

"I Used to Care, but Things Have Changed": Passion and the Absurd in Dylan's Later Work

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Those who admire Bob Dylan's entire career as a songwriter are used to hearing other people complain that his later albums are filled with cynical and pessimistic lyrics. And so they are—but this is no reason for anyone to disdain all of the recordings Dylan has made since the sixties. On the contrary, one of the virtues of his later work is its exploration of these gray areas—that is, bleak emotional landscapes and states of mind which are only a few shades removed from an absolutely black despair. At his darkest of moments, Dylan shows us something about the possibility of finding hope in a blighted world, and he even considers how one might continue to live without hope if necessary. In doing so, he makes a valuable contribution to the literature of the existential tradition, which is represented by such philosophers as Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) and Albert Camus (1913–1960).

Existential Attunement to *Blood on the Tracks*

Existential philosophy is preoccupied with questions about the meaning of life, and it takes very seriously the experience of anguish or disenchantment in which that meaning is at issue. This is not due to a perverse taste for unpleasant moods, but because such moods are viewed as revealing certain truths about the human condition. It's fully legitimate, Camus suggests, to ask whether or not life is worth living—indeed, he calls this "the fundamental question of philosophy."¹

¹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage,

Although we are often surrounded by advertisements "proclaiming from every wall that life is not tragic," this kind of insistent optimism seems to Camus "like a bad joke in today's world."²

Turning our eyes away from the harshest features of existence prevents us from living on authentic terms. Along similar lines, Kierkegaard suggests that "a person who himself has become unhappy" may be in a unique position "to help others who are capable of realizing happiness."³

In a radio interview following the release of his album *Blood on the Tracks*, Dylan remarked that he couldn't understand why so many people were enthralled with such a painful collection of songs—but he could have found in Aristotle's *Poetics* an account of why this album would have so many fans.⁴

It is not because we enjoy pain, but because we value works of art that help us understand life by "telling it like it is," portraying the sort of things that happen to people similar to ourselves. This is why, when we are in the audience at a Dylan concert, we often feel as if we are hearing the story of our own lives.

According to Camus, our sense of the absurd arises out of the encounter between the human need for meaning and "the unreasonable silence of the world": in other words, we desire that our lives make sense, that they not seem vain and insignificant.⁵

But "one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement."⁶

This condition, in which the self has fallen away from its meaningful engagement with the world, is described by Camus as "essentially a divorce."⁷

1991), p. 3.

² Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1970), pp. 185, 351.

³ *The Diary of Søren Kierkegaard* (New York: Citadel Press, 1993), p. 58. Camus agrees, affirming that one "does not discover the absurd without being tempted to write a manual of happiness." *Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 122.

⁴ Interview with Mary Travers, cited by Howard Sounes in *Down the Highway: The Life of Bob Dylan* (New York: Grove Press, 2001), p. 285. See Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449a. Kierkegaard discusses this text in *Stages on Life's Way* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 460.

⁵ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 28.

⁶ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 13.

⁷ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 30.

The image ought to sound curiously appropriate to those who are familiar with *Blood on the Tracks*, the first of Dylan's albums to be dominated by a feeling of absurdity:

She was married when we first met
 Soon to be divorced
 I helped her out of a jam, I guess
 But I used a little too much force
 We drove that car as far as we could
 Abandoned it out West
 Split up on a dark sad night
 Both agreeing it was best ("Tangled Up in Blue")

What better illustration could there be of "the divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints" than the narrative of a tragic love affair?⁸

After all, love is identified by one existential philosopher as the basis of a person's "many-sided interest in the things of this world," and others (such as Kierkegaard) would agree.⁹

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) uses the word "care" to refer to this attitude, disposition, or frame of mind that grounds our emotional involvement in the world.¹⁰

Regardless of what language we prefer to use, we can easily tell that the voice behind these lyrics from the mid-1970s is that of someone who has loved or cared about certain things in life to such a degree that he is liable to be utterly devastated by their loss. The passionate attachments that once held the speaker's world together as a meaningful whole are now tearing him apart, and he's going out of his mind, "With a pain that stops and starts / Like a corkscrew to my heart," as he sings in "You're a Big Girl Now." The divorce that weighs upon him is not the one alluded to in the above lines from "Tangled Up in Blue," but one of more cosmic proportions.

