Painting the Passports Brown

They're painting the passports brown," sings Bob Dylan in his enigmatic masterpiece "Desolation Row" from *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965). The brown seems a reference to the color of Nazi shirts. A nose-to-the-stone activist in the civil rights movement, Dylan here evokes the fascistic qualities not merely of the police and Klansmen killing his comrades. The "brown" quality was the developing culture in Dylan's beloved America, a near-fascistic culture in which bourgeois white people relished the repression and even murder of civil rights activists. Dylan's power as a poet and what I would call a cultural interventionist is that, at his best, he is able to crystallize the world in which he is embedded, to both reflect and refract the particular moment to illuminate its universality and the possibility of human emancipation: the chimes of freedom crashing.

If "Desolation Row" was his exposition of the desolation he perceived under Johnson's Great Society, his COVID-19 opus, "Murder Most Foul," has a deceptively "shaggy-dog" quality to it. Dylan starts by rattling off a great American signifier in the classic sense, the "day that lived in infamy." Yet within a few lines he is paraphrasing his 1976 song "Hurricane" and, within a verse, riffing on the Beatles, Woodstock, Altamont, and even Gerry and the Pacemakers. He repeatedly returns to increasingly horror-movie style descriptions of the assassination. If anything, his work here is more reminiscent of the legendary Basement Tapes or his playful work with the Traveling Wilburys than it is his "serious, folkie" side. Taking the basic poetic structure of "Desolation Row" with a talking blues rap-type delivery, he is backed by one of his most astounding compositions and arrangements. It is almost ambient and droney, “shoegaze”[1] for a string section with very few chord changes, yet it very much evokes Nelson Riddle or Gordon Jenkins’ classic arrangements for Frank Sinatra.

Like “Blind Willie McTell,” left on the cutting-room floor of *Infidels* (1983), “Murder Most Foul” is an outtake from his somewhat forgettable last album of original material, *Tempest* (2012). By releasing it during the COVID-19 crisis, Dylan has pulled off a spectacular cultural intervention. While titillating Dylanologists and befuddling critics, Dylan has re-attained his gravitas with a genuine affective contagion, an ability to bypass mystification and evoke catharsis by commiserating the abstraction called “America.” This would be an astounding moment even were it in response to an old mediocrity like “Things Have Changed” or “Brownsville Girl.”

Yet this is arguably his most ambitious song-poem since “Desolation Row” itself; it marks a return to that row, the inescapable and irresistible other side of the tracks. On this side of tracks, down by the boondocks as it were, everybody asks which side are you on. Are you with Ezra Pound and T.S. Elliott, or with Einstein disguised as Robin Hood? Underneath historic specificity, Dylan sees a desolate world, what Marxists call “class society.” “Murder Most Foul” takes as its McGuffin the assassination of John F. Kennedy. From the assassination of Kennedy, we get a signifier of a rotting behemoth lurking underneath the wings of the American eagle, a figure out of H.P. Lovecraft, the secret demiurge of Desolation Row. The anxiety of all this, it seems from a surface reading, leads the troubadour to demand the legendary DJ Wolfman Jack play his favorite songs, from the Eagles to Oscar Peterson. He then finally returns to Dealey Plaza, proverbially speaking, to the blood-stained banner of the murder most foul.

But, of course, this is no Oliver Stone conspiracy nail-biter. Dylan even makes wordplay with “magic bullet.” Conspiracies aside, Stone’s social-patriotic film expresses a left-liberal desire for an alternate history where Kennedy gets out of Vietnam and makes friends with Khrushchev and Castro. If the assassination of Kennedy has been a part of Dylan lore for nearly 60 years, the seeming purpose of “Murder Most Foul” is about troubling Oliver Stone’s Camelot narrative, while also speaking to an audience that has internalized it, like the images of Pearl Harbor and 9/11, the 2008 financial crisis and the rise of COVID-19. In this read, Kennedy’s murder serves to demystify the monstrosity that is American society, but also to set it against another America, the America of rock and roll and jazz, of Marilyn Monroe and Wolfman Jack, not unlike the “America” of the Simon and Garfunkel song, of Kurt Vonnegut and Duke Ellington, of Kermit the Frog and Fozzie Bear.

