The Paradox of Apostasy: Academic Interpretations of Bob Dylan's Politics in the 1960s

Rohan Joshi

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To claim the unprecedented 60s musical output of Bob Dylan as purely ideological is tenuous. Dylan's notoriety as a man of few words makes his artistic intent during this volatile period of history non-didactic. Dylan did not want to be a part of any specific political movement, and did not feel inspiration from a prescription to a presupposed dogma or ideology. Within many of his works, the self-righteousness from concurrent political movements' intentional ignorance of the subaltern is a motivic priority. From this volatility Dylan withdraws from the political sphere after the 60s, retreating into works of a significantly more personal nature. Regardless of his non-ideological means of writing and composition, it is impossible to deny the political inception of his artistry: Dylan has always been a political artist by nature. He lived in a time of potent political instability, and was birthed out of the nascent folk revival, with its entwined leftist ties, into a rapid commercialist environment which would co-opt his music and the music of his mentors and allies into a capitalistic spiral that would thrust him into the limelight of the civil rights movement. Dylan never chose to be the guiding musical light of the civil rights movement -- herein lies the paradox of his political apostasy.

Mike Marqusee, activist writer, journalist, and self-avowed "deracinated New York Marxist Jew," sets foot into this paradox through simultaneous historical and lyrical analysis in his work *Wicked Messenger*. Marqusee trenchantly pursues the claim that Dylan's work throughout the 1960s was political, and was inspired and bred from political means. Important to note that Marqusee never places Dylan as an actor within an ideological context within a broad political movement, or even with a specific political goal. In the preface of the work Marqusee makes his biases and intents for his work clear:

> Dylan's achievements [are] tied to the unfolding political and cultural drama of its era...Tracing the thread that binds Dylan's art to its rapidly shifting environment is this book's primary purpose. My aim is not to claim Dylan for a cause. I do, however, aim to

> examine Dylan's work in its time partly in order to serve a cause: to draw inspiration, lessons, and warnings. I wrote this book with the hard rain headed Iraq's way.[1]

Dylan's work evades dogma, and because of this is indicative of the nuanced shifts of the times. Marqusee makes clear that the goal of his interpretations and approaches to Dylan's work is for contemporary protestors, Marqusee's readership, to recontextualize the music of the 60s. By reshaping the works of someone considered to be the posterchild of the early protest movements as indicators of shifting sociopolitical norms, the whole era can be recontextualized. William G. Roy, in his book *Reds, Whites, and Blues* seems to agree with this interpretation, and similarly comments on the social nature and role of music:

> …the thesis of th[is] book is that the effect of music on social movement activities and outcomes depends less on the meaning of the lyrics or the sonic qualities of the performance than on the social relationships within which it is embedded. This implies that music is fundamentally social. Accounts and perspectives that focus solely on textual meaning or sonic qualities disregard a profound sociological dimension of how music operates in social interaction.[2]

The social qualities of Dylan's music, and most importantly the relationships he forged through his path of creation are emphasized in Marqusee's approach.

Marqusee makes clear that the influence of Dylan's work, regardless of its claim, has superseded its localization. Dylan's voluminous output during the 1960s is often looked back on as an element of its time, but it has simultaneously catalyzed a variety of other artists and genres of music. The music became commercialized through various means, and during the sixties itself it became increasingly difficult to determine artistic intent. When Dylan famously performed at the March on Washington, contemporary activists lampooned Dylan's appearance as performative, and solely for publicity. Dick Gregory, at the time a famous comedian-activist, notoriously commented: “What was a white boy like Bob Dylan there for? Or – who else? Joan Baez? To support the cause? Wonderful – support the cause. March. Stand behind us – but not in front of us.”[3] The dilemma of Dylan’s role in the movement grows out of the origins of his musicianship, and turns into a dilemma regarding authenticity. Marqusee doesn’t try to answer on Dylan’s behalf, but emphasizes how his approach allows the music to speak for itself. The majority of the music written during this time plays into this dialectic – and artists responses to this problem, as well as audiences’ contemporary reception, was dramatized through the music of era, and continuously echoes through contemporary works of protest.