⁸ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 50.

⁹ Max Scheler, *Selected Philosophical Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 98. See also Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 215.

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), pp. 180–81. On "love" and "care" in Kierkegaard's writings, see M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 43–44.

"If the world is a matter of indifference" to someone who feels that life is absurd, Camus argues, "it is because he has an idea of something that is not or could not be indifferent to him."¹¹

For Dylan's narrator, it is because a love that once gave him sustenance has withdrawn from his life that he now finds himself drifting through the ruins of an empty world. As he reflects upon what has been lost, he feels as if "nothing really matters much" ("Shelter from the Storm"). Having suffered a disappointment of the most intimate kind, the speaker has developed what another existential philosopher calls "the tragic sense of life" more generally.¹²

He woke up, the room was bare, he didn't see her anywhere; then, after telling himself that he "didn't care" about her departure, he felt an "emptiness inside" ("Simple Twist of Fate")—which may indicate that his ability to care about anything whatsoever has been damaged. If we imagine that this woman meant more to him than anyone else in the world, and that his care for her influenced the way he lived, then it is reasonable for him to feel as if a void has opened up within and around him, as if he is no longer on solid ground. For who is he, without his care for her? And what good is a world from which she is absent?¹³

The character in this drama has experienced the negation of his own being, and has watched the world turn into a meaningless chaos.

And when finally the bottom fell out
 I became withdrawn
 The only thing I knew how to do
 Was to keep on keepin' on ("Tangled Up in Blue")

What was predicted in an earlier song ("If Not for You") has been fulfilled: the sky has fallen and he cannot see the floor.

¹¹ Camus, *The Rebel* (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. 7.

¹² Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life* (New York: Dover, 1954).

¹³ See Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 136. Christopher Ricks discusses a similar theme in connection with a different song in *Dylan's Visions of Sin* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), pp. 125–26.

Because of this sudden change of fortune, Dylan's narrator is appalled by the disparity between his framework of expectations and the sad reality of his circumstances. Lacking any reason to go on, he resolves to keep on going anyway—although, perhaps, without the type of passion that animates a person who is wholeheartedly engaged with the world. When the meaning of life has been obscured, life itself remains, and one must either commit suicide or else figure out how to endure those times when, as Kierkegaard says, "One cannot see the meaning of things and waits in vain for connectedness."¹⁴

Perverse as it may sound, there is some truth in Camus's assertion that "continuity in despair can give birth to joy," even though he adds that it would be more noble "to persevere in love" if possible.¹⁵

"Brownsville Girl" and Infinite Resignation

Twelve years after *Blood on the Tracks*, in a song co-authored with Sam Shepard, Dylan returns to the metaphor in which a drive on the highway stands for a relationship in time. The narrator's long rambling lines, and his enjoyment in going down the road, seem to celebrate the very fact of perseverance—even as he is moved to recollect other travels with another love whose bittersweet history is still vivid in his mind:

Well, we're drivin' this car and the sun is coming up over the
Rockies
Now I know she ain't you, but she's here and she's got that
dark rhythm in her soul
But I'm too over the edge and I ain't in the mood anymore
to remember the times when I was your only man
And she don't want to remind me—she knows this car would
go out of control ("Brownsville Girl")

Between the "she" who is riding in the passenger seat and the absent "you" who is being addressed lies all the tragic ambig-

¹⁴ *Works of Love*, pp. 132–33. Camus praises the artist who "rejects the world on account of what it lacks and in the name of what it sometimes is" in *The Rebel*, p. 253.

