

Today and Tomorrow and Yesterday, Too
***Rough and Rowdy Ways*/"Murder Most Foul" (2020),**
Bob Dylan, and Late Style Studies

By Adjunct Professor Nina Goss

Fordham University, New York

The most familiar of Francisco de Goya's Black paintings, completed in the period 1820-23, when the artist was in his 70s, is surely *Saturn Devouring One of His Children*. The painting is, at every encounter, horrifying: not, I posit, in the full-frontal cannibalism, but in Goya's depiction of Saturn's face. The drama depicted, in which the Titan Saturn devours his own children to forestall the prophesy that he will be overthrown by his own offspring, is an allegory of age resisting the natural cycle of generation. It is the crazed insatiability in Saturn's eyes, the wild desperate strength in the rangy, knobby old body, and the gruesome untamed gray hair that concentrate the tone of the work: Goya depicts intemperate and repugnant vitality in this portrait of old age devouring the inevitable. This old artist remaking his craft to conjure the unassimilable potency of old age exemplifies late style.

Theodor Adorno's seminal essay on Beethoven's late style is crucial to the genealogy of contemporary late style studies; the essay sparked Edward Said's book, *On Late Style* (2007), which brought late style as a category into mainstream cultural discourse. Adorno begins his discussion in rarefied ironic mode:

The maturity of the late works of significant artists does not resemble the kind one finds in fruit. They are, for the most part, not round, but furrowed, even ravaged. Devoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny, they do not surrender themselves to mere delectation. They lack all the harmony that the classicist aesthetic is in the habit of demanding from works of art, and they show more traces of history than of growth. (2002, p. 564)

His vivid image of indigestible prickly old artists is intended to critique the traditional emphasis on the biography of the aged artist, i.e., a direct mapping of circumstance and condition onto the art. Adorno instead privileges examining the reinvention of form in late

work itself. But he's also correct: old artists are uniquely resistant and unconstrained, and they take their difficulties out on their sensitive audiences. In this paper, I hope to demonstrate, via particular attention to Dylan's hypnotic and disconcerting 2020 project, "Murder Most Foul," that old Dylan deserves gold membership in the select club of significant late style artists. I hope also to introduce you to the terms of the flourishing and peculiar field of late style studies. The driving questions here ultimately go beyond Bob Dylan: what do you really want from the artists you relish who live long enough to be old artists? Vigorous if mediocre productivity? Protracted and dignified consistency? Wisdom from a post-creative reflective state? Or unexpected eruptions of creativity, new forms of seduction and meaning that face down senescence and mortality?

Style is an arrangement of features that cohere into a distinctive contextualized register; style is where artifice signifies identity. You can enjoy on YouTube Bob Dylan's magnificent 2010 rendition of "The Times They Are A-Changin'" at Barack Obama's White House (Sanitykey, 2011). The performance, via the subtle and insistent musical arrangement and Dylan's subtle and insistent vocals, manifests the entire historical narrative and gravitas of that moment. With tenderness replacing the original bite in the vocals, he makes a beautiful space in which to reflect on the cost, the triumph, and the precarity of this new road, America's first Black presidency. Although the performance entails a brilliant old artist's complex consciousness of time, it is a straight interpretation of the song, which is not a reinvention entailing style.

To illustrate style, I want to point out the difference between young and old Dylan by comparing two of his visions of historical time, "Masters of War" (1963) and "Mother of Muses" (2020). Young Dylan in "Masters of War" stages the moral crisis of his moment, the perilous stasis of the Cold War, on a timeless, borderless ground of Old and New Testament allegory. He plays up his youth and models himself David against the military-industrial Goliaths and having earned credibility for his boldness, plays with Judas to represent treachery for gain. Ingeniously exploiting the Cold War paranoia that beset his parents' generation, in order to galvanize his peers, he weaponizes the fear of creating another generation of the vulnerable,

You've thrown the worst fear
That can ever be hurled
Fear to bring children

Into the world
For threatening my baby
Unborn and unnamed
You ain't worth the blood
That runs in your veins
(1963)

