

2017

# "Everybody's Got to Wonder What's the Matter With This Cruel World Today": Social Consciousness and Political Commentary In "Love and Theft" and Modern Times

Thad Williamson

*University of Richmond*, [twillia9@richmond.edu](mailto:twillia9@richmond.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/jepson-faculty-publications>



Part of the [Music Theory Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Williamson, Thad "Everybody's Got to Wonder What's the Matter With This Cruel World Today": Social Consciousness and Political Commentary In "Love and Theft" and Modern Times." In *Tearing the World Apart: Bob Dylan and the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Goss, Nina and Eric R. Hoffman, 158-175. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2017.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Jepson School of Leadership Studies articles, book chapters and other publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

**“EVERYBODY GOT TO WONDER WHAT’S THE  
MATTER WITH THIS CRUEL WORLD TODAY”:  
SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND POLITICAL  
COMMENTARY IN “LOVE AND THEFT”  
AND MODERN TIMES**

Thad Williamson

Bob Dylan has spent much of the past fifty years trying to escape the label of “protest singer.” Over the past decade, there have been plenty of serious topics for the topically minded songwriter to address: the Iraq War, threats to civil liberties, rising economic inequality, the financial collapse of 2008 and “Great Recession” that followed. Unlike his musical peers Neil Young (*Living with War* [2006]) and Bruce Springsteen (*Wrecking Ball* [2012]), Dylan to date has not addressed those events in any direct way, through new topical songs, in the last stage of his career.

Even so, music journalists and much of Dylan’s fan base remain highly intrigued by the question of just what Dylan makes of the events of the day. Cryptic comments made by Dylan at a Minneapolis concert the night of Barack Obama’s election as president in 2008 were widely debated by Dylan followers on the Internet: did Dylan mean what he said when he remarked “it looks like there’s going to be a change now,” or was he gently mocking liberal exultation at Obama’s victory?

Those comments became a primary focus of a September 2012 *Rolling Stone* interview on the occasion of the release of *Tempest*. Despite repeated prodding, Dylan refused to make any substantive comment about Obama’s presidency, adding that if one wants an informed opinion about what kind of person Obama is, the journalist should ask Obama’s wife. Dylan further

added that he did not recall the election night comments of 2008, and was not sure what he was trying to say, though he did add that “I would hope that a change has in fact happened.” Pressed by the interviewer for more clarity, Dylan finally replied in exasperation, “What the fuck do you want me to say?”<sup>1</sup>

That outburst can be understood as directed not only at the questioner, but at any and all who still, half a century after *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, have an impulse to look to Dylan to find “where it’s at.” A moment’s reflection suggests the sheer absurdity of expecting Dylan to be a good source of expert insight about Obama or any specific aspect of contemporary politics.

Yet this is only part of the story. In that same *Rolling Stone* interview, Dylan made headlines by stating that slavery was a curse on American history, a stain that could never be erased.

This country is just too fucked up about color. It’s a distraction. People at each other’s throats just because they are of a different color. It’s the height of insanity, and it will hold any nation back—or any neighborhood back. Or any anything back. Blacks know that some whites didn’t want to give up slavery—that if they had their way, they would still be under the yoke, and they can’t pretend they don’t know that. . . .

It’s doubtful that America’s ever going to get rid of that stigmatization. It’s a country founded on the backs of slaves. You know what I mean? Because it goes way back. It’s the root cause.<sup>2</sup>

While Dylan refused to endorse or otherwise be drawn into a substantive assessment of Barack Obama, the songwriter landed a far more devastating critique of American society and the pervasive legacy of racism. No wonder that Dylan never has and never will escape the “protest singer” label. He no longer goes in for topical songs about current events, or for writing songs out of newspaper stories. But his work continues to reflect an acute social conscience and a deep-seated critique of American history and contemporary society. Both his recent songs and his interviews show that Dylan remains attentive to what is going on now. As one of the characters in “Po’ Boy” might put it, “the game is the same, it’s just on another level.”

Both *Love and Theft* and *Modern Times* display as a fairly consistent theme a deep concern and discomfort with social and economic conditions in the contemporary United States, as well as a consciousness of the deep injustices of American history. As has been widely noted, the very album title *Love and Theft* is a reference to scholar Eric Lott’s 1993 book about

the culture of minstrel shows in the early twentieth century, and Lott himself interprets the album as an extended reflection on themes related to the borrowing and theft involved in the cross-racial fusion of popular musical culture in the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> *Modern Times* is not put in quotes, but that album title also calls to mind Charlie Chaplin's film of the same name, a critique and parody of the impact of the industrial era on the individual.<sup>4</sup> At the very least, these album titles are suggestive of what was on Dylan's mind in constructing these records.

