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## American Dreams

by Susan Neiman

In a newspaper article announcing this conference I was daunted - no, dismayed - to see my name listed as one of a number of Dylan experts, so I'd better begin with a disclaimer. Whatever else I may be expert on, it certainly isn't Dylan. I never had the inclination to go through his treasures, much less his garbage, I don't know the secondary literature, I don't own every album, and I've never even heard all the outtakes. This last is not due to absence of passion but if anything to its opposite: I get stuck on a song or an album, let the period depend on my own state of mind or soul, and play it over and over and over. It's a form of unprincipled monogamy: why go on to the next thing when you can hear "Shelter from the Storm" one more time? - So these are not the remarks of an expert, though I look forward to learning from the experts here, but the very personal reflections of one for whom Dylan is simply home, or the closest thing to it I know. No presence in my life has been more constant. Dylan's the place where most love stories ignite and expire, the thing I unpack first when I change apartments or countries, the voice of courage or comfort when I need one or the other, the tones I want to pass on to my children. A few years ago, one of them took it on herself to call me elitist: she thought my circle of friends too narrow. I protested that my friends come from many countries and walks of life, and listed their different qualities, when she interrupted with the retort: "But I bet they all listen to Dylan". They do. It's a joy to see that the same daughter now does so herself, and after years of teasing me about it, partly credits her own wish to become a writer to the tapes of *Street Legal* or *Desire* she had no choice but to hear endlessly repeated in the back of a car on the way to supermarket or kindergarten.

If Dylan is my home, what I can offer are the reflections of an American expatriate increasingly aware of how deeply American Dylan's work is. This was long easy to overlook for all kinds of reasons. Like any really classic artist, Dylan taps something that runs through all of us, and can't be bound in any place or time. Fair enough. But there were other reasons to miss the ways in which his work was so deeply and consciously rooted. First of all: even before he stopped trying to hide it, Dylan was a Jewish intellectual, and the first after Einstein to make it big in American culture at all, much less pop culture. (Just recall 1962, the date of the first album: Allan Ginsburg was confined to the margins, Philip Roth and Saul Bellow had yet to burst into prominence. Lauren Bacall had been a sensation with Bogart, but nobody knew she'd been born Betty Perske, related to the still-unknown Shimon Peres; Barbra Streisand and her nose were still waiting in the wings.) Who but a Jewish intellectual could imagine putting Einstein, Shakespeare, and T.S. Eliot into a rock song, and that at a time when nobody even used words with as many syllables as ,desolation'? The Americans who delighted in that were those of us who look at the Old World with the ambivalent reverence that's been a staple of transatlantic relations since Henry James. We may have energy, but you have culture, we must be raw, if you are refined. If Dylan was refined, he couldn't be American, but must be part of the tribe of floating cosmopolitans who can and must pick and choose where they stand. One couldn't overlook the "Song to Woody" - though one overlooked many another reference - but then Dylan was a boy calling back to roots he would outgrow in the very next album, and wasn't Woody himself, through his fierce radical politics, so marginal that he only partly counted as American himself?

I'll have more to say about American inclinations to overlook Dylan's Americanness, but the rest of the world overlooked it for reasons that were slightly different. There are references even a scholar will miss if he didn't hear them as a child. "Highway means nothing more to me than *Autobahn*," says a Chilean friend who knows there's a world of difference between them, and does

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"In Germany, monuments reflect the nation's values", by Susan Neiman, Miami Herald, 2017/09/07

"The Rationality of the World: A Philosophical Reading of the Book of Job", by Susan Neiman, ABC Religion and Ethics, 2016/10/19

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"An Enlightenment for Grownups", by Susan Neiman, Spiked Review, March 2016

"Forgetting Hiroshima, Remembering Auschwitz: Tales of Two Exhibits", by Susan Neiman, Thesis Eleven, Vol. 129(1), 2015

"Never mind eternal youth - adulthood is a subversive ideal", by Susan Neiman, The Guardian, 2014/10/05

"History and Guilt", by Susan Neiman, Aeon Magazine 2013/08/12

"What It All Means", by Susan Neiman, The New York Times, Sunday Book Review 2011/01/20

"Truth, Hope, and Light?", by Susan Neiman, New Humanist, July/August 2009

"Is Morality Driven by Faith?", by Susan Neiman, The Washington Post/Newsweek 2008/10/08