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[1] Mike Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger: Bob Dylan and the 1960s* (New York: Seven Stories, 2006): 3-4.

[2] William G. Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues*: *Social Movements, Folk Music and Race in the United States* (New Jersey: Princeton Press, 2010): 2.

The early Greenwich Village tradition was a contentious mixing pot of varied voices. Every sort of political and social creed was drawn to the bohemian lifestyle offered in the village, and finding the pamphlets and works of Marx between individuals was not out of the ordinary. To be an active member of the bohemian “revolt” meant participating in the revolt itself, accepting your position within the community, and fearlessly reinventing one’s approach to heighten contribution. It was a feedback loop that Dylan easily fell into -- at the time sporting a fake Okie accent, shamelessly copying Guthrie. *Bound for Glory*, Guthrie’s autobiography, stoked the political fire raging in the young Dylan’s heart. He read the work cover to cover, and developed from it an insatiable claim towards authenticity. Guthrie considered himself to be a man of the people, and “was hailed by the Left as a true folk poet, a people Steinbeck, a socialist Will Rogers. He was authentic because he came from and sang of the oppressed.”[4] Marqusee succinctly summarizes Dylan’s subsumption:

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[3] Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger*, 15.
[4] Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger*, 21.

> Dylan found a creative fusion of humor and rage, a wanderlust that was both individualist and populist, and most important, an alternative to the conventions of the entertainment industry, a folk singing model of honesty and commitment. Guthrie offered an identity that was more genuinely Dylan's own than the one society had saddled him with.[5]

Marqusee's comparison to Guthrie is extremely effective. In tracing Guthrie's own background and origins, Dylan's arrival into the Greenwich scenes tracks clearly. The adoration of Guthrie by young folksingers of the time was very well known, but Marqusee changes the relationship between the two artists – viewing each of them not as markers of an era, but as artists who recontextualized and created a new medium of spreading their own art. Guthrie was the spearhead of this realization: someone who seized this nascent opportunity of the era, and understood the music and messages his listeners needed. Roy comments similarly on the influence Guthrie held on Pete Seeger:

> Pete Seeger…gives credit to Guthrie [as] his model for authenticity…Instead of following the Grand Tour of Europe as young people of his age and station often did, he took off with Guthrie to hitchhike and ride the rails across America…he partnered with Guthrie to compile *Hard Hitting Songs*, a collection of music discovered by Alan Lomax.[6]

Guthrie's influence on folk singers of the era cannot be understated, and by clearly tracing Dylan's roots to him, Marqusee ossifies the political nature and impetus of Dylan's origins. By accepting Guthrie as his model, Dylan tacitly accepted into Guthrie's political idiom. Whether or not Dylan shared the same beliefs, the early songwriting style was an act of intentional emulation. Guthrie's desire for authenticity, which was felt by Seeger, became Dylan's.

The plainchant connection between Dylan and the first folk revival did not end with Guthrie. John Hammond would soon spot the young Dylan and sign him to Columbia Records. Hammond was among the vanguard of the first folk revival, and a stalwart of the left. Alongside

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[5] Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger*, 23.
[6] Roy, *Reds, Whites and Blues,* 122.

Guthrie, Alan Lomax, and Pete Seeger he created the Almanac Singers – arguably the first ensemble to mix the highbrow with the lowbrow, and move the fusion out of the concert hall into more urban settings. The Almanac Singers flourished because of their connection to the Left, but the irony was that few of them were members of the then flourishing Communist Party. Eventually, the Almanac Singers become People's Songs, a group that hoped to further promote the left-wing politics of folk. Hammond's influences amongst these organizations were primarily organizational and infrastructural. Most importantly, he proved to the young Dylan that blurring musical boundaries would be one of the most effective means of proliferating his message:

> Hammond's ability to spot Dylan's talent was a remarkable leap across musical generations and genres…through his earlier efforts to redefine musical boundaries – between black and white, between traditional and popular and classical – Hammond exercised far more influence over Dylan before they had met than he did during their brief time together in the studio.[7]

Dylan would, throughout his entire career, take Hammonds genre blurring to heart. While his early efforts would concentrate on the melding of folk and rock, the midpoint of his career would see flourishes in country, gospel, and even blues and electronica.