The Kennedy assassination marked a turning point in Dylan’s relationship with the Old Left when he drunkenly accepted a special award from the Emergency Civil Liberties Commission. This organization, founded by those affected by McCarthyite repression and purged from the more well-known ACLU, was well-respected among the aging, Jewish, Communist Party USA fellow-traveler community in New York. From denouncing in no uncertain terms the milieu he was addressing as “old,” and counterposing them to those who had gone on a solidarity trip to revolutionary Cuba, Dylan went on to “bomb” while ending on a shout-out to the radical wing of the civil rights movement:

> I’ll stand up and to get uncompromisable about it, which I have to be to be honest, I just got to be, as I got to admit that the man who shot President Kennedy, Lee Oswald, I don’t know exactly where—what he thought he was doing, but I got to admit honestly that I too—I saw some of myself in him. … You can boo but booing’s got nothing to do with it. It’s a—I just a—I’ve got to tell you, man, it’s Bill of Rights is free speech, and I just want to admit that I accept this Tom Paine Award in behalf of James Forman of

> the Students Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and on behalf of the people who went to Cuba. (Boos and applause)

Here, as with Malcolm X’s talk of chickens roosting, Dylan was surely being a sly provocateur—a troll, as we say nowadays, but a troll of the highest order: a dialectical troll, a joker, and a thief. And the often-befuddled reaction to Dylan’s cultural production among socialists shows them taking the bait. The dominant tendency is to periodize his work as “before” and “after” his political commitments. Without making a hard break of things, the late socialist cultural critic Mike Marqusee saw Dylan as a veritable solid comrade until a song like “My Back Pages” and his drift away from the civil rights movement and organized left.[2] Yet as Marqusee and others point out, when asked by a journalist in 1965 why he no longer wrote protest songs, Dylan answered, in one of his most unambiguous statements, “All my songs are protest songs.” And indeed, as the Old Left—those who unplugged him at Newport and organized booing campaigns of his Europe tour with The Band—dropped him, the New Left adopted him. Or rather, in a sense, and rather unconsciously, he adopted the New Left. His protests weren’t for the movement, they were of the movement. Dylan was a cognitive cartographer for the New Left, whatever his ostensible political stance happened to be at any given moment.

The questions that Dylan raises for socialist intellectuals and activists are not at all predicated upon his individual political stance—indeed his stances are never as precise as they are made out to be. His position is akin to that of Walter Benjamin, who was a Messianic revolutionary and a synoptic seer puzzled by his own visions. As Enzo Traverso points out about Benjamin, he struck his two best friends, Brecht and Scholem, as in the former case, too Jewish; in the latter case, too Marxist. Dylan is large; he contains multitudes, not all of them with proper IDs.

The mythological Dylan, metamorphosing from agitating folkie to impressionistic troubadour—followed by androgynous rock star, reclusive stoner, Christian fundamentalist, rabid Zionist, and so forth—is rooted in some degree of reality. Yet throughout all of these mythologized personae, he never strayed from the antinomian idiom of a mythological America: the America of the civil rights movement and the International Workers of the World, but also the "land of Coca Cola." This America is worth ringing the chimes of freedom when the ship comes in, as you've not seen nothing like the Mighty Quinn. Yet it is set against an America of desolation, of murder, of outright evil, even. Evil exists, in Dylan's frame of reference. And it is this "Old Weird America," in Greil Marcus' terms,[3] to which he returns in "Murder Most Foul."

Dylan lore has it that "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" was inspired by one of the great eschatological moments before our present one (as of April 2020), the so-called Cuban Missile Crisis. But it also began a turn for Dylan's output, away from exceptionally vivid protest poetry (with a few love songs and deceptively profound talking blues mixed in) toward an impressionistic style. What is more, with the capitulation of Northern Democrats and even some of the civil rights establishment to the Dixiecrats at the 1964 Democratic Convention, Dylan started to see the limitations of the movement itself.

