

***"Love and Theft",
or how Dylan's mind multiplies the smallest matter***

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I will never forget the date on which I bought Bob Dylan's "Love and Theft". Nor, I believe, will any of the others who acquired the album on its pre-announced, official release date. By a strange and by no means simple twist of fate, 11 September 2001 was a date already inscribed with significance for Bob Dylan's followers, a day many will have circled in their diaries in advance; and since that fateful day, numerous critics and commentators have suggested the existence of some uncanny connection, on some level, between its dark events and the workings of Dylan's artist's imagination.

The morning of Tuesday, 11 September dawned, apparently an ordinary day; it awoke me in a hotel in the Belgian university town of Leuven. It was completely unusual for me to be in that city: I had, for professional reasons, to attend a meeting on the premises of an international organisation in Brussels; the only reason I had set my suitcase down in Leuven rather than Brussels was that all the hotels in the Belgian capital were full, thanks to the annual fashion conference. As I did not have to take the train to Brussels until lunchtime, the first thing I did after breakfast was to enter the Leuven branch of Fnac, the French-owned bookshop and media chain, and allow my eager hands to feel the weight and pressure of the long-awaited, brand-new Bob Dylan record. There it was in its shrink-wrap, complete with the extra CD offered as a reward to the first wave of loyal buyers: 'Special Limited Edition - includes bonus disc with two previously unreleased tracks'. On my way back to deposit it at the hotel, I noticed a hi-fi shop on the other side of the street, and, in the window, a state-of-the-art CD-Man player. I decided to buy myself this device in Bob's honour, as I would be in Leuven for two more nights and in this way I would be able to listen to "Love and Theft" on the first evening of its official existence. I did not know that 3000 inhabitants of New York, all living their usual lives at that moment, would never get that chance.

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That afternoon in Brussels, just after 4 p.m., Western European Standard Time, in the meeting room at the international organisation the Finnish colleague I was seated next to was suddenly drawn aside by a politician, her co-national. He transmitted a few ardent, anxious words to her, in Finnish. She returned to her seat, her usually calm features speaking disturbance and shock. She told me in English that extraordinary news was in the air: one of the towers of the World Trade Centre in New York had been hit by a suicide bomber, and it was believed to be the PLO ... A few minutes later, the Spanish chairman reported a slightly fuller version of the facts, and declared the meeting closed. The authorities had announced that all on the premises who wished could go home. I left the building as soon as I could. A crowd of colleagues had gathered outside; rumours and counter-rumours flew and collided in their talk. I exchanged a few perplexed words with some of them, and headed back to the railway station, rain beating down.

In the hotel back in Leuven that evening, shocked and shaken, I unpacked the CD-Man, laid myself down on the bed with the lights out, and began to listen to "'Love and Theft'". Away from home as I was at such a time, I was fortunate to have a pre-arranged programme, something to concentrate on in the surviving world which was important enough ****not**** to feel banal or trivial in the circumstances. As the first frantic bars of 'Tweedle Dee & Tweedle Dum' rolled out, the first feeling that came up was: 'This is weird'. The next track, 'Mississippi', had the advantage of familiarity through Sheryl Crow's version¹, but after that 'Summer Days' reinforced the impression of weirdness, and by halfway through track 6 and the baffling lyric of 'Floater', I was saying to myself, 'What is this? These songs don't make sense! This doesn't sound like Dylan!'

It was hardly the night to make sense of anything, and that first sensation of weirdness has been difficult to shake off. What ****did**** come over that evening, though, was a strong sensation of urgency and restlessness which, I still believe, pervades the album. 'Last night the wind was whisperin' something, I was trying to make out what it was', sang Dylan; and at moments like that, it felt, even on that first play, as if he had, by some strange artist's sixth sense, put his finger right on the overstrained pulse of America and the West, as it beat and raced anxiously at that painful instant.

Since then, while America has striven to live with the fallout from 9-11, more than a few commentators have sought to link "'Love and Theft'", in one way or another, to that day's fateful events. It is not the only work of art to suffer that fate: similar readings have been made of Salman Rushdie's novel 'Fury', which also appeared, if not on the fatal day itself, in September 2001². Certainly, Dylan's album has, eerily, a whole host of lines and phrases which, at least if taken out of context, offer up disconcerting parallels with the shock and horror of its release day: 'throwin' knives into the tree', 'sky full of fire, pain pouring down', 'set fire to the place as a partin' gift', 'coffins droppin' in the street like balloons made out of lead', 'in a red-hot town', 'when I left my home the sky split open wide' - or the presumed mindset of the adversary: 'trustin' their fate to the hands of God', 'some people they ain't human, they ain't got no heart or soul' - or, again, the emotions of the mourners: 'Every moment of existence seems like some dirty trick/Happiness can come suddenly and leave just as quick/Any minute of the day, the bubble can burst' - or, yet again, the political responses of America's rulers seeking revenge: 'Judge says to the High Sheriff, I want him dead or alive/Either one, I don't care' - words which, in the aftermath, can scarcely have failed to conjure up the wraith of Osama bin Laden.

The dozen songs on the album are shot through with images of chaos and war: they speak of decorated captains, war victims, back-stabbers, undertakers, and ominous knocks on the door. One critic wrote in the 'Village Voice': 'Before that fateful Tuesday, "Love and Theft" could not have been so easily read as Dylan's contribution to the literature of the apocalypse. Now so nakedly he seems revealed, bounding out of the wilderness in high prophetic mode'³; while a commentator in 'Salon' observed of the album, 'In post-Sept. 11 America, the inescapably topical is also enveloped in history and myth'⁴. Another perceptive commentator, Sean Wilentz, summed up the feelings engendered by the songs as follows: 'Then it's September 11, 2001, eerily the date this album was released, and we're inside a dive on lower Broadway, and, horribly beyond description, things are blasted and breaking up out there, nothing's standing there. And it's always right now, too, on "Love and Theft"'⁵. Great artists do, indeed, have the gift, at crucial moments, of sensing where their society is heading and miraculously providing words and images that fit the times' spirit like a glove - and in this sense, many

have greeted "'Love and Theft'" as the 60-year-old Bob Dylan's remarkable gift to our troubled times.