The extent to which Dylan participated in the first folk revival as an active protestor is unclear. Marqusee claims that outside of the performance during the march on Washington, Dylan very rarely protested actively. Nevertheless, Dylan's choice to put himself alongside the protest vanguard was an active one, and one that could never be separated from the music that he would choose to make. Because of the efforts of Guthrie, Hammond, and all of the other songsters, Dylan easily slipped into a culture of protest:

> When Dylan arrived in the Village, the folk scene was still a ghetto whose appeal was limited to a few. It was already, however a counterculture in miniature – a self-defined minority with a uniform dress and a common frame of reference. But unlike the mass

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[7] Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger*, 33.

> counterculture of the late sixties that it helped to breed, the folk revival was characterized by earnestness and restraint.[8]

The restraint of these prior individuals would prove to be Dylan's first act of protest. Oftentimes, the political stances Dylan takes in his middle works are his arguments against the means of protest. The observations in his songs of these period are non-ideological because the commercialism that he observed wasn't purely ideological. In order to dig to the core of the problem, Dylan slowly separated himself from elements of party to find sources of more authentic inspiration. One of these was the SNCC Freedom Singers, whom Dylan "met during their visits to New York in 1962"[9]. Marqusee's claim for Dylan's inspiration takes a turn here, as he feels that the influence of SNCC on Dylan was perhaps stronger than Guthrie:

> The freedom songs, more even than the example of Guthrie, inspired Dylan to adapt traditional material to new ends, specifically the ends of political intervention. It was the great participatory drama of the civil rights movement that infused Dylan…with desire, confidence, and capacity to make the old traditions anew, as Alan Lomax had demanded.[10]

To claim Dylan as pursuing new elements of musical fusion due to the nature of the civil rights movement is challenging. This presumes that Dylan's musical developments during the era were resultant of the politics within and surrounding the civil rights movement, rather than the connections that he made within the movement – the latter of which held a stronger argument. Dylan's kinship with the Greenwich musicians, musicians who were outsiders and revolting against perceived inauthenticities, is much less unsubstantiated. The chronology of the connection also falters – Dylan barely interacted with the SNCC Freedom Singers, and Marqusee relies on circumstantial evidence to demonstrate the interaction.

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[8] Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger*, 39.
[9] Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger*, 51.
[10] Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger*, 51.

Historians and critics of Dylan often grew frustrated with his remarks on his protest songs; while speaking with Joan Baez, Dylan claimed that “Masters of War” was written “for the money”[11], as a means to jumpstart his career. Marqusee’s argument here is perhaps the strongest in the literature for supporting Dylan as an outwardly political artist:

> In the years during which Dylan wrote his protest songs, the overwhelming majority of white American youth [held]…opinions within the narrow band [of] deeply conservative and cautiously liberal. The politics [Dylan] embraced in these songs were fashionable only among a small minority. That minority, however, was linked to a movement on the rise…In these plainspoken democratic songs, Dylan was writing for and taking his place within a vanguard. There were easier ways to get attention or make a buck.[12]

The strength of the argument reflects very clearly in the politics of Dylan’s protest work itself. The language used does not spare being harsh or radical, and never tries to toe a middling line of centrism. If Dylan felt personally averse about something, whether it be an event or a societal woe, he felt sufficiently liberated by his surroundings and his environment to comfortably explore and proselytize his beliefs for growingly conscious audiences.