How to Win a Culture War, by Susan Neiman, The Huffington Post, 2008/09/12

"Obama in Berlin: Finding the Right Tone", by Susan Neiman, The Huffington Post 2008/07/31

"Change Germans Can't Believe In", by Susan Neiman, The New York Times 2008/07/26

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"Across the Great Divide," by Susan Neiman, The Huffington Post 2008/05/19

"Can and Kant. The Critique of Pure Reason, by Immanuel Kant: Susan

better imitations of Dylan singing than anyone I know. But it's more than words and allusions, or even scope and resonance. Dylan has qualities so American they make other people nervous - if bound up with a fresh directness that attracts Europeans to Americans with the wistful ambivalence that's the other side of the transatlantic coin. So it's natural for Europeans and others to play those qualities down, while focusing on the features of Dylan's work which are the least local. In so doing, Europeans have done us all a service. Much in the way that the French had to receive Poe before Americans could view him as anything but a macabre member of a lower genre, the international Dylan reception surely gave him the sort of gravitas that couldn't have come without it, validating the poet from the place culture comes from before we could bring it all back home. So this is the place to thank Axel Honneth for spending the time and energy to insist on and organize this conference. But in emphasizing the universal, we needn't forget the particular, and that's what I'll examine here.

Ten days ago I read something that left me utterly daunted by all there is to explain. Waiting for an early morning airplane I thumbed through a German magazine article about long-distance relationships - *Fernbeziehungen* sounds too close for me to *Fernbedienungen* but no matter - that was full of the inconclusive banalities of which glossy magazines are made. There were the usual formulas: interviews and commentary, musings on the advantages and difficulties of such relationships, a multiple choice test which ended in bits of completely useless advice. All matters to go to sleep over, whatever the subject at hand, when I was jerked awake by the caption: *Number One Song for Long-Distance Lovers: Dylan's 'Boots of Spanish Leather'*. - I assume most of us in this room have the texts stored somewhere in memory, so take a moment to recall the ending of the most glorious blend of lyricism and irony since Heinrich Heine. The man who'd forsake the diamonds of the deepest ocean for her sweet kiss ends up with a mail order for a pair of shoes. Did the German lovers who are moved by that song miss a verse? Miss an irony? Perhaps it doesn't matter after all. We live in a land where the CDU can steal a heartrending farewell song from the Rolling Stones and still win an election, so if "Boots of Spanish Leather" helps couples endure long separations, who am I to complain?

A Dylan conference could be an occasion for *Wiedergutmachung* for Americans otherwise used to enduring European condescension about New World cultural inferiority, but I'll resist the temptation to turn the tables. Let's appeal instead to Quine's principle of charity and assume that few people miss the point of "Boots of Spanish Leather" the way the CDU missed "Angie". Is there yet something specifically American in Dylan's work that needs reexamining? Or, to lay my real cards on the table: can we use Dylan's work to understand those virtues that are specifically American?

What follows is an exercise in patriotism, so I had better make clear that I hold the current U.S. government to be a travesty and a betrayal of all of the virtues, be they American or universal ones. But patriotism itself is an American quality, one that makes Europeans - particularly Germans - so uneasy that they are likely to rush past the passages that trumpet it. Americans, even leftwing Americans, have an easier time with patriotism than other nations because our loyalty is abstract: being American was always meant to be a choice not an accident. Only a tiny number of even those African Americans dragged across the Atlantic against their wills ever chose to go back. Rather, they asserted their own place in the American dream with the appeal to the Enlightenment ideals that may have been imagined in the old world, but first glimpsed in the new. Dylan may call the Mississippi River the bloodstream of the blues - "my place in the universe, always felt like it was in my blood" - but though *Chronicles* uses the word 'blood' twice in two sentences, it's worlds away from the *Blut und Boden* talk with which European patriotism is inevitably tangled. If Americans are tied to the soil it's because of the symbol, not the other way around. Rather than waxing lyrical about pieces of ground their forebears happened to land on, we are more likely to sound like this: "Being born and raised in America, the country of freedom and independence, I had always cherished the values and ideals of equality and liberty. I was determined to raise my children with those ideals."

