human existence, and through his own idiosyncratic voice he takes on voices and characters from across time and space—even beyond time and space—in order to evoke the sense of the beyond. That this continues to be part of Dylan’s artistic endeavor is displayed in one of his most recent works, the almost seventeen-minute-long “Murder Most Foul,” released in 2020, in which he retreads the greatest dramas of the 1960s—both political and cultural—through imagery and words spanning the breadth and depth of history, politics, literature, and music.²⁸

If there is anything at all lacking in Hughes’s chapter on Dylan, it must be that it is, at least for now, merely a chapter and not a whole book. Dylan’s many artistic expressions, on record and on stage—in turns somber and humorous, spiritual and worldly, angry and satisfied, observing and partaking—contain so much that can be explored with the tools and questions found in Hughes’s book. We can thus only hope for more.

Conclusion

Hughes shows us powerfully how spirituality is strongly present in modernist literature, even if it comes to be expressed in different idioms and forms from what we commonly associate with religion or faith. A modern age that often prides itself on its independence from religious faith and from spiritual traditions, while delighting in its radically new expressions within art and literature, could certainly do worse than take the work of Bob Dylan and its evocation of mystery and spirit seriously as a salient corrective, preferably by way of Hughes’s book.

Response to Critics

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It is gratifying to find that, after one has written a book, some people have read it. When those people include scholars whom one admires, one is fortunate indeed. As William Rappard once commented (as recollected by Eric Voegelin): “Cooperation in science consists in one man writing a book, and another man reading it.”²⁹ If political science is to address the full scope of political existence, it must concern itself with the deepest matters of human life, human values, and human consciousness; and because such matters are explored with supreme deftness and discernment by great literary authors, analyses of the best literary works have their contribution to make to political science. The foregoing reflections on my book by four fine scholars, then, and this reply to them, are fruits of scientific cooperation.

Professor Kidder identifies a typical persistent problem with philosophical or theoretical analyses of literature, a problem that has bedeviled the study of literature from the first theorists of classical times, but which has recently become something of a dark force. Once literature became a separate academic field in the late nineteenth century, its university professors stood in need of methods of analysis that would justify both the academic study of literature and the establishment of a related academic career path. Various vogues have come and gone (the New Criticism of the mid-twentieth century being a well-known example), but eventually literature departments and writers of literary studies followed the lead of Continental literary theorists and semioticians such as Roland Barthes and subsequent “postmodernists.” To the degree this was the case, a hyper-sophisticated, jargon-dependent realm of theoretical discourse came into being where novels, poetry, and works of drama are treated less as artworks than as excuses for

elaborate displays of *au courant* philosophies of culture, language, and identity.

What sometimes gets lost in these mesmerizing displays of theoretical acumen is, as Professor Kidder notes, the recognition that art communicates through “intimations, inclinations, and visions rather than theories and doctrines.” The “ambiguities of experience and feeling” conveyed through the symbols of literary art have their principal meaning not as exhibitions of *theoretical* ambiguities and paradoxes, but as artistic expressions of personal and shared destiny that speak to the reader, viewer, or listener on the elemental level of symbolic immediacy.

One element of that personal and shared human destiny is the “insistence of the human urge to transcendence”—an urge that recent philosophical theory tends to cover up, or to interpret as an expression of the will to power. Professor Kidder has put his finger on the key fact: that my own study is an attempt to retrieve, through an examination of examples of great literary art *as works of art*, the normativity of the human urge to transcendence in all its human immediacy.

Professor Greenaway, happily in my view, focuses in part on my book’s Introduction, to note that as a prelude to the chapter studies of individual authors it attempts to provide a “concise account of why mystery is not only real, but potentially the most revivifying experience of the real.” He also asks three questions: one about origins of experiences of the scared, one about experiences of *cosmos*, and one about the appropriate way to describe Beckett’s posture with regard to religious faith.

To begin with, he asks whether it is easier to apperceive the sacred as a dimension of meaning when it arises from bodily pleasure and spiritually apprehended beauty. As far as I can tell, my own earliest intimations of transcendent meaning were grounded in experiences of joy occasioned by natural beauty, and later by the beauty of artworks: musical, visual, and literary. But it seems to me that suffering and concern with injustice might just as frequently impel persons to questions of transcendence. Consider many of the Psalms; passages in Isaiah and Jeremiah; the Book of Job;

the torments of Christ and of his disciples and apostles. Border experiences that disclose the reality of the sacred—experiences that carry one to the boundary where questions of ultimate meaning arise—can, it seems, be positive or negative in character: ecstatic or horrific. Both types would reveal the structure of conscious human existence to be an in-between of immanence and transcendence, and thereby disclose—if a person is at all open to its truth—the dimension of the sacred.

Professor Greenaway also asks: wouldn't it be right to say that each of us "is a cosmos in search of a cosmos"? Certainly.