Both Lott and Sean Wilentz<sup>5</sup> have pointed out the ways in which Dylan, in deploying a dazzlingly diverse array of cultural references, citations, and quotations, creates on these records a musical fusion in which past and present are continually intertwined. At one moment we are in the Civil War, the next moment we are in 2006, and then we are back in the 1930s.

A common view among some observers of the contemporary Dylan, observing the pastiche of half-borrowed melodies and lyrics on both of these albums and questions that have been raised about the veracity of *Chronicles*, is that in fact Dylan is simply the consummate "bullshit artist."<sup>6</sup> This is an understandable reaction for those puzzled by the lack of obvious political statements in the recent songs, troubled by the charges against Dylan of plagiarism, perplexed by Dylan's bizarre claim in his 2012 *Rolling Stone* interview that he had been "transfigured," and moved by the surface-level contradiction of Dylan being willing to tour China at the same time politically provocative artists like the sculptor Ai Weiwei are being persecuted by the Chinese government.<sup>7</sup>

It is not the purpose of this essay to defend Dylan against all such criticisms of his artistic integrity or political judgment, but I reject the claim that there is nothing coherent or compelling in Dylan's body of work. Writers like Wilentz have persuasively shown, first, that Dylan in fact has a powerful and well-educated mind honed not just by his personal experience but by wide, self-guided reading, particularly in American history; and second, that the deeper one goes into excavating Dylan's sources and quotations, the more coherent and compelling "*Love and Theft*" and *Modern Times* become.

Indeed, the most enduring political statement of these records, particularly "*Love and Theft*," is the open engagement with the cross-racial fusion of American culture, the deliberate calling attention to minstrelsy and the practice of simultaneously appropriating African American culture while denigrating African Americans that has characterized white engagement with black culture. Expressing a consciousness of deep historic injustice is itself a political act, and a particularly important act with respect to race in

the United States.<sup>8</sup> “*Love and Theft*” can be seen in the context of a long line of statements Dylan has made about race in virtually all stages of his career, statements that have continued with his 2012 *Rolling Stone* interview and the release of the powerful song “Pay in Blood” on *Tempest*.

At a surface level, Dylan (with one partial exception) does not include any obviously political songs on “*Love and Theft*” or *Modern Times*. There are no clarion calls here to end wars or change presidents. While social and political awareness forms part of the backdrop for Dylan’s music on these records, explicit social commentary is scattered across numerous different songs in the form of one-off lines or isolated stanzas.

The absence of an explicit treatment of current political issues in these particular records does not mean Dylan lacks an analytical frame for assessing the political condition. On the contrary, the mature Dylan has not been shy about articulating a theory of political life and, implicitly, the state of current politics. While every Dylan record is unique, none are self-contained creations to be heard in a vacuum; in interpreting their meanings, it is both reasonable and necessary to hear each album in light of previous work.<sup>9</sup>

With respect to politics, to make sense of where Dylan is coming from we need to return to his 1989 album *Oh Mercy*. On that album, Dylan provided arguably the most definitive statement of his views about politics and the tragic flaws of human nature, particularly in the songs “Political World,” “Everything Is Broken,” and “Man in a Long Black Coat.” Interestingly, the sessions for *Oh Mercy* also included a song (unreleased until 1994), “Dignity,” which by using an upbeat melody and series of amusing vignettes to paint a wistful picture that is by turns hopeful and somber, is a precursor to the kind of songwriting often found on “*Love and Theft*” and *Modern Times*.

*Oh Mercy*’s opening song, “Political World” announces that we live in a “political world,” where “love don’t have any place.” But this is just the beginning of the indictment. As the song goes on we find that we live in times when crime does not have a face; wisdom is thrown into jail; and mercy and courage are absent. The world is a “stacked deck” we can all see and feel—that is, it is unjust. The latter part of the song turns to how individuals confront this damaged world in which “peace is not welcome at all,” a world said to lack three of the four cardinal virtues (wisdom, courage, justice). “As soon as you’re awake you’re trained to take, what looks like the easy way out,” sings Dylan, a verse signaling that individuals in this society are subject to a socialization process intended to secure compliance with an unjust order. Dylan thus restates, in more compact and coherent version, a

theme of social critique dating back to “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding).” Society is fundamentally unjust, and those who recognize this fact become alienated from it (and perhaps suicide candidates); the only recourse available is to “climb into the frame and shout God’s name,” but even this is an uncertain enterprise.

