

**“Oh, Help Me in My Weakness”**  
**Entreaties and the Dissolution of Communal Time**  
*in John Wesley Harding*

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**“Once Upon a Time:” Bob Dylan and Memory**

The promise embedded in the locution “Once upon a time...” is that we are set to leave the realm of personal memory and enter into a narrative space shorn of the mundane particulars of our lives. Of course, the archetypal narrative elements of fairy tales told to children are deep reflections of the social world we inhabit. But the promise of this phrase—an escape *from* personal time and an escape *into* the timeless—is the promise made by many of the gnomic miniature ballads found on the album *John Wesley Harding* (1967). Even if not directly enunciated, most songs on the album seem as if they begin with this framing storytelling device.

In this essay, I will focus intently on one song from that sequence—“Drifter’s Escape”—in order to reveal how Dylan exposes the timeliness of (seemingly) timeless types of storytelling. By “timeliness,” I certainly mean the song is relevant to the issues concerning communal time (history) and temporality as experienced on an individual level (memory). Yet I also wish to indicate with this term “timeliness” that it is the nature of “Drifter’s Escape” (and, by extension, the entire album) to confront the philosophical problematics of time. “Timeliness,” in this sense, indicates a song that not only tells a story relevant (in discrepant ways) to the years 1967 and 1968 in America, but a song that ponders the very concepts related to time and temporality, which we often take for granted. In this way, the telling of a story goes beyond the mere evocation of past events. Storytelling, in the midst of a dissolution of communal time as occurs in “Drifter’s Escape,” becomes a means by which Dylan as songwriter exposes and critiques the predicates of storytelling, be it informally within a small community or more formally as in a court of law.

Walter Benjamin famously begins his essay “The Storyteller” (1936) with the irredeemable catastrophe of the First World War and the silence about its barbarism that

followed once the soldiers returned home. The silence relates both to the incommunicability of the catastrophe on a personal level and to the discursive limits of a society for which the catastrophe proved unprecedented. “If peasants and seamen were past masters of storytelling,” argues Benjamin—one holding tales of the local history and the other tales of faraway places—then in the “artisan class” was “combined the lore of faraway places, such as a much-traveled man brings home, with the lore of the past” (1936/2007, p. 85). Here Benjamin proposes a social situation in which the past and the developing global history of modernity proper intersect in ways that feed a reciprocal relationship between the local and the global, the past and the present, between time-worn wisdom and the new. On *John Wesley Harding*, Dylan situates his stories of drifters, immigrants, and wandering prophets at precisely this temporal intersection.

Benjamin, as well, pinpoints in his essay as a concomitant aspect of modernity’s secularization the withering away of lived experience and the vanishing of “wisdom” (of the proverbial in literary terms). He writes that:

[...] if today ‘having counsel’ is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, this is because the communicability of experience is decreasing. In consequence, we have no counsel either for ourselves or for others. After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding. (1936/2008, p. 86)

The proverbial is a form of literary expression in which the mutability of context only gently shapes the wisdom—or “counsel”—embedded within the expression. In my analysis of “Drifter’s Escape,” Dylan’s use of the proverbial is not as pronounced as in other songs on *John Wesley Harding*. Nonetheless, the ambiguous uses to which the proverbial is put on *John Wesley Harding* rests, I contend, on precisely the dissolution of the communicability of experience that Benjamin outlines, a dissolution that finds evocative form in the song “Drifter’s Escape.”

Into this ever-increasing gap between past and present floods “information;” as Benjamin describes it: “The intelligence that came from afar—whether the spatial kind from foreign countries or the temporal kind of tradition—possessed an authority which gave it validity, even when it was not subject to verification. Information, however, lays claim to prompt verifiability” (1936/2007, p. 89). Dylan’s aversion to the “verifiable” in the social interactions limned out on *John Wesley Harding* again locates his characters—as in “Drifter’s

Escape”—at the sites of fissure within the tectonic temporal landscapes of America. These characters are more or less passive witnesses to the circulation of the proverbial, of stories, of various gestures of public and private expression in a time of fracture and dissolution.

