

# The Truth about Life, Sung Like a Lie: Dylan's Timeless Arrows from Consolation Row

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The world's greatest (living?) songwriter turned eighty on May 24th, 2021. The University of Tulsa, which houses the Bob Dylan Archive and the Institute of Bob Dylan Studies, celebrated this with a wide-ranging Dylan@80 symposium to take stock of Dylan's achievements. Consider the near-impossible question I was asked to tackle in the "Tangled up in Dylan" panel: How do you see Dylan from the perspective *of a social scientist?*

## **Power and greed and corruptible seed: and the wind began to howl**

A possible answer, one of many, lies in Dylan's career-long rejection of bleary-eyed idealism in favor of cold-eyed realism as a lens for observing the world. One way in which Dylan's been there has been early on in my social science days. Back in the mid-90s, starting my PhD at the London School of Economics as a very young twenty-something, not quite from Hibbing but from the Flemish farmlands, I wanted to improve the world, no less. The big story back then, arguably the biggest story in social science since the Second World War and its camps, was the transition in the eastern half of Europe from authoritarian communism to something like free markets and liberal democracies. My bright idea was to devise a new normative system, a political philosophy to underpin something like basic income post-communism, or real freedom capitalism: Why surfers should be fed (Van Parijs 1995), and why all Poles should get a check. Bright, and as misguided as Marxism. After one year I gave up the attempt, instead choosing to do more honest, bread-and-butter empirical work on the political economy of social policy: power and greed and parametric pension reform (Vanhuyse 2006b; Vanhuyse 2006a; Cerami & Vanhuyse 2009; Gamliel-Yehoshua & Vanhuyse 2010).

Normative to positive, bleary-eyed idealism to cold-eyed realism: Dylan has not exactly influenced me here, but he's been a steady companion. Nor would he probably be as surprised as I am to see the sorry state of freedom, justice, and democracy in, say, Poland, Hungary, and Russia, thirty years after the Iron Curtain came down (Vanhuyse 2019; Cerami & Vanhuyse 2009, 1-14). A certain world-weariness has always been Dylan's wont, sometimes acerbic ("Ballad of a Thin Man"), sometimes mild, almost compassionate ("Mississippi") —but always distant. The wounded but accepting "It's Alright Ma, I'm Only Bleeding" could be cited here, or the vitriolic yet understanding "Desolation Row." What a depressing picture of humankind. Jeroen Bosch and James Ensor, eat your

hearts out: These songs scare me stiffer still. Dylan's first great apocalyptic mystery, "All Along the Watchtower," starts with deceit and confusion:

There must be some kind of way outta here  
Said the joker to the thief  
There's too much confusion  
I can't get no relief  
Businessmen they drink my wine  
plowmen dig my earth  
none of them along the line  
know what any of it is worth.  
(Dylan 2004, 224)

People are people, life is but a joke, but no reason to get excited: We've been through that and this is not our fate. Best to take note, then replace those handles taken by the vandals, and reread Moby Dick or listen to Hank or Woody. Dylan's songs were not painted in rosier colors in mid-life, see *Oh Mercy* gems like "Political World" and "Everything Is Broken." But let me focus here on two outright masterpieces from Dylan's so-called lost decade in the Lord's desert. In "Jokerman," he paints political worlds that metaphorically describe imperial Rome in the momentous century between Augustus and Trajan or Hadrian as well as the last couple of years in Russia or Turkey, China or America:

Well, the rifleman's stalking the sick and the lame  
Preacherman seeks the same, who'll get there first is uncertain  
Nightsticks and water cannons, tear gas, padlocks  
Molotov cocktails and rocks behind every curtain  
False-hearted judges dying in the webs that they spin  
Only a matter of time 'til night comes steppin' in.  
(Dylan 2004, 464)

Rings a bell? Two decades earlier, "All Along the Watchtower" had still ended its lament with apocalyptic overtones that were left entirely unstated. Instead, the mysterious final lyrics transitioned into a thin, eerily menacing harmonica howl:

