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SONG CORNER

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Resurrecting Dying Voices in “Every Grain of Sand”

On November 5, 2021, at the end of the third concert of his Rough and Rowdy Ways World Wide Tour, Bob Dylan surprised and delighted the Cleveland audience by closing with “Every Grain of Sand.” He had not played the song since 2013, but from November 5th onward he concluded each show with poignant performances of the album closer from 1981’s *Shot of Love*. In the midst of the global pandemic, it took a shot of vaccine to get into the venue for Dylan’s first concerts since COVID-19 forced an end to the Never Ending Tour. For many fans lucky enough to nab a ticket, and for thousands more following the shows online through almost instantaneous bootleg recordings, the sublime tour provided the medicine we desperately needed, as did the album *Rough and Rowdy Ways* (released in summer 2020) which formed the backbone of the concert setlists. For other listeners tuned into a different frequency, “Every Grain of Sand” is a more somber reminder that our individual and collective fates are still very much “hanging in the balance,” as the singer puts it, and the scales could tip either way—toward salvation or damnation. No one knows the ingredients of the skeleton’s syringe on the *Rough and Rowdy Ways* tour poster [see Figure 1 below], but it sure doesn’t look like a shot of love.

“There’s a dying voice within me reaching out somewhere,” sings Dylan in the opening verse of “Every Grain of Sand.” It’s difficult not to hear this line as self-referential in 2021, as if the forty-year-old Dylan who wrote the song half a lifetime ago is speaking again through the medium of the eighty-year-old performer, crossing time and space and reaching out across the footlights to communicate with audiences in a very different historical moment. “Every Grain of Sand” meant one thing (well, several things) in the context of Dylan’s art and spiritual journey in 1981; it assumes additional layers of meaning in the context of 2021, and more specifically within the context of the tour’s setlist. The present article will raise more questions than it answers, but they all stem from two initial curiosities: Why did Dylan resurrect “Every Grain of Sand”? And what impact does it have on listeners in 2021?

Following closely on the heels of *Slow Train Coming* (1979) and *Saved* (1980), *Shot of Love* (1981) is generally viewed as the final installment in Dylan’s Christian trilogy. The initial