Worse than his own death is the preemptive destruction of the next generation: the masters' greed will foreclose the future through the bold singer's young body. In his righteous prophesy of moral justice, the masters die nameless and unredeemable. Young Dylan presides over a landscape where history is written in colossal figures and infused with high-minded and cocky moral conviction. In "Mother of Muses," Old Dylan constructs another imaginary landscape that also distorts history and aggrandizes the singer, but now the remaking is tough work for us as its methods are allusion, compression, fragmentation, and scattered ubiquity. The third stanza exemplifies this:

Sing of Sherman - Montgomery and Scott
Sing of Zhukov and Patton and the battles they fought
Who cleared the path for Presley to sing
Who carved out the path for Martin Luther King
Who did what they did and then went on their way
Man, I could tell their stories all day
(2020a)

In only six lines, this stanza manages to ride U.S. history from the 18th to the mid-20th centuries with relish in the vocal phrasing and an exclamation of the pleasure he takes in this work; this must be what omniscience feels like. Seven specific namechecks range over five wars (note that he's outgrown his own naïve "Masters of War" moral vision—Patton and Zhukov remind us that indeed world wars can in certain ways be won). Additionally, he alludes to the genocide of indigenous Americans in the figure of Winfield Scott who was crucial to the Trail of Tears calamity that immiserated the Cherokee nation; the passage brings us up to the Civil Rights era. Old Dylan is beset by memory—the mother of all the arts—which exists as discrete elements that may be composed, decomposed, and recomposed as fluid narrative arcs. Old Dylan and the supply closet of memory offer moral

contradictions and complexity in this highly sophisticated thumbnail historical narrative ultimately tracing the rise of King and Presley, two sociocultural and political touchstones of his formative era, the mid 20th century. Through a finely-grained timbre and precise yet relaxed phrasing, he creates a persona that feels convincingly at home in this collapsed timescape. In a mere 32 words; through formal purpose and effect, this brief lyric asserts an identity. This is style.

Although in Dylan's most recent work, as above, there is a special wild density to the allusions, and an increasingly audacious ubiquity to the persona, we can trace a genealogy of these features in post-millennial Dylan. His work in the last 26 years certainly offers abundant evidence for consistency in themes, genres of reference, and musical patterns. However, I'm more interested in the field binding the concrete consistencies, which I see as late-life consciousness binding the micro and macro elements of his work since 1997–2001. This field may be characterized as compulsive movement in stalled time. This operates on both the subjective and the historical levels. First, throughout late Dylan, we meet a persona who exhausts himself, mind and body, while bemoaning his self-imposed imprisonment in static temporalities. In his early late work, we easily find this subjectivity of static urgency, for instance in two songs from *Time Out of Mind* (1997) “Not Dark Yet,” in which he sings, “it looks like I'm moving, but I'm standing still,” and “Love Sick,” which offers a portrait of the artist trapped in tiring rounds in an unreal realm of town and country, where he is sustained by self-willed alienation and repetition.

As the late work progresses, Dylan masters inhabiting landscapes that seem timeless, or folkloric, yet are minefields sharded with history: events, voices, texts, figures. He assimilates pariahs such as Junichi Saga and Henry Timrod, he camouflages the canon, slipping in fragments of Homer or Chaucer, he gives pop culture figures deconstructed second lives, as with Leonardo DiCaprio in “Tempest” (2012). Even a composition rooted in the historical reality of the Civil War, “Cross the Green Mountain” (2008), is a quilt of voices ranging from soldiers to officers to mothers awaiting news from the battlefields, all figured as the dream of a sleeper generations distant from these lives he is compelled to reconstitute. These examples are an utterly infinitesimal representation.

Thus, we do the mortal work of tracing the great underweb of historiography and western literature that Dylan has been weaving for 26 years. By now we take for granted Dylan's deft sleight of hand with history, but I posit that he is bringing his late style to a

climax of sorts via the formal strands that have run through the work: the time-hopping daemon of a persona, and a profligate density of allusion.