The songs of Bob Dylan balance, sometimes discordantly and sometimes with uncanny equilibrium, different experiences of time. Time, in Dylan’s work, is never a fixed quantity either in terms of personal experience or as understood as history. As the variegated stylistic weave of his oeuvre convinces, there is never a past without the insinuation of possible futures once imagined. Nor is there a future without the call and demand of the past. The present is thereby figured as a liminal space. This is celebrated in one song (think “Like a Rolling Stone”), railed against in others (think “Maggie’s Farm”), and faced with stoic resolve in recent pieces (think “Sugar Baby”). Time is explored on *John Wesley Harding* through a highly self-conscious presentation of various modes of public address (or we can say the gestures of storytelling, in Benjamin’s sense of this cultural activity). On the other hand, the songs on this album interrogate the framing devices used by storytellers by leaving them unfixed and ambiguous. “Once upon a time” (resting on the singularity of a *back then* and a *right now*) is recast, for example, as “As I went out one morning.” The shape and tone of that song—its apparent timelessness and archaic signifiers—remain at odds with the abrupt *in media res* or telescoped timeframe of the opening storytelling gesture. We are in the midst of a story which is just unfolding, and we can be tempted to see this rehearsal of enigmatic events as a tale pulled from the store of folk music’s protean canon.

*The Forward* asked Greil Marcus to assess the greatness of 2020’s *Rough and Rowdy Ways*. Its benchmark for the last “great” Dylan album was 1975’s *Blood on the Tracks*. In a manner typical of his unseating of preconceived judgments, Marcus refused to rank the album and refused to mark *Blood on the Tracks* as a “great” album. He replied:

The marking point is *John Wesley Harding*, and every album after that [...] up until the **kinship** albums *Good As I Been to You*, *World Gone Wrong*, and *Time Out of Mind*, is some kind of mistake, put-up job, a disguise you could see right through, a lie. As *John Wesley Harding* did, *Good as I Been to You* and *World Gone Wrong* allowed you to rehear all of Dylan’s music, and the world at large, in a new way, with values you didn’t understand as such (persistence, endurance, disappearance) replacing those that ruled the world (money, power, love, even honesty and truth). (Marcus, 2020, my emphasis)

Marcus's formulation here is quite pertinent to this essay: marking the album *John Wesley Harding* as revelatory of the value of persistence (a kind of timelessness), and tacitly linking its aesthetics to the folk music contained on the "kinship albums," one is enjoined to think about Dylan and time. However, if one is to prize apart the key term "kinship" in this refiguration of *John Wesley Harding's* timeliness, the sense of liminal time, as described above, becomes evident. As a synonym for "honesty," in Marcus's list of putative values, I would posit "authenticity." And for a song-series like *John Wesley Harding* to function as a "marking point"<sup>1</sup> before a series of "cheats" and "lie[s]" implicitly values the authentic over the doubled, the split, the utterance that vexes a frictionless ideological commerce between the past and the present. Marcus himself indicates Dylan's fidelity to paradoxes such persistence and disappearance being coeval values that allow us to reconfigure the discourses that bound our historical and political lives. Is Dylan capable of "inauthentic" work when he is not actively engaging in acts of "kinship" by reinhabiting past voices (often those of Black musicians)? Or does Dylan see (as much theoretical work on the blues that Marcus has never engaged with does) that "disappearance" and "persistence" are aligned in the blues?

In other words, the blues remains a form that embodies liminal temporalities, that can claim disappearance (i.e., the formation of linguistic and musical codes that evade dominant discourses or the disappearance of self into the layers of intertextual recitations that make up the genre) and persistence (the destabilizing supplementary of works that take shape and are reshaped in the liminal space between popular song and poetic expression, between dominant white discourses and the expression of Black history).

*World Gone Wrong* (1993) and *Time Out of Mind* (1997) are clearly "returns." *World Gone Wrong* is a curated album of folk and blues songs from Dylan's past. And *Time Out of Mind* inaugurates Dylan's late poetic, a poetic deeply invested in citation and in recitation. However, at this juncture, I would like to note that *John Wesley Harding*—so often elided in Dylan studies—is always referred to as a song-series that "returns to" Dylan's "folk origins." Dylan's no doubt apocryphal quip that only the Hank Williams songbook and the King James Bible were by his side as he composed these songs underscores Dylan's own figuration of the album as a return to key sources, key generic forms (Williams was deft at weaving the emerging modern sounds of country music with blues music), and—with the Bible—a return to prophetic voices and their insistence on communal returns. Such a characterization

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<sup>1</sup> The idea of a "marking point" remains a vague concept to me, but it is one to which I nevertheless assent, finding *John Wesley Harding* a *sui generis* song series rather than kin with anything at all.

reduces what is in fact a powerfully dramatic staging and critique of a singer's confrontations with the doubled nature of time.