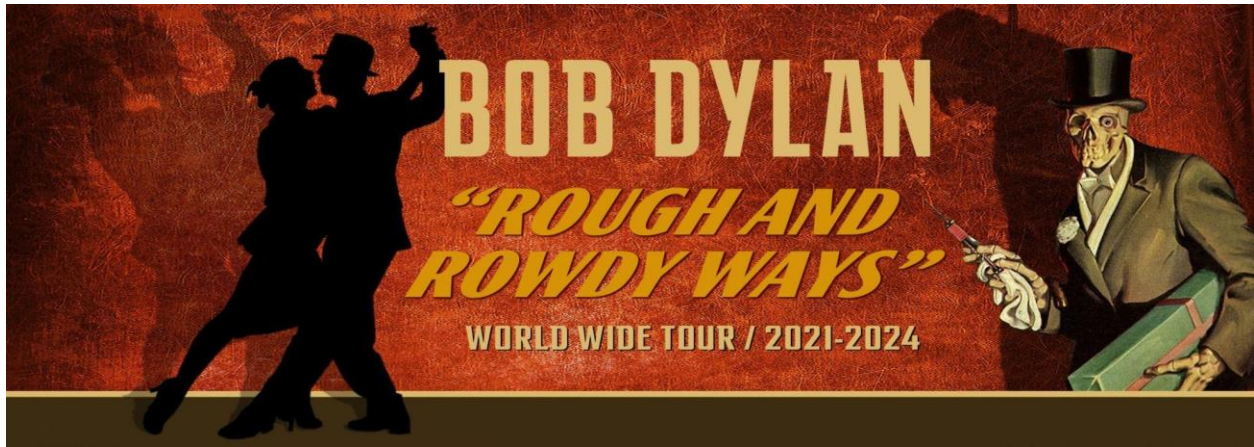


Figure 1: Poster for Bob Dylan's Rough and Rowdy Ways World Wide Tour

reception of *Shot of Love* was mixed, though its stature has steadily risen over the intervening years. A treasure trove of songs from the recording sessions have since been released, and it now seems that Dylan had a great album in the master tapes even if that's not what made it into record stores. The one song from *Shot of Love* that was instantly hailed as a masterpiece was "Every Grain of Sand." Even Paul Nelson, in his otherwise scathing two-star review for *Rolling Stone*, paused his evisceration long enough to spare one vital organ: "'Every Grain of Sand' is something special: the 'Chimes of Freedom' and 'Mr. Tambourine Man' of Bob Dylan's Christian period. . . . For a moment or two, he touches you, and the gates of heaven dissolve into a universality that has nothing to do with most of the LP" (Nelson). Wordsmiths like me tend to focus disproportionately on lyrics, but it's important to note that much of the song's appeal has always been musical. Nelson was an avowed apostate when it came to Dylan's born-again songs, but he was sonically enraptured by "Every Grain of Sand": "Dylan's beautifully idiosyncratic harmonica playing has metamorphosed into an archetype that pierces the heart and moistens the eye" (Nelson). Likewise, for Paul Williams, the most sensitive and perceptive commentator on Dylan's Christian music, the magic of "Every Grain of Sand" comes primarily through the music. Unlocking the song's power in the second volume of his *Performing Artist* series, Williams writes, "The key to the performance is its motion: it moves like the sea, forth and back and forth and back, filled with a quality of restfulness but never resting" (205). The rhythms of those motions have shifted over time—from the official release on *Shot of Love* (1981), to the demo on *The Bootleg Series, Volumes 1-3* (1991), to the rehearsal version on *Trouble No More, The Bootleg Series, Vol. 13* (2017), to the most recent live incarnations in 2021. But the musical

power of “Every Grain of Sand” to enthrall listeners has continued undiminished for generations. I love the touching story Laura Tenschert tells about “Every Grain of Sand” in the first season of her fantastic *Definitely Dylan* radio show and podcast. She recalls growing up in Switzerland and singing in a church choir. When she was sixteen her music teacher decided to have the group perform some of Dylan’s Christian songs, so he gave her *Shot of Love* and recommended she learn “Every Grain of Sand.” She had never heard the song at that point, and she admits to having a general aversion to Christian rock. Nevertheless, she recounts,

I took that cassette tape [. . .] and I listened to it at home—and it completely blew me away! I’m not even sure whether my English was good enough at the time to completely understand all the lyrics. But I remember that I was completely spellbound by the song and its imagery. Who knew that a harmonica could sound like that—you know, like actually *good* and expressive and melodic, instead of just shrill. I don’t want to be corny and say “the rest is history.” But let’s just say that there is a very direct line that leads from that moment of me hearing “Every Grain of Sand” to me being here on the radio talking about Bob Dylan every week. In the words of “What Can I Do for You?” this song “Every Grain of Sand” “opened up a door that couldn’t be shut and it opened it up so wide.” (Tenschert)

Before playing it on air, she introduces “Every Grain of Sand” as “the song that made me a Dylan fan.” The song has been winning fans and captivating listeners for four decades now, and it is sure to convert more devotees on the 2021 tour.

Apparently the first person caught in the song’s spell was Dylan himself. In a discussion with Bill Flanagan about the craft of songwriting, Dylan singles out “Every Grain of Sand” as a mystery that simply arrived from nowhere. His job was to remain receptive and committed long enough for the song to finish writing itself. He told Flanagan,

Sometimes you’ll write a song where you’ll just stick with it and get it done. You’ll feel that it’s not coming from anyplace, but it’s for you to do. There’s nothing to base it on. You’re in an area where there isn’t anybody there and never was. So you just have to be real sensitive to where you’re walking at the time. Not try to go one way or the other, just stay balanced and finish it. “Every Grain of Sand” is a song like that. Writing that song was like, “This is something that I’m going to have to stay steady with.” Otherwise it

could get out of hand. You must keep it balanced. And there's no footnotes around. It's the kind of area where there's no precedent for it. (831)

Dylan doesn't often praise his own songs in such exalted fashion, so he clearly finds something extraordinary about "Every Grain of Sand." He stresses the unprecedented nature of the piece, springing from "an area where there isn't anybody there and never was," covering a subject for which "there's no footnotes around." But critics have traced several footprints behind "Every Grain of Sand" and provided footnotes leading back chiefly to the Bible and William Blake.

