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“You’ve Been with the Professors”: Influence, Appropriation, and the Cultural Interpretation of Bob Dylan

Sean Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*. New York:
Doubleday, 2010. 390 pp., 99 b&w illus., index.

Greil Marcus, *Bob Dylan: Writings 1968-2010*. New York:
PublicAffairs, 2010. xx, 483 pp, 14 b&w illus., index.

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American Studies as a discipline, at least as practiced in the United States, has sometimes attracted criticism that it encourages narcissistic navel-gazing by a culture whose socioeconomic base is affluent enough to afford that luxury. This complaint is especially prevalent in attacks on scholars who direct their attention to popular examples of the products of mass culture. A former colleague of mine, for example, often aimed sarcastic barbs at people who “write about their record collections.” At the least, he believed, such unprofessional scholars are too lazy to look beyond narrow personal interests; at worst, they project their own guilty pleasures onto the

larger culture in a solipsistic gesture motivated by self-justification. Although my colleague's opinion reflected a bitter, ultimately dismissive attitude toward recent scholarship on contemporary mass culture, there is indeed a gray area where celebrity worship, fanboy obsession, and personal desire to claim cultural capital may blur traditional notions of scholarship's neutral objectivity. Attempts to overcome such attacks often seek to prove by applying audience or reception theory that popular culture products do have substantive impact on the lives of those who consume them. That defense may appear questionable not only because reception is notoriously difficult to measure but also because critical theory's densely-worded, jargon-laden arguments may seem like self-serving obfuscation to readers already inclined to be skeptical of serious claims for popular or mass culture.

These issues afford a backdrop for reviewing two books about Bob Dylan, one written by Greil Marcus, the acclaimed rock critic whose work over forty years has advanced from comments about new musical releases to wide-ranging cultural history and criticism, and the other by Sean Wilentz, whose three-decade academic career as a social and political historian has recently moved toward freewheeling commentary of the sort practiced by more popular critics. In 2005, Wilentz and Marcus co-edited a collection of essays entitled *The Rose & the Briar: Death, Love and Liberty in the American Ballad*.¹⁾ Perhaps owing to their collaboration, Wilentz seems to have been inspired by Marcus's free-associational style but at the same time has

1) Sean Wilentz and Greil Marcus, eds., *The Rose & the Briar: Death, Love and Liberty in the American Ballad* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005).

striven to maintain scholarly objectivity of a sort that Marcus, despite his having adopted the trappings of academic scholarship, has never much worried about. While Marcus has become more academically inclined over time, Wilentz has become less bound by scholarly conventions. It seems appropriate that their interests have converged on Bob Dylan, a figure whose songs and performances owe their distribution to the media of mass culture but whose work over the past fifty years has often possessed a cultural significance transcending its commercial origin.

Of the two authors, Marcus is the writer whose work is most closely associated with Dylan. The critic has met Dylan at least once, speaking with him briefly after an outdoor concert in New Jersey in 1963, at the beginning of the singer’s career. Overwhelmed by the performance that day, Marcus offered spontaneous praise to a person whose name he had not even caught during onstage introductions. Prior to the publication of the book under review here, *Bob Dylan: Writings 1968-2010*, a collection of record and concert reviews, longer analytical pieces, and brief mentions from such periodicals as *Rolling Stone*, *Village Voice*, and *Interview*, Marcus had published two other books about Dylan. The first was *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes*,²⁾ in which Marcus discussed a series of private recordings made by Dylan and the members of his backup group, later well known in their own right as The Band, as they jammed together in 1967 in a secluded house in the Catskill

2) Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), reprinted as *The Old, Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes* (New York: Picador, 2001) with the title the author originally wanted.

Mountains in upstate New York. There they worked through a series of old folk songs, obscure commercial tunes from the first half of the twentieth century, and new compositions that Marcus portrayed as having evolved naturally out of an old, weird, invisible, and ultimately forgotten stream of American vernacular creativity.

Among its many virtues, *Invisible Republic* demonstrated Marcus's ability to reconstruct the creative process of making new music as he listened attentively to a type of fugitive recording, widely distributed now as illegal bootlegs, that had never before been available. He relied just as much on in-house tapes from Columbia Records for his second Dylan book, *Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads* (2005), which reconstructed the recording-studio process yielding "Like a Rolling Stone," a song the book's jacket copy celebrated as "the signal accomplishment of modern music."³) Both of Marcus's earlier books on Dylan established the critic as an interpreter to be reckoned with, in the first instance for suggesting the songwriter's connections to hidden springs of past American creativity, and in the second for revealing how, in a single song, he had expressed the impatient desires and ambivalences of the countercultural generation. In *Bob Dylan: Writings 1968-2010*, we find Marcus's earliest expressions and frequent reworkings of these themes, allowing us to watch the evolution of Dylan's most rewarding commentator, along with much else—some of which would have been better left uncollected.