No that's not Johnny Cash, about whom more in a moment, but the man who feared that everything was broken long before he sang it, writing about the assassinations of the Kennedys and

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King and Malcolm X and the horrendous consequences they produced. Of all the surprises on reading his magnificent autobiography none is starker than Dylan's clarity about his origins. Not just the musical origins in folk and blues, but the straightforwardness of his ties to American history. Nor will it be an accident that the Civil War is the piece of American history he saw as central, and closest to his own era. The beginning of *Chronicles* records the midwestern Jewish boy's longing to understand what he calls "that cataclysmic event", his wish to be part of the world where great battles were fought, his fascination, even a touch of envy for the southern characters he met in New York City, whose ties to the heart of the deepest American drama were directer than his own. For he writes about the Civil War that "If you turned the light towards it, you could see the full complexity of human nature. Back there, America was put on the cross, died and was resurrected. There was nothing synthetic about it. *The godawful truth of that would be the all-encompassing template behind everything I would write.*" (emphasis added) But before we stop at this amazing statement I'm going to give you two more. "„All the other cultures of the world were fine, but as far as I was concerned mine, the one I was born into, did the work of them all." And lest we be tempted to view that remark as a bit of exaggerated oversight, let's consider where *Chronicles* ends: with a list of people from the North Country, "adventurers, prophets, writers and musicians...each one of whom would have understood what my inarticulate dreams were about. I felt like I was one of them or all of them put together."

All of that is striking but not jolting, even if you're happier with Dylan's identification with fellow Minnesotan realist writer Sinclair Lewis than with Charles Lindbergh, the pilot who flirted with fascism. The most interesting thing on his list, though, is his description of F.Scott Fitzgerald: not, in the first instance, as the author of *The Great Gatsby* but the descendant of the author of "The Star-Spangled Banner", our unsingable national anthem. For years many have said, with more than a touch of humor, that the country would work better if we had a civil hymn that wasn't an old British sailors' song, meant to be sung - or anyway enjoyed - only when blind drunk. Should we take Dylan's work, all together, as an offer to replace it? Nobody's ever going to do better.

The first thing that makes Dylan's work more suited to the national anthem than the one we've got is the thing which even the Nobel Prize would scarcely reward: he took apart the lines between high and low culture and gave us simply culture instead. Did I say culture? Culture is what Europeans have, albeit with skepticism, irony, and sometimes guilt. Dylan gave us "a fountain of truth, light, and beauty". This is just a quote from Dylan's obituary for Cash turned on himself. They are words no European will take in her mouth (with some reason; when I tried using just one of them, beauty, a couple of months ago, I was shouted down in a Frankfurt theater. With all due allowance for American naivete, wasn't I aware that the thought that art had anything to do with beauty was hopelessly, painfully passe?) From the outset, Dylan made it clear that the boundaries between eras were as trivial as the boundaries between genres. If Mona Lisa can have the highway blues it's less surprising to read in *Chronicles* that Dylan „was still in the Age of Enlightenment", and having read Voltaire, Rousseau, Locke, Montesquieu and Martin Luther „it was like I know those guys, like they'd been living in my backyard". One of those wondrous and wondering souls for whom the whole world remains alive, Dylan took the fierce and liberating erotics of popular music and mixed it with reflection, and nearly bottomless irony. Suddenly you didn't have to choose between body and soul. - Among the things that clouded the 60s was a revival of D.H.Lawrence; Dylan, by contrast, moved your mind the way he moved your body, and never let you forget the power of either. - Knowing that his themes are classic, he was never shy of means that are conservative, and the fact that most 20th century poets held rhyme for anachronistic didn't stop him from becoming its master. Like every virtuoso he knows his own talent, and isn't averse to showing it off just to play. Once again, *Chronicles* shows that he knew exactly which parts were play, and which were monumental. To appreciate one of his funnier pieces of wizardry you need to know that the rhyming of June and moon is the archetype, in America, of trite and hackneyed verse, stock in trade of the Tin Pan Alley mechanics who cranked them out in ditties by the dozen. Who but Dylan would have the nerve, and the humor, to use it in the midst of one of his most powerful, and dark, later works? He described "Man in the Long Black Coat" as historic. "In some kind of weird way, I thought of it as my „I Walk the Line", a song I'd always considered to be up there at the top,

one of the most mysterious and revolutionary of all time, a song that makes an attack on your most vulnerable spots, sharp words from a master". Yet in the middle of that great, elusive song, where secrets of love and conscience are spoken but not revealed, he gives us a mighty joke - in the same deadpan gravelly tones as the rest.

There's smoke on the water It's been there since June  
Tree trunks uprooted, Neath the high crescent moon

And just to tease the listener doubly:

Pulse and vibration, rumbling force  
Somebody's out there beating on a dead horse

Clichees about beating dead horses piled on top of clichees about June moons, turning dross into gold.