In the chapter entitled "Time is Longer Than Rope" from *The Old, Weird America*, Marcus writes on the hesitantly given name of the singer in the song "Lo and Behold!"

Now he is faced with a demand that goes just past the endlessly rehearsed gestures of fellowship and distance, acknowledgement and evasion, presentation and disappearance, that in 1835, in *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville caught as the very stuff of a democratic walk down the street of the American small town. (1997, p. 44)

Rather than marking routes or roots of "kinship," de Tocqueville, in Marcus's reading, points to evasive or ambiguous modes of public address as uniquely American. I would contend that the America's uniqueness, in this context, inheres in the liminal temporality experienced and re-experienced in public and private life. Freddy Cristóbal Domínguez, writing on Marcus and the timelessness of American ballads, notes that, for Marcus, these songs recycle the "liminal world, the world of the self-made man struggling with a puritanical order established by...the prophets of the city on the hill" (2022, p. 118). "From these songs," Cristóbal Domínguez explains, Marcus describes "the voice of an America split within itself, a place of dereliction and hope, of oppression and freedom, of newness and obsolescence" (p. 117). Cristóbal Domínguez offers us a prototype of American temporality inspired by Marcus's work that evades the weight of "kinship," a weight that forecloses not only historical narratives, but the very possibility of individuals to critique or reimagine themselves within the narratives they inherit.

Dylan's *John Wesley Harding* is not an album of returns, of a retracing of routes of kinship, but rather it presages the liminal temporality of songs found on *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, for instance. That this song series was forged in the desperate year of 1967 illustrates the stakes involved for Dylan's writing: as I will explore later in this essay, this year is a bifurcated one. Its bifurcation expresses an almost inevitable chasm between American history and American memory. As Anne Whitehead delineates the vision of history offered by Friedrich Nietzsche: "In literate societies...the individual cannot participate fully in the cultural tradition. [They share a] sense of a past which is too expansive to be absorbed or assimilated, but which cannot readily be discarded" (2009, p. 40). Memory in modernity is

defined by its proximity to the fracture or fissure between history and memory or, as Benjamin would have it, between the process of storytelling and atomized information.

Dylan's songs on *John Wesley Harding*, though borrowing from prophetic forms, can be seen as a work of prophecy in that, as a response to temporal fracture, it asks its listeners to balance newness and obsolescence. It asks us to conceive, through its exacting fashioning of modes of address, a doubled time, a time that foreshadows, a time that repeats, or a time that contains divergent, even incommensurate, narratives. A distinct melancholy pervades the work, a melancholy constituting an ethical stance towards modernity's barbarism—refusing to forget, the writing opens a space for a newness that ever recedes from view. This melancholy was articulated by Benjamin and, as Elliot Wolfson argues, is a version of Judaic messianism Dylan revives in his work. “The philosophic import of the melancholic nature of the asymptotic curvature of messianic time,” writes Wolfson, “and by extension of the finitude of temporality more generally, finds a deep resonance in Dylan's oeuvre” (2021, p. 216). To redeem, fully, the messianic must remain that which is to come. The arc of justice becomes—after World War One, the catastrophe of American slavery, or the Holocaust—an asymptotic curvature, a bending that is felt or that is urgently imagined, but a bending that refuses closure as it is the very nature of temporality to remain unfixed, open, and finite.

### **“Oh, Help Me in My Weakness:” “Drifter's Escape” and History**

In the song series that constitutes *John Wesley Harding*, the failure of utopian bending of the arc of justice into an unbroken circle yields a complex sense of time. The “rustic” or “folk” tonality of the music inspire a sense of return (as, perhaps, such mediated sounds of the folk revival always had) however the way in which a listener must grapple with allegories that dissolve the moment a referent is fixed leaves one with the feeling of being obsolete, an exile in one's own land. The songs are Möbius strips where proverbial (sounding) wisdom is bent into prophetic enigma.