How do Modernists of literary and other art, expressing the human situation in late modernity, tend to represent this search of inner cosmos for encompassing cosmos? First, in late modernity the external cosmos, the "whole," feels (at least to most great artists) oddly distant and increasingly *other*, and traditional artistic evocations of its orders of intelligibility and beauty—think of Dante, or Raphael—however inspiring and timelessly "true," feel more and more foreign to contemporary experience. Meanwhile, the subject's inner cosmos feels more and more like a disordered aggregate of multiple *personae*, unconscious layers of self, and drifts of existential becoming. The Modernists show that, by now, we face a challenge both of finding an elusive coherence in the reality that embraces us *and* of managing an interiority that refuses full integration—and then of telling stories that reflect those experiences.

The six Modernists discussed in my book have absorbed and express these feelings and outlooks, but also convey that the new, late modern human story of fragmented and fragile conditions can, and should, include narrative patterns that arise from experiences of transcendent mystery (or in Beckett's case, the idea of divine mystery). How they express this, in their respective ways, is the principal subject of my chapters.

With regard to Beckett and his characters (who would appear, with due caveats, to be speaking for—or rather, feeling on behalf of—the author): they do perpetually long for an absolute, an idea of which is presented as a given of consciousness. They are aware that their existences could have meaning only if there were a real

absolute that corresponds to this idea, and are haunted by this awareness. Should we conclude from this that Beckett evidences a kind of religious “faith”?

The problem with this conclusion is that, in the world of Beckett’s characters, all consolations deriving from any sort of *participation* in a divine absolute are unavailable. At the same time, Beckett’s world is not one of existential despair, or mere absurdity. His works, in the end, affirm neither a redemptive meaning nor a nihilistic meaninglessness. “The key word in all my plays,” he once said, is “perhaps.”

Why then call him, as I do, a “*mystic* without faith”? Because his works show that Beckett always views world and existence from the boundary where a mystery of transcendent meaning would answer the incompleteness and failures of contingent being, at the furthest reach of human longing and questioning. From this vantage, he regards world and existence—like the harshest of early Christian mystics—as worthless unless redeemed by a fulfillment initiated by a divine absolute. And yet, for him, merely the *idea* of that absolute in the mind is not an experience that justifies (contra Descartes) “faith” in, much less a claim to knowledge of, the reality of a *being* that corresponds to that idea.

The upshot is that with Beckett it is misleading to apply an either/or of 1) religious faith or 2) nihilism. There is a middle posture, a limbo state, which Beckett inhabits: waiting in the “perhaps” of a maximally anguished agnosticism—an anguish that feels refreshingly honest amidst the “easy-going agnosticism” so pervasive in modern culture.

Modernity broadly is the focus of Professor McPartland’s comments, who explains well how all the writers discussed in my book are “anti-modern” in that they present visions of the human situation that exclude “scientism, reductionism, materialism, progressivism, utopianism, and radical revolution,” offering instead the existentially therapeutic alternatives of “anamnetic venture[s] of creative restoration.”

We are familiar with the standard “cover story” that literary and other artistic forms of Modernism were concerned exclusively with

communicating experiences of fragmentation, alienation, breakdown, and loss of faith in transcendent meaning. The authors and works discussed in my book, each of them (Dickinson excepted) a principal architect of literary Modernism, show that this was not the case. The “creative restorations” offered by their artistic visions are certainly modern in that they convey experiences of alienation induced by urban, technological, and bureaucratic living, experiences of disrupted interiority, and acute awareness of existential embeddedness in nature and history. Still, as Professor McPartland states, they avoid the perils of assuming a radical “subjectivism,” which has often been a result of such experiences on the part of both artistic creators and their latter-day analysts. (Indeed, the theorists who have dominated the analysis of literature for over a half century rely on philosophical assumptions and explanations that have no critical or methodological tools for defending the visions of Modernist, or any other, literary authors from the charge of being merely “subjective.”)

To read these authors is to discover that with their art, as with the great literature of any time, the vision communicated (as they would each insist) is not reducible to *arbitrary* perceptions, impressions, and imaginings. Indeed, if one lovingly engages with their works, each will supply the reader with forms of symbolic narrative, image, and action that offer an alternative to artistic portrayals of self and world that rely on a false dichotomy of confrontation between “inner subject” and “world”—a dichotomy that has oppressed Western self-interpretation, in art as in philosophy, for the last five or six hundred years. As the supreme haiku master Basho once remarked: “The trouble with most poetry is that it is either subjective or objective.”³⁰ The fact is that all great artworks, whether or not their authors think so, obviate this dichotomy.

We are reminded, finally, by Professor Syse that there is much popular art—especially, I would say, in the realms of song and film—that deserves to be recognized as satisfying the conditions of being aesthetically “important”: first, a certain exquisiteness of form, content, and adequate relation of form to content; and

second, recurrent symbolic evocations of the “undefined surplus of significance and momentousness” in which human consciousness is involved.³¹ I am pleased that he uses a focus on my book’s chapter on Dylan to affirm that popular song is a medium that is no less capable than genres of “high art” of mediating a sense of transcendent mystery.

