

Bob Dylan's Folk Poetics in the Later Albums: Telling the Story of America in Ruins in Simple Poetic Language

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Abstract

Bob Dylan's recent albums have returned to a more basic sense of American vernacular and poetics, employing stock phrases that evoke a rural America of the past. However, the past does not provide any shelter from modern day angst and impending devastation. We see this particularly in the 2001's *Love and Theft*, coincidentally released on the day of the Twin Towers attack. By foregoing concepts of radical artistic individuality, Dylan use more traditional folk poetics to provide a historical and communal account of the descent of the United States into what Dylan calls "an empire in ruins."

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Familiar though his name may be to us, the storyteller is in his immediacy by no means a living force. He is already something remote from us and something that is becoming more distant.

-Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller" (83)

Bill Flannagan: You don't use elevated language on these songs – it's mostly every-day speech and imagery. Did you decide to keep a lid on the poetry this time out...?

Bob Dylan: I'm not sure I agree. It's not easy to define poetry. Hank Williams used simple language too."

-Bob Dylan, Bill Flannagan interview, 2009

I. *Time out of Mind* Coming from a Different Time Altogether

Larry Sloman calls the songs on Bob Dylan's 1997 *Time out of Mind*: "Lyrical landscapes of the past." Sloman describes the change in Dylan's songwriting in the liner notes to Columbia's 2008 two-disc group of tracks from the cutting room floor, *Tell Tale Signs*: "What seemed to be overlooked in the analysis of [Dylan's *Time out of Mind* (1997)] was that the act of retreating for solace in the 'old songs' of his previous two albums inspired Dylan to begin writing his own 'archaic' songs...Dylan was out of tune with contemporary culture" (31). The two albums Sloman cites as formative in Dylan's development as a songwriter are straight solo performances of traditional folk songs recorded in Dylan's home studio: 1992's *Good as I Been to You* and 1993's *World Gone Wrong*. Only going back to that "archaic" American music could he create his own vision of an old American music (35).

It was a long time coming, but *Time out of Mind* was the first full-fledged display of Dylan's mature highly allusive and sparse songwriting style (we see glimpses of this earlier on in his career as I note below with "Blind Willie McTell."). The last group of original songs, 1990's *Under the Red Sky*, was received negatively. Though critics will admit to a few scattered gems throughout the two decades: most of the 80s and 90s albums generally represent an ebb in Dylan's ability as producing *consistently* good work. That was the general opinion, and his own as well. But in 1997 he found his way back to songwriting and critical fame with *Time out of Mind*, a relentless series of blues and rockabilly meditations on mortality with stark instrumentation. The album won 3 Grammy Awards, including Best Album of the Year.

These idyllic *lyrical landscapes of the past* are all surface landscapes, however. Doom is always lurking around the corner in the album's most emblematic and powerful track "High Water (for Charlie Patton)"; the genial sounding "Mississippi," where we hear Dylan sing about a "sky full of fire, rain pouring down"; and "Bye and Bye," which opens with a schmaltzy vaudeville joke: "I'm sitting on my watch so I can be on time," and end with the last three lines as a curse, the sentiment of which that anyone who has been left by a lover can recognize: "I'm gonna baptize you in fire so you can sin no more / I'm gonna establish my rule through civil war / Gonna make you see just how loyal and true a man can be." All the while the bubbly upbeat 1930s and 40s sounding tunes carry the devastating songs forward. This is the pattern throughout the album, suggesting that the idyllic America represented by these carefree melodies is only a barely functional veneer around a deeply troubled core.

In exploring America's past through this lyrical landscape, the speaker finds corruption, oppression, and chaos. But even among these ruins, Dylan sees further disaster ahead on "*Love and Theft*," particularly in its most acclaimed track, "High Water (for Charlie Patton)." In an age of rootlessness Dylan is able to find a lyricism that comes out of the deep American roots music. He forges a new sound that is made up of old, mostly forgotten, scraps of American music. The lyrics are typical blues or folk structured songs, punctuated by Dylan's unique aphorisms that are assembled through discarded fragments of western culture, but particularly pieces of American folk, blues, country, and rockabilly songs that he particularly loves. Through forging roots in the past, he manages to create poetic statements that don't completely reside in the past, but have a direct bearing on the present, quite literally in the case of 9/11 and "*Love and Theft*."