The evidently denuded language of *John Wesley Harding* belies the fact that the songs on it are a weave of different registers—usually of forms of direct, public address—that undo the very act of casting moral judgments upon a fallen world. The outlaw figures that populate the album are not allegorical fixtures whose patterning in short, sharply drawn narratives opens up the album's significance. On the contrary, close attention to the language used in the modes address presented in these songs dissolves the clear boundaries between speaker and addressee, between a listener's status before the law and their place outside its reach,

between exegete and text, and between set generic forms. That this is accomplished on a recording whose putatively “sepia-toned,” astringent musical palette (in contradistinction to the variegated swirl of *Blonde on Blonde*, 1966) involves a listener in a song-series sounding like a *complete statement* only emphasizes the lack of closure held at the core of each song in the series.

The songs on the album are frequently structured as a colloquy between insiders and outsiders, between those on the margins and those communal voices in need of alignment, concord, or direction. The modes of address, manifold as they are (entreaty, public condemnation, juridical remonstrance, formal[ized] testimony or confession) signal that Dylan is far less interested in his public persona and its function within American culture than with the valences of the voice within American society. Dylan’s attunement to the way particular voicings have profound ramifications within the album’s network of tropes, allusions, archetypes, and modes of address allows him to examine, with almost unprecedented complexity, the way in which the voice is socially constructed, socially constrained, and quite able to portend or to testify to social violence despite its evocation, always already, after the fact. The past becomes template for the future; the present is pitched between half-broken legends and an exigent desire for closure.

Exploring just one mode of address—the entreaty—we find in the song “Drifter’s Escape” the exigent tone I alluded to in the previous paragraph. For those characters or figures deploying entreaties in these songs, time is running out, an imminent conflict that will bear no just resolution is at hand or, more terrifyingly, the figure positing his entreaty faces an irresolvable chaos. “Drifter’s Escape” is about extra-judicial violence—a fact of American life and a fact of American history that has yet to be fully accounted for (fully narrated or worked through) in our collective memory. Americans inhabit “the scene of the crime,” as Dylan described Tulsa in “Murder Most Foul” (2020). Writ large, as a nation, we do not currently sustain a communal narrative about this crime, about its founding crimes, and therefore, the dissolution of a common narrative leaves us incapacitated to confront the ongoing crises that we face. The faces that stare out at us from the photograph titled “Patients recovering from Effects of Race Riot of June 1st, American Red Cross Hospital, Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA, 1921” (Universal History Archive, 2023) register degrees of exhaustion, resignation, dignified assertion, and a turning away from the probing lens. It is a photograph that haunts one. It addresses one primarily through the figure in the center standing up through the ruins outside the frame, yet offers no redemptive catharsis, as it fits

no communally recognized national narrative. I hesitate to say it offers an entreaty to the future, as that would instrumentalize its testimonial weight. What it does do is exacerbate the American sense of temporal dissolution, temporal fracture, temporal dispersal and, as such, it offers us testimony of our own place amid narratives and counter-narratives about racial violence in America and its sources in the nation's identity and history. Dylan's investigation of the divisions and fissures belying any sense of "communal time" in America can be found in this song if we tend closely to the semantic gesture of the entreaty that begins "Drifter's Escape."

An entreaty proposes a distinct relegation of power – to offer an entreaty is to cut the self off from power and to fix the addressee as the holder of determinations of individual fate. The earnestness and humility enwoven in the term's etymology casts the speaker in a submissive, humble relationship to the addressee. As far as inscriptions go, either in juridical documents or, more piercingly, on tombstones, the exigent entreaty for justice structures the more formalized attempt to signal power relationships and to dismantle them through the largesse of the powerful. When the entreaty finds its way into the courtroom document, it proposes a mercy at the core of the violent imposition of justice (justice being an end to storytelling, a way of finalizing the juridical discourse in this one instance). The bare lineaments of the most modest tombstones—a name and two dates—is an entreaty to remember. A judgment that consigns entreaties for mercy to the margins of its purportedly definitive accounting is a barren site of leveling violence. It is akin to the barren sight of a cemetery whose inscriptions, though legible even, cannot be read within a community of those who know the dead. Their entreaties for memory strike us as eminently poignant and, at the same time, as sites for the archeological imagination to colonize the names and dates and resurrect a possible network of now vanished social relations. In this case, historicizing means abjuring empathy in favor of knowledge.

