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PLEADING FOR UTOPIA: AMERICAN PASTORAL IN BOB DYLAN'S MUSIC

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the relationship between pop culture, i.e. pop music, and ideology. The main thesis of the text is that the works of pop culture are the product of the social-historical context in which they emerge, but that the same works can also function as a criticism of that very context. As an example, we took Bob Dylan's media phenomenon and the elements of utopia as a narrative genre in his work. As a theoretical-interpretative context we relied on the propositions of American analytic philosopher Stanley Cavell: through his ethical theory on 'moral perfectionism' an analysis was made of the way in which pop culture functioned as the necessary internal corrective of a democratic community. It is assumed that texts on pop culture cannot be truly revolutionary, but they can certainly be critical.

Keywords: pop culture, pop music, moral perfectionism, utopia, ideology, democracy.

Апстракт: Рад се бави односом између популарне културе, односно популарне музике и идеологије. Основна теза текста јесте да су дела популарне музике продукт друштвено-историјског контекста у коме настају, али да та иста дела могу функционисати и као место критике тог контекста. Као пример узети су медијски феномен Боба Дилана и елементи утопије као наративног жанра у његовом раду. Као теоретско-интерпретативни оквир искоришћене су поставке америчког аналитичког филозофа Стенлија Кавела: кроз његову етичку теорију о „моралном перфекционизму“ анализира се на који начин популарна култура функционише као нужни

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унутрашњи коректив демократске заједнице. Претпоставка је да текстови популарне културе и музике не могу бити револуционарни у јаком смислу те речи, али могу бити критички.

Кључне речи: популарна култура, популарна музика, морални перфекционизам, утопија, идеологија, демократија

Ralph Waldo Emerson in the postmodern context

The starting point of this paper is the analysis of the relationship between Bob Dylan's music and the broad tradition of the 'inclination' towards utopia, which was most clearly anticipated by Ralph Waldo Emerson within the American romanticist tradition. This kind of Emersonian progressive heritage is determined by the philosopher Stanley Cavell as 'moral perfectionism'; moral perfectionism implies the reflection on ethics that begins with Plato and Aristotle, and ends with thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Friedrich Nietzsche in the 19th century, i.e. Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein in the 20th century. In its modern form, moral perfectionism implies the principle of ethical progress of the subject, i.e. the transcending of the moral and material conditions of existence, but through the denial of the external guarantee of this transcending. In that sense, moral perfectionism represents the first manifestation of criticism of Western metaphysics: the process of moral progress is not attained through interaction with the external instances of God, absolute spirit, ruler's authority, religion, etc., but through the process of individual transfiguration that Stanley Cavell, taking Emerson's philosophy as central, labels as 'the process of individuation'. Moral perfectionism, in that sense, is the system of the reflection of subjectivity, along with the denial of the possibility of the external representation of that same subject; this process is, perhaps, the most consistently conveyed in Emerson's essay 'Self-Reliance', where the self is defined as the process of continual individual progress, the revolutionizing of that same self towards transcending the current conditions of living, but through the anti-metaphysical denial of the subject's involvement by representation¹. According to Cavell,

¹ Ralf Valdo Emerson, „Samodovoljnost“, Ogleđi, Grafos, Belgrade, 1983, p. 48–77; on Emerson cf. Tiffany K. Wayne, *Critical Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson. A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*, Facts on File, New York, 2010; Harold Bloom (ed.), *Bloom's Classic Critical Views: Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Bloom's Literary Criticism, New York, 2008; Harold Bloom (ed.), *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Emerson's Essays*, Chelsea House Publishers, New York, 2006.