While Marcus is an old Dylan hand, Wilentz approaches this

3) Greil Marcus, *Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005).

national cultural icon as a relative newcomer in print, though his involvement is also personal. In the introduction to *Bob Dylan in America*, the historian reveals that he learned of the singer at age thirteen, in 1964, through friends in a liberal Unitarian youth group, and that he attended a Dylan concert at Philharmonic Hall in Lincoln Center that same year. Although Wilentz became acquainted with Dylan’s early recordings through other fans, he takes pride in pointing out that his father and uncle owned the 8th Street Bookshop in Greenwich Village, and that Dylan first met the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg late in 1963 in his uncle’s apartment over the shop. Unaware of that connection as a teenager, Wilentz experienced Dylan’s music as did many other fans, exhibiting enthusiasm when the singer shifted from acoustic folk to electrified rock for three influential albums during the mid-1960s, losing interest as Dylan’s career faded during the 1980s, and tuning in again during the early 1990s after Dylan released two albums of traditional folk songs rendered in a plain, unvarnished, harsh style reminiscent of the basement tapes and indicative of a concern for American roots that has marked the singer’s work ever since. Eventually Wilentz published an essay on Dylan in 1998, an act that brought him to the attention of the singer’s publicists, who asked him to write commentaries for www.bobdylan.com and eventually liner notes for an official release of a recording of the very concert he had attended as a teenager in 1964.

Like Marcus, Wilentz seems compelled to share details of his involvement with Dylan’s work before getting down to the business of interpreting it. There seems a conscious desire to personalize his

connection to the artist—whether to gain the sympathy of the fans among his readers or, more probably, in the interest of full disclosure. Either way, Wilentz the historian, like Marcus the critic, is operating in that potentially impure gray area marking the intersection of popular culture with objective scholarship.

Both these writers situate Dylan in the context of older American cultures that form the matrices from which his songs and music have sprung and discuss the intersections of his career with larger trends in American society. Emphasizing a national connection in his very title, *Bob Dylan in America*, Wilentz promises to explore two interrelated questions: “What does America tell us about Bob Dylan—and what does Dylan’s work tell us about America?”⁴) However, Wilentz loses sight of this overriding intention for much of the book, focusing instead on moments in Dylan’s career that reveal his engagement with particular sources and his creative reworking of them, or that represent significant transition points other commentators have not emphasized. Wilentz’s treatment is thus episodic, though it moves for the most part chronologically—too mechanically so in a final section treating the first decade of this century, which witnessed a phenomenal resurgence of creativity as the singer, by then in his sixties, released three albums of new music, collaborated on the allegorical film *Masked & Anonymous*, published a volume of memoirs (*Chronicles: Volume One*), and served for three years as host of a weekly satellite radio program (*Theme Time Radio Hour*)—all while maintaining a grueling concert schedule that fans refer to as

4) Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*, 8.

“the never-ending tour.” Although this final group of chapters, entitled “Recent,” seems hurried, as if Wilentz felt he had to cover everything from an extraordinary decade, however briefly, he takes a more measured approach throughout the rest of the book.

Unfortunately Wilentz’s imaginatively conceived, endlessly rewarding meditation on one of American mass culture’s most influential figures of the past fifty years gets off to a weak start by keeping Dylan mostly offstage for seventy pages. This section, “Before,” consists of two chapters situating the singer first in the context of the composer Aaron Copland and the Popular Front of the 1940s, and then in the context of the Beat Generation and Allen Ginsberg in the 1950s. In the Copland chapter, the book’s actual starting point, Wilentz indulges a penchant for unsubstantiated free association that is similar to Greil Marcus’s approach to criticism at its weakest. Writing as a historian interested in politically left-leaning cultural production, Wilentz wants to suggest, without presenting convincing evidence, that Dylan’s work comes from a significant strand of American radicalism.