In “Murder Most Foul,” Dylan braids the Kennedy assassination through fact, fiction, political and cultural history, and the moment of its making, into 17 minutes of a vocal performance that is more one-man show than merely a song, but I’m going to be lazy and call it a song. Although released in 2020 concurrently with the record *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, “Murder Most Foul” is regarded as a discrete project. Noted Dylan scholar Timothy Hampton published a response to “Murder Most Foul” on Princeton University’s blog in November 2021 to coordinate with the anniversary of the assassination. Hampton’s piece is a strong valorization of Dylan’s late-career historical consciousness: he sees Dylan’s fluency in 20th and 21st century America illuminating the nation’s inability to extricate itself from all its atrocious past lives. Hampton notes, “One of the striking features of the song is that the narrative unfolds from several viewpoints at once,” and this is what I want to emphasize and complicate, the extreme polyvocality. At very rough count, there are 89 cultural and historical allusions in the 162 lines, which does not include separating out all the references to the assassination and the Kennedy family. Also at roughest count, Dylan sings through ten personas. These include Kennedy, Oswald, and murderers *plural*, whom Dylan either directly voices or indicates, thereby enacting the dark history of conspiracy theory that shadows America’s other dark histories of violence, destruction, and malign silences.

An arbitrarily selected passage may illustrate what I mean by the extremity of Dylan’s late *late* style architecture and persona, and the vexing ethos of the historiography that emerges from this. Here I chose lines 42–49:

Don’t ask what your country can do for you
Cash on the barrel head, money to burn
Dealey Plaza, make a left hand turn
Go down to the crossroads, try to flag a ride
That’s the place where Faith, Hope and Charity died
Shoot ‘em while he runs, boy, shoot ‘em while you can
See if you can shoot the Invisible Man
Goodbye, Charlie, goodbye Uncle Sam Frankly, Miss Scarlet, I don’t give a damn
(2020b)

Ten specific allusions perforate this slice of text with cultural-historical memory ranging from 1917 to arguably 1975, and also make a house of cards of any moral narrative.

Line 42 introduces Kennedy's magisterial injunction to altruism and is immediately followed by line 43's winking at the conspiracy theory that organized crime and payouts were behind the assassination of this most honorable man. In the reference to "crossroads," the obvious homage to Robert Johnson's song ("Cross Road Blues", 1937) and his mythic Faustian exchange can be read as a subtle counterpart to Kennedy's theme of sacrifice (what are you willing to do for posterity; what if you read posterity as the glory of your own name?). The line quoting Junior Walker's Civil Rights era song, "Shotgun" (1965), is uncannily contemporary for American listeners—suddenly we in the 2020s are implicated in the distinctly American lineage of white authority gunning down black men running for their lives. However, the selection of lines I've framed at random ends with a chain of references that begins in dichotomy ("Goodbye, Charlie" may refer to the war in Vietnam whose origins trace directly to Kennedy himself, and infuse the call to sacrifice in line 42 with awful irony; it is also the title of a frothy Rock Hudson film from 1964), and then ends with a pop culture archetype of cavalier white masculinity from an exemplar of now,-cancelled American racist nostalgia (HBO Max has pulled *Gone With the Wind* [1940] from its streaming inventory). This one arbitrary slice of the song yields a fleeting coherence, a moral narrative that dissolves as soon as it begins to emerge, and a persona that is unreliable from every angle. This segment deceptively knits disparate—even incompatible—events, cultural products, and texts into a parsable syntax faster than you can identify the parts.

The word *play* occurs 61 times in "Murder Most Foul." It is used for incantatory effect in the voice of Kennedy as, while dying, he rhythmically issues a list of requests for DJ Wolfman Jack. Here the narrative time frame of the song freezes, and Dylan exploits the speech act of the word *play*: each name, number, or event is released from the past into the present, revived from memory into momentary life—this indeed is what it means to play a song.

Hampton writes of Kennedy's dying playlist,

Now Dylan is asking us to think about the layers of meaning that are sedimented in even our happiest works of art. Music is salvation, Dylan still seems to believe. It can comfort you on the way to the hospital. But don't kid yourself that it isn't as haunted as our history. (2021)

This is sound, yet I also find the moral life of this song more active than is conveyed by a structural image of layers: I think it's covered by the dictionary entry of *play* that is specific and cruel: a fish playing a line is when the fish is caught on a hook and helplessly thrashing and exhausting itself against its capture. I think this *play* figures the condition of subjectivity Dylan has mastered in his late work—the only “now” is the song in play, the historical past is in a constant rotation of new stories and new meanings, yet American history is always caught on its own violence, atrocity, and injustice. Progress itself feels like no more than flailing against undying dark history. The song ends, *play murder most foul*—play the song we are hearing, play more conspiratorial, unanswered lethal violence (which is what King Hamlet cries out for when he uses this phrase)—this stuckness is more American than we may want to admit.