This critique of society is thoroughly radical, and it follows in the footsteps of radical skeptics of the received order from Thrasymachus (the skeptical character in Book One of Plato’s *Republic*) to Karl Marx. The key point is not simply that the world is unjust; it is that this “political world” also has mechanisms in place intended to secure consent and disguise the unjust character of the existing power structure. Unlike a figure such as Thrasymachus, however, Dylan does seem to insist that there are things such as wisdom, courage, justice, and peace that have real meaning—but that these virtues are scarcely present in our world.<sup>10</sup>

If we take this account of what it means to “live in a political world” as a statement of Bob Dylan’s mature theory of the polis, we can quickly see why it might seem redundant for later songs to bother to talk about specific wars or other political evils. Dylan’s mature critique is not aimed at ephemeral surface-level events, but rather at the deep structure of society and its perennial tendencies. Equally important, this critique is not generated from a reading of the newspaper or other short-term events. There is little reason to think that, if Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale had been president in the 1980s instead of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, the content of Dylan’s assessment of the political (and human) condition would have been significantly different.

Other songs from the *Oh Mercy* sessions speak to related themes, including most obviously “Everything Is Broken,” the meditation on human sin that is “Disease of Conceit,” and searching self-examination in “What Good Am I?” The jaunty anthem, “Dignity,” describes “dignity” as utterly elusive.

These songs collectively reflect an understanding of politics shaped strongly by the Christian doctrine of Original Sin: not the strident fundamentalism of his earlier “Christian” period but rather the views that a) politics consist most fundamentally of systems of domination, and b) due to the prevalence of egoism in human nature, particularly with respect to political questions, there is no “political” solution to the problems and suffering produced by domination. This conception of politics is consistent with the views of influential neo-orthodox twentieth-century Christian theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr (1932), who harbored harsh critiques

of the existing political and economic order while simultaneously regarding as hubristic any claim that these orders could be overturned and replaced with a fully just order.<sup>11</sup>

Dylan's having delivered a veritable political treatise on *Oh Mercy* helps us understand why he saw no need to "repeat the past" in subsequent records. But there is a sense in which *Oh Mercy* should be understood as the beginning of the "mature" period of Dylan's work. Starting with *Oh Mercy*, Dylan begins (artistically) inhabiting the role of world-weary veteran who has seen it all. Some of the playfulness evident in both "*Love and Theft*" and *Modern Times* comes from the way Dylan's elder statesman persona insists there is still a young man inside him who can show all comers—perhaps even Alicia Keys—a whopping good time. Dylan himself has encouraged this periodization by describing *Oh Mercy* in his autobiographical *Chronicles* as the start of an artistic rebirth and through the 2008 release of the box set *Tell Tale Signs*, which treats the entire period from 1989–2006 as a coherent phase of Dylan's work.

Social and political commentary in the more recent records thus should be read against the backdrop of *Oh Mercy*. The existence of injustice and human cruelty for Dylan is no surprise, and so deeply embedded in the human condition (and in the specifics of American history) that it is foolish to expect that any specific corrective action will uproot these evils.

What kind of commentary, then, do we find on "*Love and Theft*" and *Modern Times*? Four recurrent themes can be identified.

## THE EXISTENCE OF SUFFERING

First, we find relatively broad statements of social empathy demonstrating awareness of the reality of widespread suffering. At times, Dylan goes so far as to suggest that he has reached a place where he has, if not the chosen-one/prophetic-vision attributed (by others) to some of his earlier work, at least a pretty good vantage point into suffering and the human condition: "I can see what everybody in the world is up against" ("Sugar Baby"). More often, though Dylan treats this suffering as obvious for all with eyes to see; its endemic nature is a fundamental part of the human condition.

In this earthly domain, full of disappointment and pain ("When the Deal Goes Down")

Time is pilin' up, we struggle and we scrape  
 We're all boxed in, nowhere to escape ("Mississippi")

The suffering is unending  
 Every nook and cranny has its tears ("Ain't Talkin'")

Everybody got to wonder what's the matter with this cruel world today  
 ("Thunder on the Mountain")

In three of these examples, Dylan points to suffering, disappointment, struggle, and cruelty in matter-of-fact asides, in the course of songs whose focus lies elsewhere. Importantly, Dylan indicates that this cruelty and suffering are not things one simply sees, but also things one inevitably experiences and participates in. Denial of the reality of suffering is akin to the denial of the reality of our own lives. This is not really up for debate, Dylan seems to say.

Dylan gives the theme of suffering and struggle his most sustained attention in "Ain't Talkin'," the closing song on *Modern Times* and undoubtedly the album's magnum opus. The song can be understood with more confidence than usual as Dylan speaking not as a character but for "himself" (or at least, for the character called "Bob Dylan"). Because "Ain't Talkin'" captures many of the critical themes Dylan is voicing on these albums, I will consider the song in more detail later in this essay.

## POVERTY AND DEPRIVATION

A second recurring motif on these two albums is poverty. Poverty and material deprivation appear in two forms: first, as a result of some specific catastrophe, and second, as a result of hard economic times.

Catastrophe-induced poverty is referenced in "The Levee's Gonna Break" in an apparent nod to the events of Hurricane Katrina (which struck the Gulf Coast just six months before the album was recorded), as well as in the earlier "High Water."