“Blowin’ in the Wind” is the most famous of Dylan’s protest songs: the combination of the lyrical openness, along with the simplicity of its melodic elements, made it not only a meritorious public hit but also a work emblematic of the goals of the first folk revival. It is the primary example of Dylan’s post Guthrie/Hammond fusion: to take the melodic elements of folk, and juxtapose them into a format easily understood and digested by new audiences who would absorb the material, reinterpret it, and pass it on unencumbered. In fact, the history of the melody, identified by Pete Seeger, is not of repose:

> The melody, as Seeger was the first to spot and as Dylan has acknowledged, is in part a reworking of “No more Auction Block (Many Thousands Gone)” – a song first sung by escaped slaves in Canada before the Civil War. Paul Robeson performed and recoded it; Odetta picked it up from him, and Dylan picked it up from her.[13]

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[11] Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger*, 54.
[12] Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger*, 55.
[13] Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger*, 59.

Marqusee's lyrical interpretation emphasizes how the song is not abstract, or naïve, but an implementation of the ideals of the folk revival. A representation of the effects racism and war had on the "social challenges" of the time:

> Listeners had no doubt what Dylan was referring to when he asked when the "cannon balls" would be "forever banned" or how long it would be before "some people…are allowed to be free." The song is delicately poised between hope and impatience…The ambiguous refrain…gropes for the unnameable. In this it touches a mood explored in Dylan's work through the rest of the decade. The "answer" is here, and not here; it exists, a force felt around us, but remains elusive.[14]

The ambiguity that other contemporary critics claimed that Dylan explores in this song, perhaps the aspect critically considered its strength, is one that Marqusee finds ironic and contradictory. His argument culminates in the analysis of this song: Dylan's unique position within the movement allowed him to write a song its circumstances. It portrays a world without answers – and his analysis echoes into the present due to the fact that there are still no teleological conclusions.

The most pertinent and prevailing issue within political analysis of popular music is co-option. Academics, critics, and journalists will all have vested personal interests in their analyses of music. Personal beliefs, assumptions, and desires will always reflect in the work they write; the biases held by these authors may not be held by the artists that they discuss. This is especially the case with Dylan, who as above discussed, dodged ideology and despised compartmentalization. The commercialization of Dylan's music, and his position as the posterchild of a movement he eventually would distance himself from only makes academic criticism of his work more challenging. In fact, William G. Roy considers the emphasis on Dylan within contemporary news outlets a purely negative facet of music of the civil rights movement, a means of legitimizing protest for commercial audiences, due to his race. White audiences were not prepared for the reality of the influence of organizations with black roots, such as SNCC[15], in protest:

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[14] Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger*, 60.

> Robert Shelton, folk music critic of the *New York Times,* constructed a media frame of heroic songsters for freedom. To legitimize the music with the northern audience of the *New York Times*, the article concluded by noting that its influence was being felt beyond the South, exemplified by a young singer-songwriter named Bob Dylan, who had written a song about "patience and dignity" called "Blowin' in the Wind." [In] 1966, they carried only 16 stories [about social movements], though 50 of [Robert Shelton's] 408 stories managed to mention Bob Dylan.[16]

Dylan's usage within the *New York Times* was undoubtedly not the way Dylan would have wanted his music to be portrayed, but for the time, it was easiest to portray him as the musician with the most power. In the process, the music was bastardized – turned into a commercial commodity in which the words were simplified and utilized to serve a capitalistic readership. Dylan would soon come to critique this process in his music.