II. Dylan, Modernity, and 9/11

Dylan's work throughout his career has taken a glaringly negative stance toward the modern world. Using broad terms to define the words *modernist* and *poet*, Dylan is the populist modernist poet, whether he likes it or not. Modernist poets, broadly defined, have their fair share of apocalyptic views concerning modernity, i.e. T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," Ezra Pound's "Hugh Sawlyn Mawberry," and W.B. Yeats "Second Coming."

The condemnation of the modern world, that I later refer to as modernist apocalypticism, existed since his self-titled 1962 debut album, containing "Talkin' New York" and "Song for Woody," the only two original Dylan compositions on the album which both directly concern modernity. This apocalyptic attitude pervades his best 60s albums with songs like "Desolation Row," "Subterranean Homesick Blues," and "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" to greater and lesser degrees. It resurfaces again most apparently on tracks like tracks 1979 Grammy-winning "Slow Train Coming" and others like 1989's "Political World," but the attitude pervades his 39 years in the recording industry between his debut and the release of *Time out of Mind*. In the time since, it has become a lyrical obsession. In 2006, he made an album called *Modern Times*, a piece too complex and suggestive to discuss here.

However, modern American history gets a specifically rough and thorough treatment in Dylan's successor to *Time out of Mind*, "*Love and Theft*" and in his brilliant interview with Mikhal Gilmore, which took place two months after the 9/11 event and as his album was contemporaneously being hailed as a triumph by fans and critics alike. "*Love and Theft*" is commonly regarded as Dylan's return to his full potential as elite lyrical craftsmen. 1997's Grammy-winning *Time Out of Mind* and 1999's "Things Have Changed" threw him back into the fringes of the musical spotlight again, but it was "*Love and Theft*" for many fans and critics that reestablished confidence in Bob Dylan's songwriting ability.

In tracing America's history, "*Love and Theft*" relates unjust race relations, corruption, and modernity's hubris. It is the same things about which he has always sang. In "*Love and Theft*," not even the fading visions of idyllic America in "Bye and Bye" or "Floater" can endure modernity's woes. The album's bleak message about the modern world was released on one of America's most traumatic days, when the modern post World War II giant, the United States, was found vulnerable. What did Dylan have to release to the world on that day: dark, apocalyptic musings and stories from an old America.

So what do we make of the coincidence? We see no real hope or plan of a revolution or a plan of action in "Love and Theft." In this way it resembles Freud's *Civilizations and its Discontents*. Despite its bleak outlook, we get some interesting psychological observations about what it is like for us, listeners to live in this modern world. The songwriter has lived too long and grown too old to hope for any form of external change. "*Love and Theft*" is an album of reconciliation for a modern world, where events like 9/11 are inevitable.

III. Dylan's Folk Poetics

As quoted above, Walter Benjamin writes, "Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers....In every case a storyteller is one who has council for his reader" (84). We don't tend to think of stories as instructing us. At least, it's not fashionable for us post-modern people to think so.

It may seem strange to think of Bob Dylan, the man who nearly single-handedly forged the modern concept of the singer-songwriter, foregoing notions of intellectual property and individuality to become a communal storyteller. We can think of him in this sense as analogous to Benjamin's storyteller and as Bob Dylan's work now seems to disregard the modern and illusory concept of *intellectual property*. With Dylan, we are not promised an album of songs with lines that we have never heard before. He's a storyteller now; he's using old melodies and delivering old lines in *his* particular way, which is what really everyone is doing, since *originality* itself is an illusion of sorts. By drawing off various American musical traditions, Dylan is able to forge anaphoristic style out of rural American dialects and scriptural language.