Emerson's problem of representativeness, or exemplification ('imitation'), or perfection, thus begins earlier than Plato's, both in lacking a sun and in having no standing representative man (anyone is entitled, and no one is, to stand for this election) and he warns that we have to – that we do – elect our (private) representative(s). In a sense his teaching is what we are to see beyond representativeness, or rather see it as a process of individuation.²

Thus, Cavell relates the philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson to the contemporary criticism of metaphysics; Emerson is, in that sense, the anticipation of Heidegger's philosophy that supports the doubt in Cartesian rationality, where there is a denial of the possibility of absolute completeness, the totality of thinking (Emerson, due to Heidegger, is also the anticipator of the thesis about 'the not-whole' of thinking and the subject, which post-modernism most consistently inherits). The anticipation of knowledge, not mediated by any external guarantor, is also the basis of Wittgenstein's philosophy: his main thesis is that all traditional, metaphysical notions and judgments should be considered in the context of the structure of everyday speech: knowledge, truth, the subject are the forms of linguistic definition, the proposition whose meaning is determined by context (by the rules of 'linguistic games') within which this proposition becomes used. So, Stanley Cavell comes to conclusions close to postmodern philosophy; the basis of his theory is, relying on Emerson – the deconstruction of Western metaphysics and the devastation of the assumption about the complete, 'whole' subject. However, the point where Cavell, i.e. the doctrine of 'moral perfectionism' and post-modernism disband are political implications of these two theoretical systems; the relativistic positions of Lyotardian post-modernism, through an assumption that manifestation, sense, meaning, value, or any other effect of signifying a product, are relative or arbitrary, necessarily lead to a sort of political, ethical and existential nihilism.³ Contrary to this, Cavell associates Emersonian moral perfectionism to the emancipating principle of the utopian transformation of the subject and the world; utopia is, thus, not seen as an ideal place (which would be a 'metaphysical' determination of utopia), but more like a *non* place, as an on-going and never finished process of the progressive improvement of the self:

Emerson's invoking the world he thinks is at once to declare what I am making as the perfectionist's address to Utopia as to something somehow here, whose entrance is next to us, hence persistently just missed, just passed, just curbed, and so to declare that the world in question inspires or requires a particular mode of thinking.

² Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1990, p. 10.

³ Miško Šuvaković, „(Post)moderna i nihilizam“, *Projekta(r)t* No. 11–15, Novi Sad, March 2001, p. 276–282.

(...)

But suppose that the intelligible world is ‘the city of words’, say Utopia; and suppose that the world of that city is not a ‘something’ that is ‘outside’ (i.e., ‘beyond’ ‘the world of sense’ – what is the process Kant figures as taking a standpoint?), but is, as it says, ‘no place’, which perhaps suggests no place else, but this place transfigured(...) You cannot bring Utopia about. Nor can you hope for it. You can only enter it(...) In this way the imaginability of Utopia as a modification of the present forms a criterion of presence of good enough justice.⁴

Having all this in mind, it is possible to come up with more precise conclusions about the ‘nature’ of Dylan’s politics: Dylan’s utopism is not leftist-Marxistic (although Dylan mostly comes from the American Leftists’ heritage and leftist-oriented folk music); his abandoning of leftist positions of folk reflects ‘the spiritual climate’ that announced post-modernism; however, Dylan’s distancing from folk is not nihilistic (in the way Lyotard’s or Baudrillard’s is): Dylan’s abandoning of folk, his distancing from the left wing will retain a utopian character; this kind of utopism is in its base Emersonian, and hence anti-collectivistic, i.e. highly individualistic.

Utopism of the Midwest and ‘The North Country’

Dylan’s utopism can be regarded, as David Pichaske points out, in the context of the grand heritage of the American ‘pastoral’, with the two central moments within: the motive of nature and the motive of travel. The American pastoral vision starts from the praising of rural life and it binds it with the attempts of the ethical defining of the ‘right’ and the ‘authentic’ way of living; within the Anglo-Saxon tradition, pastoralism becomes visible already in the works of the early British romantic poets such as Oliver Goldsmith and Thomas Gray, and later in the works of William Wordsworth, William Blake, and John Keats.⁵ The American pastoral, thus, has a triple foundation: aesthetic, religious and philosophical. The aesthetic frame finds its origin in the tradition of British and American Romanticism, while the religious aspect finds its inspiration in the labour ethics of Lutheranism and later – Calvinism. The philosophical foundation of the American pastoral will allow, first of all, the representatives of transcendentalism, such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralf Waldo Emerson; their direct antecedent is Jean Jacques Rousseau’s philosophy, who praised nature as the source of good in the ethical sense, considering that nature and ‘the

⁴ Stanley Cavell, op. cit., p. 19–20.