Tony Fluxman, a professor of politics at Rhodes University, places Dylan within a political tradition started by Adorno and Horkheimer. His approach towards Dylan's 60s output is undoubtedly ideological, but shares several lyrical and historical interpretations with the work of Marqusee. Fluxman's argumentation is structuralist in approach: he attempts to "examine in a systematic manner Dylan's social critique…and argue[s] that [Dylan] is a profound critic of the forms of domination in late capitalist society."[17] It is important to understand that there is certainly a problem of co-option, similar to the way Dylan was portrayed within the *Times,* but the primary difference is that Dylan in Fluxman's work is not being portrayed as serving a cause. Dylan's work, like any artists, will be multiplicitous in interpretation, and Fluxman hopes to place it within a rigorous academic framework[18] to give legitimacy to an artist relegated to the annals of "popular music". He opens the argument with a discussion of the paradox of analyzing the work itself, and calls Dylan ideological from the outset:

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[15] SNCC worker Charles Jones was vocal about the influence that music had within the Albany Movement. He saw the movements use of music as important for morale and maintaining courage. The use of the music, however, was always set within an African-American framework: in the spirit of slave spirituals and black churches. Bob Dylan's is never mentioned as a primary influence within the protest movement itself. This perhaps lends more credence to Marqusee again – viewing Dylan as an artist alongside.

[16] Roy, *Reds, Whites and Blues,* 200-201.

[17] Tony Fluxman, "Bob Dylan and the Dialectic of Enlightenment," *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory, no. 77 (1991)*, 90.

> Bob Dylan appears as a complex and indeed paradoxical phenomenon. For a start, Dylan has probably altered his ideological stance more often than any other figure of mass culture. Positions he has adopted include being the darling of the folk left in the early sixties, the leader and pace-setter of the counter-culture...He is at once the incisive critic of the multiplicity of forms oof life in modern capitalist America and at the same time the patron of its most naïve forms of consciousness.[19]

Fluxman's work is chronological, but has less of a historical bend than Marqusee, and is primarily lyrical. While he analyzes Dylan's entire career (up until the point of his publishing the 1991 article), the most pertinent portion regards the early protest phase. Dylan's work, in Fluxman's eyes, is a very active critical view of Enlightenment society – of societal structures leading to hegemonic constriction and oppression. He is keen to notice Dylan's emphasis on the subaltern, and his empathetic artistic capacity. While Dylan rarely directly discusses the nature of this hegemony, Fluxman finds that his work "Only a Pawn in Their Game" explores this conception within an expansive narrative:

> The [song] is concerned with more than just the story of Medgar Evers…It is firstly an analysis of the personality of the kind of white man who engages in such deeds: he is mindlessly obedient ('like a dog on a chain'), he is herd-like ('he's taught to walk in a pack') and psychopathic (he kills 'with no pain'). Secondly, Dylan shows us how racist ideology is much more than just a set of irrational beliefs; it is one of the chief mechanisms employed by the rulers for [hegemonic] domination of all men, black and white.[20]

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[18] Fluxman wrote the article in 1991, preceding the contemporary boom of academic traditions on Dylan. Of course, this is more than a decade before Dylan would win the Nobel Prize.

[19] Fluxman, "Bob Dylan and the Dialectic of Enlightenment," 91.

[20] Fluxman, "Bob Dylan and the Dialectic of Enlightenment," 94.

The argumentation here fits nicely within Marqusee's narrative: the position that Dylan held within the protest movement was not one of leadership or participation, but one of mutual existence. As such, his perspective on events of racial tragedy were critically holistic: not only would they emphasize the tragedy of the event, but as Fluxman implies, he acts as a critical stalwart freely pinpointing the corruption within the domineering class/race. The song is perhaps one of the first points in Dylan's career where he took an active political stance, a view that simultaneously "encouraged protest and social action in the hope of realizing liberal goals,"[21] Comparing Fluxman's analysis to Marqusee's finds many similarities in conclusion:

> In contrast to the moralistic and utopian rhetoric favored by the movement at this time, Dylan's song argued that racist violence was the product of political manipulation and an unjust social system. Racism is neither a natural nor an inexplicable phenomenon…Dylan's expose of the white elite's dive-and-rule strategy …struck powerful chords among SNCC activists, whose thinking about the nature of the challenge they faced was undergoing rapid evolution. [22]

Marqusee not only agrees with Fluxman's observations, but reframes the motivation – due to the fact that this song was first sung and publicized on television during a SNCC registration drive in Greenwood, Mississippi. There is no reason to think that Dylan was unaware of the public impact of his words. Due to the fact that "police cars and Klan members"[23] were amongst the viewing gallery, the potency of the song's words would perhaps never be heightened.