Bob Dylan's music evidences an exhaustive knowledge of the American songbook, but he rearranges the American folk lines and ideas to tell his distinct stories. By just telling the American story, the storyteller who tells an honest tale about America speaks about oppression, poverty, and unjust race relations. Even though Bob Dylan certainly doesn't write protest songs any more, in the typical sense of the genre at least, or solution songs, like John Lennon's "Give Peace a Chance" or "Imagine," he writes what he calls distinctly *American* songs, documenting American history and stories. With this, Dylan sometimes delivers biting critique, like "God is in his heaven and we all want what's His / But power and greed and corruptible seed seem to be all that there is" ("Blind Willie McTell").¹ However, in that shockingly brutal evaluation of contemporary humanity, the lyricism is very plain. Nothing strikes you as ostensibly flashy. None of the words draw attention to themselves as *poetry*. It is written in common vernacular, but an almost ancient one, profoundly influenced by scriptural language and literature ("Ain't Talkin'" in 2006's *Modern Times* is a good example.). On top of this, in the two above lines Dylan uses a distinctly American, primarily rural, vernacular. The statements "God is in his heaven" and "corruptible seed" seem to have jumped right out of a country church pulpit. In so doing, he shows the decline of a culture using that culture's own language.

He now uses nearly all very straightforward American folk music lines like “I’m riding a midnight train, / I’ve got ice water running through my veins” as the context for his more fierce imagism of a line like: “Even if the flesh falls off of my face, I know you’ll still be there to care.” Fusing the folk poetic and Dylan’s incisive ability to craft a wicked image and sly rhyme is what makes the histories that these songs document unique to Dylan, and not mere American folk songs, even though they owe their existence to American folk.

Using the musical traditions, lyrical styles, images and vocabulary of the past, Bob Dylan manages to chronicle quite literally America collapsing on “*Love and Theft*,” released the day the Twin Towers were attacked. He knows the vernacular of the American songbook from folk to blues to country to gospel and back again, and naturally this manifests itself in his songs. Because he knows the American songbook so well, he almost cannot help but write songs that have lines from old blues or country tunes. He finds ways to put them together in unexpected ways though his work. This ability allows him to chronicle the country’s decline in the very language that emerged as part of the idea of America that could be getting scrutinized (along with America’s ascendancy to cultural and political dominance).

As Freud outlines in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, this trauma of being alive becomes exacerbated when human are forced to live in the city and sublimate their primal impulses to an even greater degree. If we agree with Freud’s premise that other humans are what we pose the greatest threat to a human being’s psyche, than the contemporary urban world presents an unprecedented opportunity for the individual to be wounded by the hordes of unnamed humanity and its uncontrollable mob-like energy. The trauma of city life and its discontents is the very trauma that permeates “*Love and Theft*,” especially when a nation has become modernized by way of oppression, institutionalized and otherwise.

Dylan attempts to navigate modernity’s isolation and impermanence through this shared communal vocabulary of the American folk past. However, while attempting to find roots in a more traditional, storytelling poetics, the contents of the songs still carry the print of an individual poet constructing images out of scraps of Americana to roundly condemn modernity and its seductive but dehumanizing tendencies. Throughout the album Dylan laments the modern world, seeking some sort of pastoral escape into a more idyllic past. This is apparent in the music which draws off various music traditions dating back to the 20s and 30s. Rob Sheffield writes, “*Love and Theft*” takes us on a full-blown tour of American song in all its burlesque splendor...Dylan veers into country, ragtime, vaudeville, deep blues, cocktail-lounge corn, the minstrel show and the kind of rockabilly he must have bashed out with his high school band more than forty years ago.”

III. A World Gone Wrong: “*Love and Theft*” Touches America’s Racial Wounds

We see this striving for roots in the past before the album even plays, the title already alluding to—and ironically thieving—the title of Eric Lott’s 1993’s groundbreaking work on minstrelsy, “*Love and Theft*.” Lott’s book makes an argument about the ambiguous emotions of working class toward African American males. Lott argues that white working class in 19th century America admires, fetishizes, and robs from black culture in minstrelsy tied to a complicated relationship of love and disgust for the black male body.