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The album's title is immediately arresting. As is well enough known by now, Dylan has lifted it straight from the title of a book about the nineteenth-century 'blackface' minstrel shows. 'Love and Theft' (the book) was published in 1993, and is by Eric Lott, a professor of American Studies at the University of Virginia⁶. Professor Lott confesses himself duly gratified: as one critic put it, 'Lott, a longtime fan (...), said he is flattered by the singer's apparent admiration for the title'. The same critic says of Lott's book that it 'examines the complicated racial dynamics surrounding the blackface minstrel shows in the 19th and early 20th centuries'⁷; this is a fair description, and, indeed, the reading of this work can only enrich the aware listener's understanding of Dylan's album⁸. Eric Lott expounds, in well-researched and convincing detail, how the minstrel shows, in which white performers 'blacked up' and imitated African-Americans on stage for a largely white, Northern and working-class audience, were, above all in the immediate antebellum period, an expression of contradictory attitudes to black culture on the part of (mostly less-favoured) whites⁹. On the way, he also demonstrates how a knowledge of this ill-understood cultural phenomenon can illuminate other productions of nineteenth-century US culture, among them Mark Twain's 'Huckleberry Finn' and the songs of Stephen Foster (both of which are of Dylan interest)¹⁰. From the viewpoint of Dylan's "'Love and Theft'" (the album) and its relationship to 'Love and Theft' (the book), the most interesting feature of Lott's analysis is its stress on ambiguity. As he sees it, the minstrel shows, at one and the same time, 'coupled a nearly insupportable fascination and a self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices'; this was the paradox of minstrelsy's 'economy of celebration and exploitation ... what my title loosely terms "love and theft"'¹¹. The ambiguity that pervades the minstrel shows, obviously and by definition, relates to one particular, albeit vitally important, element in US culture and history, namely the white attitude to blacks. That notion clearly cannot be transferred without modification to the analysis of Dylan's album, since, as we shall see, the cultural sources which it draws on are, variously, both white and black. The concept of ambiguity -does-, however, seem to apply amply enough to the picture of American society as a whole which emerges from Dylan's album, and it is certainly interesting to find the idea of ambivalence written into Dylan's title, in the paradox of 'love and theft'.

The words "'Love and Theft'" reverberate beyond Lott's title too, in their two-faced ambiguity: they suggest other archetype-on-archetype phrases, such as 'Time and Love', 'Love and Death' or even 'Life and Death'. 'Time and Love' shows up in one of the album's songs, 'Po' Boy' ('time-and-love has branded me with its claws'), and is also the title of a song of 1969¹² by the late great New York singer-songwriter Laura Nyro, who opened for Dylan on his 1991 tour¹³. 'Love and Death' is the title of Woody Allen's respectful cinematic parody of Tolstoy's 'War and Peace' from 1975; and Allen's phrase also suggests the terminology of psychoanalysis, that no-longer-fashionable science of the mind created by a once-revered Viennese-Jewish doctor. In the psychoanalytic theory of mind and culture first sketched out in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', Freud's seminal work of 1920, the psychic universe appears as condemned to eternal ambivalence, riven by the contending powers of Eros and Thanatos, Life (or Love) and Death¹⁴. The youthful Dylan once ventured a parody of Freud and psychoanalysis, in a passage in his book 'Tarantula'¹⁵; and there is no doubt that today's sexagenarian Dylan has chosen, for this his newest album, a title rich in connotation and suggestion.

Love and theft might seem to be polar opposites, but the figure of the thief has a long-standing and paradoxically honourable place in the Dylan canon. We have only to think of such honest-thief lines as: 'Now you stand with your thief, you're on his parole' ('Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands') or 'To live outside the law you must be honest' ('Absolutely Sweet Marie'). 'Tears of Rage' foregrounds the thief-as-victim ('Tears of rage, tears of grief/Why must I always be the thief?'); and, beyond all mere secular archetypes, the two strands, honest thief and thief-as-victim, combine in the person of Christ, in the memorable (and biblically-based) lines from 'When He Returns': 'Like a thief in the night/He'll replace wrong with right/When He returns'¹⁶. In Dylan's world, thievery may be a virtue.

'It takes a thief to catch a thief', declares Dylan in 'Moonlight'. He goes on to give that stock phrase a new twist by following those words with the lines: 'For whom does the bell toll for, love?/It tolls for you and me', which are, of course, pilfered from the prose writings of John Donne, via the title of an Ernest Hemingway novel - and yet also stealthily hark back to two great Bob Dylan songs from the past, 'Ring Them Bells' and 'Chimes of Freedom'. As every critic has noticed, the whole of "'Love and Theft'" is, from one angle, a mosaic or patchwork of quotations and allusions - musical, literary, nursery-rhyme, biblical and more¹⁷ - all enriched by a fair stash of lines and images considerably purloined by Bob Dylan from himself¹⁸.

Is the 'Romeo and Juliet' line in 'Floater' a reference to Shakespeare's celebrated creation, or to Dylan's own earlier appropriation of Romeo in 'Desolation Row'? When Othello and Desdemona get walk-on parts in 'Po' Boy', should we think more of Shakespeare's play itself or of Paul Robeson, who famously played Othello and also recorded 'The Lonesome Road', one of the old songs Dylan quotes in 'Sugar Baby'¹⁹? Should the cameo of the Po' Boy 'washin' them dishes, feedin' them swine' send the listener back to the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15, or to the nursery rhyme 'Curly Locks'? Does the 'streetcar named Desire' allusion in 'Tweedle Dee & Tweedle Dum' point back to Tennessee Williams' play of that name, or to Dylan's use of the streetcar image in 'Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands' and his album title 'Desire'? Do the lines from 'Summer Days' which critics swiftly identified as coming straight from 'The Great Gatsby' - 'She says, "You can't repeat the past"/I say, "You can't? What do you mean you can't? Of course you can"²⁰ - also conjure up the shade of Dylan's own Mr Jones from 'Ballad of a Thin Man', who had famously 'been through all of F. Scott Fitzgerald's books'? The answer to all these questions can only be, as appropriate, 'both' or 'all': these songs allude on several levels, and point in several directions, at one and the same time. The references from the consecrated world of books include not only the texts and writers already mentioned - the Bible (several times), Shakespeare, Donne, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Williams - but also Charlotte Brontë, Charles Darwin, Lewis Carroll, Mark Twain and, yes, even the old Roman master Virgil, whose 'Aeneid' is quoted in 'Lonesome Day Blues'²¹. And then again, from a rather different area of tradition, there is a repeated vein of nursery-rhyme allusion ('pig without a wig', 'pickin' up sticks') which continues Dylan's previous mining of such material on his 1990 album 'Under the Red Sky'. Indeed, with "'Love and Theft'" Dylan has given an arresting new lease of life to his own lines of years ago from 'Love Minus Zero', 'read books, repeat quotations' - he has turned those lines into a piece of advice to himself.