Some people on the road carrying everything they own  
 Some people got barely enough skin to cover their bones ("The Levee's  
 Gonna Break")



High water risin', the shacks are slidin' down  
 Folks lose their possessions—folks are leaving town (“High Water”)

The flood of “High Water” is likely better understood as a metaphor for times being tough than a reference to a particular event. Succeeding verses of the song tell us that there’s “Nothing standing there,” “It’s tough out there,” “Things are breakin’ up out there,” “It’s rough out there,” and—skipping to the final stanza—“It’s bad out there.”

What is metaphorical in “High Water” is far more explicit in “Workingman’s Blues #2.” The song, commonly regarded as one of the strongest on *Modern Times*, speaks in a visceral way to hunger, redundancy, and loneliness, set against a context in which “the buying power of the proletariat’s gone down” and “money’s getting shallow and weak.” The narrator here inhabits the role of the down-and-out, economically marginalized person who is determined to carry on with the help of companionship and an ability to “live off rice and beans.”

It does not seem likely that Bob Dylan has spent a large amount of time poring over economic data demonstrating the stagnation of working-class incomes in the United States and widening economic inequality since the 1970s, but this song makes clear that he is aware of what is going on. Laments about capitalism have occasionally popped up throughout Dylan’s career, from “North Country Blues” to “Union Sundown” to “Heartland” (1993, with Willie Nelson) to his comments on behalf of displaced American farmers at Live Aid in 1985. “Union Sundown” is the most explicit of these efforts, telling us that “capitalism is above the law / . . . ‘it don’t count unless it sells” and that “this world is ruled by violence but I guess that’s better left unsaid.” The impact of that song, however, was dampened by both clunky lyrics and the ambiguity about whose “greed” it was that “got in the way” (corporate greed, or union corruption, or both?).

“Workingman’s Blues #2” takes another tack, inhabiting the character of a down-and-out person trying to fend off hunger and express his love for a companion and determination to keep right on living. For the narrator of this song, the proletariat’s buying power going down is just a fact, a “reality” that “they” say we must accept in order to “compete abroad.” As in “Union Sundown,” there is no hint that this is anything but inevitable—this is the way capitalism works—but here the focus is on how a person can survive and try to create or preserve meaning within that context. “Po’ Boy” operates similarly: the repeated references to humble economic circumstances set a

stage for the story, but the focus is on the story. If Dylan here is engaged in protest against poverty and economic inequality, it is at first glance a muted protest; but a deeper look suggests the radical implications of Dylan inhabiting, humanizing, and drawing sympathetic attention to the lives of people with limited economic means—an age-old strategy of literary critics of American capitalism like John Steinbeck. And as with Steinbeck, whose writing made a large impression on the young Dylan,<sup>12</sup> Dylan's character does not shy away from articulating class resentment and from accusing the privileged classes of ignorance: "Some people never worked a day in their life / don't know what work even means" ("Workingman's Blues #2").

### **POWER, POWERLESSNESS, CORRUPTION**

Dylan's lyrics on these records also point to inequities of power, and a moral universe in which there are enemies to be confronted. These themes are again seen most clearly in "Workingman's Blues #2." Part of the workingman (narrator's) experience is what political theorist Iris Marion Young (1990) terms "marginalization"—the experience of being on the fringe of society, excluded from the mainstream, regarded as lacking in value.

"Sometimes no one wants what we got / Sometimes you can't give it away": Those lines are sung by a narrator who plans to "sleep off the rest of the day." For the marginalized, the day is something to be survived. Interestingly though, Dylan also has the narrator assert that he will "feed [his] soul with thought" prior to sleeping off the day. On the one hand, the narrator likely would prefer to fill his stomach with food before filling his soul with thought. On the other hand, the references to "soul" and the narrator's thinking capacities are an assertion of the workingman's dignity, humanness, and intelligence in the face of a society that has cast him off as "sometimes" worthless.

Yet at other times, the workingman works. In this line Dylan seems to invoke the idea of what Young terms "powerlessness"—the inequity in power and respect in the workplace across class lines. "Now they worry and they hurry and they fuss and they fret / They waste your nights and days": This striking quatrain also helps flesh out the subjective experience of the narrator. That character's experience of the world is not just one in which hunger is an ever-present threat, but in which one's existence is shaped by the decisions of others. The account of those who worry, hurry, fuss, and fret likely refers not to "the boss," the actual capitalist, but rather to the harried but privileged professional class, the managers with whom one is in direct contact during

the work day. The fact that the narrator can dismiss the worriers by forgetting them further indicates that they are accessories to power, not power itself.