In his short but influential book *The Bible in the Lyrics of Bob Dylan*, Bert Cartwright identifies numerous scriptural allusions in "Every Grain of Sand." Michael Gray builds upon Cartwright's work and extends well beyond it in *Song & Dance Man III*, devoting an entire chapter to explicating "Every Grain of Sand" and teasing out the eclectic threads of its rich intertextual tapestry. In the first refrain the singer declares: "In the fury of the moment I can see the Master's hand / In every leaf that trembles, in every grain of sand." The second refrain offers this variation: "That every hair is numbered like every grain of sand." And the final refrain offers a third set of similes: "Like every sparrow falling, like every grain of sand." Within the context of *Shot of Love*, "the Master" unmistakably refers to God, and the imagery comes from the Gospels. Matthew reports Jesus as saying: "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore" (10:29-31). The scriptural antecedent for the title image comes from David in Psalms: "How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! How great is the sum of them! If I should count them, they are more in number than the sand" (139:17-18). So far, so good: the song would appear to fit squarely within Dylan's Christian oeuvre, espousing faith in God's omnipotence and omniscience.

However, the song owes just as many lyrical debts to William Blake, who uses the scriptures as leaping-off points into the mystic. Blake inspired the Beats with his visionary poetics, and Dylan's initial exposure probably came from Allen Ginsberg. "Every Grain of Sand" reflects noticeable influence from Blake's shorter lyrics and self-described "songs." The most direct echo comes from Blake's "Auguries of Innocence," which begins:

To see the World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour. (Blake 209)

Blake's focus is less on divine power than on the powerful potential of human perception. Michael Gray makes a compelling argument that "it is William Blake who, re-writing the Bible in his own unique way, hovers all around Bob Dylan's song in relation to its themes, its language and the rhythms of that language." Gray further observes, "Blake's interest in taking biblical text and flying it to mystical heights is evident everywhere in his work, as is Bob Dylan's interest in that work by his mystic predecessor; and never more so than around the texts behind 'Every Grain of Sand'" (412). The song is no mere scriptural pastiche or restatement of pious platitudes. Like Blake, Dylan strains against the boundaries of conventional morality. And unlike Dylan's earlier proselytizing work, which sometimes pushed listeners away with its judgmental sermonizing or zealous proclamations of righteousness, "Every Grain of Sand" is a humble, vulnerable, conflicted, ambivalent description of spiritual crisis. The singer is haunted by his past, his present strength is flagging, his future pathway is uncertain, and God's grace and mercy do not seem guaranteed at all.

The dramatic conflict in "Every Grain of Sand" hinges upon a tension between looking back and moving forward. The singer begins with his eyes fixed toward the past and filled with tears of shame and regret: "In the time of my confession, in the hour of my deepest need / When the pool of tears beneath my feet flood every newborn seed." What a vivid image! The singer has much to confess, and the memory of his prodigious sins makes him cry so much it's as if he's standing in a puddle of his own tears. He invokes familiar Christian imagery and tenets of belief, but he applies them in unorthodox ways. Pools typically have positive Christian associations with baptism, but a pool of tears troubles the waters. Similarly, confession and repentance are supposed to be crucial first steps in moving forward on the righteous path toward God. In this song, however, confession seems oriented backwards, functioning more as an impediment than a catalyst for personal progress. The singer's excessive tears threaten to wash away his seeds along with his sins, inhibiting his growth by making rejuvenation impossible. He concedes as much in the second verse: "Don't have the inclination to look back on any mistake." Don't look back. The song suggests that dwelling too long or obsessively upon the past prevents one from moving forward. The time of confession, it would seem, is coming to an end. In retrospect, Dylan appears to be signaling a pivot in his spiritual and artistic journey. "Every Grain of Sand" was the last song on the last album of his Christian trilogy. Before recording *Shot of Love* in spring 1981, he had already embarked upon "A Musical Retrospective Tour" in fall 1980, where he

began reintegrating secular music into his setlists. Religious themes, imagery, and warnings continued to preoccupy him on *Infidels* (1983) and have periodically resurfaced ever since, but this song seems to mark an important milestone and turning point in Dylan's road.