¹⁵ Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, pp. 100–02.

ity of a fate that the speaker accepts, even though it is not what he would have chosen.¹⁶

Overall, his attitude is one of resignation: "Oh, if there's an original thought out there, I could use it right now." In Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, a pseudonymous author known as "Johannes de Silentio" distinguishes between two characters, the "knight of faith" and the "knight of infinite resignation." The former is a person who remains "true to his love" in a life that is united by an absurd faith, which constitutes "the highest passion in a human being."¹⁷

The knight of infinite resignation, on the other hand, is someone who has abandoned all hope but who does not forget whatever has been most precious in his life. He may not be in the mood to remember an experience of disenchantment, but he does—and, in trying to tie his memories together, he comes to understand how these real experiences weigh upon the present. Like the narrator in "Brownsville Girl," the knight of infinite resignation has renounced the passionate aspirations that oriented his life "before the stars were torn down," but he realizes that his present identity is largely defined by what he has cared about in the past, so that he would be a different person if he had not survived this particular disappointment.¹⁸

When, in the twentieth stanza of the song, we hear for the fourth time about a movie starring Gregory Peck, we realize that it serves as a point of reference for the speaker. By continually returning to a simple event around which so many emotions are organized, he reminds himself of who he is and where he has been. Even if he is somewhat the worse for the wear, he does not feel that all of his experience has come to nothing.

Ob Mercy: The Stage Sets Collapse

"There are no mistakes in life some people say," Dylan sings, adding: "It is true sometimes you can see it that way" ("Man in

¹⁶ Nietzsche advocates *amor fati*, the loving embrace of necessity, in a number of places. See, for instance, *Ecce Homo* (New York: Penguin, 1992), pp. 37–38. On a fate which one has inherited and also chosen, see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 351.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Penguin, 1985), pp. 95, 143–46.

¹⁸ See Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 72–73.

the Long Black Coat"). In other songs on the 1989 album *Ob Mercy*, however, we hear the voice of a narrator who has trouble seeing it that way. Instead of being reconciled to the way things have turned out, he is concerned about the fact that everything is broken. "Seems like every-time you stop and turn around / Something else just hit the ground" ("Everything Is Broken"). It's not easy to harbor fond memories of everything that was most precious in life when all that remain are shattered fragments: indeed, there are "experiences which one cannot survive, after which one feels that there is no meaning left in anything."¹⁹

But the singer claims to be doing a pretty good job of dealing with his absurd situation—staying focused, keeping his feet on the ground—that is, most of the time. He understands what has happened, and says "I wouldn't change it if I could" ("Most of the Time"). Here, in the darkest song on the album, he makes it sound as if all of this misery, pain, and suffering can be traced to a frustrated love:

Most of the time
I'm strong enough not to hate
I don't build up illusion 'til it makes me sick
I ain't afraid of confusion, no matter how thick
I can smile in the face of mankind
Don't even remember what her lips felt like on mine
Most of the time

The most he can claim is that he's "halfway content," that he doesn't "hide from the feelings that are buried inside," and that he doesn't even care if he ever sees her again—most of the time. Which means that, some of the time, he is less than halfway content, does hide from his feelings, and does care.²⁰

Things might be easier for him if he could let it go, but like the knight of infinite resignation he feels that even though his love has come to grief, "he will never be able to wrench him-

¹⁹ E.M. Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 8. And see Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge, 1963), p. 73.

²⁰ See also Ricks, *Dylan's Visions of Sin*, pp. 356–57.

self out of it," since he knows that "the content of his whole life lies in this love."²¹

And if he has become painfully aware of "the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering," that is perhaps "the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth."²²

By now it seems that the singer's mood of weariness threatens to consume everything: at one point on the 1990 album *Under the Red Sky*, he mutters, "You can have what's left of me" ("Born in Time"). Yet it sounds as if there is nothing left to give, and possibly nothing left to sing about anymore.

Further into the Absurd: *Time Out of Mind*

Just when you think he can't go on, though, he somehow manages to keep on going—which is fitting for an absurd hero or a knight of infinite resignation. Dylan's remarkable 1997 album *Time Out of Mind* begins in a familiar existential predicament, with a narrator "walking through streets that are dead," feeling sick of love but still "in the thick of it" ("Love Sick"). Skies are gray, and his mind is like a graveyard, but "that's how it is when things disintegrate" ("Can't Wait"). Then he adds a bit of black humor: "It's mighty funny, the end of time has just begun."²³

Laughing sardonically at his condition may help him to resign himself to it, but his self-ridicule does not alleviate the sense of futility which is setting in like never before. "You broke a heart that loved you," he sings in "Tryin' to Get to Heaven," making what is both a wincing confession and a damning accusation. "When you think you've lost everything," he says later in the song, "you find out you can always lose a little more." Having learned this, he can only close his eyes and "wonder / If everything is as hollow as it seems."