Not only that, Dylan has tacitly added: 'listen to music, repeat quotations' too! The songs overflow with quotations from across the American popular-music tradition. Several of the song titles are, like the title of the album itself, purloined - in this case from earlier folk, blues or old-time songs, indifferently of black and white origin. 'Lonesome Day Blues' is the name

of a song recorded by Dylan's hero Blind Willie McTell; 'Sugar Baby' shares its title with a Dock Boggs number; and 'Po' Boy' may be Dylan's least originally named song ever, considering the number of songs in the tradition that bear that title. 'High Water (for Charley Patton)' openly credits a great bluesman in its subtitle (and Patton himself laid down a track called 'High Water Everywhere'). Another blues legend, Robert Johnson, is ventriloquised twice on the album ('I got love for you, and it's all in vain', 'Well, I get up in the mornin', I believe I'll dust my broom'²²). Nor does Dylan hesitate to lift lines and images wholesale from such well-worn old songs, from the folk tradition and elsewhere, as 'The Coo Coo Bird', 'Love is Pleasing', 'The Darktown Strutters' Ball', and 'The Lonesome Road'²³. As Sean Wilentz succinctly and informedly puts it, 'There isn't an inch of American song that he cannot call his own. He steals what he loves and loves what he steals.'²⁴

All of this is true, yet true only on one level, for it is no less obvious that Dylan's new songs are **also** self-sustained compositions in their own right, qualitatively new objects which may be built partly from quotations but are very much more than the sum of their parts ('High Water' and 'Sugar Baby' come immediately to mind). Indeed, if anything the "'Love and Theft'" songs are **more** fully autonomous and developed creations in themselves than many of those on Dylan's previous album, 'Time Out Of Mind', which also draws deeply on the songwriting tradition of his forbears, and where a song like 'Tryin' to Get to Heaven' comes across as virtually a patchwork woven from fragments of older songs. Even so, there is no doubt that, in a certain sense, a magpie Dylan has made "'Love and Theft'" out of multiple acts of ... theft. He has surely, though, done this as an honest thief, since he would hardly be likely to deny the pilfering; and the stealing itself may, if we recall that other word in the album's title, also be an act of ... Love. Thievery becomes a labour of love; like Edgar Allan Poe's purloined letter, Dylan's stolen words leave a long trail in their wake.

If we consider all this, the quotation marks which surround the title, as printed on the CD and its sleeve, take on a particular significance. This is the first time a Dylan album has appeared in this way, with inverted commas round the title²⁵. One explanation for the quotation marks would be the existence of Eric Lott's book: Dylan is making clear that he lays no claim to exclusive rights on the phrase, nor does he pretend to have invented it. Beyond that, the inverted commas also act as a marker surrounding the entire collection of songs, warning the listener even before purchase that this is an album composed **under the sign of quotation**. Seldom, if ever, has a new album by Bob Dylan appeared with such an explicit hint on its cover as to how best to listen to it!

A further context is, enticingly, provided - or at least was to the album's first buyers - by the extra, two-track CD which was thoughtfully included with early copies of "'Love and Theft'". This is by no means the first bonus CD in the history of Dylan marketing; but, despite that undeniable fact, it is actually unique of its kind. Its two tracks are the traditional 'I Was Young When I Left Home' (recorded in December 1961; the song is a new addition to the official Dylan canon) and an out-take of 'The Times They Are A-Changin'' from October 1963. What is unusual is that this extra CD features early Dylan recordings ('I Was Young When I Left Home' is even **very** early Dylan), rather than the recent live performances which have generally featured in recent years on his official 'non-album' releases (there has been something of a stream of CD singles/EPs and bonus second CDs, many of them released only on certain regional markets). 'I Was Young When I Left Home', a track laid down when Dylan too was young and had just left home, comes - like the material covered by Dylan on his first album, which it predates, and more recently on his solo acoustic albums 'Good As I Been To

You' and 'World Gone Wrong' - straight from the wellspring of popular tradition on which the "'Love and Theft'" songs draw; and it tells a story that helps illuminate one of those songs, the palpably traditional-influenced 'Po' Boy'. The inclusion of 'The Times They Are A-Changin'" is more puzzling, especially as another outtake of that song, also from 1963, had already been exhumed on 'The Bootleg Series volumes 1-3' in 1991. 'Times' is of course one of Dylan's most celebrated early 'protest' songs, and is still regularly featured in his live repertoire. It is, however, highly unlikely that the Dylan who in 1964 so forcefully turned his back on the black-and-white simplicities of 'protest' with 'My Back Pages' would want his audience to take a set of songs as complex as those on "'Love and Theft'" as some kind of belated return to that rather limited genre. The point is, surely, that he is asking his listeners to connect these new songs, written out of today's America, with his 'protest' stance of four decades back in some much more oblique and indirect way - to see them as 'state-of-the-world' songs for the twenty-first century. At any rate, the second CD is clearly there for a reason, and we discount it at our peril.