The title serves a dual purpose: it both demonstrates how much he loves and thieves from African American music, but also shows that the industry of which he is a vital part, and an acknowledgment that our nation itself, grew out of oppression. Rob Sheffield finds the album’s triumph in its ability to:

evoke an America of masquerade and striptease, a world of seedy old-time gin palaces, fast cash, poison whiskey, guilty strangers trying not to make eye contact, pickpockets slapping out-of-towners on the back. *“Love and Theft”* comes on as a musical autobiography that also sounds like a casual, almost accidental history of the country.

Sheffield is correct. *“Love and Theft”* is a history of country, and it is autobiographical. How is any work of art not autobiographical? In his 2009 interview with Bill Flanagan Dylan continually insists that there is no perspective-less speaker: “Wait a minute Bill. I’m not a playwright. The people in my songs are all me” (6).

The album points to the cruelty and instability of modern society built on exploiting the other guy (whether driven by race relations or merely unbridled capitalism), in entering into the past Dylan finds the same cutthroat capitalist ethos where people will “stab you where you stand,” as he writes in the first track “Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum.” When asked about 9/11 attack, he cites Kipling’s poem, “Gentleman Rankers” about the soldiers who “saw the first when [they] were too young” (interview with Gilmore). After atrocities they took part in the soldiers can now only see a world that is done with truth, loyalty and honor. While seeking out the past through its musical tradition, the singer cannot avoid seeing the same seedy underbelly there as well as in the present.

In the opening track, “Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum,” the speaker describes inept and malicious city dwellers who are “living in the land of Nod / Trusting their fates into the hands of God.” In addition to the names which he borrowed from Lewis Carol, Nod is the place in Genesis where Cain sought refuge after murdering his brother: “And Cain went out from the presence of the LORD, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden” (Gen 4.13, KJV). Outside of God’s grace, Cain wanders the earth, a marked man, and goes onto build the first city according to Jewish and Christian tradition. To give generic names to the city-dwellers, Dylan uses Carrol’s characters from Alice in Wonderland whose primary characteristic is their mutual imbecility. In addition to this, Dylan tells us these modern men spend their days living in Nod, Cain’s first stop while outside of God’s presence.

Using this as the prototypical American city, the album suggests one cannot live in the city, even if it is one that resembles the seeming innocence of Tin Pan Alley New York, without being drawn into the crimes, chaos, and subsequent consequences. In the song “Mississippi,” which has a deceptively seductive melody, the speaker opens the song mourning the inevitable trouble a person finds in the city. He tells us that “I was raised in the country / I’ve been working in the town / I’ve been in trouble ever since he put his suitcase down.” It’s the typical American coming of age story, it’s older than America; it’s the prodigal son. But Dylan tells the story in a specifically rural American vernacular. He’s talking about America in America’s own tongue.

Like any good work of art, this song of course can be read a multitude of ways. However, the most immediate narrative tells the story of how the city ends up running the poor country boy dry, leading him to finally say: “I got nothing for you, I had nothing before / Don’t even have anything for myself anymore / Sky full of fire, rain pouring down / Nothing you can sell me, I’ll see you around.” The speaker came from the country—to me it seems he didn’t have any money, or anything else before, and now amidst this chaos somehow he has even less. And on top the sky’s full of fire and judgment is upon him. Throughout the album, city is a place of violence, where like Tweedle Dum people will “stab you where you stand” to get what you have. The speaker squeezes in these lines (Sky full of fire...) that sound straight out of a Biblical prophecy, as if this type of divine retribution is just part of the deal you make for living in the city.