Dylan's musical career grew infamous with his "electric turn" at the Newport Folk Festival, but his self-excision from the old left and his folk influences began at the 1963 ECLC (Emergency Civil Liberties Committee) Bill of Rights dinner. Dylan was awarded the prestigious Tom Paine Award, and over the course of a drinks-laden night, grew inebriated and disillusioned with his audience. While his award speech initially starting calmly, he began to disparage the

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[21] Ibid.
[22] Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger*, 82.
[23] Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger*, 81.

ECLC, and even identified himself as sharing similarities with JFK's killer, Lee Oswald. The audience at the dinner rejected the young singer, but Marqusee notes Dylan's break from the movement was not as sudden as this event portrays it:

> Dylan's break from the Left was never the total caesura both Dylan and some of his biographers have made it out to be. Clearly, Dylan was increasingly coming to see the protest singer identity as a personal burden and creative straitjacket. And he made it clear that he felt himself unqualified for the role both the movement and the media had cast him in. But even as he beat a retreat from politics…, as he railed against the movement, his music remained entangled in its fate.[24]

The song to best exemplify this is one touched on by both Fluxman and Marqusee: "My Back Pages," on *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, an album connecting his early protest work with his electric turn. The song removes itself from social criticism, and instead is a self-reflection and repudiation of his origins. Fluxman comments:

> By this stage, Dylan has become disenchanted with art being tied to political protest. In 'My Back Pages' he derides the simplicity of his earlier protest vision…What is strikingly different from the previous material is that the tone is not at all one of moral outrage.... The social criticism has an internal character.[25]

Dylan is not repudiating protest as much as he is repudiating the idealism expected of him: the society he is criticizing is far removed from where he feels his art should be, and his desire is now to create art that is of a greater personal authenticity. Marqusee concurs:

> The lilting refrain [of "My Back Pages"] must be one of the most lyrical expressions of political apostasy every penned…. The retreat from politics is a retreat from false and stale categories and acquired, secondhand attitudes...His argument with the movement is partly that its definition of the political doesn't go far enough, isn't radical enough, partly that it is in itself a prison, a restraint…[26]

Dylan's music would reflect this freedom, and this is perhaps the reason Marqusee and Fluxman's argument holds credence. The liberation of artistry coincides with his political apostasy: he simultaneously moves out of the folk tradition, and in the act creates a new blend of musical style and form, while distancing himself from antiquity. To be an artist of the environment coincides with understanding when the roles have been miscast, and when the protest movements moved towards hegemony, Dylan finally revolted.

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[24] Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger*, 98.
[25] Fluxman, "Bob Dylan and the Dialectic of Enlightenment," 95.
[26] Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger*, 112.

"My Back Pages" can also be interpreted as the primary injection of political skepticism into Dylan's work: Dylan's fight is with the nature of politics. By participating within the political system, and allowing his narrative to be shaped by the agenda of others, his voice was effectively drowned out. Paradoxically, this stance is itself political. In an effort to liberate and inspire artistic voices, the protest movement shackled Dylan (re: Fluxman). Marqusee begins to hint at this, but does not pursue it in as much breadth as necessary to fully realize the conception. He instead sees this point as Dylan's political rebirth, rather than Dylan's re-orientation:

> In the end, most of all, it is the inner cost of political activism that Dylan rejects; its certainties, its Manichaeism, are a betrayal of his own identity and autonomy…Dylan is alarmed by the discovery of authoritarianism at the heart of the challenge to authority—and within himself…One is nothing and one owns nothing: recognizing that is the only starting point for real authenticity, the only way to escape social control.[27]

Marqusee sees this point of Dylan's career as self-betrayal, and a realization that by ceding his place within the limelight, he would grow into a greater authenticity. The contention in this point of view is that it places Dylan's previous works into a limbo and perhaps makes Marqusee's observations circular – would the protest period then be a period of inauthenticity? His placement within the folk tradition, and the potency of his work would counter this – Marqusee's point falters because it becomes an aesthetic conclusion. Marqusee makes his analysis of Dylan's work normative, and in an effort to provide even analysis and historical backing to every side of his career brushes over the complications of this turning point.