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"'Love and Theft'" has had a generally enthusiastic critical reception. Greil Marcus, in a piece in the New York Times - a newspaper itself twice named in Dylan songs²⁶ - which, previewing the album before official release date, actually antedated the 11 September, read it as 'an album of stories, some told to the end, some of the most remarkable only hinted at', and went so far as to declare that one single word off one of the songs (in fact, the verb 'care' that culminates the dark phrase from 'High Water', 'Dead or alive/Either one, I don't care') is powerful enough to encapsulate 'a whole way of being in the world, and a whole way of talking about it'²⁷. Andy Gill, writing in the London newspaper The Independent, declared: "'Love and Theft'" portrays a man at ease with not just his own history, but with popular music history in general ... he's singing more confidently and imaginatively than ever here, switching with facility between blithe, romantic croons and the dark, ragged authority of the harder blues numbers ... once again, the spokesman of a generation is setting the highest standards for any generation to live up to²⁸. It is said of Eric Lott himself that he 'considers "'Love and Theft'" - the album - to be one of Dylan's best²⁹, and this judgment has been echoed by many. Nor is the positive appreciation confined to the English-speaking world: on 12 September, a day on which many critics might have been justifiably distracted, the Belgian newspaper La Dernière Heure, saw Dylan as 'returning to the sources of American popular music ... plunging the listener into blues, country, gospel, rock of course, and R & B too'.³⁰ In a similar vein, the Spanish Dylanologist Diego Manrique, in the 9 September issue of the Madrid daily El País, praised 'Dylan the alchemist: the magician who draws on the range of America's history, mythology and roots, combining all the elements with humour and a steady hand'³¹. Critics apart, "'Love and Theft'" has, besides, shifted large numbers of copies and has won Dylan a Grammy award for Best Contemporary Folk Album. Its songs, too, have been given their just value by Dylan himself, in his capacity as performing artist: in late 2001 and 2002, any Dylan concert would typically include a good three or four of them, all cohabiting perfectly on stage with his earlier classics. Indeed, as of 17 October 2002, when Dylan debuted 'Bye and Bye' in Los Angeles, all twelve songs had been performed live, making "'Love and Theft'" only the sixth Dylan album to register 100% performance³².

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As is always the case with classic Dylan albums - here as on 'John Wesley Harding', 'Blood on the Tracks' or 'Oh Mercy' - the twelve songs all 'talk to each other', interconnected and, ultimately, woven into a single fabric by common themes and images. This is as true of 'Mississippi', the song actually written for the 'Time Out Of Mind' sessions but held over until

this record, as it is for the other eleven³³; this track too dovetails with the others' subjects and concerns. The last song on the album, 'Sugar Baby', repeats crucial images from 'Tweedle Dee & Tweedle Dum', the first song ('ain't got no brains nohow/'Brains in a pot, they're beginning to boil'; 'I've got my back to the sun/'They're makin' a voyage to the Sun'). In addition, "'Love and Theft'" is an album that, several times over and even self-consciously, draws the listener's attention to itself as a work of art - as something made by the composing master's hand, a qualitatively new object born in time out of words and music. The narrator of 'Mississippi' declares: 'All my powers of expression and thoughts so sublime/Could never do you justice in reason or rhyme'; 'Bye and Bye' throws out the apparently breezy confession 'I'm singin' love's praises with sugar-coated rhyme'; and 'High Water', in rather more sinister vein, ventures the statement: 'I can write you poems, make a strong man lose his mind'. Behind the masks of the fictional 'I' we can trace Bob Dylan the poet and songwriter, cannily watching himself at work.

Among the various thematic complexes which occur across "'Love and Theft'", several are particularly dense. Dylan piles up the appearances of human power- and authority-figures: the captain in 'Lonesome Day Blues', the politician in 'Summer Days', the police in 'Tweedle Dee & Tweedle Dum' and 'Po' Boy', the judge and high sheriff in 'High Water', the doctor and lawyer in 'Moonlight', another lawyer and a preacher in 'Cry A While'. By the same token, parental and familial figures, or their ghosts, weigh down heavily on an album soaked in genealogy. In 'Lonesome Day Blues', the narrator declares: 'my pa, he died and left me'; the Po' Boy confesses: 'My father was a travelling salesman, I never met him'; and the narrator of 'Floater' brings in not only his progenitor ('My old man, he's like some feudal lord/He's got more lives than a cat') but that progenitor's sire ('My grandfather was a duck-trapper'). In the words of the Dylan of 1966, 'all my fathers, they come down', indeed! By contrast with all this, though, we find the repeated presence of trees and woodland, emblems of a natural calm all too easily disturbed: Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee are 'throwin' knives into the tree', but also 'walk among the stately trees'; 'Mississippi' has its narrator 'walking through the leaves, falling from the trees'; in 'Lonesome Day Blues' 'leaves are rustling in the wood'; 'Floater' tells of 'a new grove of trees on the outskirts of town'; the narrator of 'Honest to Me' announces 'I'm goin' off into the woods'; and the whole of 'Moonlight' is set deep in an arboreal landscape ('the boulevards of cypress trees', 'the branches cast their shadows over stone'). Other images too recur across the songs - rivers and floods ('weather not fit for man or beast', levees, 'high water risin"', a triad of 'rebel rivers'); domestic animals, invoked both literally and metaphorically (in one or other capacity, pigs/hogs/swine appear three times, cats twice, and dogs, mules, roosters and geese once each); and, more darkly, the paraphernalia of death (coffins, undertakers, funerals). The twelve songs, taken together, create a coherent imaginary universe, on which Dylan lavishes all his powers of irony, humour, invective and pathos.

These multiple resources of Dylan's songwriting light up this album much as they do the greatest of his earlier works, and for power, excitement and illumination the "'Love and Theft'" songs compare perfectly favourably with those of 'The Times They are A-Changin"', 'Highway 61 Revisited', or 'Blood on the Tracks'. Two aspects of Dylan's writing on this album, meanwhile, merit particular mention, namely detail and humour. At crucial moments on "'Love and Theft'", we find Dylan bringing to his craft an attention to detail which has by no means always been a hallmark of his writing (and was largely lacking on 'Time Out Of Mind'). Now, in 'Tweedle Dee & Tweedle Dum' we have brains boiling in a pot, 'dripping with garlic and olive oil'; in 'Moonlight', we are invited to gaze botanically at 'orchids, poppies, black-eyed susans'; while the narrator of 'Floater' catches not just fish but 'bullheads', and reports as if for a forestry survey: 'There's a new grove of trees on the outskirts of