Outside in the distance a wildcat did growl  
Two riders were approaching, the wind began to howl.  
(Dylan 2004, 224)

Fiery Jimi Hendrix and blind Jeff Healey might have later given this song more electrical oomph, but it was Dylan who nailed that final howl. In the haunting “Blind Willie McTell,” decades later, apocalypse or disaster have now become the clearly stated starting premise:

Seen the arrow on the doorpost  
Saying, this land is condemned  
all the way from New Orleans  
to Jerusalem.  
(Dylan 2004, 478)

For Greil Marcus, this song is quite simply a version of the book of Ecclesiastes (Marcus 2010, 159). Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, and Dylan mirrors this in the song’s finale:

Well, God is in His heaven  
And we all want what’s his  
But power and greed and corruptible seed  
Seem to be all that there is  
I’m gazing out the window  
Of the St. James Hotel  
And I know no one can sing the blues  
Like Blind Willie McTell.  
(Dylan 2004, 478)

The album for which “Blind Willie McTell,” like “Jokerman,” was originally destined, was first named, not *Infidels*, but rather, unusually prosaically, *Surviving in a Ruthless World*. You can see how that skill may help a young student of politics understand his topic better — how it might fortify a starting social scientist earning his stripes in the publish-or-perish world of 21<sup>st</sup> century academia.

### **Tradition as anti-surfing: handing down to delve deeper, see longer**

A better answer to the birthday symposium’s impossible question may lie in Dylan’s laser focus on tradition. The Nobel Committee awarded him the 2016 Literature Prize “for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition” – and, boy, were they were right on the money. I want to highlight here Dylan’s *traditio* in the Latin sense of the passing on of something of core value across the generations, handed down over time from fathers to sons. Dylan was handed down to me in my teens by my parents in the form of a Best-of LP whose hip cover portrait intrigued me, and by my adored teacher of Latin, a true *auctoritas*, in a rather tradition-focused Jesuit high school in Ghent. As the German political philosopher Hannah Arendt put it in her 1954 book *Between Past and Future*, the

handing down of core values was a distinctly Roman ritual — an act, not a thought, and one which the Greeks had no concept for. Janus, the high Roman god of beginnings and of gateways, had two eyes, one looking into the past and one looking into the future. By seeing at the same time what mere humans could not see at all, Janus the god connected the past to the future — and so guarded the order of the Roman universe (Arendt 1954, 7).

Tradition: that unfashionable notion for contemporary minds, which Dylan has always cared about so much — which, in the end, lends him his remarkable depth and staying power. To pay homage and remember once more the lines of tradition in his art — something he thankfully much prefers to spoon-feeding us direct explanations of it — is, I bet, the main reason why he wrote his memoirs. “Ah, but I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now:” as a very old twenty-something, Dylan was a barnstorming modernist with a strong interest in T.S. Eliot, Rimbaud and that thin wild mercury sound of electric strings, sure. But before, during and after this, he studied classics such as Suetonius’s *Lives of the Caesars*, Ovid, Sophocles, Thucydides and Machiavelli, American originals such as Melville and Faulkner, and, even more so, the musical tradition he followed — the Great American Songbook of blues and folk. In a rare moment, on *Biograph*, Dylan was even happy to preach:

To the aspiring songwriter and singer, I say disregard all the current stuff, forget it, you’re better off, read John Keats, Melville, listen to Robert Johnson and Woody Guthrie.

(Ricks 2003, 36)

For Dylan, understanding his own tradition through and through — knowing it inside out — was a way not just of paying his dues but also of seeing deeper and further, behind mere appearances. Dylan adds another eloquent voice to a lofty chorus composed of Nabokov, Calvino, Barzun, Bloom, Steiner, Nussbaum, Dreyfus, and others who have sung the praises of the Western classics and, in particular, have made cogent arguments for their continued vital importance in our age and for our students (Vanhuysse 2006c). Just like the Civil War era, of which he keeps singing and which he studied on micro-filmed newspapers at the New York Public Library, might be closer than it seems to 1960s America — or perhaps today:

The age that I was living in didn’t resemble this age, but yet it did in some mysterious and traditional way. Not just a little bit, but a lot. There was a broad spectrum and commonwealth that I was living upon, and the basic psychology of that life was every bit a part of it. If you turned the light towards it, you could see the full spectrum of human nature.