As with most of the book’s chapters, Wilentz opens this one with an effective framing vignette, in this case describing how Dylan preceded each show during a two-month post-9/11 tour with a recording of part of Aaron Copland’s music for the ballet *Rodeo* before he and his band took the stage and began playing. Over the next several years, Dylan also sometimes used Copland’s *Fanfare for the Common Man* or selections from *Appalachian Spring*. By opening with passages from Copland based on themes from traditional American folk music, Dylan evoked continuity with the past during a

time of national crisis and perhaps also sought to reference his own borrowings from that same tradition. However, Wilentz goes beyond these obvious conclusions to suggest that “sixty years on, whether he knew it or not, Dylan had closed a mysterious circle.”⁵⁾ Although unable to discover when Dylan “first heard Copland’s music”⁶⁾ and unaware of any “direct influence,” the historian discusses the composer’s career at length (especially his left-wing political activity) and suggests “shared affinities and artistic similarities recognized only in retrospect.”⁷⁾ We learn, among other coincidences, that Copland and Dylan were both descended from Lithuanian Jews, and that in the summer of 1934, more than seven years before Dylan’s birth as Robert Zimmerman, a young Aaron Copland was delivering a Communist stump speech to the farmers of Bemidji, Minnesota, at about the same time the singer’s future parents Abraham and Beatrice Zimmerman were setting up housekeeping 150 miles away in Duluth.

Wilentz’s forced emphasis on Copland nearly derails the book before it gets under way (though his treatment of the composer is itself rewarding). Fortunately, his chapter on Ginsberg and the Beats more than makes up for the false start. As Wilentz reprises the familiar story, the 19-year-old apprentice folksinger arrived in New York in 1961 (merely four years after publication of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* popularized the Beats among the American public), at a time when scruffy poets still read their work to jazz accompaniment in Greenwich Village coffee houses. In the same dives one could

5) *Ibid.*, 18.

6) *Ibid.*, 34.

7) *Ibid.*, 18.

also listen to folksingers who traced their inspiration to Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and the Almanac Singers, all of whom had shared Popular Front credentials with Copland but clearly had far greater impact on Dylan. However, while this chapter contains a thoughtful discussion of the two-way influences and collaborations of Dylan and Ginsberg, even here Wilentz insists on the Copland connection. Spinning another web of association, Wilentz observes that a poem in Kerouac's collection *Mexico City Blues (242 Choruses)* situates the writer in an all-night movie theater in 1940, watching a film made from John Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men*. Kerouac's poem evokes railroad boxcars rolling by in the movie but does not refer to the movie's theme music, composed by Copland.⁸⁾ For Wilentz, however, "yet another complicated cultural circuit closed" in 1975, when Dylan, Ginsberg, and others made a pilgrimage to Kerouac's grave, where Ginsberg's recitation of the same poem somehow "link[ed] Kerouac listening to Copland" with Dylan's pilgrimage.⁹⁾

In most chapters Wilentz varies his methods to fit the material he writes about—a strategy that gives *Bob Dylan in America* a playful, shape-shifting quality appropriate to unraveling the significance of a figure often described as mercurial or like a chameleon. Indeed, in the film *I'm Not There* (2007), director Todd Haynes notoriously employed six actors to capture different aspects of Dylan's public persona. Although Wilentz does not use that many approaches, he is

8) Jack Kerouac, "54th Chorus," *Mexico City Blues (242 Choruses)* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 54.

9) Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*, 49.

well aware that his subject cannot be best viewed from a single perspective. In a chapter devoted to the concert at Philharmonic Hall attended by the author as a teenager, for example, Wilentz attempts, using a bootleg recording, to imagine and describe what it must have been like to experience Dylan with fresh ears and eyes, fifty years earlier, at the height of the singer's early fame as an acoustic performer of social protest songs set to the tunes of traditional folk music.

In the following chapter Wilentz tries his hand at using tapes of recording sessions to reconstruct the evolution of *Blonde on Blonde*, one of the three landmark albums of Dylan's electrified, surrealist-tinged rock phase of the mid-1960s. Although Wilentz does not handle this material with the total assurance exhibited by Marcus's book on the song "Like a Rolling Stone," Wilentz's treatment of sessions in both New York and Nashville, with a shifting cast of sidemen, conveys a convincing sense of the musician's creative process at that point in his career. Wilentz even makes a strong case for revising the list of contributing musicians at one of the sessions. Both these chapters, each so different from the other, employ flashbacks for background information and a wealth of interview transcripts, now readily available owing to fans and buffs (some of them problematically anonymous) posting material online. Overall, despite Wilentz's many publications as a professional historian, these chapters suffer, as does the entire book, from a casual approach to documentation that frustrates because his penchant for argument by association often drives a reader to want to know more.