town/The other one is long gone/Timber two foot six across/Burns with the bark still on'. At the same time, humour is strongly present across these songs, as it probably hasn't been on a Dylan album since 'The Basement Tapes'. The politician of 'Summer Days' runs comically onstage in his jogging shoes ('he's runnin' for office'); Dylan is back at his old tricks, giving new life to a dead cliché by bringing the figurative back home to the literal plane. He does it here with the conventionally inert metaphor 'runnin' for office', as he did in the past with such triumphs of linguistic reanimation as 'Money doesn't talk, it swears' or 'You can play with fire, but you'll get the bill'³⁴. The line from 'Honest With Me', 'I'm here to create the new imperial empire', has been taken by some as a mere tautology, but we could also read it as a wicked parody of a Bushism. What seems slapstick can also have a sinister ring to it: at times on this album we get a close-up of the 'frowns on the jugglers and the clowns'. The line from 'High Water' that features 'the Englishman, the Italian and the Jew' sounds on first hearing as if someone is going to offer us a joke, but no comic story materialises; the knock-knock jest at the end of 'Po' Boy' has raised a fair number of critical eyebrows, but as soon as we venture the supposition that the line 'Freddy or not, here I come' is actually masking the thought police, the 'agents and the superhuman crew', coming to get the all-too-dangerous Holy Fool, then the comedy starts to look as if it's concealing something very dark indeed.

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The album also exhibits a high degree of coherence in both space and time. To take the spatial aspect first, most of the songs are visibly set, not in some vague 'general America', but quite specifically in the Southern states. If we define the South as the area of the old Confederacy³⁵, we will find that a large majority of the album's placenames and place references are to Southern localities. As on other Dylan albums ('Bob Dylan', 'New Morning', 'Blood on the Tracks', 'Time Out Of Mind'), the topography of the songs repeatedly reminds us of the size and diversity of the United States that made them. "'Love and Theft'" offers a good dozen explicit place references. The songs name three states (Mississippi, Florida, Georgia), five cities (Kansas City with its 'Twelfth Street and Vine', Vicksburg, Clarksdale, and two mentioned as the termini of transport links - the 'Pennsylvania line' and the 'Denver road'), three other transport links of various kinds (the 'streetcar named Desire', Highway 5, and the Southern Pacific railroad line), and three rivers, 'the Ohio, the Cumberland, the Tennessee'. More geographical locations are, if not named, suggested by implication. The city of New Orleans is never named as such, but is powerfully suggested through a good three references in 'Tweedle Dee & Tweedle Dum' (one to that famous streetcar) and another in 'Sugar Baby'. The South in general is evoked across the album through such local-colour touches as 'pecan pie', and 'tobacco leaves', not to mention the various direct or indirect Civil War references. Certainly, not all the album's explicit or implicit locations are Southern in the strict sense, or even at all. The 'black-eyed susans' image on 'Moonlight' turns out to be, on one level, a tribute to the official state flower of Maryland³⁶, the border state in whose capital Edgar Allan Poe died a demented death and William Zanzinger killed poor Hattie Carroll³⁷. Kansas City and the Ohio river both lie outside the old Confederate border, Highway 5 runs from Washington state down through California, the 'city that never sleeps' of 'Honest With Me' may be a Sinatra-friendly New York³⁸, Don Pasquale in 'Cry A While' suggests the Chicago or New York mafia, and the Scott Fitzgerald quotation points not south but north, to New York and Minnesota³⁹. Some of the above, though, are at least border-state references; the Southern Pacific started in San Francisco but ended up in New Orleans⁴⁰; and the journeys to Denver and Pennsylvania mentioned in 'Cry A While' could both have their starting-point somewhere below the Mason & Dixon line. If we take "'Love and Theft'" as a whole, its themes and atmosphere do come across as overwhelmingly southern, and this is, surely, especially true of 'Tweedle Dee & Tweedle Dum', 'Floater', 'Moonlight' and 'Po' Boy'.

If Dylan - no southerner himself - has chosen the South as spiritual home for his new song-cycle, it is no doubt in tribute to the traditional musical forms, both 'black' and 'white' - Delta blues, Appalachian folk, old-time country - which first appeared in that region, from which he draws so much of his musical sustenance, and which form part of the complex American musical heritage that is so magisterially brought to life on "'Love and Theft'" by his superb musicians. He has, we may recall, also chosen a Southern location for such major earlier songs as 'Only a Pawn in their Game', 'Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again', and, above all, 'Blind Willie McTell'. On another level, the 'Old South', with its plantations and magnolias, its beaux and belles, conventionally stands for a certain traditional and old-fashioned element in American life, and here place connects with time: for one of the most striking things about this album is the songs' apparent non-contemporaneity.

It is not just the music, with the old-fashioned swing rhythms on 'Moonlight' and 'Bye and Bye' or the Appalachian banjo on 'High Water'; it is also the songs themselves. Close examination reveals remarkably few lexical items or direct cultural references later than about 1950 (Dylan's own many self-quotations apart). The play 'A Streetcar Named Desire' dates from 1947, but the Desire tramline in New Orleans from which it takes its name was rather older; the jogging politician might seem to be out of the 70s or 80s, but in fact 'to jog' in the contemporary sense is found as early as 1948⁴¹; the jargon term 'booty call'⁴² in 'Cry A While' is recent, and the character Don Pasquale may be a latter-day mafia boss⁴³ - but he may, equally, be the hero of the opera of that name by Gaetano Donizetti, premiered in 1843⁴⁴. The songs on "'Love and Theft'" resonate as if they had emerged from the vaults of an America far older than the empire of Clinton or Bush Jr. - almost as if time had come to a halt somewhere around the dead middle of the twentieth century. Dylan seems to be singing out of a time-warp vault, out of the old, lost days when hogs snuffled contentedly 'out in the mud', rather than living out a death-row existence on factory farms. And yet - as we saw at the beginning of this essay, in those unnerving correspondences between the world of the songs and the 11 September - just below the surface, and despite the patina of archaism, this album is alive and glowing with rich contemporary significance.