²¹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 70–71. For the knight of infinite resignation to give up his love just because it cannot be actualized "would be to lose the defining, stabilizing center of self and world." Edward Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), pp. 45–46.

²² Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, pp. 6, 120.

²³ "When we laugh at a true absurdity," Ted Cohen suggests, "we simultaneously confess that we cannot make sense of it and that we accept it." *Jokes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 41.

I'm going down the river
 Down to New Orleans
 They tell me everything is gonna be all right
 But I don't know what "all right" even means

Where do you go from here, when you don't even know what would count as happiness? The poet feels as if he has been thrown into a world that he cannot understand, only for the sake of drifting or being driven toward some goal in which he does not even believe. Although he feels "almost like I don't exist," he is reminded of his existence by the suffering that he continues to undergo, which is a sign that he does still care ("Cold Irons Bound").²⁴

However, in another song ("Not Dark Yet") he wonders if it will be possible to endure much more of this.

In the opening stanza of this raspy-voiced dirge, the singer introduces himself as steeled and scarred. Night is falling, "time is running away," and he cannot find a space in which to exist: "There's not even room enough to be anywhere / It's not dark yet, but it's getting there." What follows is a chronicle of the decline and fall of his ability to care about anything under the sun: "Well, my sense of humanity has gone down the drain / Behind every beautiful thing there's been some kind of pain." This is the voice of someone who has seen too much. Making a gesture of resignation, he shrugs his shoulders and says: "I just don't see why I should even care."

I've been down on the bottom of a world full of lies
 I ain't looking for nothing in anyone's eyes
 Sometimes my burden is more than I can bear
 It's not dark yet, but it's getting there

The burden of existence may not always be too heavy to bear, but sometimes it is, and at this point the singer has simply had enough. He is anxious about the prospect of death, but he takes

²⁴ See Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, p. 43. On "Cold Irons Bound," Dylan sings: "I found my world, found my world in you / But your love just hasn't proved true."

comfort in the thought of escaping from life altogether. In "Highlands," the sixteen and one-half minute anthem that ends the album, he sings: "I've got new eyes, everything looks far away." Although it certainly sounds as if he is finally opening himself to "the gentle indifference of the world,"²⁵ these are not quite the last words of the burnt-out dude walking off the face of the earth.

The Ends of Despair: From "Things Have Changed" to "Love and Theft"

That distinction is reserved for "Things Have Changed," which was released on a movie soundtrack in 2000, three years after *Time Out of Mind*. The song has been characterized as "a kind of farewell to every possibility for engagement in the world."²⁶

Accompanied by driving rhythms, Dylan's voice (sounding increasingly like that of an old man) reports on a final passage into the absurd. "I'm locked in tight," he sings, but then he growls: "I'm out of range." When a rupture of such proportions has opened up between self and world, *things* lose their meaning because *I* no longer care. Hence the punch line: "I used to care, but things have changed."

Once again, Dylan's grim sense of humor shows up in the midst of an anguish that is dead serious: "Lot of water under the bridge, lot of other stuff too / Don't get up, gentlemen, I'm only passing through." In this world, there is nothing left to believe in or to hope for, and love exists only as a grotesque kind of desire: "All the truth in the world adds up to one big lie / I'm in love with a woman who don't even appeal to me." The lone note of hopefulness in this apocalyptic song is sounded when the singer makes reference to two characters who "jumped in the lake," then adds: "I'm not that eager to make a mistake." But even if he is not quite suicidal, he appears to have arrived at the nadir of existential desperation.

Nevertheless, life goes on, and so does the process of writing songs—even after what might have sounded like the writer's

²⁵ This phrase is used by the character Meursault in Camus's novel *The Stranger* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 122.

²⁶ Terrence Rafferty, "God is Dead. Bob Dylan Lives," *GQ* (June 2001), p. 102.

final words. On September 11th, 2001, Dylan released the album *Love and Theft*, which takes up some of the existential themes of "Things Have Changed" in a number of places. Some of its lines might suggest that the singer has only wandered further into the absurd: "I say, 'How much you want for that?' I go into the store / The man says, 'Three dollars.' 'All right,' I say, 'Will you take four?'" ("Po' Boy").