"Every Grain of Sand" is not a metaphysical battle with God so much as a civil war between opposed selves. The singer reports, "There's a dying voice within me reaching out somewhere / Toiling in the danger and in the morals of despair." Dylan the Gemini has made numerous references over the years to his struggle with adversarial alter-egos. For instance, the line "I fought with my twin, that enemy within" in "Where Are You Tonight? (Journey through Dark Heat)"; or "Keeping one step ahead of the persecutor within" in "Jokerman"; or "I and I / One says to the other no man sees my face and lives" in "I and I." Given the theme of dueling dual selves, and given the knowing games Dylan sometimes plays with acronyms (cf. BOB, JWH, TOOM), I wonder if he was conscious of the fact that the initials for "Every Grain of Sand" is EGOS. I and I indeed! "Every Grain of Sand" stages an internal battle for the soul of the singer, a "psychomachia" where the singer's Good Angel struggles against his Bad Angel. It is not clear which of these figures is represented by the "dying voice within me." The song raises a slew of essential questions with life-altering stakes: Does the dying voice emanate from the "good" self or the "bad," from Cain or Abel? Will he confess and dwell upon his former sins? Will he backslide and return to committing those sins [cf. "I gaze into the doorway of temptation's angry flame / And every time I pass that way I always hear my name"]? Is the dying voice better left for dead? Or is the dead voice in need of resuscitation, heeding the vocation of his true calling? "Every Grain of Sand" implies so many fundamental questions, but definitive answers elude the listener and interpreter just as surely as they elude the singer himself. Yet the singer must pursue them. Everything hinges upon the decisions he makes at this pivotal moment and the pathway he chooses. The fate of his soul hangs in the balance.

For a song poised upon a fulcrum point, it seems telling that Dylan has been torn over how to end the song. On *Shot of Love* he sings, "I am hanging in the balance of the reality of man / Like every sparrow falling, like every grain of sand." I'm frankly not sure what that first line is supposed to mean, but it is the copyrighted lyric posted on his official website. The sentiment is clearer in the demo version of the song released on *The Bootleg Series, Volumes 1-3*, as well as the rehearsal version on *Trouble No More*, where he sings, "I am hanging in the balance of a perfect finished plan." He retains this lyrical variation for the 2021 tour. The invocation of "a

perfect finished plan” is more readily recognizable as an expression of faith in God’s divine plan, the belief that, no matter how bad things get, everything happens for a reason and ultimately serves a higher holy purpose. That said, we should not pay so much attention to the affirmative “perfect finished plan” that we forget the outcome is still irresolutely “hanging in the balance.” Gray wisely guides us back to the full context of that sparrow reference in Matthew. In this passage Jesus commands confession and obedience—or else:

Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows. Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven. Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace but a sword. (10:31-34).

Gray comments, “Far from throwing God’s infinite care over every tiny creature in his universe, as the early part of his speech might imply, it’s a severe and conditional vision: it mentions the sparrows only to devalue them in the comparison with men and it excludes from God’s care all but true Christian believers” (405). In “Every Grain of Sand” the singer may be trying to obey God’s commandments, at least some of the time, and he pledges faith in the Master’s “perfect finished plan.” He just doesn’t know if that plan will end up with him on the saved or damned side of the ledger sheet. It could still go either way, for the singer and by extension for his listeners, in 1981 and in 2021.

I’ve been thinking a lot lately about the deliberate dramaturgy of Dylan’s setlists. The prompting came first from Erin Callahan and Court Carney, who are editing a forthcoming collection of essays on the subject. There have also been a lot of discussions on this topic led by Laura Tenschert on *Definitely Dylan* and her affiliated Patreon group. In particular, her treatment of “When I Paint My Masterpiece” and “Baby Blue” as bookends for *Shadow Kingdom* (listen to the podcast “Shadow Kingdom: A Midsummer Night’s Dream”) has helped to clarify my thoughts about Dylan’s setlists on the fall 2021 leg of Rough and Rowdy Ways World Wide Tour. The reintroduction of “Every Grain of Sand” is no coincidence. The song is highly compatible with the *Rough and Rowdy Ways*-centric setlist, and it serves a pivotal function as culmination of and release from the theatrical experience Dylan and crew deliver each night.