The album's quaintly old-fashioned feel is, however, reinforced on one level by what can only be called Bob Dylan's sublime lexical disregard for the fashionable niceties of the contemporary belief-system known as political correctness (defined in one dictionary as 'conformity to a body of liberal or radical opinion on social matters, characterised by the advocacy of approved views and the rejection of language and behaviour considered discriminatory or offensive'⁴⁵). In these brand-new songs, Dylan defies the bien-pensant orthodoxies of his time, unabashedly flaunting such non-approved words and expressions as 'Siamese twins', 'Indian chief', 'royal Indian blood', 'senile', 'bully', and even 'ladies'. This is not new in recent Dylan: the lines from 'Sugar Baby', 'The ladies down in Darktown/They're doin' the Darktown strut' recall the similar lines from 'Blind Willie McTell' (written in 1982), 'Them charcoal gypsy maidens/Can strut their feathers well', which - in a song which is actually an awed tribute to a great African-American musician - contain three words in a row ('charcoal', 'gypsy', and 'maidens'), any one of which could well have reduced their author, were he a student or academic, to lifetime persona non grata status on more than one US campus. The album even contains a pointedly non-judgmental reference to the dreaded sot-weed itself, in the lines from 'Floater': 'I left all my dreams and hopes/Buried under tobacco leaves'. Dylan can hardly be unaware of the existence of political correctness, written into the law and underwritten by self-styled radical pundits, in a USA which recently all but impeached a sitting president for supposed 'inappropriate' behaviour. He is writing in an

America in which a scion of an old political family named Al Gore can place his head on the block in public for having once dealt in tobacco⁴⁶, while Philip Roth, one of the nation's leading novelists, can, with full credibility, imagine a scenario in which a once-respected academic becomes a pariah over a chance misuse of the single word 'spooks'⁴⁷. Ignoring the lexical proscriptions of the dominant neo-puritanism, Dylan bravely stakes his claim as chronicler of a different America, one that is older and more lasting than that created by the purveyors of passing fashion.

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The lesson of "'Love and Theft'" is surely that what matters is what lasts: today's America can best understand itself by drawing sustenance from its cultural and musical roots - from those old 'dreams and hopes' that make their bow in 'Floater'. On this album, too, Dylan returns to the roots of his own creativity. In those strong and resonant lines from 'Summer Days', 'She says, "you can't repeat the past,"/I say "You can't? What do you mean you can't? Of course you can"', he not only, as we have seen, evokes Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* and his own 'Ballad of a Thin Man', but also challenges the sceptical among his listeners to see whether Bob Dylan too cannot repeat his own past, the glories of his own past songwriting - and get away with it, triumphantly. Can he? Of course he can! One of Dylan's best critics, Michael Gray, at the end of his monumental study published in 2000, surely spoke for the community of Dylan's admirers when he expressed the hope that that the master's old age will yield us 'extraordinary new songs ... performed with grace and wit and ardour'⁴⁸. "'Love and Theft'" has more than generously fulfilled that hope. In these new songs, Bob Dylan's mind, like the mind of his own Wicked Messenger from years ago, multiplies the smallest matter, weaving and teasing out fresh meanings from old fragments of quotation and allusion, to create a many-layered, eloquent work of dense artistry that speaks straight to the uncertain heart of our chaotic times.

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¹ As is well enough known, Sheryl Crow covered 'Mississippi' (with some lyric changes and deletions), well before the release of Dylan's own version, on her 1998 album *The Globe Sessions*.

² The Rushdie/Dylan comparison is certainly not without interest, especially, though not only, in the context of 11-9. In Rushdie's previous novel, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), the rock-singer male protagonist is part-modelled on Dylan, and the text is strewn with Dylan allusions and quotations (as I have myself shown in detail in my article 'Rushdie's Un-Indian Music: "The Ground Beneath Her Feet"', published in Rajeshwar Mittapalli and Pier Paolo Piciucco, eds., *Studies in Indian Writing in English*, vol. II, Delhi: Atlantic, 2001, pp. 122-157). Rushdie wrote *Fury* after moving from Britain to New York: the novel's dust-jacket shows a fiery cloud above the Empire State Building, and there are numerous passages which, if taken just slightly out of context, seem uncannily predictive ('Explosions were heard on every side. Human life was now lived in that moment before the fury, when the anger grew, or during - the fury's hour, the time of the beast set free - or in the ruined aftermath of a great violence, when the fury ebbed and chaos abated' - Salman Rushdie, *Fury* [London: Jonathan Cape, 2001], p. 125). The critic Celia M. Wallhead has suggested that, indeed, in certain passages Rushdie 'comes very close to foreseeing the attack on the Twin Towers' ('A Myth for Anger, Migration and Creativity in Salman Rushdie's "Fury"', *Atlantic Literary Review* (Delhi), Vol. 2 No. 4, October-December 2001, pp. 201-216 [p. 205]). That apart, the text contains at least one obvious Dylan allusion ('sly-eyed lady of the Fenlands', p. 31); and, strikingly, it refers to Shakespeare's *Othello* and Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* (pp. 10-11, 82), both characters who also make their bow on "'Love and Theft'". Rushdie's writing in this novel, dense with allusion, quotation and pastiche and drawing at will on the resources of both 'high' and 'popular' culture, also bears some similarities to Dylan's on his 2001 album. A detailed comparison of the two artworks

could prove historically and culturally illuminating, although I happen to believe that, while "'Love and Theft'" is certainly [very] good Dylan, it remains an open question whether 'Fury' is good Rushdie.

³ Greg Tate, 'Intelligence Data', *Village Voice*, 26 September -2 October 2001, <http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0139/tate.php>

⁴ Ellen Willis, 'The new talkin' World War III blues', *Salon*, 6 October 2001, http://www.salon.com/ent/music/review/2001/10/06/love_theft/index.html

⁵ Sean Wilentz, 'American Recordings: On "'Love and Theft'" and the Minstrel Boy', at www.bobdylan.com

⁶ Eric Lott, 'Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class', New York: OUP, 1993. It may be noted that Sean Wilentz (see note 5) is cited several times in Lott's book, in the context of his work on the nineteenth-century Northern working class (Wilentz is a lecturer at Princeton University).

⁷ See *Charlottesville Daily Progress*, 'Love and Theft and Dylan: UVA Professor Pleased That Music Legend's New Album Is (Apparently) Named After His Book', article republished on [rec.music.dylan](http://rec.music.dylan.com), 29 November 2001.