Whether satirically or directly critiquing the past, the album has a distinctly end of days tone concerning modernity. In Dylan’s tribute to pre-war blues “High Water,” the song revisits

the Louisiana flood of 1927 to make a commentary on the corruption of the modern American ethos both then and now. It's an eerie apocalyptic vision, compounded its 9/11 release date. At the end of every chorus, the speaker ominously repeats, "It's getting dark out there; high water everywhere." Often cited as the best work of the album, renowned rock critic Greil Marcus writes "Verse by verse in Dylan's 'High Water,' the flood spreads, takes in and upends more lives, making everyone understand that your freedom under the constitution are nothing compared to what God wants from you this night" (304).

In his commentary, Marcus draws out a central tension that runs throughout, and the album makes a special point of drawing attention to the racial inequality at the center of all these tales. As mentioned earlier, the title of the album is taken from a book on blackface minstrelsy. Although America's unequal race relations have been protected by the constitution, the song suggests that this way of behaving doesn't mean that your past deeds aren't going to catch up to you.

The song is also riddled with references to emblems of racial oppression in American history. The people affected most in floods are usually the poor. The song seems to point to unjust socioeconomic conditions as part of the judgment that's experienced in the song through the flood's destruction. Just as the title of the album referencing Lott's book on minstrelsy, casts a shadow of the economically exploitative and complicated race relationships throughout American music and history, specific references in the song show how the destruction was worsened by the flood. He writes about the "[h]igh water risin', six inches 'bove my head / Coffins droppin' in the street / Like balloons made out of lead / Water pourin' into Vicksburg, don't know what I'm goin' to do/" "Don't reach out for me," she said / "Can't you see I'm drownin' too?" "It's rough out there / High water everywhere." These lines highlight the racial tension amidst 1927 disaster. Vicksburg is historically known as the site of several Ku Klux Klan activity and lynchings of its black residents.

The song similarly references Clarksdale, when Dylan sings "Thunder rolling over Clarksdale, everything is looking blue" in the final verse. Clarksdale, a city historically made up of an African American demographic, and famous for being one of the places where the blues tradition flourished. It is also the place where Empress of the Blues, Bessie Smith died from injuries sustained in a car accident outside of the town. Mackay points out the significance of Dylan's reference here due to the fact that many have speculated she might have lived had she not be refused service at the white's only hospital. The exploitation evoked through referencing this town further highlights how this disaster hits an already oppressed and neglected demographic. The greed that drove slavery and post-civil war institutionalized racism continues to affect the African American population the most.

The album's gloom, particularly in "High Water", allows it to carry another strange prophetic aspect. This revisiting of the scenes of death and destruction in 1927's was on the last album released by Dylan before Hurricane Katrina. As noted above, the song's vision of destruction is not merely founded in modernity per se, but in the unjust socioeconomic conditions that led to the disaster to take on a specifically class and racial aspect, all of which we find examined in this song four years prior. Both disasters affected African American populations the most, in the very regions which America owes a significant cultural debt for Jazz, the Blues, and countless other cultural treasures.

"Love and Theft" is perhaps Dylan's most thorough investigation of this American past, and what he finds is relentless exploitation, corruption, and racism. What he foresees, both in the album and the cited interview, is further disaster. The coincidence of the album's release with September 11th is no surprise to him because he seems to have the attitude of what else would you expect from a world which has built itself up through the exploitation of other nations

and its own citizens. The weary prophet croons, "Don't reach out to me...can't you see I'm drowning too." He is not working for reform to the modern world; it seems to be too far-gone in his estimation for that. For this reason, when asked what we should do in light of 9/11 he responds by saying "it is time to change the internal world." Considering the international conflicts, oil depletion, the destruction of the natural world, our culture's disregard for the arts, amongst other detrimental qualities of the modern world, Dylan's advice to change "the internal world" means he finds little-to-no hope of avoiding continued large-scale disasters like that of 9/11.

Note

¹. "Blind Willie McTell" was actually written in 1983, the time before Dylan's fully realize songwriting renaissance. I think this track, which was album outtake later specially released, represents Dylan touching on what he would later develop more fully in *Time out of Mind*.

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