Is there anything about all this that's specifically American? Describing a visual artist who influenced him, Dylan wrote "He incorporated every living thing into something and made it scream - everything side by side created equal" - a phrasing that deliberately invokes the Declaration of Independence to show how Ma Rainey and Beethoven will wind up in bed together in "Tombstone Blues", Lincoln County Road and Armageddon might be interchangeable destinations in "Senor". Americans are democrats - small d - in their breath and their bones. While Europeans today may have the more democratic institutions, they are singing a song they had to study. Nothing to be said against studying, but if it begins too late it will rarely go very deep - as anyone knows who ever watched a European Social Democrat beam and bow the moment he spots a government minister. (Or a minister's deputy, known in this country by the portentous title of *Staatssekretär*. The level of floating obsequiousness in European capitols is very high.) Even where real American conditions may be almost feudal, American instincts will be democratic - and those instincts stream through Dylan's work.

But the mix of the grand and the lowly, of classical form and ragged fashion, of profound and profane is what makes up great writing generally. Shakespeare did it daily, though it's hard to think of many who succeeded since. (Both Joyce and Döblin tried it, but what are we to make of the fact that Dylan himself says he found Joyce unreadable?) Still it's a mix that we recognize, and there needn't be anything particularly American about Dylan's blend but the particular idiom he had no choice but to use. What seems American-born, impossible to imagine coming from the old world, is the moral directness expressed in a song like "Ring Them Bells". Start with the title: this is bad English, an ungrammatical form used only by those who never finished school - or those who want to speak to them. Dylan's use of it is as deliberate as his use of an exaggerated American accent when he does, as is rare, take up bits of foreign languages ("s'il vous plait" is drawled out to rhyme with „Black Diamond Bay“, „Senor“ is given a hard American r). But there is nothing funny in "Ring Them Bells". The song is a plea to sound the alarm for all those left out of account: the blind and the deaf and the poor man's son.

Are we talking religion? Like many Dylan texts, this one is full of allusions that can't be understood without knowledge of Bible - knowledge which, unlike that of other great texts, is easier to acquire and take for granted in U.S. than in Europe. But it isn't only Europeans who incline to rush over Dylan's religious journeys with apologetic embarrassment. Of all the turns Dylan's work took, none more enraged most American fans than his born-again Christian period. And though I joined them at the time, I find it hard to recapture the sense of betrayal today. Apart from the fact that most anything which will produce a song as good as "Every Grain of Sand" is fine by me, I find the openness of Dylan's quest for faith moving, and the fact that the quest has moved between down-home Christianity and orthodox Judaism is the sign of someone not afraid to admit that he's lost. It's also the sign that what he's seeking isn't dogma. Dylan's religious concerns began long before he was concerned with doctrine. You don't write a line like "G-d said to Abraham: kill me a son" unless you are living with Abraham, and the story that is the starting point of all three western religions. I submit that it's the point to which Dylan returned decades later in "Ring Them Bells". Though there's no reference to churches, bells are a Christian medium: imams call from their towers, Jews get time by the moon. Along with the lilies that are unambiguously Christian, two saints appear in the song - not just St. Peter, founder of the Church, but also St. Catherine, the popular medieval saint who was martyred by the Romans because she had, at 18, converted a slew of pagan philosophers not by working miracles but by her sheer

powers of argument. Dylan's naming of all these marks one point of departure, but his churchbells also chime out the most important Jewish prayer:

Ring them bells so the world will know that G-d is one

This last line is the end of the Sh'ma, the short prayer every Jew is meant to know, the line that is repeated in every synagogue service and posted in every doorway, the verse that should be on one's lips at the moment of death. In taking this as the message the world should know, Dylan takes his religious wanderings to a point beyond ecumenicism, for what drives those wanderings is less a search for G-d than a search for the good. I don't want to exaggerate: though Dylan does mention a number of Enlightenment philosophers as "living in my backyard", Kant is not among them, so a *theory* that religion must be grounded in ethics and not the other way around is no easier to find in his work than a catechism. Yet after rambling between the shepherds and the saints and the sacred cows "Ring Them Bells" ends with a moral plea of simplicity so breathtaking it's hard to imagine anyone but Dylan getting away with it. The bells must be rung, he concludes

For the lines are long And the fighting is strong And they're  
breaking down the difference Between right and wrong