⁵ David Pichaske, *Song of the North Country: A Midwest Framework to the Songs of Bob Dylan*, Continuum, New York, 2010.

authentic' human community are contaminated by contradictions and complexities, i.e. by the progress of human history. The utopian vision of nature is, thus, at the very centre of Emersonian idealistic philosophy, which begins from the assumption that the manifesting, material world is only a kind of reflection of that which Emerson will denote as 'over-soul' in the manner of Neo-Platonism. Emerson views nature in the context of reflecting the universal world of ideas.⁶ For Emerson, nature is one of the elements for attaining the ethical principal of self-reliance, i.e. the element of the progressive improvement of the subject and the critical transcending of the current conditions of existence, which is 'contaminated' by the apparatus of a mechanical civilization.

The reinterpretation of the Emersonian vision of nature as an element of criticism of the consumerist culture, mostly became the basis of the American counter-culture during the 1950s and 1960s – from literature (the writers of that period in their criticism of American capitalism often started from the dialectic tension between 'the freedom' of the revelation of nature and 'the alienation' of the big cities – this is the main conflict in the novels such as Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* and Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*), then in the movies (Laszlo Benedek's *The Wild One*, Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*, John Boorman's *Deliverance*), to pop music (the whole folk revival from the beginning of the 1960s was founded on the fascination with the rural musical tradition of 'the old' America, while Emersonian pastoralism would mostly be integrated into the heritage of American psychedelic rock and country rock; typical examples are songs such as 'Goin' Up the Country' by Canned Heat, 'Woodstock' by Jonni Mitchell, 'Take Me Home, Country Roads' and 'Wild Montana Skies' by John Denver, numerous songs by The Byrds, Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, etc.). Such a dialectic between the criticism, i.e. the alienation of the urban and the projection, i.e. redemption in the rural, is the basis of Dylan's utopian pastoralism: places of alienation mostly are the big cities of the East Coast (especially New York), while the utopian vision is reserved mostly for the territory of the American Midwest or 'the North country' (Dylan's homeland Minnesota). This pastoral vision was present already in Dylan's earliest songs – on the first album, in the songs such as 'Talkin' New York' or 'Song to Woody', nature is the place of literal, but also spiritual escape from the destructiveness of the great megalopolis, which is directly sung about in 'Desolation Row', 'Subterranean Homesick Blues,' and 'Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again'. As Pichaske points out,

⁶ Ralf Valdo Emerson, „Priroda“, Ogledi, Grafos, Belgrade, 1983

Usually, Dylan finds nature, whether sunny or stormy, to be a source of sanity, restoration, escape, grace... and the right kind of girl, what Andy Gill calls 'the unpretentious, undemanding earth-mother type'. Nature is an antidote to insanity, decay, confinement, corruption, and the wrong kind of girl. 'Time again in *Love and Theft*', writes Andy Muir, 'it seems that "majesty and heroism", if it is to be found anywhere, is to be found in or of country roots...' The agrarian world is depicted as the authentic alternative to all that has 'gone wrong'.⁷

So, Dylan's vision of nature is a symbol of deliverance and renewal, in his love songs it is a space of emotional escape from a bad relationship (e.g. 'Don't Think Twice, It's All Right'), and very often a place of fulfilment of the religious ideals of the Judeo-Christian myth, where nature is related to Biblical reinterpretations (e.g. '11 Outlined Epitaphs', 'When the Ship Comes In', 'In the Garden', etc.).

The second important segment of American utopian pastoralism is the motive of travel: Pichaske minutely explains the archetypal structure of this motive, which has been present since classic American literature, to western movies, to country music and rock and roll. Dylan's songs on this issue reflect three basic 'stages' of pastoral myth on travelling:

the 'preliminary' stage, or departure; the 'liminaire' stage, or separation from home on a road fraught with dangerous adventures in marvelous environments; and the 'postliminaire' stage, or return.