The excess, distortion, and resistance in Dylan's late style are the crucial criteria for late style studies itself. Scholars and audiences have asked a lot of late style masters—they should both synthesize and transgress their early flourishing with expression of what Gordon McMullan and Sam Smiles—shepherds of contemporary late style studies—call the “conscious contemplation of mortality” (2016, p. 4). And there's no arguing with the representative short list: Michelangelo, Titian, Shakespeare, Beethoven, and Goya are the figures who were exalted by early critics for their peculiar ability to reshape their respective art to do justice to mortality with a magnificent and irregular creative growth.

Regarding an origin story, late style studies—in musicology, art criticism, literary studies (with, significantly, Shakespeare as a special case)—gained traction from several conditions of galloping modernity in the 19th century. This is a fascinating story in Western intellectual history, and I can only whet appetites with the following observations. First, the brute facts of population increase and increasing lifespans in the industrial revolution, linked with labor requirements under expanding capitalist production encouraged socioeconomic measurement of the utility of the aging citizen. To rationally quantify the productivity of a human lifespan with greater precision and uniformity than had been applied through millennia of slavery and compulsory labor entails the developing social sciences with their scientific templates for human activity, relations, and experience. “The need to maximize the efficiency of the working population saw researchers into the aging process using statistical methods to assess human productivity across a lifetime” (Simmel, as quoted in McMullan & Smiles, 2016, p. 17). Now add modern culture's engines of revolution, innovation, and radicalization, as well as the intensifying primacy of the individual expressive creative subject.

On the one hand, rational discourse casts the narrative of a single life onto a graph of socially useful viability and productivity. On the other hand, the enduring Romantic ethos sustained by modernism valorizes the singular artist from whom radical new form erupts out of the crucible of the self. Further, significantly in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the depredations wrought on traditional Western vocabularies of eternity, immortality, and transcendence by modern science and philosophy, as well as unforeseeable savageries on civilized soil, created meaningful new challenges for the aesthetic realm to manifest the perdurable and the transcendent. I can't—no one should—argue for late style studies being deliberately constructed from the triangulation of one, age as a category of productivity; two, the idealization of the radical artist; and three, a new space for the discourse of art and infinitude or imperishability. Instead, I submit that late style can generate discussion on how this triangle of ideologies and desires may be playing out on this critical field.

The discourse of late style studies has been characterized by a pattern of rupture, a repeated breakdown of the analytical into the irrational. Late style critics can't seem to avoid extremity, vexation, and repulsion, which they articulate with curious emphasis. First, across time and place, these critics have insisted on a drastic uniqueness of late works. Hans Tietze in 1933 wrote, “the late works of great masters” are “greetings from a world lying beyond our own” (as quoted in McMullan & Smiles, 2016, p. 27). Writing of late style in general, Edward Said gushes about the “essentially unrepeatably, uniquely articulated aesthetic works written not at the beginning but at the end of a career” (2007, p. 17). In his study of Shakespeare's late style, Russ McDonald insists on the general resistance of the text, “In both its manifestations, prose and verse, Shakespeare's late style is difficult – difficult to listen to, difficult to read, difficult to understand, and difficult to talk about” (2006, p. 3). Critic Kenneth Muir claims that Beethoven's final quartets, “mak[e] a last attempt to solve the enigma of life” (1961, p. 3). Late style critics place these works just outside the limits of expressibility and in doing so, they are willing to risk hyperbole.

Then there is a tetchy internal vexation regarding the credibility of this field. Central curators of contemporary late style studies, Sam Smiles and Gordon McMullan, both voice this. Here is Smiles:

As new iterations of late style appeared, its proponents developed not a theory but a discursive field, with different emphases and values, reflecting different technical traditions and cultural expectations [...]. Seen in this light, the credibility of late style as a coherent concept in

aesthetics, with a wide application across art forms, cultures and epochs, is less assured. (2016, pp. 29-30)

Gordon McMullan writes, “the internal contradictions and denial of contingencies and materialities which feature so markedly in accounts of late style need a great deal of critical reflection yet” (2016, p. 37). Smiles and McMullan are estimable in their skepticism: they posit the dissonant nature of the field as essential, almost disqualifying, without impugning the value of trying to wrest conceptual coherence from work that surely has a significant common ground.