I had long been staggered by the unabashed moral plainness of those lines, so I wasn't really surprised to see *Chronicles* devote a page to them - the only time I recall him writing that he'd failed to get a line right. I think it's just fine, but Dylan records how he tried unsuccessfully to fix it. Right or wrong, right from wrong, right and wrong? "I'd always been confused about that kind of stuff, that stuff troubled me, the legal and moral aspects of things. There are good deeds and bad deeds. A good person can do a bad thing and a bad person can do a good thing. But I never did get to fix the line." Perhaps it no more needs fixing than the last line of *Chronicles*, which records his taking an open road on which one thing was sure: "Not only was it not run by G-d, but it wasn't run by the devil either". If there's a moral message in Dylan's work it's one about the fact that ethical stuff, as he calls it, is really hard, and the only way to stay true to oneself is to figure it out piece by piece.

But doesn't the very suggestion of a message, much less a moral message, cut against everything Dylan ever said about his work? Pressed for a message he's insisted on offering nothing less cryptic than in-your-face teasers like "Always carry a lightbulb" or "Don't follow leaders/Watch the parking meters". (Despite a recent attempt I just saw in German this one is untranslatable because it's not about Parkuhren but about rhyme, and play, and the senselessness of sense itself. Otherwise "Don't follow leaders" could become a piece of dogma - commitments to anarchism? - too.) Suppose we take Dylan's refusal to function as the prophet most of us wanted at one time or another as a rejection of nothing more than that. Prophets foretell, and they show you the way, pointing to particular religious or political paths. In foregoing all of that Dylan is not foregoing a moral standpoint, but a refusal to fix that point in political or religious foundations that are often thought needed to keep morality straight. The fact that we live in a political world is not, after all, a fact he wants to celebrate.

If we distinguish the moral from the political and the religious, it's easy to understand how Dylan made decisions about which causes to take up. (Anybody who thought he disdained the idea of cause altogether should be corrected by *Chronicles*' description of why he rejected the Beat scene of his youth: "The rebel-without-a-cause thing wasn't hands-on enough - even a lost cause, I thought, would be better than no cause".) Thousands were angry when he didn't follow his unambiguous engagement for the Civil Rights Movement with all the '60s engagement that seemed its logical consequence at the time. Looking at the film clips today one sees the face of a boy from the provinces honored to share a Washington stage with Martin Luther King or a Mississippi tent with Pete Seeger - and how could that not play a role? But looking back at the '60s one can also marvel at the boy's good judgment, for the Civil Rights Movement was the one clear moment in American history when we knew which side G-d was on. Unlike the identity politics that emerged later, or the opposition to the war that was strongly driven by fear of the draft, the Civil Rights Movement was about a difference between right and wrong that could not be broken down.

This thought makes sense of Dylan's description of the Civil War as the "all-encompassing template behind everything I write". For the Civil War was a war fought over the clearest of moral questions: thousands massacred their brothers or cousins over

the right to own slaves. But looked at more closely the war opens up a moral morass that has yet to be cleared. *Chronicles* records Dylan's trips to the New York Public Library, reading "newspapers on microfilm from 1855 to about 1865 to see what daily life was like. I wasn't so much interested in the issues as engaged by the language and the rhetoric of the times...You get the feeling that the newspapers themselves could explode and lightning will burn and everybody will perish." And yet despite the pounding of the language and the gravity of the question, the moral center of the war was anything but clear. "It's hard to find any of the neoclassical virtues," Dylan writes. The Civil War, he says, was a battle between two kinds of time, sometimes two kinds of evil: moral tragedies abound here, too complex to be resolved, and not just because every war is hellish. "The suffering is endless, and the punishment is going to be forever," *Chronicles* concludes. I don't know about forever, but it was clear to Americans by the last election at the latest that the punishment is still going on. For the division the country fought to avoid in 1860 is the division that plagues it today, and what is now called the split between red states and blue states mirrors the Civil War almost exactly - not just in geography but in force and passion.

So named after an accidental graphic showing the election polls in color, red states are those whose majority voted for Bush, the blue states are those that voted against him (though there are urban islands of blue in middle of the red sea, and denizens of Nashville or Atlanta today will rush to tell you their town went blue). But the split has far less to do with politics than with culture. There's no neutral way to describe it, but let's say that on the whole, blue states think urban while red states think country, blue states talk rights while red states talk values, blue states drink wine while red states drink beer, blue states quote everything else while red states quote the Bible, blue states have irony while red states have sentiment, blue states listen to Bob Dylan and red states listen to Johnny Cash.