In "Murder Most Foul" Dylan constantly returns in grotesque or melodramatic fashion to the scene of the crime. Increasingly he breaks into what has been derisively labelled "doggerel," compared by critics to maudlin romanticism in the style of Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire" or Don McLean's "American Pie." In this common reading, Dylan is simply showing the "decline" of an America that can achieve partial salvation through the "great American songbook." But Dylan is engaging in immanent critique of this separation. This is akin to a scene in Quentin Tarantino's Django Unchained in which one hears the sweet, sweet sounds of Americana, banjos, dobros, and a fiddle. Yet the camera pans and we see this music being played by poor southern white men, who are about to castrate an escaped slave who is hanging upside down from the barn ceiling. This is why Dylan at times plays “Dixie,” of all songs, and grapples with themes of the South in the Civil War. The ugliness of America is inseparable from the beauty of America, akin to Benjamin’s unpacked library existing alongside his conception of progress as piling corpses. Like Benjamin, Dylan is engaging in revelation.

It is for this reason that Dylan’s sense of humor has always been a key ingredient in his genius, as it is both surreal and dark, titillating and poignant. The double-entendres and inside-joke references have always been there. Take “Rainy Day Woman #12 & 35,” as much about having stones both literally and proverbially tossed at one’s person as about cannabis-induced intoxication. Or “The Mighty Quinn,” a joking reference to Anthony Quinn but also to the idea that the mere presence of a celebrated figure will make everybody “jump for joy.” Like the masterpiece that never gets painted, Desolation Row is inescapable, and is seeded by murders most foul. Dylan scholars, both professional and amateur, may have great fun picking out references that are embedded throughout “Murder Most Foul” and why they are included. Does Dylan ask Wolfman Jack to play Billy Joel’s “Only the Good Die Young” in a joking reference to his own song’s surface-level similarity to “We Didn’t Start the Fire”? Is jazz saxophonist Stan Getz merely there to rhyme with Dicky Betts (of the Allman Brothers), or is it vice-versa? These are Dylan’s particular charms, a series of maker’s marks. It reminds me of the Wu-Tang Clan tracks in which RZA shouts out all of the other MCs and friends from the neighborhood, people who have inspired him: corner kids and shopkeepers, Allah’s Five Percenters and community organizers.

Dylan’s art encourages engaged listening and processing, not use as passive background noise. Cultural consumption is certainly in the sphere of commodity production, but it also retains an aura, a parcelized amount of disalienated time that can move beyond mere leisure or contemplation and toward taking a side. It may be the devil, or it may be the lord, but we live in a political world. Dylan is quite clearly not a socialist. Yet his art can only be understood as springing from a socialist frame of reference, as much Duluth as New York City. A well-informed generalist for whom nothing under the sun is alien—even the Eagles' wretched "Take it to the Limit" and the significance of the number 33 and the three tramps partying on the grassy knoll—Dylan is our Heine, our Goethe. To quote another poet/rock lyricist, Robert Hunter, his "job is to shed light, but not to master."

While one can oppose the existence of the Nobel Prize, there is no doubt that if anyone deserves a Nobel Prize for literature, it is Dylan. Yet in one of his greatest recent cultural interventions, Dylan gave a deliberately trolling and plagiarized speech to the Nobel Committee, mailed in just before the six-month cut-off date. As with probably every great work that he has ever produced—from his renaming a Celtic folk song "Girl from the North Country" and then even stealing from himself by using the same music for "Boots of Spanish Leather," through to his lack of denial that he cribbed from Civil War poets on his 2001 album "Love and Theft"—he stole, he thieved, he did it in a way that he would obviously get caught. And not just from an esoteric source that some such Hardy Boys would find in the darkness of night. No; it was from the online Spark Notes. Like a first-year student, he dazzled the bourgeoisie with brilliance and baffled them with bullshit. Rub-a-dub-dub, comrades, it's a murder most foul.

Notes

1. For an explanation of the rock subgenre "shoegaze," see [here](#).

2. See Mike Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger: Bob Dylan and the 1960s* (Seven Stories Press, 2005).
3. Greil Marcus, *The Old, Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes* (Picador, 2011).