Given the author's promise to locate Dylan's work in an American

context, we learn a surprising amount about his reliance on European figures like poets William Blake and Arthur Rimbaud, playwright Bertold Brecht, and film directors François Truffaut and Marcel Carné. Even the "all-American carry" side of Dylan's aesthetic,¹⁰ according to Wilentz, owed much to Carné, and it seems puzzling that in a book so alert to the cultural milieu of Dylan's creativity, Wilentz does not mention the Italian director Federico Fellini, whose films *La Dolce Vita* (1960) and *8½* (1963) portrayed carnivalesque worlds similar to those evoked by the surreal lyrics of Dylan's classic songs "Mr. Tambourine Man" and "Desolation Row," both recorded in 1965. The singer even referred directly to *La Dolce Vita* and to its statuesque female star Anita Ekberg, an object of male teen fantasy, in the songs "I Shall Be Free" (1962) and "Motorpsycho Nitemare" (1964). On the other hand, Wilentz does make a convincing case for Dylan's indebtedness to Kerouac's "spontaneous bop prosody" in the rhetorical strategies, if not the imagery, of "Desolation Row."

Such searches for influence may seem a pedestrian exercise typical of overly literal critics lacking any greater aesthetic or cultural vision. In the case of Dylan, however, who has been often celebrated and dismissed as a "magpie" for stealing flashy bits here and there from which to assemble or collage both his sound and his lyrics, influence is of the essence. Like Marcus, whose collected magazine pieces in *Bob Dylan: Writings 1968-2010* reveal the genesis of the pathbreaking study of influence he published as *Invisible Republic*, Wilentz is at

10) Ibid., 171.

his best when exploring the infinitely expanding topic of Dylan's sources. Indeed, the most satisfying chapter of *Bob Dylan in America* constructs a complex parallel between Dylan and Blind Willie McTell, one of the lesser-known blues musicians, who was active from the late 1920s into the mid-1950s. McTell was adept at absorbing and transmuting a wide range of sources and influences, and Dylan seems to have adapted him as a secret prototype for his own public persona.

Significantly placed at the center of Wilentz's book, with five chapters before and five after, the chapter on McTell shifts back and forth between a consideration of the blues musician in his own right and a song Dylan entitled with his name, "Blind Willie McTell"—a song most critics regard as a masterpiece but which Dylan omitted from his album *Infidels* in 1983 and did not officially release until eight years later when Columbia Records issued the first three discs of the ongoing *Bootleg Series*, which comprises unreleased material from album sessions, alternate takes, and concert recordings. As Wilentz describes the recording session for "Blind Willie McTell" in 1983, proving himself an expert at a task most amateurs find difficult, Dylan "runs through" the song at the piano as Mark Knopfler (then leader of the band Dire Straits) "softly, exquisitely picks an acoustic guitar in the background."¹¹ The lyrics proceed from a weary observer making his way through a blasted South marked by the legacy of slavery and the Civil War but also allegorically connected to the larger failure of the biblical promised

11) *Ibid.*, 198.

land to provide any redemptive release. Repeated throughout this older, wiser, broken reprise of Dylan’s apocalyptic mode from the mid-1960s is a puzzling refrain, “Nobody can sing the blues like Blind Willie McTell.”¹²⁾

The song is not narratively *about* McTell, and there is no indication the song meant more to Dylan than any other song from the same period—indeed, probably less so because he did not include it on the album he was recording. The singer did eventually perform it at concerts but only after hearing a cover version by The Band. Despite Dylan’s cavalier attitude toward a song that has garnered extravagant praise over the years, Wilentz finds in the figure of McTell, whose presence in the song’s refrain conveys a signifying aura of mystery, an analog for Dylan himself. As the historian reconstructs McTell’s biography, he seems not so much a traditional blues singer as a consummate professional, sensitive to the needs of his Atlanta audiences, whether black or white, and capable of providing whatever music they wanted without compromising his own standards of musicianship and without abandoning an urge to be perpetually innovating. He was, according to Wilentz, not so much a “bluesman” as a “songster…working in a tradition, indebted to minstrelsy, that dated back to the vagabond musicians of the Reconstruction years,” borrowing from “all kinds of popular forms, from spirituals to the latest hits from Tin Pan Alley” and encompassing “vaudeville hokum (with its spoken repartee), jug band romps, ragtime, country folk songs, modern spirituals, and pop

12) *Ibid.*, 200.

songs.”¹³⁾ Picking bits and pieces from out of the air as he needed them, McTell reworked them and made them his own, creating derivative works of utter originality. It is plausible that, as Wilentz claims, “for Dylan, McTell’s music had become a touchstone, a standard of excellence for comprehending the world,”¹⁴⁾ and McTell himself a model for the ways in which Dylan would contribute to his own world and culture.