*Nashville Skyline* provoked more outrage than going electric at the Newport Folk Festival, but the ramifications were so wide that it struck people dumb. Here are some comments by one Richard Williams, writing two decades later in an otherwise decent Dylan book: „Dylan fans of every kind were appalled by the fumbling, stumbling job...All the edge had disappeared, and that seemed to go for his mind, too...There was no reason why Bob Dylan shouldn't have been allowed to try his hand at singing like a truck driver at a Tuesday night talent contest in a very small town somewhere in Arkansas, „ says the critic generously, after allowing how the pressures of the preceding years might have gotten to be too much. Perhaps the motorcycle accident had gone to his brain? "Or perhaps," Williams concludes, „For a while, he genuinely didn't have anything to say."

I will spare you further quotation, including one description of "Girl from the North Country" that's so obscene it will take time to forget it before being able to enjoy that haunting song again. Thankfully, I was too young at the time to read that sort of thing. I knew enough to know that Cash was really, really not politically correct, but I thought *Nashville Skyline* one of the most beautiful things I ever heard. Had I done something besides play it over and over, I might have found out that Dylan's and Cash's interest in each other went back far and deep. (Without any biographical information there were clues even in that most splendid of stoned prismatic New York City texts, "Visions of Johanna", where you could hear that "The country music station plays soft/ But there's nothing, really nothing to turn off". ) Cash recorded Dylan, and was the first major voice to tell Dylan's early critics to "shut up, he knows what he's doing". Dylan called Cash "...the North Star; you could guide your ship by him - the greatest of the greats then and now", and it was for Cash that Dylan overcame his aversion to television in order to play together. And the woman who wrote of „...a beautiful girl with long raven hair named Sara, who became one of my best friends and is one woman I will never, ever forget - Bob's wife and the mother of his children" - was not, say, Yoko Ono, but June Carter Cash.

But blue state types didn't read liner notes by June Carter, or listen to Johnny Cash unless Dylan rammed it down their throats. So none of the background to *Nashville Skyline* was common knowledge. The album itself appeared like a bolt from nowhere, and Dylan's claim that "the smallest line in this new album means more to me than some of the songs on any of the albums I've made" was dismissed as astonishing, and ignored. The song he wrote with Willie Nelson wailing that the American dream was coming apart was buried - for most Dylan fans - on one of the

Nelson's albums, just as the 2004 tour they did together through a series of minor-league baseball parks got no press in *The New York Times*.

Let me be fair to die-hard blue staters like my earlier self. Contrary to what the red staters often allege, this wasn't merely a matter of coastal elitism. There were - and are - wars raging, and racism was and is an issue. Whatever the private convictions of its stars, country music was very white, and red states were places where crosses were not only brandished but burned, well into the '60s by the Ku Klux Klan. There were better reasons than snobbery to be suspicious of the culture - and to feel betrayed by the fact that the man who had shared a stage with Martin Luther King was now crooning away with the icon of the country world.

But the wheel, as he told us, was still in turn, and Hilary Clinton and Jesse Helms are now stumbling to do in the Senate what Dylan and Cash did so gracefully forty years ago. The difference is all the difference between politics and culture: culture goes further, and it need make no compromises. For the conflict between red and blue state is a conflict about whose America is real, and whose America is other. (Calling the red states the heartland is not just geographical accident.) This is a conflict threatening to tear the country as it was torn in the last Civil War - a tear that could, given the balance of global power, threaten far beyond America's borders. Am I suggesting that Dylan should come out and lead us, as others did with mobs and bullhorns the last time America looked ready to tear itself apart? No - for I think he's done enough, if we know how to work with it. Dylan's work contains a vision of America that embraces enough of each part of the equation to make them add up, and not divide. Once again, from the obituary for Cash: "Truly he is what the land and country is all about, the heart and soul of it personified and what it means to be here; and he said it all in plain English. I think we can have recollections of him, but we can't define him any more than we can define a fountain of truth, light and beauty. If we want to know what it means to be mortal, we need look no further than the Man in Black. Blessed with a profound imagination, he used the gift to express all the various lost causes of the human soul. This is a miraculous and humbling thing."