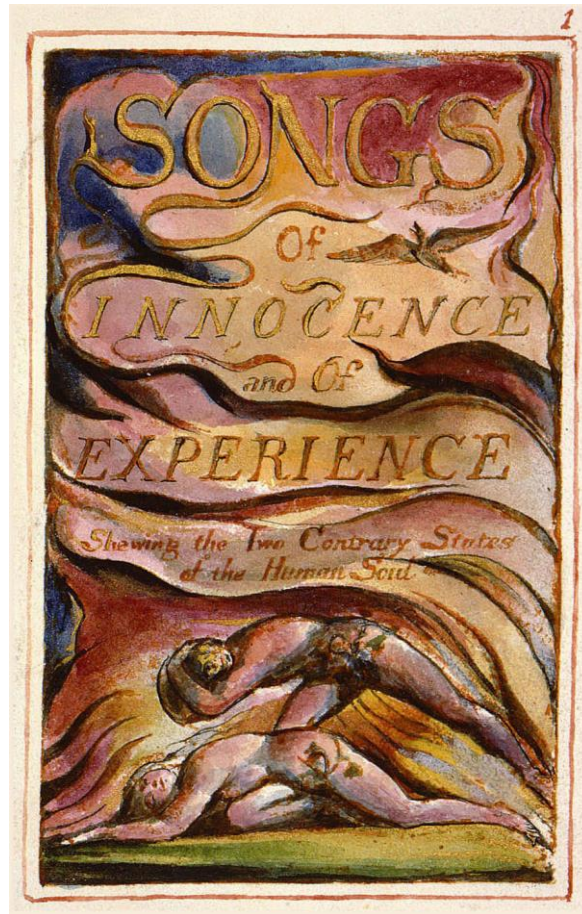


Figure 2: Title Page for *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* by William Blake (1826 edition)

What summoned the song up from the depths of Dylan's deep back catalogue? In part it must have been auguries of experience from William Blake. After decades of unnamed influence, and following a direct allusion to Blake's "The Tyger" in *Tempest's* closing song "Roll on John," Blake finally earns a public shout-out by name in "I Contain Multitudes," the opening track on *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, and the first song from the album played in each of the 2021 concerts. The title "I Contain Multitudes" is taken from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," and a number of other influences across the cultural spectrum get named in the song. He numbers Blake among the multitudes: "I sing the songs of experience like William Blake / I have no apologies to make." Two things are interesting about this allusion. The first is that he hacks off half of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* [see Figure 2 above]. Dylan is long past innocence at this point, and so are his audiences. In fact, *Rough and Rowdy Ways* might just as well have been titled *Songs of Experience*. The other interesting thing is that second line: "I have no apologies to make." This might seem at first like a non sequitur, but it is not. "I have

no apologies to make” is a paradoxical echo of the opening of Dylan’s most Blakean song, “Every Grain of Sand”: “In the time of my confession.” From confession in 1981 to no apologies in 2021. Except that Dylan’s dramaturgical sequencing of the setlist actually reverses the trajectory, going from the braggadocio of “I have no apologies to make” early in the show to the contrite “In the time of my confession” by the end. Dylan’s individual songs function as scenes within the dramatic arc of his live performances. The songs build upon and respond to one another—reinforcing and refuting, complementing and complicating—working in tandem to create a holistic theatrical experience for each show. “Every Grain of Sand” means one thing considered in isolation, it means something different reconsidered in context with the other songs on *Shot of Love*, and it sends new and distinct signals in live performance as epilogue for the 2021 concerts.

In “Thunder on the Mountain” (a staple of Dylan’s tours in recent years, but absent from the 2021 shows) he declares, “I’ve already confessed—no need to confess again.” But the hour of his (and our) deepest need seems to have returned with a vengeance since 2020, and accordingly an impulse for confession has crept back into Dylan’s most recent work. Two other *Rough and Rowdy Ways* songs in the setlist explicitly use the word. The magisterial “Key West (Philosopher Pirate)”—the anchor of the 2021 shows—foregrounds confession from the start: “McKinley hollered—McKinley squalled / Doctor said McKinley—death is on the wall / Say it to me if you got something to confess.” The setlist moves from deathbed confession to a raunchier roadhouse variation in “Goodbye Jimmy Reed,” the song that immediately precedes “Every Grain of Sand” in concert. There the singer leers at a “Transparent woman in a transparent dress / It suits you well—I must confess.” Feeling an urge to confess again, the time is ripe for a revival of “Every Grain of Sand.”

Dylan could have placed “Every Grain of Sand” anywhere in the setlist, so why give it pride of place as the concert’s closer? He probably doesn’t overthink these things. It felt right: good enough for him. Ah, the hours we readers and contributors to the *Dylan Review* could save if that were simply good enough for us! But it’s not, obviously, and it never will be. Dylan creates; Dylanologists *review*. His intuitive calculus may have been primarily musical. He described the song as a “mood piece” to Flanagan (832), so maybe it simply fit the mood he wanted to end the show with. Whether he arrived at this decision intellectually or instinctively

(one assumes the latter), he must have sensed what a compatible bookend “Every Grain of Sand” as closer makes with the tour’s regular opener, “Watching the River Flow.”