On the other hand, Wilentz may be projecting what he knows about Dylan back onto McTell. Dylan has long been known as a magpie or a sponge and has frequently been criticized for it. From his earliest days as a folksinger in Minneapolis to his most recent album of new songs in 2009, he has often set new lyrics to traditional tunes and claimed the resulting songs as his own compositions, and he has just as frequently echoed musical phrases from old pop songs. Over the years there have also been so many reports of verbal borrowings, not only from song lyrics but from a wide range of poets, including the forgotten nineteenth-century Southerner Henry Timrod, that whenever Dylan releases a new album, both fans and detractors obsessively google phrases from its lyrics. Dylan himself pointedly referred to this aspect of his compositional style in the very title of *Love and Theft* (2001; released, unfortunately, on 9/11). “More explicitly than ever,” Wilentz writes about this album, “Dylan travels through time and space at will..., picks up melodies and lyrics from hither and yon (including some wildly unexpected places), and then assembles something new

13) Ibid., 193.

14) Ibid., 192.

and original for himself and his listeners.”¹⁵⁾ Even the album’s title, Wilentz reminds us, comes from Eric Lott’s scholarly study, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993)¹⁶⁾—a conjunction suggesting that Dylan is a minstrel many times over: a traveling singer and performer, a promoter of his own vaudeville show with the Rolling Thunder Revue of 1975-76, a chameleon frequently changing both his musical style and his public persona (“right down to swiping his own surname”),¹⁷⁾ and above all, perhaps, a white man whose career has sometimes involved performing blackness. But despite Wilentz’s insight that Dylan’s authenticity is as constructed as that of any nineteenth-century blackface minstrel or, indeed, as constructed as that of the consummately professional singer Blind Willie McTell, the historian has somehow missed Dylan’s most obvious cultural theft—that of his own legend as a consummate recombinator of aspects of the “old, weird America,” a legend mostly created by Greil Marcus in his *Invisible Republic*.

At this point we should turn to Marcus’s essay collection, *Bob Dylan: Writings 1968-2010*, for early statements of ideas that went into Marcus’s idiosyncratic understanding of Dylan’s “enormous achievement: the rewriting, in all senses, of American vernacular music.”¹⁸⁾ As early as 1970, Marcus, who had recently earned a degree in American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, drew on his education to declare in a record review that Dylan was

15) *Ibid.*, 263.

16) Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

17) Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*, 266.

18) Marcus, *Bob Dylan*, xvi.

“an American with a vocation... a calling—that old Puritan idea of a gift one should live up to.”¹⁹⁾ Four years later, in 1974, reviewing an album of live tracks from a national tour of Dylan and The Band, the critic applauded them for their “particularly American spirit,” for creating a sound that was “brawling, crude, not completely civilized, an old-fashioned, back-country, big-city attack on all things genteel.”²⁰⁾ Although Marcus invoked the American Studies myth and symbol tradition by relating the meaning of their performances to such figures of high literature as Walt Whitman and Mark Twain (much as Wilentz later alluded to Herman Melville by referring to Greenwich Village clubs as “Bob Dylan’s Yale College and his Harvard”),²¹⁾ it was in this review that Marcus first hinted at what was to become his major theme by announcing that Dylan and his associates had abandoned the “comforts” of contemporary society and instead had assumed “the *burden* of joining a bigger, more mysterious America.”²²⁾ And only a year later, in 1975, commissioned to write liner notes for an official release of some of Dylan and The Band’s basement tapes, which had long circulated as bootleg recordings, Marcus tried out his future thesis by characterizing their fugitive music, scraps of traditional songs and new compositions sounding just as traditional, as “a testing and a discovery of memory and roots...a kaleidoscope of American music” with “strange adventures and poker-faced insanities” lurking “just below the surface.”²³⁾

19) *Ibid.*, 23.

20) *Ibid.*, 56.

21) Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*, 2.

22) Marcus, *Bob Dylan*, 58-59.