To know the other is not the goal of offering an entreaty. It is to submit. It is to survive manifestations of power or to seek refuge from chaos. Knowledge, in the social situation formed by the entreaty, becomes a force of domination; neither the font of communal wisdom nor aggregate of personal experience *knowledge*, in the space of songs marked by the gesture of the entreaty is a commodity. Those who have it conceive of regimes of power (inherited or not) while those beyond its zone of comprehensiveness are exilic, solitary voices. On *John Wesley Harding*, one of the things Dylan is reckoning with is the dissolution of a communal culture and a shared sense of time. Unbroken cultural spaces, literal and

figurative, can resound with an entreaty such as “How many roads must a man walk down/Before you can call him a man?” They do so in a way that can abide the rhetorical status of the questions. They are not vexations, but questions meant to weave together a group of socially concerned citizens. And the evocative enigma of the answer offered (“The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind”) would then indicate a shared knowledge between singer and listener. In that anthem, the voicings circulate in a cascade of righteous emblems linked by a forcefully moral tone, its force only underscored by the apparent wandering, indefatigable inquisitiveness of the singer. All is ultimately legible.

The illegibility of the entreaties proffered in the songs on *John Wesley Harding* is not a result of an overdetermined set of allegories. The trace of the allegorical in the songs has no bearing on their powerful questioning of standard modes of reading. An allegorical ascription given to the source of the entreaty or to the often indifferent community addressed will never open up the songs on *John Wesley Harding*. The songs do indeed open up, but it is a manifold set of interpretive possibilities that are opened up. And this interpretive proliferation is not the songs’ value as such; the proliferation of possible readings is the impact of a song series attuned to dislocations in time, dislocations of which the songs’ textual instability—and their fiercely reduced means of expression and series of archetypal images and figures—testify in a profound manner.

“Drifter’s Escape” originally closed the first side of *John Wesley Harding*. Following a series of ballads and prophecies—in other words, songs retelling tales from the past (the title track and “The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest”) and songs evoking an uncertain future (“All Along the Watchtower” and “I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine”)—“Drifter’s Escape” promises an escape from a seemingly deadly fixity. This escape is that offered by the peripatetic essence of the drifter-figure. In three short verses, a society is evoked, several characters comment on it, while the singer, guitar, and bass fixedly move the time ahead. It is as if the singer has but a few moments to tell his tale, each detail remaining evocative only because of a dissolution of time, of a site or a space in which the stately, open-aired entreaty of “Blowin’ in the Wind” has vanished and darker currents sweep away fixed points of reference.

The opening verse contains the whole of the drifter’s entreaty, an entreaty voiced as he is carried from a courtroom. The courtroom as site of communal storytelling, of *precedent* defining the present, gives way to the liminal space—a village commons, say—where social relations established in the courtroom are placed into circulation. “Oh help me in my

weakness’/I heard the drifter say,” the song begins. A listener is confronted by a cry for help, a cry tempered by the singer’s interjection, by the interjection of a story. The social surround in which this cry may or may not become legible is the focus of the rest of the song’s narrative. The tightly linked nature of these first two lines and the tempo of the song makes the passage *from* the drifter’s voice *to* the singer’s all the more jarring. Narrative instability becomes an inherent fixture of the song. Thus, any listener is placed in two reflective realms: that of active responsiveness and passive listening. A listener is further untethered from the story as the singer modifies the second two lines of the song’s first verse: “As they carried him from the courtroom/And were taking him away.” The bare detail of a “courtroom” is enough to create a scene of incipient chaos: the “they” who take him away may be bailiffs of the court, although we cannot be certain if they are not a mob (the judge’s abdication later on in the song underlies such a reading).

As the song’s first verse returns to the voice of the drifter, Dylan sings of his life of no position: “My trip hasn’t been a pleasant one/And my time it isn’t long.” A listener here *wants* a story to unfold, but there is no time for it to do so. No past can be gleaned from this overly-decorous, sardonic description of his previous trip. It is completely determined by where he is now: a present shaped by judgment’s abdication and the anxiety such vacancy produces. In “Drifter’s Escape,” the judge’s casting of his robe aside is indicative of a refusal to tell, a refusal to judge, a refusal to offer closure. The song contains the trappings of judgment and is permeated by an incipient violence attendant upon a desire for such judgment. But it is ultimately about a lack of an author(ity). The drifter is left to fling his entreaty out to anyone who may listen while the arbiter of knowledge and knowledge’s power asks why *we* must even try to understand—the time of linearity and precedent, of precedent-*setting*, of the law, is vanishing, leaving in its wake an empty expanse of time, a time of temporal confusion engendering great urges for violence from the assembled crowd.