Dylan’s 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature helped, somewhat, in legitimating serious attention to his art. Professor Syse helpfully references Dylan’s song, “Shelter From the Storm,” whose lyrics, along with others songs quoted in my book, nicely represent the symbolic power of Dylan’s verse, his mastery of form, and the power of his recurrent use of religious (especially eschatological) imagery to evoke experiences that, *on the level of the psyche’s affective spontaneity and imaginative immediacy*, correspond to what intellect identifies as absolute truth and value. Only through the efficacy of such mediations, whether by way of works of popular art like Dylan’s or works of so-called “high art,” can we orient ourselves in the cosmos at the level of feelings and psychic spontaneity, at the same time that we advance in intellectual appreciation of ultimate mysteries and truths.

Professor Syse also raises the point that art’s ability to “communicate” trans-temporally, or trans-historically, in itself testifies to a fact of transcendent meaning. The art of classical antiquity, of ancient China and India, of tribal Africa, of the Renaissance, can still for us now illuminate lives and expand appreciation of the cosmos because the situatedness of persons transcends mere historicity; humans exist in between worldly meaning and transcendent meaning. The so-called timelessness of art always suggests our participation in eternal meaning. In modern and postmodern times, the problematic presented by this fact is more confusing and challenging than it has ever been. Ignoring this problematic, though, serves only to eclipse reality and further embed confusion in culture. My explication of various visions of transcendence in Modernist literary art should be understood as, in part, a response to the need to face up to this problematic.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Glenn Hughes, *Sleeping at the Open Window* (San Antonio, TX: Pecan Grove Press, 2005); *Erato: Twenty Elegies* (San Antonio, TX: Pecan Grove Press, 2010).
2. Glenn Hughes, *From Dickinson to Dylan: Visions of Transcendence in Modernist Literature* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2020).
3. See, e.g., Eric Voegelin, "Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History," and "Reason: The Classic Experience," in *Published Essays, 1966–1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).
4. Hughes, *Dickinson to Dylan*, 73–87, 110–19.
5. Hughes, *Dickinson to Dylan*, 120–44.
6. See, e.g., Glenn Hughes, *Mystery and Myth in the Philosophy of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993); *Transcendence and History: The Search for Ultimacy from Ancient Societies to Postmodernity* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003).
7. Hughes, *Dickinson to Dylan*, 52.
8. Hughes, *Dickinson to Dylan*, 7.
9. Hughes, *Dickinson to Dylan*, 8.
10. Hughes, *Dickinson to Dylan*, 9.
11. Hughes, *Dickinson to Dylan*, 85.
12. Hughes, *Dickinson to Dylan*, 10.
13. Hughes, *Dickinson to Dylan*, 124.
14. Hughes, *Dickinson to Dylan*, 125.
15. Hughes, *Dickinson to Dylan*, 127–28.
16. Hughes, *Dickinson to Dylan*, 23.
17. Hughes, *Dickinson to Dylan*, 23–24.
18. Hughes, *Dickinson to Dylan*, 25.
19. Hughes, *Dickinson to Dylan*, 34.
20. I have discussed this point in Henrik Syse, "From across the Universe to I, Me, Mine: What Can We Learn from The Beatles?," in *Between Closeness and Evil: A Festschrift for Arne Johan Vetlesen*, ed. Odin Lysaker (Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press, 2020), 425–44.
21. Hughes, *Dickinson to Dylan*, 151.
22. Hughes, *Dickinson to Dylan*, 151.
23. Hughes, *Dickinson to Dylan*, 155.
24. "Bob Dylan Goes Deep on Life, Religion, Politics and the Modern World 1985," Peter Stone Brown Archive, YouTube, 17:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXmLlhRw9Mo&t=1046s> (accessed June 9, 2022).

25. Hughes, *Dickinson to Dylan*, 166.
26. Lyrics quoted from Bob Dylan, “Shelter from the Storm,” the official Bob Dylan site, <https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/shelter-storm/> (accessed June 9, 2022). The song is included on the album *Blood on the Tracks*, released in January 1975 on Columbia Records.
27. Voegelin, *Published Essays, 1966–1985*, 294.
28. The lyrics to “Murder Most Foul” can be found at Bob Dylan, “Murder Most Foul,” the official Bob Dylan site, <https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/murder-most-foul/> (accessed June 9, 2022). The song is included on the album *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, released in June 2020 on Columbia Record.
29. Eric Voegelin, “Draft Letter to Karl E. Ettinger” (January 1954), in Charles R. Embry, ed., *Robert B. Heilman and Eric Voegelin: A Friendship in Letters, 1944-1984* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 317.
30. Quoted in Robert Bly, ed., *News of the Universe: Poems of Twofold Consciousness* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1980), 209.
31. Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, vol. 3 of *The Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, eds. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 556.