The situation is different in other lyrics in this song, in which the narrator speaks of those with real power—permanent enemies who are inclined to use physical force, and who must be confronted with physical force as well: “I’ll drag ’em all down to hell and I’ll stand ’em at the wall / I’ll sell ’em to their enemies.” The assertion that there are permanent enemies that one cannot simply (and simply cannot) reason with is central to class-based politics. These “foes” have the power to reduce one to utter poverty and ruin, and must be reckoned with one way or another (whether one chooses to confront them or hang back). Moreover, despite the fantasy of dragging them all to hell, the song as a whole makes clear that the foes are not going anywhere. Contrary to one of Dylan’s earlier songs, the ship is not coming in, and Goliath is not about to be conquered.

The theme of heartless opponents capable of crushing life creeps up elsewhere on these records. “Cry a While,” for instance, speaks of people that “ain’t human, they got no heart or soul.” “Ain’t Talkin’” amplifies these themes, and like “Workingman’s Blues #2” speaks openly of violent confrontation with enemies: “If I catch my opponents ever sleepin’ / I’ll just slaughter them where they lie.”

A key question to be considered is who “they” are in each of these songs. Presumably people of wealth and power who do not even have to be named in any specific sense: in any given situation or circumstance, we know the agents of wealth and power pull the strings. But at times Dylan does name names so to speak, through depictions of heartless characters—the captain of “Lonesome Day Blues,” for instance, who does not care how many of his pals he has killed, as well as a certain “Mr. Goldsmith” described in “Cry a While” as “a nasty, dirty, double-crossin’, backstabbin’ phony I didn’t wanna have to be dealin’ with.” Wealth, power, and heartlessness seem to be the toxic combination.

## MORAL CORRUPTION

Finally, Dylan on these records frequently points to the ways in which it is *difficult to be a good person* in the context of social breakdown and the ubiquity of sin. “Well, they burned my barn, they stole my horse / I can’t save a dime”: “Workingman’s Blues” makes the simple point—reiterated by Dylan himself in a 2008 interview—that moral rectitude and sustained poverty do

not go hand in hand. “America is in a state of upheaval,” said Dylan. “Poverty is demoralizing. You can’t expect people to have the virtue of purity when they are poor.”<sup>13</sup>

The “virtue of purity” is not easily achieved by the more comfortable, either. Consider Dylan—now presumably speaking for himself—in “Ain’t Talkin’”: “They say prayer has the power to help / So pray from the mother / In the human heart an evil spirit can dwell.” This is one of the great verses of Dylan’s recent work, and his gravelly vocalization comes off as simultaneously spooky, timeless, and profound. It is one thing to confess sin to God, but presumably much harder to confess to one’s mother. Whether Dylan had in mind his actual mother (deceased for five years at this point) or used the line metaphorically, this is an expression of moral helplessness: an inability to overcome the evil spirit in one’s own heart, and an inability despite good intentions to act as one ought.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, sometimes good intentions are thwarted, or even backfire, as in “Lot of things can get in the way when you’re trying to do what’s right” (“Honest with Me”) or “Try to make things better for someone, sometimes, you just end up making it a thousand times worse” (“Sugar Baby”).

The “things” that get in the way of doing what is right might be the opposition of others, the practical costs of doing the right thing, or the resistance of one’s own heart. The use of the term “trying” in both this lyric and five years later in “Ain’t Talkin’” is of interest. Dylan might mean that he has given it his best faith effort, but that it still falls short; or he might mean that he had the *intention* of doing what was right, but as soon as he got started and saw what doing right actually entailed he found complications, rationalizations, and so forth, which prevented him from following through. Both thoughts are variations on the theme of “What Good Am I?” from *Oh Mercy*, in which the narrator has “had every chance and yet still fail[s] to see,” is fully conscious of human pain but still fails to act.

Yet good intention is no guarantor of good result. This is another frustration of the moral life, voiced in the couplet from “Sugar Baby.” It would be easy to read Dylan’s complaint here as cynicism, as a justification for not engaging since the results are uncertain and quite possibly perverse. But this line must be read in the context of other places in Dylan’s recent work where he faults himself for inaction and failure to love, and by the important qualifiers “someone, sometimes.” Some people can be helped, but perhaps some cannot. Sometimes attempts to help may help, but sometimes they backfire dramatically, for reasons that may be entirely independent of the

quality of one's intentions. Indeed, this is the risk of a morally engaged, loving-your-neighbor life: sometimes your engagement will lead to heart-break, and sometimes you will feel as if it would have been better not to engage at all. But, as other lyrics from Dylan point out, moral disengagement from the reality of suffering is not a satisfying option either. Read together, Dylan's lines on the dangers of both inaction and action illustrate something tragic and inescapable about the human condition. Good intentions may be an improvement over moral obliviousness, but they are no guarantee of effective action.