As Dylan had done in 1967 when he and The Band recorded the basement tapes, a quarter century later he returned for renewal and perhaps redemption to the tradition Marcus later defined as that “old, weird America.” Entering his 50s, often dismissed as a has-been, Dylan released two albums of world-weary acoustic versions of traditional blues and folk songs: *Good As I Been to You* (1992) and *World Gone Wrong* (1993). Coming after fifteen years of lackluster original compositions, these twenty-three deceptively simple tunes transformed Dylan’s image. The two discs represented a distillation of many traditional songs he had performed occasionally in concert over the previous four years, a development Marcus regarded “not as culture at all, but as some sort of contradiction, anomaly, or disruption, coming out of nowhere: speech without context, a foreign language.”²⁴⁾ Five years later, in 1997, Dylan confirmed his unlikely renaissance in late middle age with his first critically acclaimed album of original material in many years. Bitter, depressed and depressing, sounding almost as if from beyond the grave, the rambling philosophizing lyrics of *Time Out of Mind* seemed unlike any of Dylan’s own prior compositions and unlike anything else in the whole spectrum of recent popular music. Even so, as always, Dylan had drawn on a multitude of sources and had transformed them in the process. “Though crafted out of fragments and phrases and riffs far older than anyone living, bits of folk languages that joke and snarl as if for the first time,” according to a review by Marcus, “this [recording] is a picture of a country that has used itself up.”²⁵⁾

23) Ibid., 68.

24) Ibid., 201.

Marcus's rhetoric here is reminiscent of the fictional jeremiads of the novelist Thomas Pynchon, who has lamented "the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from,"²⁶⁾ and who has imagined, as a kind of subversive counterforce, a parallel or alternate "Republic" that might be glimpsed "through any of a hundred lightly-concealed entranceways, a hundred alienations," a "Republic...invisible yet congruent" with everyday America.²⁷⁾ As Marcus declared in his own *Invisible Republic*, describing eighty-four early-twentieth-century recordings collected by Harry Smith in a six-record *Anthology of American Folk Music* in 1952, which Dylan and other musicians used as an essential source during the folk music revival of the early 1960s, here was the "mystical body of the republic, a kind of public secret: a declaration of what sort of wishes and fears lie behind any public act, a declaration of a weird but clearly recognizable America within the America of the exercise of institutional majoritarian power."²⁸⁾ This alternative or countercultural America, for Marcus, "is defined solely by the way it can be made up, or can rise up, on any given day, whole and complete in a single phrase or metaphor, melody or harmony."²⁹⁾

Dylan's close attention to Marcus's interpretation is obvious from the wonderfully evocative memoir the songwriter published in 2004.

25) *Ibid.*, 214.

26) Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1973), 556.

27) Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Bantam, 1967; orig. 1966), 135.

28) Marcus, *Invisible Republic*, 125.

29) *Ibid.*, 128.

Although *Chronicles: Volume One* garnered enthusiastic critical acclaim, it was also attacked for directly borrowing phrases from Twain, Marcel Proust, Jack London, and even Sax Rohmer. Given Dylan's penchant for collaging the music and words of others in his songs, it is not entirely surprising to find him using the same compositional practice in an extended prose work. Although he did not copy phrases from Marcus, the critic's "old, weird America" trope runs throughout *Chronicles*, and Dylan even tipped readers off that he had read Marcus. Shortly after dismissing early 1960s country music because "all the wildness and weirdness had gone out" of it, he declared there was "nothing easygoing about the folk songs" he sang when he first arrived in New York in 1961. Those songs, Dylan recalled (which included many from Smith's *Anthology*), had been his "preceptor and guide into some altered consciousness of reality, some different republic," a nebulous place that "Greil Marcus, the music historian, would some thirty years later call...the invisible republic."³⁰

As Dylan remembered that time, the "madly complicated modern world" inhabited by most people had possessed "no relevancy, no weight" for him. Instead, the "news" that he "followed and kept tabs on" involved old folk songs—whether "the Titanic sinking, the Galveston flood, John Henry driving steel, [or] John Hardy shooting a man on the West Virginia line."³¹ And the old singers who inspired him appeared as living presences rather than hazy figures from out of the past. Some people might have regarded the

30) Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 33-35.

31) *Ibid.*, 20.

terminally ill Dust Bowl balladeer Woody Guthrie, whom Dylan sought out in a sanitarium outside New York, as “backdated,” but for Dylan the older man’s songs “were totally in the moment, current, and even forecasted things to come.”³²⁾ Even bluesman Robert Johnson, who died in 1938, had been “playing for an audience that only he could see, one off in the future.”³³⁾ A few contemporary singers, such as those who recorded for Sun Records in Memphis, also seemed prophetic, “singing for their lives,” and “sounded like they were coming from the most mysterious place on the planet.”³⁴⁾ When Dylan began to write his own songs, drawing on the music, lyrics, and moods of the old folk music, he wanted “to write songs that are bigger than life,” that “say something about strange things that have happened to you, strange things you have seen,” and that “go past the vernacular.”³⁵⁾ It seemed he was entering the numinous spirit of the old, weird music he was emulating: “I was beginning to feel like a character from within these songs, even beginning to think like one.”³⁶⁾

Wilentz actually quotes two parts of a long paragraph from *Chronicles* in which Dylan revealed the full extent of his indebtedness to the mythical realm Marcus had evoked with *Invisible Republic*.³⁷⁾ However, because Wilentz is focused on his own use of this paragraph, he omits a crucial section in the middle of the

32) Ibid., 247.