Many common lyrical elements run through both songs. First let’s dig into the sand. Alongside associations with God’s particularized knowledge discussed earlier, sand is also associated very closely with time, as measured by sand falling through an hour-glass. The most overt reference to time in “Every Grain of Sand” comes in the line: “The sun beat down upon the steps of time to light the way.” Really, though, the entire song is a meditation upon the ravages of time, and the competing impulses to return to the past or move ahead into the future. The sands of time play a crucial part in “Watching the River Flow,” too. This song also features a singer who is stuck between his current life and his next life. He dreams of returning to the city and reuniting with his distant love. The song is rollicking and upbeat, and the lyrics contain lots of movement: trucks roll, birds fly, winds blow, and the river ceaselessly flows. But not the singer. He is a stone gathering moss. He makes his way from a café to the riverside, but that’s as much get-up-and-go as he’s got. Instead, as he repeatedly declares, “I’ll sit down on this bank of sand / And watch the river flow.” This water song is no “Proud Mary” “rollin’ down the river,” but rather “Sittin’ on the Dock of the Bay” resituated on a sandy riverbank. In a sense the concert travels a great distance only to return full circle where it began: from the sandy riverbank of “Watching the River Flow” to the sandy seashore of “Every Grain of Sand.” No dancing beneath a diamond sky on circus sands here. These bookend songs feature characters whose hour-glasses are clogged.

Yet “Every Grain of Sand” has more forward momentum than “Watching the River Flow,” even if moving forward does not necessarily equate to hopeful progress. Lines like “every time I pass that way” and “onward in my journey” suggest a character who has gotten off his knees and has begun to walk again, even if he’s not yet sure where he’s going. The final verse of “Every Grain of Sand” begins, “I hear the ancient footsteps like the motion of the sea / Sometimes I turn, there’s someone there, other times it’s only me.” Many listeners, myself included, immediately think of the kitschy poem “Footprints in the Sand” when hearing these lines. Such an association presupposes that the entity following the singer is a supportive Lord. However, given the moral ambivalence and uncertainty surrounding the singer’s fate, listeners shouldn’t take salvation for granted. Those ancient footsteps behind him might just as well be hellhounds on his trail. Or is time catching up with him? At this point in the concert, maybe we

should hear an echo in the “ancient footsteps” of “Every Grain of Sand” back to the “ancient footprints” in an earlier song (and exact contemporary with “Watching the River Flow”), “When I Paint My Masterpiece”: “Oh the streets of Rome are filled with rubble / Ancient footprints are everywhere.” Time eventually reduces all human constructions to rubble; give it some more time and the rubble will erode into sand (ask Ozymandias). Or maybe those foreboding footfalls come from time’s enforcer, the Man in the Long Black Coat, the Grim Reaper himself; better known in this concert as Black Rider: “Black Rider Black Rider all dressed in black / I’m walking away and you try to make me look back.” [Hint: don’t look back]. This reading resonates with the tour poster, which adapts the cover for *The Shadow* #96, featuring dapper Death calling to collect his next victim [see Figure 3 below]. In 2020 this same modified image was used for the cover of the “False Prophet” single, another song filled with Blakean references as Bob Jope shows in his piece for the website *Untold Dylan*.



Figure 3: Cover for *The Shadow* #96 (July 15, 1942) by Maxwell Grant

Speaking of shadows, those footprints in the sand might just as well come from the adversarial shadow self, since doppelgängers always crave to track down their doubles. After all, the precise phrasing in “Every Grain of Sand” is “Sometimes I turn, there’s someone there, other times *it’s only me.*” Is the dying voice within now externalized in the form of a stalking alter-ego, shadowing the singer and gaining on him from behind? “You could almost think that you’re seeing double.” Rob Reginio drew my attention to another Blake allusion from “My Spectre,” encompassing the shadow self as well as the dying voice and pool of tears:

My Spectre around me night & day
Like a Wild beast guards my way
My Emanation far within
Weeps incessantly for my Sin. (Blake 195)

The spectral shadow self also intermingles suggestively with the Rough and Rowdy Ways World Tour poster, where the creepy skeleton in the foreground is rendered even more menacing by his silhouette shaped like a hanged man [see Figure 1]. How’s that for hanging in the balance? Musically, even without Dylan’s beautiful harmonica in 2021, “Every Grain of Sand” is so serene, viscerally imparting a sense of calm tranquility. Lyrically, however, it elicits starkly different sensations, dramatizing a singer who might be escaping on the run or might be stumbling into an ambush.