### HOW THEN SHOULD WE LIVE?

What then, for Dylan, is the best response to the reality of human suffering, poverty, power struggles, and corrupted virtue? It has long been clear that Dylan rejects what might be called Baez-ism (unreconstructed 1960s pacifism) as an adequate response. Indeed, in a striking and humorous bridge from "Moonlight," Dylan invokes Baez-ism and speaks of deploying it as an effective courtship strategy: "Well, I'm preaching peace and harmony/ . . . Yet I know when the time is right to strike." This passage is not unambivalent—while it suggests a cynical stance toward the preaching of peace and harmony, at the same time Dylan is more than happy here to be with someone (a woman) who responds well to preaching of that kind. Baez-ism is not Dylan's own view, but perhaps he still admires it in others.

As for himself, Dylan at different points offers four kinds of responses to the problem of how one is to live amidst the backdrop of profound suffering. The first is *making an effort to live a life of moral integrity* as an individual, although as we have seen, Dylan's writing casts some doubt on this kind of response taken alone. Even so, at times Dylan seems determined to practice compassion and do justice:

The sun keeps shinin' and the north wind keep picking up speed  
Gonna forget about myself for a while, go out and see what others need  
("Thunder on the Mountain")

I'm gonna spare the defeated, boys, I'm going to speak to the crowd  
I am goin' to teach peace to the conquered  
I'm going to tame the proud ("Lonesome Day Blues")

Of course, neither of these examples is unambivalent. Particularly in the musical context of “Thunder on the Mountain,” Dylan could be heard as wanting to out and see what others need out of boredom with one’s self, as a form of stress release, or just because it seemed like a good thing to do on a sunny, windy day. In any case, this self-forgetting is only expected to last “for a while.” Likewise, in the line in “Lonesome Day Blues,” the operative word is “conquered”—the justice and kindness the narrator plans to dish out comes from a position of strength, after the conflict has already been won. Indeed, teaching peace to the conquered and taming the proud are good ways to consolidate one’s own hegemony.

Second, Dylan seeks out and praises *companionship* as a kind of response—not just romantic companionship, but comradesly companionship, with the two at times seemingly fused together, as in “Workingman’s Blues #2.” Affection for “those who’ve sailed with me” and for “loyal and much-loved companions” are also a theme in, respectively, “Mississippi” and “Ain’t Talkin’.”

Third, and perhaps most surprising, Dylan validates the honor and necessity of *collective social struggle*—even though he no longer seems to hold promise that it likely to be successful. In “Summer Days,” social struggle is referenced in a sardonic context: “What good are you anyway if you can’t stand up to some old businessman?” (echoing, perhaps, the first verse of “All Along the Watchtower”). It appears as an aside in “Honest with Me”: “I’m not sorry for nothin’ I’ve done / I’m glad I fought—I only wish we’d won”; as a fantasy of rebellion in “Thunder on the Mountain”: “Gonna raise me an army, some tough sons of bitches / I’ll recruit my army from the orphanages”; or, more earnestly, in the refrain of “Workingman’s Blues #2,” in front-line struggle: “You can hang back or fight your best on the front line.” The image invoked here is that of a labor struggle (a strike, or a march of the unemployed, or a simple act of resistance at work), a struggle that is somehow connected to both the narrator and the person being sung to. The struggle does not offer solution or salvation, but it is there as backdrop and is presented as an honorable (though perhaps futile) thing to participate in. At the same time, Dylan is not here critiquing “hanging back”—refraining from direct engagement—as an invalid course of action. Ultimately, what is important is that whether one hangs back or fights their best, they need to “sing a little bit of these workingman’s blues.”

The most developed response, however, and one that incorporates aspects of the previous three, is found in “Ain’t Talkin’.” The key line here is that the narrator is not talking, but is *walking*—*no matter what*. No matter that efforts to practice virtue have fallen short, that he is practicing a faith that has long

been abandoned, or that he has to use a walking cane, or that he cannot let go of revenge fantasies, that he is worn out from weeping, that he cannot forget the gal he left behind, or for that matter get you yourself out of his miserable brain. The narrator will keep on walking as long as his heart is yearning and burning, through cities of plague and endless woe, all the way out of sight unto the “last outback at the world’s end.” It’s tempting to think Dylan’s “mystic garden” will be a place of refuge, but this is not the case either: at the start of the song, the narrator is “hit . . . from behind” in the garden; at the end he returns to find that the “gardener is gone.”

What are we to make of this? The loneliness of Dylan’s walk immediately comes to mind, despite his talk of his loyal companions. Shout-outs are given to both (departed?) parents, to ancient enemies, long lost loves, but in the end the narrator is very much alone with his thoughts and his walking. One cannot accuse Dylan of simply being selfish here—at least he has tried to love his neighbor, even if it has not gone well. What Dylan seems to be getting at is the importance of simply carrying on, despite the condition of the world, and despite one’s flaws. Where there is yearning and burning, there is still life, and still value in walking—or as Dylan put it in a previous era, in trying to “keep on keeping on.”