This is the ideal scheme, and within American pop-culture some of these stages (as the third stage, or return) can be left out. In that sense, the road, in the utopian spirit, is experienced as a sign of individual freedom (travelling as a rejection of materialism, social hypocrisy, as well as an invitation to reject the conventional, routine way of life); finally, the metaphor of the road signifies the place of individual development, i.e. 'In terms of personal, individual development (...) individuals are woefully incomplete if they fail to go on the road'. American authors, like Dylan, 'proclaimed other attributes of the American open road, including health, freedom of choice, heroic deeds and art, above all the expanded consciousness'.⁸ The motive of travel is essentially related to the dialectic tension between criticism and projection; the frequent absence of the third phase implies the Protestant ethics which insist on the linear, progressivist view of history and consideration of America as a utopian project of constant expansion towards the West. On the other hand, the absence of the motive of return implies the issue of alienation of the subject which is in the process of

⁷ David Pichaske, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁸ Cecelia Tichi, *High Lonesome: The American Culture of Country Music*, The University of North Carolina Press, 1994.

ongoing internal transformation. Here lies the ambiguity of American utopism which is still necessarily connected to the feeling of loss (a typical Dylanesque bond between travel and problematic emotional relationships), and thus, to the motive of nostalgia. As Pichaske points out,

You can't go home. Nat Hentoff once wrote of Dylan, 'You can only go home for a visit, unless you've stopped growing', but that's not it, really. You can't go home again because the person returning home is not the person who left home, and home is not the way you remember it. Actually, in the Midwest these days, home is probably falling apart.

(...)

Thus develops the sense of bewildered nostalgia which colors so much of the departure-return literature of the Midwest, including the late songs of Bob Dylan. You remember why you left, you know that what you found away from home was in many respects no better than what you had at home, you know that home is even deadlier now than it was when you left, you know you no longer fit in at home, so you might as well be away.⁹

Such a description fits perfectly into the determination of 'moral perfectionism' that Stanley Cavell provides, and which, again, agrees with the post-modernist thesis about the non-whole subject, i.e. the subject in the process, but from over-antinihilistic positions. According to Cavell, Emersonian moral perfectionism describes a progressive process of signifying a 'still not attained, but attainable self':

To recognize the unattained self is, I gather, a step in attaining it(...) I do not read Emerson as saying(...) that there is one unattained/attainable self we repetitively never arrive at, but rather that 'having' 'a' self is a process of moving to, and from, nexts. It is, using a romantic term, the 'work' of (Emerson's) writing to present nextness, a city of words to participate in.¹⁰

Utopism of romantic love

One more element that follows, and practically derives from Dylan's utopian pastoralism is the image of the romantic relationship; it is even possible to say that in the whole of Dylan's opus, along with the motive of politics, the motive of romantic love takes a dominant position. What is typical of Dylan is the fact that the image of this romantic relationship is always related to a broader vision of the critical perception of social reality, i.e. to an attempt of transcending it; accord-

⁹ David Pichaske, op. cit., p. 157.

¹⁰ Stanley Cavell, op. cit., p. 12.

ingly, a few motives are integrated into Dylan's perception of romantic love: (1) criticism of urbanized consumerist society, (2) the praising of individualism and (3) searching for 'authentic' life, in keeping with the pastoral vision of the world.

The frequent method that Dylan uses in the criticism of modern consumerist society is the representation of the allegedly 'inauthentic' way of life through female characters, in songs like: 'Like a Rolling Stone', 'Just Like a Woman', 'To Ramona', 'Bob Dylan's Blues', 'Love Sick', etc. What connects all these songs is the bond between the 'bad' woman and the alienation of life in a consumerist megalopolis; a paradigmatic case is 'Like a Rolling Stone' in which Dylan portrays the 'fallen' woman from high society.

The song famously opens: 'Once upon a time you dressed so fine / You threw the bums a dime in your prime, didn't you?' The suggestion here is that the female addressee held a high position in the social hierarchy, from which she behaved condescendingly towards others lower down the ladder. The idea that she is further developed in Dylan's remark that: 'You never turned around to see the frowns on the jugglers and clowns / When they all come down and did tricks for you.' This woman was clearly the center of attention, and used those around her for her own pleasure and entertainment. Further, Dylan seems to accuse the addressee of the song – and presumably others like her – of being not only callous towards others lower down on the social ladder, but also guilty of the crime of wasting their own time (...)