A lynching—that paradigmatic extra-judicial American ritual—is present in this song’s evocation of mob violence, of a jury furious for “more,” and of a social space unmoored from the courtroom or courthouse. Thus the song’s initial entreaty, ““Oh, help me in my weakness’/I heard the drifter say,” dislocates the listener’s relationship to the entreaty (it made to us by the singer but then, as the second line immediately affirms, it is merely a scrap or fragment of speech being retold to us). Not only that, however, the implication of a lynching shadows this rapid dislocation so that a listener is made uncomfortable. The drifter’s fate becomes tied to the society’s communal fate as either a

regime bound by manifold acts of violence or a social arrangement that can be evaded. Power and the evasions actuated by the outlaw ethos, hallmark themes of Dylan's pre-1965 work, are reworked in the song's opening wherein a life outside the law is linked to some essential "weakness." The term is crucial: the drifter is not "helpless" in body only—it is an inner sense of dislocation that besieges him in the tempest that begins the song. The listener's position as witness is thereby an unstable one, as being "in weakness" is, perhaps, the place where an inactive bystander is situated. In this song "weakness" is an oddly deployed synonym for "helplessness." "Weakness" becomes, in this reading, a manifest symptom of the drifter's social position outside the law or, we may say, outside the law's protections.

The drifter's essence, his very being beyond the habitation of the law, is further emphasized when he admits "And I still do not know/What it was that I've done wrong." Rather than the site of the production of knowledge, the courtroom and its proceedings further alienate the drifter from the society in which he finds himself thrown. The stories told about him in the courtroom, stories which enflame the jury and generate the crowds, are left out of the song, but the rudiments of American racial injustice are as clear here as they are in "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" (1964), another song in which Dylan uses the proceedings of a court—and not a direct indication of the race of those involved—to implicate *our own* internalized assumptions and knowledge of how race works in America. The truncated and elliptical nature of "Drifter's Escape" does not evade the fact of two Americas existing, as it were, on two historical continuums, two Americas that tell two distinct stories of a shared history of violence. Rather, unlike "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," wherein justice's arc across time is evoked if not insisted upon, the failure of any cohesive narrative to take place in "Drifter's Escape" is a symptom of a rupture in national narratives that goes beyond even the violently bifurcated narratives of race that score the land.

A chaotic bisecting of lines of address follow. A listener is not entirely sure if the judge, who speaks next, addresses the drifter directly or addresses the singer of the song or addresses his retinue. In the first line of the second verse we are told, "Well, the judge, he cast his robe aside/A tear came to his eye," these gestures signifying either a regretful completion of his all but limited duty in a jury trial or, perhaps more in line with the tone of abandonment and collective violence in the song, the dual gestures signify an abdication of his role as arbiter of a clear lineage between precedent and incipient violence. If the latter, the judge is a figure who witnesses the dissolution of law as commonly understood. The

subtle rhyme between “aside” and “eye” that links the two gestures evokes a sense of shame on the judge’s part, the line “a tear came to his eye” rendered in passive voice underscoring that he is resisting a public revelation of pity. The “weakness” of the first line—cutting across physical powerlessness of the scapegoated victim and the inner collapse of the passive witness—bleeds into the judge’s own position of powerlessness.

The pervasive “weakness” experienced by the characters in the song represents a collapse of knowledge and truth and a severing of a communal sense of history and time. Rather than a tension between a felt sense of *Gemeinschaft* and the alienation of *Gesellschaft*, Dylan’s work, in 1967, exists at a time when a common sense of national history has been effaced. Ironically, Dylan constructs his faltering allegories—that is, tightly-knit narratives resistant to allegory as much as they encourage it—in a musical form reminiscent of folk music. The folk revival itself (that very *name*) sought to resurrect a set of lost connections, to trace out a map of once forgotten allegiances and commonalities. Those connections were a simulacrum to begin with. The songs on this album are a doubled gesture: they promise on the surface, in music and language, a return *to*, but, in the intricacies of the song series they effect a *denial of* such a return. We listen in a haunted, liminal space or a space that becomes liminal in the way it is haunted by a past always already undone as it is re-voiced in the name of a return.

The products of a functioning courtroom—an agreed-upon narrative woven into the texts of law and precedent—are completely absent in this song. The entire endeavor of knowledge production, or of an alignment of the social scripts of the courtroom with the chaos encircling it (acts of reading and interpretation), are, for the judge, at this point in the song, absurd rituals. “You fail to understand,’ he said” Dylan sings, and then dropping into a lower pitch he completes the couplet: “Why must you even try?” It is not that wisdom must be imparted and the singer—and thereby his audience of listeners—will learn from this calamitous aftermath of the ritual of justice. Even questions brought before the law after it appears a ruling of some sort has been made are essentially futile.