Taken as a whole, these records suggest that Dylan still has an acute social conscience, and is inclined to see the world in terms not just of individual “sin” but of structural conflict between the more and less powerful. Beyond these general points, Dylan also consistently articulates the idea that America is a society on the brink, one in a “state of upheaval,” a time in which (to quote an alternative version of the 1989 song “Dignity”) “the soul of a nation is under the knife.” The film *Masked and Anonymous*, released between “*Love and Theft*” and *Modern Times*, makes this explicit, with its depiction of a dystopian version of the United States that has taken on the characteristics of a Third World society—gaping poverty, continual politically motivated violence, political dictatorship—with some familiar echoes of our own society (use of the media and celebrity as an instrument of diversion and political control). So too do recent interviews, and “Workingman’s Blues #2.”

Nonetheless, one would be hard pressed to claim that Dylan’s fundamental aim on these records is to call attention to specific social problems, much less current events. Instead, Dylan is telling us what he sees, and making it clear that human suffering and cruelty to others is an important part of that picture. Likewise, while Dylan does not call on his listeners to take any particular action, he does call on them to think deeply—everybody *does* have to wonder what is going on with this cruel world today.

Here we can finally come full circle and make good on the claim that a concern with race is central to Dylan's music in "*Love and Theft*" and *Modern Times*, and reconsider why we should be singing a little bit of the working man's blues. Charley Patton, Alicia Keys, and Nettie Moore all make appearances on these records, all allusions to African American experience and to black culture. Who is it in American culture that might teach us how to persevere, live with dignity, and create meaningful, even beautiful lives, while facing up squarely to the reality of human suffering and profound injustice? Singers of the blues. In this rich and compelling part of black culture—exemplified by Charley Patton, Blind Willie McTell, and many others—we find the most compelling answer on offer concerning how to make one's way through a cruel world. To recognize this point, and to pattern one's own life (musically and/or morally) after the bluesmen and women, is an act of both love and theft.<sup>15</sup>

Singers of the blues took for granted a backdrop of racialized brutality and oppression, a backdrop Dylan's recent songs, movie, and interviews have referenced in various ways. Few would contest Dylan on the claim that America is a deeply troubled society, but Dylan's invocations of America's racial history also offers something deeper than the recent antiwar, anti-fat cat songs of Neil Young and Bruce Springsteen. The point of Eric Lott's *Love and Theft*, for instance, is not simply to demonstrate how the minstrel shows offered a potent way to exploit blackness for pleasure and profit while furthering an ideology of racial supremacy. The politically consequential point is that the racial borrowing/mockery involved in minstrelsy was *constitutive* of the cultural identity of the white American working class, and helped redirect the social resentments of white workers away from their bosses and instead toward African Americans. What is at stake, then, is ultimately the ability of elites to keep power through the development of distinctively white cultural identity that white workers will (in the main) place a higher value on than class identity, thus sharply reducing the likelihood of fundamental challenges to the power structure. This is an analysis Dylan absorbed and brilliantly articulated as early as "Only a Pawn in Their Game," his hardest-hitting civil rights song.<sup>16</sup> To understand this point is to understand a crucial feature of the deep structure of American politics—and to understand why acts of historical and cultural recovery are political acts, especially in the context of a society determined to forget this history.

Dylan in his later years seems determined not to let us forget—hence his 2012 interview comments on slavery, and hence also the signature song off *Tempest*, "Pay in Blood." A full analysis is beyond the scope of the present



work, but the song can be plausibly interpreted not only as a graphic account of human bondage but as a rageful dialogue between slave and master, accentuated by commentary from a third narrative voice.<sup>17</sup> On this interpretation, the slave tells his master (or ex-master), “You lousy bastard, I’m supposed to respect you?” In the closing verse, the narrator then reports that “our nation must be saved and freed / you’ve been accused of murder, how do you plead?” Dylan’s precise meaning here is uncertain, but it is plausible that he is articulating, again, the need to save and free the nation from the burden and living legacy of past historical crimes.

This is a much bigger project than simply electing or reelecting an African American president. When Dylan deflected interview questions about Obama’s first term in his 2012 *Rolling Stone* interview by saying real change begins in the heart, he was not simply voicing a truism, nor was he being apolitical. He is best interpreted as saying the full magnitude of America’s original sin of slavery and racial oppression must be grappled with in the heart and gut if the country is to get anywhere, and that this is more important and more difficult than voting for Obama. It is worth noting that, in the end, Dylan did in fact—in a slightly roundabout way—endorse Obama from the concert stage on the eve of the 2012 election. Perhaps conscious of the debate over his 2008 remarks, Dylan also had his representatives take to Facebook to restate the gist of the comment to the audience (a statement that he had told his band they had to play well because the president had just been there, followed by a prediction that Obama would win reelection easily, and a warning not to believe the media to boot). It is entirely understandable that at a certain moment during the campaign, Dylan came to the conclusion that reelecting the first African American president would, in the large sweep of history, be a big deal and much better than the alternative, and felt a need to get himself clearly on the record on this point.