(Dylan 2004a, 86)

All well and good, but at least in theory, any historian worth his salt, any social scientist who still peeks beyond the borders of his subfield of a subfield, could pull off such a feat, too. So far, I have made a plea for understanding and maintaining (only *then* to critically discuss) the handing down, and intimate knowledge, of valued elements of culture in the intellectual realm generally. Dylan indeed merely joins hands here with historians, philosophers, and social theorists such as Thucydides, Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville, Hannah Arendt, E.D. Hirsch Jr., and many contemporary thinkers all too readily dismissed as conservatives, in order to more conveniently cancel their ideas without engagement. For Arendt, the loss of tradition is dangerous because it entails a crisis of thought: without it

there seems to be no willed continuity in time and hence, humanly speaking, neither past nor future, only sempiternal change of the world and the biological cycle of living creatures in it. (...) For remembrance (...) is helpless outside a pre-established framework of reference, and the human mind is only on the rarest occasions capable of retaining something which is altogether unconnected.

(1954, 5).

Arendt cites the last chapter of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*: "Since the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity" (1954, 6). Or, one might add today, the mind surfs on forever in the echo chambers of social media, floating ever further in the shallows, between anger and amusement. Fake news tactics, 280-character politics and the unbearable lightness of being on screen: We're clicking on, chasing likes, in infinite jest, rewiring our brains in the process (Carr 2010). Where's our Wi-Fi-free Desolation Row for this latest version of hell — our gilded age of surveillance capitalism? Shelter, please, as the Tech Big Four optimize click-baiting techniques to keep us hooked with dopamine hits; as Google algorithms dominate storage, and selection, and retrieval, of knowledge — become our memories (Zuboff 2019).

Tradition: Without it, we cannot know our roots as well, thus we float on with less structure, pulled along more forcefully by events and other noises — life, history, as one damn thing after another. For Arendt, "without a securely anchored tradition... we would deprive ourselves of one dimension, the dimension of depth in human existence. For memory and depth are the same, or rather, *depth cannot be reached by man except through remembrance.*" (1954, 94). Arendt's fears from the post-war era about a parallel crisis in education — a flight from authority and judgement — have become reality: Witness the contemporary aversion from canons (the best) or even cultural literacy (the core), and the emphasis on skills (learning how to learn) rather than substance (learning). Not knowing, but searching; not boosting anti-fragility through reasoned debate, but coddling (hence fragilizing) through safety-ism and trigger warnings (Lukianoff & Haidt 2019); "not languages but coding; not literature but textual decoding." (Steiner 2019, 163). In the process, we are in danger of losing our bearings and becoming less multi-dimensional, as in Abbott's *Flatland*, and more manipulable, as in Huxley's and Orwell's dystopias.

For surfers, depth is dangerous. The metaphor is apt: Surfers *can* only ever stay on the surface. To cite Alessandro Baricco on the mutation of culture: “the idea that *understanding* and *knowing* mean delving deeply into what we study, to the point of reaching its essence, is a fine idea that is now dying.” (2013, 74). It is here that Dylan, like all great art, can offer insights into the human condition; insights that are certainly parallel to, but often also *deeper* than, those offered by empirical social science – and which go beyond the contingent and the contextual to touch something constant or essential about who we are. To some degree, some of the sharpest minds in the social sciences acknowledge as much. Nobel laureate Herbert Simon noted that fiction can aid understanding and deep learning through what he termed “hot cognition.” If you want to truly understand what the Gulag camps were like, read not a history or sociology text but rather Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* (Simon 1983). The great political economist Albert Hirschman and the Norwegian social theorist Jon Elster forever cited insights from the French moralists, notably La Rochefoucauld and Montaigne, and novelists such as Stendhal. Half of Elster’s *Alchemies of the Mind* (1999) is devoted to spelling out about which subset of the emotions we can still learn more from novelists, playwrights and moralists than from the cumulative findings of scientific psychology. Did someone mention Shakespeare?