⁸ At the Isle of Wight Festival in 1969 Dylan gave a one-off performance of a song called 'Minstrel Boy', later released (in that live version) on his 1970 album 'Self Portrait'.

⁹ It emerges from Lott's study (pp. 64-66) that one of the main centres of minstrel-show production was New York City: the popular theatres of the Bowery and Lower Broadway offered regular minstrel fare to their largely white, working-class clientele. As if coincidentally, Dylan mentions 'the Bowery slums' in 'Bob Dylan's 115th Dream' (1965), and Lower Broadway in 'Dirge' (1974).

¹⁰ 'Huckleberry Finn' is directly cited by Dylan on "'Love and Theft'" in the 'Aunt Sally' reference in 'Sugar Baby' ('I'm staying here with Aunt Sally/But you know she's not really my aunt'). Dylan recorded Stephen Foster's 'Hard Times' on 'Good As I Been To You' (1993). For the links between minstrelsy and Twain's novel, see Lott, pp. 5 ('Without the minstrel show there would have been ... no "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn"'), 31, 33-35, 166-167. Lott, though he does not mention 'Hard Times', examines Foster's 'Plantation Melodies' in detail in his Chapter 7 (pp. 169-210).

¹¹ Lott, p. 6.

¹² 'Time and Love' appeared on Laura Nyro's 1969 album 'New York Tendaberry'.

¹³ See Kevin Roberts' post on [rec.music.dylan](http://rec.music.dylan.com), 'Re: Laura Nyro', 10 January 2001.

¹⁴ See Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), in 'On Metapsychology: the Theory of Psychoanalysis' (Pelican Freud Library vol. 11), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984, pp. 271-338.

¹⁵ See the section 'Cowboy Angel Blues' in Dylan, 'Tarantula' [1966], New York: St Martin's Press, 1994, pp. 100-104.

¹⁶ Cf. I Thessalonians 5:2: 'the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night'.

¹⁷ A very large number of the allusions and references on the album (including alternative explanations) have been collected by 'Artur J.', at: <http://www.republika.pl/bobdylan/lat/> (this site is extremely useful, despite an occasional lack of clarity arising from its editor's non-native speaker English; it should be noted, however, that the site rubric specifically excludes Dylan self-quotations).

¹⁸ The trail leading back to Dylan's earlier work even extends to a textual reminiscence of the very first track on his very first album. 'Honest With Me' offers the line 'I can't tell my heart that you're no good', which harks back to his cover of Jesse Fuller's 'She's No Good' on 'Bob Dylan' - the song which opens that album, and therefore the first song recorded by Bob Dylan which any of the (few) first-time buyers would have heard.

¹⁹ Paul Robeson's 1929 recording of 'The Lonesome Road' (the song is by Gene Austin and Nat Shilkret) can be found on the CD 'Paul Robeson sings "Ol' Man River" and other favorites' (EMI, 1985, CDC-7 47839 2). The line from 'Sugar Baby', 'Look up, look up, seek your Maker, 'fore Gabriel blows his horn', is borrowed verbatim from this song.

²⁰ The parallel lines of dialogue from Chapter VI of 'The Great Gatsby' read: "'I wouldn't ask too much of her", I ventured. "You can't repeat the past." "Can't repeat the past?" he cried incredulously. "Why of course you can!"' (F. Scott Fitzgerald, 'The Great Gatsby' [1926], Harmondsworth: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994, p. 117). Among the first critics to notice the connection was John Harris, reviewing "'Love and Theft'" in the British magazine 'Q' (October 2001, p. 122).

²¹ In 'Lonesome Day Blues', Dylan's narrator declares: 'I'm going to spare the defeated, boys, I'm going to speak to the crowd/I'm going to teach peace to the conquered, I'm going to tame the proud'; Book VI of 'The Aeneid' contains the following remarkably similar exhortation: "'Roman, be this thy care - these thine arts - to bear dominion over the nations and to impose the law of peace, to spare the humbled and to war down the proud"' (Virgil, 'The Aeneid', VI, 851-853; trans. John Jackson [1908], Ware (England): Wordsworth Classics, 1995, p. 108).

²² These lines are from 'Tweedle Dee & Tweedle Dum' and 'High Water' respectively. Robert Johnson recorded 'Love In Vain' and 'I Believe I'll Dust My Broom'.

²³ Of those four songs, the first is quoted in 'High Water' and the other three in 'Sugar Baby' (cf. note 12 above).

²⁴ Wilentz, op. cit.

²⁵ The one partial exception is the album (released in 1998) generally known as 'Live '66', whose full title includes the phrase 'The "Royal Albert Hall" Concert', for the good, factual reason that the famous concert recording long thought to have been from that venue was in fact not from there at all, but from the Manchester Free Trade Hall.

²⁶ In 'Talkin' New York' on 'Bob Dylan' and 'I Shall Be Free No. 10' on 'Another Side of Bob Dylan'.

²⁷ Greil Marcus, 'Bob Dylan: Sometimes He Talks Crazy, Crazy Like a Song', *New York Times*, 2 September 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/02/arts/music/02MARC.html>

²⁸ Andy Gill, review of "'Love and Theft'", *The Independent* (London), 6 September 2001, http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/music/recorded_reviews/story.jsp?story=92667

²⁹ Eric Lott, cited in *Charlottesville Daily Progress*, loc. cit.

³⁰ *La Dernière Heure* (Belgium), 12 Sept 2001, magazine section, p. 27: 'Dylan sort un grand cru' ['Dylan brings out a vintage product'] (review signed by 'L.L.'; my translation from French).

³¹ Diego Manrique, *El País* (Spain), 9 September 2001, 'Bob Dylan demuestra su renacimiento creativo en su nuevo disco, "Love and thief [sic]" ['Bob Dylan proves his creative resurgence in his new album, "Love and thief [sic]"'] (my translation from Spanish):

http://www.elpais.es/articulo.html?anchor=elpepiesp&xref=20010909elpepiesp_1&type=Tes&d_date=20010909.

Manrique, curiously, got the title wrong, calling the album "'Love and thief" [sic]' - had he been thinking over-allusively of that other 'thief in the night', of Jesus' supposed saving grace anticipating Dylan's alchemical power? - but he certainly did not err in his analysis.