The key tension between outside and inside is rendered explicitly in the close of the second verse:

Outside, the crowd was stirring  
You could hear it from the door  
Inside, the judge was stepping down  
While the jury cried for more

The sketch of a society constituted by an outside and an inside crucially underpins the song's binaries of crowd/drifter, law/chaos, and community/atomization. The incipience of the stirring crowd *outside* is matched by the decisive, resigned stepping down of the judge *inside*. The straightforward binary between inside and outside is complicated by the jury's cries within the courtroom echoing the crowd stirring beyond it. What seems a stable structure—insofar as it is defined by an outside and an inside—is eroded by the tumult of voices. The stirring crowd seems primed for an explosion of cries once the judgment that has been passed is transmitted from the confines of the courtroom (a space of public reckoning nonetheless) to the wider public realm.

The jury's cry for "more" may be an excited demand to retain their temporary power within the confines of the court and its dispensation of law. The jury is urging more time to feel *as if* they are in control of the levers of power, of the law and its univocal (and thus violent) dispensation of judgement. The jury, it seems, in its desire to transform the mob-like stirring of the crowd into an official determinant of the courtroom's "justice" reveals the precarity of the law's ability to bind a community.

An attendant and nurse (figures whose ancillary roles sketch out a stratified society) cannot bear the dissolution of the site of the law. The attendant and nurse are prime witnesses outside the official avenues of power and are situated at the limit between the mob and the courtroom, between violence and justice:

"Oh, stop that cursed jury"  
Cried the attendant and the nurse  
"The trial was bad enough  
But this is ten times worse"

The jury's cry and the cry of the attendant and the nurse reverberate against one another signifying an indeterminate, tense standoff that the attendant and nurse read as a sign of the impending, total dissolution of the stratified society they inhabit. Their investment in a system that can dehumanize and ostracize a drifter dissonantly charges their sympathetic investment in his fate. However, the concluding verse of the song indicates a shared mode of reading and interpretation, a shared ideological investment in the social system that links judge, jury, crowd and our two witnesses:

Just then a bolt of lightning  
Struck the courthouse out of shape  
And while ev'rybody knelt to pray  
The drifter did escape

In “The Wicked Messenger,” seemingly divine portents and arbitrary phenomena are desperately set as signs to be interpreted by a singular, putatively wise, messenger: the people confront the messenger when “The leaves began to falling/And the seas began to part.” A natural, specifically arbitrary phenomenon (leaves falling) is conflated with a supernatural occurrence (the seas parting). Likewise, in the conclusion of “Drifter’s Escape” what allows the escape—“exegesis” having as its Greek roots the notion of being “led from,” of *escape*—is a determined reading of signs. Refusing the closure of determinate readings opens the route of the drifter’s escape and, for listeners attuned to Dylan’s liminal temporality, opens up the texts determining American discourse: its resentments (the pathological fixture of the past) and its prophecies (the ever-present desire to elide the past for a future dimly perceived). Performing this kind of critical work, “Drifter’s Escape,” and by extension *John Wesley Harding* fractures American prophecy by ironically giving voice to the past.

The arbitrary lightning bolt is of course read as a form of divine intervention, a chastisement, and “everyone” primed to read this phenomenon as such adopts the requisite attitude of deference to determine readings, determinate lines between authority/law and the undifferentiated masses (“everyone”). The struck-out-of-shape courthouse fixes everyone’s attention on this bastion of law and order, and if we venture to read such deformation as wholly arbitrary we have a drifter figure outside the law offering a rebellious reading of the scene of divine chastisement. It is the powerful alchemy of the law and its attendant rituals that transform the arbitrary into the determinant. But it is a deeper ideological fixation upon sites of origin as *the determinants* of communal identity that make the damaged courthouse a symbol of a putatively less textual, more direct form of law-giving. The drifter/exegete becomes an outcast yet again when he determines to read the lightning bolt as nothing more than an arbitrary sign: his escape is predicated upon his own mode of reading beyond the figurations of law-giving. It is thus in the song’s conclusion where issues of reading, interpretation, and the law of genre intersect with a searing social critique.

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