### **Songs as moments out of time: lyrical vaccines to boost our defenses**

In his long late peak that started with *Time Out of Mind*, Dylan has now fully assumed his belonging to — and has intensified his dialogue with — a rarified line of wise trickster bards who have distilled yet often had to dissemble key insights into the human condition: Thucydides and Homer to Virgil, Sappho, and Catullus, then to Verlaine and Rimbaud, possibly George Brassens and Jacques Brel. About Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian War*, a key early influence, Dylan marveled:

a narrative which would give you the chills. It was written four hundred years before Christ and it talks about how *human nature is always the enemy of anything superior. ... it's like nothing has changed from his time to mine.*  
(Dylan 2004a, 36)

Richard Thomas cites Dylan saying that the thing about his music is “that there is the old and the new, and you have to connect with them both. The old goes out and the new comes in, but there is no sharp borderline. ... It goes on and on like that. Forever through the centuries” (2017, 126).

And then there is something else, something more: something that tradition in *song* can do particularly well. As Dylan writes about the great blues singers:

What makes the real blues singers so great is that they were able to state all the problems they had; but at the same time, *they were standing outside of them and could look back at them.* And in that way, they had them beat.  
(Ricks 2003, 78)

Hannah Arendt discusses a short story by Franz Kafka, “HE,” to interpret the present as precisely such a moment out of time; a mental bubble of sorts (Arendt 1954, 7-13). The present can be a short break in the forever-continuum of time, in between the push of “the things that are no longer” and the pull of “the things that are not yet.” Into this mental bubble — the duration of, say, one timeless song — the mind can step to stand back, make bridges, gain strength, then make a judgment or gain deeper insight. As it is with the blues, so it is with folk songs:

Folk songs are evasive — *the truth about life, and life is more or less a lie*, but then again that’s exactly the way we want it to be. We wouldn’t be comfortable with it any other way.

(Dylan 2004a, 71)

Not a bad way, this, to summarize what art, and only art, can offer: world-weary wisdom, non-sugarcoated consolation. As it is with folk songs, so it is with Dylan. His *Chronicles* tell the truth about his life, perhaps never more so than when he’s lying. And in his best songs, Dylan shoots off evasive, Janus-faced truths concisely captured within musical moments out of time. And he conveys these old truths in surprising, amazing ways: *new* poetic expressions, said the Nobel committee. Dead serious about his art and the tradition within which it stands, but couldn’t-careless about its reception, in his greatest work Dylan just transcends time. Power and greed and corruptible seed will reign supreme through the ages, but Mr. Tambourine Man keeps strumming his lyre, offering solace also of a mental kind.

No one can sing the blues like Blind Willie McTell.

(Dylan 2004b, 478)

Jokerman dance to the nightingale tune

Bird fly high by the light of the moon.

(Dylan 2004b, 464)

With the grizzled insight and sheer beauty of sublime song, Dylan becomes a mythical version of the song and dance man he always claimed to be: a singing sage dancing beneath the diamond sky, one hand waving free, the other hand gently patting blind Homer’s back. I imagine them, up there, toasting Sappho with a cup of ambrosia — a divine sip, literally, of immortality. Dylan takes us disappearing through the smoke rings of our minds, down the foggy ruins of time. From high up with the Greats on Consolation Row, like a cranky, creaky-voiced, blindfolded Cupid, he has been shooting arrows of a different kind onto our doorposts for decades. Not just harbingers of doom, also lyrical vaccines to boost our defenses: it’s alright ma, it’s life and life only. Arrows that offer insight into ourselves and our world: Not what is new about it but what is old. Like nothing has changed from his time to mine.

For all that, from this kingdom of Denmark, I take my bow: marveling still, still struck with awe. The harmonicas play the skeleton keys and the rain, and these arrows of Bob Dylan will be all that remain.

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