Confession: I think too much about Dylan’s words. If this is a sin, my punishment is that I couldn’t be content with my initial elation as I walked out of the Aronoff Center into downtown Cincinnati after seeing Dylan in concert on November 9, 2021. I felt what others felt—what a gift! My immediate sensation after hearing the final song was like I had just received a fast-acting inoculation against danger, bitterness, despair, and loneliness. I walked away feeling *healed* by “Every Grain of Sand,” which is exactly the power Paul Williams ascribes to the song: “‘Healing’ is an appropriate word. The song is intensely personal, for listener and singer both; the intimacy of confession, the honest sharing of a sense of sinfulness and despair, creates a possibility of genuine assurance. ‘Every Grain of Sand’ cuts through doctrine and proselytizing and speaks directly to the listener’s need” (205). The listener’s need: I suppose I heard what I needed to hear. As we’re all learning, however, vaccines (including shots of love?) begin to lose some of their efficacy over time. I haven’t lost the magic of that night’s performance; if anything, in listening to subsequent concerts I have become increasingly awed by the time-

defying, life-renewing power of Bob Dylan as a live performer. Nevertheless, my understanding of “Every Grain of Sand” has become more complicated and shaded the longer and deeper I’ve contemplated what it says, and what it doesn’t say.

“Every Grain of Sand” actually doesn’t say that everything is going to be okay, certainly not for everyone. Describing the effect of “Every Grain of Sand” on the first night at the Beacon Theatre (November 19, 2021), Anne Margaret Daniel writes, “His performance of it now is something beyond, and above, elegy: a goodbye that has its original meaning of God be with you” (Daniel). God will certainly *be* with us, according to the song, but we might not like what God *does* with us. Dylan evidently believes firmly in God, believes in a divine plan, and believes that individual and collective fates are governed by the Master’s hand. But that Master has a right hand and a left: he has a plan that saves some and damns others. One doesn’t have to interpret the song within the strict Christian framework in which it was written to hear its contemporary relevance. Things might be all right. They might be getting better. Or they might be getting worse. As Andrew Muir recently reminded me, “Every Grain of Sand” echoes not only the Bible and Blake, but also Hamlet’s moment of acceptance, when he recognizes he can neither predict nor fully control his destiny: “There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ’tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now; yet it will come. The readiness is all” (Shakespeare 5.2.197-200).

A full appreciation of “Every Grain of Sand” means acknowledging both its exquisite, uplifting beauty and its irresolute, unsettling uncertainty. These same Janus-faced qualities and animating tensions are on forceful display throughout Dylan’s recent recordings and live performances. The title *Rough and Rowdy Ways* sounds to me like a road sign at another Dylan crossroads: the rough road of righteousness heading one direction, the rowdy road of iniquity heading the other. It’s the location and condition of some of Dylan’s greatest work, including “Every Grain of Sand,” in both its nascent form from the evangelical period and its resurrected form by an octogenarian who has apparently been gulping from the fountain of youth. Listeners may or may not share Dylan’s theological framing of the problem, but by this point in the pandemic—to name only the most immediate and pervasive of our shared threats—we all know what life lived “hanging in the balance” feels like. We know the steady accumulation of troubles like grains of sand into a heap, as Clov describes it at the beginning of Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*: “Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished. [*Pause.*] Grain

upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap. [*Pause.*] I can't be punished any more" (93). Dylan cannot cure all that troubles us, but he sure has been a welcome, reliable, generous, sure-footed guide "in the sorrow of the night."

Those dangers still await audiences as they exit the auditorium and return to the world outside. But inside the world he crafts for us in the theater, Dylan gives us a light to take with us back out into the darkness. Ultimately, I find myself as a listener thinking about "Every Grain of Sand" in much the same way Dylan described it as the songwriter: "'What's this like?' Well, it's not like anything. 'What does it represent?' Well, you don't even know. All you know is that it's a mood piece, and you try to hold onto the mood and finish. Or not even finish, but just get it to a place where you can let it go" (Flanagan 832). Dylan conjures the mood, finishes the performance, then lets us go, leaving us to meditate upon what we've experienced, and releasing him to rev up the tour bus and head down the road to dispense his musical potions again.

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