33) Ibid., 285.

34) Ibid., 216.

35) Ibid., 51.

36) Ibid., 240.

37) Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*, 301-302.

passage where Dylan most obviously echoes Marcus on that “old, weird America.” As a historian pleased to find the young Dylan reading Civil War newspapers on microfilm at the New York Public Library, Wilentz conflates this key passage near the end of Dylan’s memoir³⁸⁾ with a discussion of Dylan’s interest in history that occurs near the beginning.³⁹⁾ Although there is no intent on Wilentz’s part to mislead readers, and his interpretation of the singer’s historical consciousness is convincing, this conflation causes him to omit key sentences that do not fit his reading but that do confirm the reminiscing musician’s wholesale involvement in the “invisible republic” Marcus had constructed for him.

As written by Dylan, the precipitating trigger for this passage was his disdain, as a young man, for the Beat ethic that surrounded him in Greenwich Village. “I had already landed in a parallel universe, anyway, with more archaic principles and values,” he recalled, and then, as quoted by Wilentz: “one where actions and virtues were old style and judgmental things came falling out on their heads. A culture with outlaw women, super thugs, demon lovers and gospel truths··[sic] streets and valleys, rich peaty swamps, with landowners and oilmen, Stagger Lees, Pretty Pollys and John Henrys—an invisible world that towered overhead with walls of gleaming corridors.”⁴⁰⁾ Wilentz then omits the most important section and ends his quotation from this long passage with a line that a historian attempting to animate the past for contemporary readers might

38) Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One*, 235-236.

39) *Ibid.*, 84-86.

40) *Ibid.*, 235-236 and Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*, 301.

appreciate: “It was out of date, had no proper connection to the actualities, the trends of the time. It was a huge story but hard to come across.”⁴¹) When conflated with Dylan’s ruminations on history much earlier in *Chronicles*, these lines do reinforce the picture Wilentz constructs of Dylan steeped in a historical past revealed in folk song but also documented in old newspapers and in the surviving streets and structures of the old Manhattan in which he found himself.

Even so, the crucial sentences omitted by Wilentz from his quotations suggest a more nebulous relationship of the young songwriter to a wholly imagined, even imaginary, past—at least as Dylan looks back from his early sixties with the advantage of Marcus’s romantic interpretation to draw upon. As Dylan recalled in the omitted section of the passage, “folk music was a reality of a more brilliant dimension” that “exceeded all human understanding, and if it called out to you, you could disappear and be sucked into it.” Even more, he “felt right at home in this mythical realm made up not with individuals so much as archetypes, vividly drawn archetypes of humanity, metaphysical in shape, each rugged soul filled with natural knowing and inner wisdom.” More than the contemporary events playing out in the streets around the young singer—presumably even more than the historical events he absorbed through microfilm—folk music “was so real, so much more true to life than life itself” because “it was life magnified.” It was, he recalled of himself forty years earlier, “all I needed to exist,” but

41) Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One*, 236 and Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*, 302.

"there wasn't enough of it," a judgment that must have stimulated his own creativity.⁴²⁾

The "mythical realm" of Marcus's *Invisible Republic* is nothing if not an assemblage of "metaphysical archetypes" bodied forth in the songs of Smith's *Anthology*, its contents taken from scratchy old 78 records and sequenced by their compiler with an intuitive associational logic. As experienced by Marcus and translated into emotive prose, the cultural work of these old songs, especially the ballads, was to "dissolve a known history of wars and elections into a sort of national dream, a flux of desire and punishment, sin and luck, joke and horror—and as in a dream, the categories don't hold."⁴³⁾ With the former American Studies student invoking Jonathan Edwards, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Whitman, Melville, Emily Dickinson, and the foundational American Studies scholar F. O. Matthiessen, as well as John Winthrop's "city upon a hill," we are clearly in the presence of a late manifestation of myth and symbol—but as reflected in a distorting fun-house mirror, or rearing up from an eccentric, bare-bones, gargoyle-inflected underworld of American culture. In the terms of Marcus's ramifying metaphorical system, we are traveling not through "utopian seventeenth-century Puritan communities" but through "frontier towns, with the guilt and doubt of utopians and perfectionists no less present in the air than the free rapaciousness of traders, con artists, and killers, all walking streets where a mask was just part of the wardrobe,"⁴⁴⁾ perhaps a mask of flesh-crawling

42) Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One*, 236.