If everything has lost its value, then why not just pay the four dollars and be done with it? However, it may be a mistake to interpret the lines in this cynical spirit, since the album also expresses a different perspective. The opening lines of "Sugar Baby" give voice to a transformed emotional outlook on the world: "I got my back to the sun 'cause the light is too intense / I can see what everybody in the world is up against." Rather than telling new stories of hope and disappointment, the poet is surveying things with an expanded sense of gratitude and compassion. The tragic sense of life is still most definitely present, but without the same agitated grasping. It is almost as if, by ceasing to expect anything at all from life, Dylan's narrator has opened himself to the possibility of seeing things in a different light. Even his romantic complaints reveal a change of tune: "I care so much for you—didn't think I could / I can't tell my heart that you're no good" ("Honest with Me"). Here, he acknowledges that he cannot bring himself to stop caring, even when faced with mixed evidence.

"Some of these memories you can learn to live with," he sings in "Sugar Baby," "and some of them you can't." There are times when "existence seems like some dirty trick," and it is always true that "happiness can come suddenly and leave just as quick." Yet, although life doesn't always seem to be worth living, he comprehensively accepts it, displaying an appreciation that could almost be called joyful. In "Mississippi," he claims that his heart "is not weary" despite all the debris of the shipwrecks he has experienced: in fact, "it's light and it's free / I've got nothing but affection for all those who've sailed with me." These words are not exactly bubbling over with jubilation, but they are more convincing as an existential affirmation for that reason—they do not require any kind of self-deception. And the person whose ability to care has been significantly diminished may be

the one who is ready to love unselfishly, or "to give without taking hostages."²⁷

This view is hinted at on earlier albums, but now it has assumed a new prominence: "There can be no love where feelings are denied, where one has not the courage to accept existence in all its facets, where one doesn't want to recognize pain."²⁸

Love has "a way of tearing the world apart," as Dylan's narrator admits, but he adds that it is "not an evil thing" ("Sugar Baby"). This cannot be an observation; it must be a premise accepted on trust. Although the singer's voice has not lost its overtones of alienation, he seems to have a renewed belief in the possibility of love. Insofar as he does have this belief—since love, of course, also has a way of holding a world together—he begins to look more like a knight of faith.²⁹

In another gesture of reconciliation, he makes peace with time: "So many things that we never will undo / I know you're sorry, I'm sorry too" ("Mississippi"). But, as if to insist that he is not wallowing in despair, he immediately launches into another line as the tempo of the music rises. "Some people will offer you their hand and some won't," and that's how it goes, but in saying this he reaffirms his acceptance of life in a world where the conditions of his own well-being are out of his control. Expressing a strange and beautiful faith, he sings: "I know that fortune is waiting to be kind / So give me your hand and say you'll be mine." His logic is this: chance events have been going horribly, so they must be due to turn around sometime. Here,

²⁷ Janet Gezari, "Bob Dylan and the Tone Behind the Language," *Southwest Review* 86 (2001), p. 488. Regarding the diminished ability to care, see the following lines from "Mississippi": "Got nothing for you, I had nothing before / Don't even have anything for myself anymore"; and "You can always come back, but you can't come back all the way."

²⁸ Aldo Carotenuto, *The Call of the Dalmon: Love and Truth in the Writings of Franz Kafka* (Wilmette: Chiron, 1993), p. 106. This theme is discussed at greater length, in relation to Kierkegaard's writings, in my book *Wisdom in Love* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

²⁹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 75–79, 101. See also Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation*, pp. 53–54. In *Youthful Writings*, Camus writes: "So many things are susceptible of being loved that surely no discouragement can be final" (New York: Marlowe, 1976), p. 206.

Dylan looks directly at a world lacking any clear purpose and makes an appeal that is filled with absurd faith in what is still possible. This is what may remain after a person has sounded out the depths of existential despair and come to terms with a finite and sometimes tragic life on the other side. In a universe from which all the stars have been torn down, a human being feels like a stranger. But it is not impossible to keep on living under such conditions, and Dylan shows us how it might be done. For this timely philosophical insight, we are forever in his debt.

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