But it’s the third tone that matters most—the interplay of aversion and pleasure or revelation that’s pronounced in late style critics. Adorno wanted a critical language for late work whose focus was not the “biography and fate” of the aging artist, or a “subjectivist methodology” but the unique formal conditions of the late work itself. And even in his irrefutable critical severity, Adorno ends his essay in thrall to a fearful destructiveness: “In the history of art, late works are the catastrophes” (2002, p. 367).

Art historian Kenneth Clark examines late style in painting in his essay “The Artist Grows Old.” He writes:

Titian’s subject is horrifying, Rembrandt’s grotesque, yet both arouse in me a similar emotion. For a second I feel that I have had a glimpse of some irrational and absolute truth, that could be revealed only by a great artist in his old age. (2006, p. 85)

Less luridly but still insisting on the pleasure of late style’s recalcitrance, Said writes, “I’d like to explore the experience of late style that involves a nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against* [...]” (2007, p. 7). He ends on the ellipsis in a sustained note of existential abrasiveness. An arresting demonstration of aversion and revelation is Peter Nicholls’ 2007 study of the poet George Oppen’s late work which Oppen composed while suffering from Alzheimer’s. Nicholls writes, “it is only in [Oppen’s] late style that the temporally divided self of the survivor comes also to define the poet’s relation to language [...]. [I]t is easy to see how this sense of a fading linguistic agency was [...] at once symptomatic of a frightening and all-pervading ‘strangeness’ *and* a fulfillment of his poetic of ‘impoverishment’” (as quoted in McMullan, 2016, p. 45). There is no disingenuous delicacy in Nicholls’ appraisal. He is ghoulishly eager to credit

Oppen's decay with the "fulfillment of his poetic of 'impoverishment'" (as quoted in McMullan, 2016, p. 45). Nicholls may seem to us, in 2023, as treading very closely to exploiting his subject for his own critical innovation, and any role for dementia in late style studies may become an increasingly urgent question.

My signal passage comes from Georg Simmel, the 19th century critic. Simmel wrote, "While old age nibbles senselessly away at the average and common man and destroys what is essential as well as what is useless, it is the privilege of some great beings to be acted upon by nature according to a higher plan, so that even where she destroys, she uses destruction to extract the eternal out of the extraneous and the disingenuous" (as quoted in Smiles, 2016, p. 20).

We may put forward that these critics are fashioning a peculiar mortalism—a special creative energy only available in the state of conscious lateness—but their personal agons of recoil and exultation are so dramatic that they break through critical agendas. In his definition of the sublime, Edmund Burke writes,

[B]ecause there are very few pains [...] which are not preferred to death: nay, what generally makes pain itself, if I may say so, more painful, is, that it is considered as an emissary of this king of terrors. (1757)

Reasonably, as our decades advance, existence becomes the daily emissary of "the king of terrors." Late style critics claim that certain old artists have created/are creating forms equal to the "pain itself" of mortality. These critics somewhat fervently pry open a special dark chasm of "catastrophe," of "unproductive productiveness," of "a poetics of impoverishment," and "destruction extract[ing] the external," and play in that dark illumination with certain old artists. I posit it is the critical voracity for this extremity of expression and form that may invite thoughts about late style studies as a footnote to contemporary discussions of the sublime.

I believe late style studies leaves us with a terrific dilemma between the seductions of the discourse, which imputes and feeds on extremity, and then effects of late style extremity itself one work at a time. It's one thing to relish the lurid vitality of Goya's Saturn as an exemplar of late style intensity and another thing to negotiate your own excitement at this vision of mortality trying to consume itself. Remember that pre-Adorno, old artists were considered to show "more history than growth;" Adorno insisted that the old greats

manifested their history in formal growth, and we can say Bob Dylan uses history as the material for his formal growth. Doing justice to old Bob Dylan should exact a higher price than the intellectual labor of navigating the thorny, resistant thicket of his late style poetics, and acquiring a refined taste for the ravaged lucidity of his late style voice. If we really dig into his harlequinade of history and memory and its never-conclusive ethics and dig into the fact that his static urgency is hard to reconcile with political optimism, then we may find ourselves in the quandary of late style. In Dylan's case of genius, the "destruction" that "extract[s] the eternal" may invite listeners to give up dreams of righteousness and morally progressive history, in favor of an aroused complicitness in the provisionality of historical truth.

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