Dylan's generosity towards those from whom he's learned is profuse and open-hearted, and indeed the ability to offer exuberant praise is a particularly American talent, leaving in its wake the suspicion that the praiser is uncritical, or naive. It's not a suspicion I entertain, but though I've recently come to appreciate Cash profoundly, I think Dylan's words are more suited to himself. He's the North Star by which you can guide - with the crucial caveat that this star is not fixed, and steering your ship by it will entail a lot of thinking for yourself, or getting lost in the process. What's important is the wealth of words he uses to praise Cash, all the dead-on directness of country enriched by every piece of treasure that ever washed up on the coasts.

His beachcombing was as conscious as any other treasure-hunter's. Few things are more revealing - about Dylan, but also about the difference between Europe and America - than Chronicles' description of his discovery of Brecht. Threepenny Opera changed his songwriting from „a little shack in the universe" to „a glorious cathedral". „Pirate Jenny", in particular, knocked him flat on his back, made him feel he hadn't eaten or slept, led him to spend weeks taking the song apart, unzipping it. Woody had never written anything like it, he tells us, and he was struck by the way the songs „...like folk songs in nature but sophisticated...seemed to have a pistol in their hip pocket, a club or a brickbat and they came at you in crutches, braces and wheelchairs." Right at the outset he was „...totally influenced by ‚Pirate Jenny' though staying far from its ideological heart." Ideological heart? Dylan says „It's a nasty song, sung by an evil fiend, and when she's done singing, there's not a word to say...there was no love for people in it."

We are here at the *Institut für Sozialforschung* to honor a man we all think has contributed more to shared language than anyone in our lifetimes. Now close your eyes and try to imagine Brecht, or any other European whose language you take seriously, writing those lines. Don't bother to decide whether you'd laugh or you'd wince, the thought experiment isn't really imaginable. Only Americans sound like this, and by and large it is not the Americans on the wide open coasts. Dylan's description of his meeting with Archibald MacLeish, American poet laureate and

consummate blue stater, is perfectly clear about the differences. MacLeish had asked him to write songs for a new play he'd just finished. „After hearing a few lines from the script," writes Dylan, „I didn't see how our destinies could be intermixed. The play was dark, painted a world of paranoia, guilt and fear - it was all blacked out and met the atomic age head on, reeked of foul play. The play spelled death for society with humanity lying facedown in its own blood. MacLeish's play was delivering something beyond an apocalyptic message. Something like, man's mission is to destroy the earth."

Dylan's aversion to MacLeish's standpoint was much like what he described feeling about the work of the Beat poets on arriving in New York City. „Creatively, you couldn't do much with it. I had already landed in a parallel universe, anyway, with more archaic principles and values; one where actions and virtues were old style and judgmental things came falling out on their heads...It was all clear - ideal and G-d-fearing - but you had to go find it." Dylan found it in Guthrie, who „was interested in the liberation of the human race and wants to create a world worth living in." He found it in Robert Johnson, who was „neither forlorn nor hopeless nor shackled". He found it in Cash, the only person whose situation he saw as similar to his own. And he found it ever again in himself, in the wit and play that kept his songs from becoming sententious:

I'm crossin' the river goin' to Hoboken  
Maybe over there, things ain't broken

„That was my bit of optimism to go along with a song like this." For lighthearted or not, when he wants to Dylan can write crystalclear sentences about the point of his work. „I try to use my material in the most effective way. The songs were written to the glory of man and not to his defeat." I haven't the beginning of a clue about how to translate that - despite, or because of the man's insistence that „I suppose all these things are simple, matter of fact enough." Dylan is right to call his values archaic. The fearlessness about sentiment, in particular about moral sentiment, cannot be found in a world read through the hermeneutics of suspicion. And it's the absence of suspicion that can drive Europeans wild. Has he no qualms? *Evil fiends? Glory of man?* Isn't this the sort of - polarising, to put it nicely - language we've had to endure these last years from the White House? Archaic values, ideals you can touch - what's to distinguish this sort of moral rhetoric from the absolutist poison radiating from Washington? There are complicated answers to this question which appeal to judgment and criteria, but you needn't get very complicated to call a hypocrite a hypocrite. The men in the White House have been lying, and next to the wreckage of lives in Irak the most enduring damage they have wrought till now has been the speeded-up corrosion of the idea of value itself. Bush's call for moral clarity is a travesty of both words. The man whose sanctimonious appeals to the tragedy at the World Trade Center fueled more than one war was publically laughing about the timeliness of the attack as the ruins were still smoking in the fall of 2001. If this be moral clarity, who wouldn't run for the mud?