43) Marcus, *Invisible Republic*, 107.

44) *Ibid.*, 197.

“fish-belly white,” as Twain’s Huck Finn described his brutal Pa’s face, but in any event more visceral than Melville’s equally famous “pasteboard mask.”

The mask image proliferates through *Invisible Republic*, with Marcus’s rhetoric often overrunning any precisely locatable meaning. The singer and banjo player Dock Boggs, for example, an Appalachian coal miner who eventually wound up in Smith’s *Anthology* and as a prominent citizen of Marcus’s “invisible republic,” created a music that sounded “more subterranean than anything else… like the mask behind the mask, even if the feeling is strong that the mask behind the mask is a face, and that if it is a face, if the way this man sounds is the way the face looks, one might prefer it were a mask after all.”⁴⁵⁾

By the time a reader finishes *Invisible Republic*, a feeling of exhaustion has set in. Metaphors that initially energized one’s understanding of these old songs and of Dylan’s creative involvement with them have mostly collapsed under their own weight. What remains from the critic’s tireless rhetorical variations is a sense of intoxication wearing off, a feeling that one has glimpsed interpretive possibilities that unfortunately remain ungrounded. It seems certain, however, that Dylan has absorbed his most sympathetic critic’s myth-making. Beyond Dylan’s direct acknowledgement of the book, already cited, he has over the past decade increasingly assumed the characteristics of one of Marcus’s weird old-timey musicians. Although Dylan has always been known for creating and performing

45) *Ibid.*, 154-155.

new roles, his masking has become ever more idiosyncratic, even eccentric. In his film *Masked & Anonymous*, released in 2003, the year before he published *Chronicles*, Dylan appears as Jack Fate, a former musical star, wizened and visibly creaky, released from prison to sing a benefit concert in an alternate America ruled by a banana-republic dictator and racked by a revolution of dubious intent. Hailed by a few critics as a work of genius reprising all the major themes of Dylan's career but dismissed by most as a hollow, jumbled vanity project, *Masked & Anonymous* presents the singer as a mythical hero in western garb, an antique troubadour with an outsized cowboy hat, a pencil-thin moustache, and a dry-as-dust manner of seeing through the present day's empty gestures and garbled rhetoric. A man of few words (mostly Zen-like pronouncements delivered in a cracked monotone), Jack Fate appears out of nowhere, possibly a redemptive figure, possibly a channeling of Melville's "confidence-man" leading his followers to an unspecified doom, definitely a figure not of our time.

Wilentz's otherwise admirable *Bob Dylan in America* fails to recognize that Dylan's most significant act of love and theft is his borrowing of Marcus's "old weird America" as the major image of his career and essentially the only image of its later phase. Much might be made of Wilentz's frequent use of the term "virtual reality," which for him defines the overwhelming unreality of an American commercial culture that Dylan has been opposing as he weaves an alternate mythical realm from the stuff of bygone cultures. In loving and thieving Marcus's *Invisible Republic*, Dylan has made himself an avatar of myth and symbol in an alternate or parallel

universe prefigured by the surreal “Desolation Row” in 1965 and fully embodied by *Masked & Anonymous* in 2003. Dylan’s career has revolved around a process of self-creation as he attempts to make something coherent, innovative, and newsworthy from “down in the flood” of debris perpetually washed up by mass culture (to borrow the title of one of his songs). That his main approach has always been the inventive collage, not an ironic or empty pastiche but a full and signifying assemblage, suggests his involvement from the very beginning in the construction of virtual reality. At first this process seemed similar to that of traditional folk performers, borrowing and reworking what had already been done, but by the late phase of Dylan’s career it was something else entirely, more of its own postmodern time but still appearing, to a sympathetic observer, to derive from an utterly old, traditional, even archaic culture. To allow Wilentz the final word, Bob Dylan was not a “sponge” but an “alchemist” who had always been “absorbing, transmuting, and renewing and improving American art forms long thought to be trapped in formal conventions.”⁴⁶⁾

46) Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*, 334-335.