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[27] Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger*, 112-113.

Stefan Snaevarr, sheds light on this crucial point of inflexion. Instead of casting Dylan as a political actor, as Marqusee and Fluxman have, he places Dylan's artistic trajectory within a lens of postmodern political skepticism, alongside the lines of philosopher Richard Rorty. He primarily orients his approach around a discussion of political vocabulary: Rorty, in his philosophical project, discusses the nature of truth and reality, and how neither are necessarily correspondent to each other. The means in which human interpret their reality, through human creations, are primarily through languages and sentences which are either true or false. In order to approach authenticity towards an interpreted reality, we must "recreate our selfhood by inventing new vocabularies."[28] While he does not feel that Dylan shares the same conception of truth, he finds that Dylan within his 1960s work takes a skeptical stance. On top of this, Dylan's work conceptually always "mixes the highbrow with the lowbrow,"[29] and lyrically acts multiculturally: blending the traditions between classes. Perhaps the most unique idiosyncrasy in Snaevarr's work is the clear distinction he makes between the artist and art:

> I will not draw any clear line between Dylan as an individual and his artworks; after all, rock comes in packages where the person, the act, and the image are intertwined with the music and the lyrics…I shall focus on ways of interpreting his songs as being polysemic, containing dimensions of meaning that were not necessarily intended by the author.[30]

In many regards, the stance within this article is of complete opposition to Marqusee and Fluxman. By removing Dylan from the historical undercurrents that he was in touch with, Snaevarr wants to focus purely on interpretation. For an artist within such a complicated web of influence as Dylan, this seems to be an approach fraught with complications. While the works of Dylan surely have enough merit to stand on their own, interpreting them without connecting them to Dylan's personal trajectory is intentionally ignoring a sea of confluence that Marqusee and Fluxman make clear. Marqusee inadvertently comments on this dangerous claim:

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[28] Stefan Snaevarr, "Dylan as a Rortian: Bob Dylan, Richard Rorty, Postmodernism, and Political Skepticism," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 48, no.4 (2014), 38.

[29] Snaevarr, "Dylan as a Rortian," 39.

[30] Ibid.

> In his great music of the 60s, Dylan rebelled against the neat compartmentalization of the aesthetic, political, and personal…Yet his constant insistence that he is merely a singer of songs betrays an unease. Dylan himself has repeatedly testified to the life-changing power of song…So whether Dylan likes it or not, being "merely" a singer of songs – songs that speak to their time and then outlast it – is a daunting vocation.[31]

Marqusee speaks towards Dylan's own insistence – towards Dylan's own incredulity to the political influence and confluence of his art, but also notes the paradoxical affirmations Dylan has given towards the art form as a whole. There is an artistic responsibility and an inseparability in his works: something that can not be escaped. While Snaevarr chooses to readily ignore this aspect, it is not entirely detrimental to his observations.