³² The other Dylan albums all of whose songs have been performed live are: 'The Times They Are A-Changin'', 'Highway 61 Revisited', 'Slow Train Coming', 'Saved' and 'Oh Mercy'. It is worth noting that, at least as at when the present version of this article went to press, 'Po' Boy' had been performed live only twice (6 November 2001, Grand Rapids, Michigan; and 15 November 2002, Philadelphia).

³³ Cf. note 1 above.

³⁴ From: 'It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)' (1965); 'Heart of Mine' (1981).

³⁵ Certain 'border states' such as Maryland, Kentucky and Missouri are sometimes considered Southern, at least for certain purposes, but such a classification is of course disputable.

³⁶ See the Maryland State Archives site at:

<http://www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/mdmanual/01glance/html/symbols/flower.html>

³⁷ Maryland was on the Union side in the Civil War, but it was also a tobacco-growing slave state, and many Marylanders had pro-Southern sympathies (see:

http://freespace.virgin.net/john.cletheroe/usa_can/usa/mas_dix.htm#maryland).

³⁸ Cf. the line 'I want to wake up in a city that doesn't sleep', from 'New York, New York', by Fred Enn and John Kander, recorded by Frank Sinatra in 1980.

³⁹ Fitzgerald's father, however, was from Maryland (cf. notes 27 and 28 above); according to Robert M. Crunden ('Scott Fitzgerald's Jazz Age', *Kakatiya Journal of English Studies* [Warangal, India], Vol. 16, December 1996, pp. 89-105), Fitzgerald senior was 'a gentleman inclined to romanticise the Old South of his Maryland background' (p. 92).

⁴⁰ See the American Western History Museum website at:

http://www.linecamp.com/museums/americanwest/western_clubs/southern_pacific_railroad/southern_pacific_railroad.html

⁴¹ According to John Ayto, 'Twentieth Century Words: The Story of the New Words in English over the Last Hundred Years' (Oxford: OUP, 1999), the usage 'to jog' in the sense of 'to run at a gentle pace as a form of physical exercise' first appeared in English in 1948: 'At first it was mainly used by athletes, with reference to training running at a slower speed than racing. It did not come into general use until the 1960s' (entry 'Jog', p. 283). It is clear, though, that the term as such was coined soon enough after the premiere of Williams' 'Streetcar'.

⁴² 'Booty call' appears to be a contemporary term, used from the early 1990s on, with less than decorous connotations. However, I would at least tentatively suggest that in Dylan's song it can be read, not as the fixed phrase it 'now' is, but as the sum of its two component parts. If so, Don Pasquale is calling at 2 a.m., not for reasons which would earn him an immediate thunderbolt from one of Philip Roth's recent female characters (cf. note 47 below), but to claim 'booty' in what is still the word's basic sense - i.e. plunder, or material goods to which he has no title in law. In other words, in 'Cry A While' we are talking about a mafia financial racket, of a kind which has been around for a good long time.

⁴³ The career of the mafia boss Don Pasquale (Pasquale Cuntrera) is recounted by Tom Blickman in 'The Rothschilds of the Mafia on Aruba', *Transnational Organized Crime*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Summer 1997, pp. 50-89; on Internet at: <http://www.tni.org/archives/tblick/aruba.htm>.

⁴⁴ This would not be Dylan's first reference to Italian opera: the titular heroine of Giacomo Puccini's 'Madame Butterfly' (1904) makes a bow in his song 'Tight Connection to my Heart', on 'Empire Burlesque' (1985). On "'Love and Theft'" itself, the Othello allusion in 'Po' Boy' suggests not only Shakespeare's play but Giuseppe

Verdi's Shakespeare-inspired opera of 1887, 'Otello' (usually considered one of the composer's finest works). All this may be grist to the mill of 'High Water's mysterious 'Italian'!

⁴⁵ 'The Oxford Dictionary of New Words', ed. Elizabeth Knowles and Julia Elliott (Oxford: OUP, 1997), entry: 'Political Correctness', p. 239.

⁴⁶ Al Gore's distant relative Gore Vidal, in an essay of 1998 entitled 'Honourable Albert A. Gore, Junior', narrates the following incident: '[Al Gore] took part in his father's various livestock and tobacco dealings. Later he was to share, most publicly at a convention, the guilt he still felt because he had once grown and sold the poisonous leaf that had struck down a beloved sister in her youth. He ceased to traffic with the murderous weed, prayed for forgiveness. (...) The speech .. wetted every eye, including the speaker's. Actually, Al had somehow forced himself to continue in the tobacco business for quite some time after her death.' (in Vidal, 'The Last Empire: Essays 1992-2001' [London: Abacus, 2002], pp. 142-143). By contrast, for the Dylan of 'Floater' the 'tobacco leaves' are simply part of the all-enveloping Southern landscape.

⁴⁷ In Roth's novel 'The Human Stain' (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), Coleman Silk, classics professor and onetime dean at the fictional Athena College, resigns over an alleged racist episode. He inadvertently refers to two absent students as 'spooks' without knowing they are actually African-American: 'I was using the word in its customary and primary meaning: "spook" as a spectre or ghost. I had no idea what colour these two students might be. I had known perhaps fifty years ago but had totally forgotten that "spooks" is an invidious term sometimes applied to blacks' (p. 6). The Canadian critic Alex Good has said of Roth's predicament in today's neo-puritan America: 'For a writer who has always been frank, (...) this new gentility - and it is everywhere - is scary stuff' (review of 'The Human Stain', 2000, at: <http://www.goodreports.net/humrot.htm>). The fictional episode runs very close to the factual bone: in 1999, an assistant to the mayor of Washington, D.C. was disciplined for using the word 'niggardly', even though it has nothing whatever to do with African-Americans, either etymologically or semantically (see 'Race row in Washington', The Guardian, 29 January 1999, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,3814084,00.html>). Meanwhile, imagine what could have happened to Philip Roth's Coleman Silk had he spoken of 'charcoal gypsy maidens'!

⁴⁸ Michael Gray, 'Song and Dance Man III: The Art of Bob Dylan' (London and New York: Cassell, 2000), p. 877.