At the same time, it is implausible to suppose Dylan believes that Obama’s elections mean the nation has been “saved and freed.” Presidents can be elected without hearts changing and without the full force of history being addressed. Modern times continue to be times of hunger and desperation for many, suffering continues to be unending, and claims that “It’s All Good” are either the products of self-deluded elites or sick jokes. Against this backdrop, Dylan recognizes the impulse to struggle and scrape, to fight for change, but has only limited confidence such change will be successful. Those with wealth and power, who have never worked a day in their lives, do not give in so easily.

## NOTES

1. Gilmore, "Bob Dylan Unleashed," n.p.
2. Gilmore, "Bob Dylan Unleashed," n.p.
3. Lott, "Love and Theft in *'Love and Theft'*."
4. Alternatively, Dylan might be quoting his own liner notes for *World Gone Wrong*, in which he refers to "these modern times" as the "New Dark Ages."
5. Lott, "Love and Theft in *'Love and Theft'*"; Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*.
6. Dylan borrows melodies and sometimes lyrical phrases from an astonishing range of sources, but almost always put his own distinctive stamp on the final product, musically and lyrically.
7. Maureen Dowd, "Blowin' in the Idiot Wind," *New York Times*, April 9, 2011.
8. Lawrie Balfour, *Democracy's Reconstruction: Thinking Politically with W. E. B. DuBois* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
9. Put another way, Dylan's oeuvre can be considered a cumulative body of work. Each new record does not have to tell us that "the answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind" or that "the times they are a-changin'"; those ideas have already been established, and still carry validity even when new ideas or observations have been grafted on top of them. The assumption here is that Bob Dylan can be described as a single artist whose work can be viewed as an evolving whole. This is the case, in my view, even though it is also the case that almost no artist has engaged in continual reinvention and deliberate (or accidental) presentation of a multitude of personas as well as musical idioms, and even though there is reason to think that Dylan's angle of vision has evolved and shifted multiple times over the course of his long career.
10. For extended analysis of Dylan's invocation of virtues and vices throughout his career, see Ricks, *Dylan's Visions of Sin*.
11. To this very day, Dylan frequently closes his concerts with "Blowin' in the Wind," which I interpret neither an accident nor as (or not simply as) an effort to please his audiences. Whereas earlier audiences often heard the song (especially when sung by Peter, Paul and Mary) as a kind of call to arms, the mournful, stately manner in which Dylan performs the song today invites listeners to hear simply a series of plaintive questions with no clear answer, motivated by an awareness of unnecessary and wasteful human suffering that seems to have no end in sight.
12. Bell, *Time Out of Mind*.
13. Alan Jackson, "Interview with Bob Dylan," *New York Times*, June 2008.
14. How "ought" we to act, according to Dylan? As the lyric from "Ain't Talkin'" suggests, moral action for Dylan here means to "love my neighbor and do good unto others."
15. In Eric Lott's book, it is fairly clear that both "love" and "theft" involve white appropriation of black culture, repackaged in the minstrel shows. The embrace of blues culture by both early white rock 'n' roll artists and the folk revival also had an obviously racialized dynamic, albeit one that could have a liberating impact (in both directions). Yet it would probably be a mistake to assume that Dylan's homage to the blues singers is aimed at only his white listeners (just as it would be utterly false to assume, despite the demographics of most of his contemporary concertgoers, that Dylan only has a white audience). Recalling

the blues singers of eighty and ninety years ago is an act of cultural recovery with relevance for all listeners.

16. Mike Marqusee, *Chimes of Freedom: The Politics of Bob Dylan's Art* (New York: New Press, 2003); Avery Kolers, "Who Killed Medgar Evers?" in *Bob Dylan and Philosophy: It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Thinking)*, Peter Vernezze and Carl Porter, eds. (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2005), 29–39.

17. I take this interpretation from <http://johannasvisions.com/great-song-pay-in-blood-by-bob-dylan-a-land-built-on-slavery/>. For a theologically oriented interpretation of the song based on the view that the blood that is paid with is Christ's, see Kees de Graff's extensive effort at [www.keesdegraaf.com/media/Misc/8620p17fre4ggh1kcifeh8501s1iaggi1.pdf](http://www.keesdegraaf.com/media/Misc/8620p17fre4ggh1kcifeh8501s1iaggi1.pdf).