Snaevarr frames his entire argument around political skeptics, whom he defines as "person[s] who [do] not think that there is anything like *the* best solution to political problems,"[32]. Dylan never offers any sort of political solution to the problems that he notices: but he notes and preaches on societies changing notions of cruelty. Snaevarr finds that Dylan's eventual skepticism towards politicking and ideology can be justified by placing him within this canon:

> Dylan is skeptical of political ideologies. This skeptical attitude makes him wary of the dogmatic claims of both the Left and the Right; he says in no uncertain words that "there is no right wing or left wing…. There is only upwing an' downwing." Further, he said in an interview with *The New Yorker* in 1964 that he could not make it with any political organization.[33]

This observation is accurate, but is shortsighted due to Snaevarr's historical ignorance. In 1964, Dylan had already vocally distanced himself from the vogue of the old left. In August of the same year, he would release *Another Side of Bob Dylan*. Dylan removed himself from the narrative not only because of skepticism, but because his music was beginning to be marginalized and painted solely as protest music. Snaevarr dismisses his early protest phase singlehandedly, and claims Dylan's early output show no clear cut left-wing or socialist tendencies:

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[31] Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger*, 333.
[32] Snaevarr, "Dylan as a Rortian," 40.
[33] Snaevarr, "Dylan as a Rortian," 41.

> The Left loved Dylan's earlier protest songs… but, no clear-cut left-wing or socialist tendencies: no straightforward condemnation of capitalism, no advocacy of the welfare state, let alone communism. Songs such as "Blowin' in the Wind" express a general humanist view of the world, which both people on the Left and the Right can subscribe to.[34]

Snaevarr's interpretation hints at the problem of co-option: since there is no finality in interpreting any of Dylan's words, they can be multifaceted in use – bending meaning and lyrics to fit any political ideology. Snaevarr is, in many ways, pointing out the biases of authors such as Marqusee and Fluxman, who due to their leftist academic backgrounds, may be painting Dylan within a tradition that he has never been a card-carrying member of. Finger-pointing aside, Snaevarr's argument culminates from this understanding and returns to his original point of a reinvention of political vocabulary:

> Dylan's means of construction are artistic ones…he is a strong poet in Rorty's sense of the word, giving us hints as to how we could create a new vocabulary to redescribe or recreate our political world and do away with the traditional vocabulary that describes politics in terms of the Left-Right dichotomy. In the new vocabulary the differences between Left and Right are deconstructed.[35]

The effectiveness of Dylan's artistic project are his artistic means: he becomes a political actor who reshapes the way in which politics are discusses through his music. His liberation after the ECLC dinner is within his lyrical voice itself, and if he hadn't evolved, he would have "remained incarcerated in [the] confines"[36] of the old lingua franca. On top of this, the power of Dylan's artistic means is in how it “rid[s] us of dichotomism.”[37] Dylan creates metaphors through his interpretation of the world around him – and in doing so, his audience subsumes his metaphorical intent and reinterprets it for themselves.

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[34] Snaevarr, "Dylan as a Rortian," 42.
[35] Snaevarr, "Dylan as a Rortian," 45.
[36] Ibid.

Marqusee, Fluxman, and Snaevarr are all representative of general academic tendency towards Dylan. The fear of placing Dylan’s effusive artistry into a box is palpable within all of their works, but perhaps most palpable in Snaevarr’s. They all, regardless of approach, deal with the paradoxical political nature of Dylan’s work and place his songs as supremely influential political art. Not only were the songs representative of the political world that Dylan occupied, but within the 1960s, they were indicative of a wholly different relationship between media, consumer, and artist. Dylan, while being thrust into the limelight of a movement that he did not participate in, ended up representing within his music a firebrand apostasy: a separation from the vanguard, which ironically helped inspire the vanguard. In his desire to remove himself from a position of influence, he left a trail for artists such as Phil Ochs, Bruce Springsteen, and beyond, to pick up on. Dylan’s music itself has no claim, and this is perhaps the danger in dealing with his work. It is nearly impossible to not co-opt the meaning of his material into political causes, as can be seen within the three markedly different academic traditions of Marqusee, Fluxman, and Snaevarr. But the impact of his work within the academic world is perhaps similar to the musical: it connects disparate traditions and has continued to inspire and challenge those with interest in anti-capitalist art, protest music, and the resounding influences of the first folk revival.

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[37] Snaevarr, “Dylan as a Rortian,” 46.

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