Nor is it only Europeans who get nervous at such tones. Blue state Americans hear them even more clearly, and nothing is a sadder comment on the current American culture war than the current issue of *The Nation*, the most reliable American left-wing weekly paper. In it there's a smart piece by classic rock critic Richard Goldstein, commendably aimed at avoiding what he calls Dylan hagiography. Goldstein „comes not to worship him but to complicate him". So far, so good. After all, Jews don't have saints. But Goldstein's list of Dylan's sins is a mournful roster of blue state dogma. Dylan, we are told, is so patriarchal he can only appeal to one sex. („What do women think of this shit?" asks Goldstein. „We don't really know.") „Consider," Goldstein continues, „This roster of Dylan themes: suspicion of worldly women - and therefore the world; rejection of modernism, especially when it threatens old values; rigid, sin-burned religiosity; the falsity of social life; the corruption of love; and lately, the perversion of divine order. These values resonate with the paranoid tendency in machismo."

Goldstein does make one point worth making, in criticizing the formalist tendencies in what he calls PhDylanology („20 years of schooling and they put you on a syllabus"). Critics who argue for Dylan's stature by stressing his connections to high, European culture and forgetting the influences of American music do both a disservice. But there are two ways to go with this insight. You can, as Goldstein does, use it to undermine Dylan's appeal, by pointing to „these reactionary attitudes and that unctuous, unforgiving theodicy" found otherwise only in country music. Or



you can turn all that around, and use Dylan's own use of that work to point to another American dream.

This is not a plea for reaction, or for idealizing that part of the world centered on Nashville. Like early folk and gospel, country music's appeal is its absence of cool, its claim on a part of us deeper than fashion. But like anything else, unashamed sentimentality can be part of a pose, manipulable and manipulating in its turn. „To hell with country," said Merle Haggard, currently touring the south as opening act for Dylan, in a recent interview. „Country people are always trying to use you, the rock people are coming from the heart and soul." - So no standpoint is safe, just like that. Perhaps Dylan was protected by the very thing that was also a torment. The drawbacks of being catapulted into unprecedented fame, awash in the weight of the world's expectations at a bruisingly tender age, are clear enough. But there was one advantage: long before he was thirty, nothing he needed could be bought or sold. If you live outside the law you must be honest.

So Dylan may have found it very easy to be true, or at any rate easier than the rest of us. Not every red state expression of sentiment is genuine, and not every blue state expression of skepticism is caustic, and his great songs achieve a mighty balance between both. Dylan would never record „America the Beautiful" anymore than he would have „...sung ‚Washington's a bourgeois town'. He wouldn't have noticed, „ *Chronicles* writes of Robert Johnson, „Or if he did, it would have been irrelevant". - But he is right there in Johnny Cash's „From Sea to Shining Sea", a 1967 recording of „America the Beautiful", the song that many Americans substitute for the national anthem - it sounds more like a hymn, and at least it is singable when sober. It also has one line I find myself dwelling on recently: „G-d shed His grace on thee". The line can sound like a desperate plea. Grace is close to *Gnade*, for it's undeserved and undeserving. But though, like mercy, it does protect you from the executioner's hand, it does so with the ease and beauty that led another songwriter to call it amazing. Like any other sinner, America hasn't earned grace, but we need it just because.

But while I've find myself hoping for grace these days, Johnny Cash says we've already got it, and his take on „America the Beautiful" is very different. It's short - some will say mercifully short - for Johnny's intonation of the hymn with June's vocals in the background can try even those of us whose threshold for sentimentality is very high. But what's striking is Cash's claim that the line about grace is not a prayer, but an assertion. G-d did shed his grace on America, he says, and America needs to be refreshed by recalling just where G-d gave us the gifts we could not deserve. To the landscapes celebrated in the original hymn Cash adds two more: Guthrie, Oklahoma, and Hibbing, Minnesota. Grace we got, says Cash in 1967: all we need now is brotherhood.

I'm rather glad I didn't bring the cd to play here, for though I can call it simply oversight, I suspect that actually hearing the track might cause Europeans to break out in hives. If you are moved when you hear this, it will be in the direction of the exit, while a part of me is simply moved. So I don't expect you to like it, or even to understand it; just to know that you will not understand Dylan if you don't take this sort of thing very seriously. He is indeed the other America; but don't emphasize the *other* and forget about the *America*. Dylan may have been a tad too generous, but he was almost right about Cash; in tying Dylan to a national anthem Cash was absolutely right about Dylan. Bring the two together, and you get the American dream.