Those at the top of the consumerist culture ladder fritter away their lives by trading with each other the tokens of their success. All of us who are familiar with this song will no doubt agree that Dylan's bitterness at such societal workings is hard to overestimate.¹¹

For Dylan, material wealth and status symbols mask weakness, and they are not able to offer maturity, 'depth', or strength. As an answer to the 'lies' of consumerist society and 'inauthentic' life, Dylan offers the need for the individualistic, spiritual transformation of the subject. This is why the second dominant theme of Dylan's love poetry is the criticism of possessiveness, emotional relationships, i.e. an escape from a bad relationship; typical examples are: 'Don't Think Twice It's All Right', 'I'm Not There', 'It Ain't Me, Babe', 'It's All Over Now, Baby Blue', 'If You Gotta Go, Go Now', etc. These motives derive from a typical Emersonian view on interpersonal relationships; the base of Emersonian philosophy is searching for the state of self-reliance of the subject; anyway, this does not imply a life in isolation, but reaching for mental self-reliance, where

¹¹ Kevin Krein and Abigail Levin, 'Just Like a Woman: Dylan, Authenticity, and the Second Sex', Peter Vernezeze and Carl J. Porter (eds.), *Bob Dylan and Philosophy: It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Thinking)*, Open Court, Chicago and La Salle, 2006, p. 54–55; also cf. Barbara O'Dair, 'Bob Dylan and Gender Politics', Kevin J. H. Dettmar (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, p. 80–86.

no social relationship is experienced as given, but as an assumption that all social relations are prone to constant questioning and the free decision of an individual; loneliness is often a basic element of self-acceptance of the subject, and a precondition for reaching emotional independence. Only with this acceptance of the self is it possible to enter into social relationships on an equal basis. Such a relationship implies a radical rejection of possessiveness:

In two essays on love and in other pieces on domestic life, Emerson tries to look at love – even at personal love – from the perspective of mental self-reliance. It is not always easy to say whether he is being unsettlingly radical or just prudish or cold. Maybe the line between the two is indistinct: the radical individualism of Emerson's sort is in a principled opposition to possessiveness and exclusiveness in human relations because these qualities are interwoven with the vices of envy, jealousy, and spite. What binds too tightly also blinds: exclusive love presumptuously defines the lover and the loved.¹²

This does not mean that Dylan, especially in his poetry of the 1960s, rejects the possibility of a harmonious, almost ideal emotional relationship; this relationship is, however, bound to his pastoral utopian criticism of capitalism. The 'ideal' woman in Dylan's imagination is always related to the rural and preindustrial archetype of the 'authentic' America; such an idealized image of the woman is in opposition to the inauthentic life in the big cities – the 'ideal' woman is a synonym for nature, i.e. for the rural territories of the Midwest and 'The North Country' (projection), while the 'bad' woman, i.e. bad emotional relationship, is related to urban (criticism):

Dylan's pastoralism causes him to associate good women with benevolent nature, and bad women with the city (...)

The association of the good girl with country life is not unusual in American thought, and might have religious origins. In his study of the American pastoral, Mark Peter Buechsel notes, 'The conflation of the Virgin, Woman, Midwestern nature, and sacramentalism in opposition to an ideological cluster centered around the Dynamo (mechanical culture), abstraction, industrialism, literalism, and the New England tradition can be traced in any number of Midwestern works.' Dylan is in this regard a typical Midwestern pastoralist.¹³

Such examples of the idealized, rural archetype of woman are more than numerous: 'Girl of the North Country', 'Tomorrow is a Long Time', 'Ballad in Plain D', 'Mama, You Been on My Mind', 'Love Minus Zero/No Limit', 'Sad-

¹² George Kateb, 'Friendship and Love', Harold Bloom (ed.), *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Emerson's Essays*, Chelsea House Publishers, New York, 2006, p. 208.

¹³ David Pichaske, op. cit., p. 124.

Eyed Lady of the Lowlands', 'I'll Remember You', 'One More Cup of Coffee (Valley Below)', and among albums, Dylan's most 'pastoral' one is *Nashville Skyline* (1969), which is, by no means accidentally, a true country album, both in the musical and in the poetic sense; it is dominated by songs where the visions of idealized love are interwoven with pastoral visions of nature ('To Be Alone With You', 'I Threw It All Away', 'Lay, Lady, Lay', 'Tonight I'll Be Staying Here With You'). The album represents one more of many 'turnovers' in Dylan's work – the lyrics are reduced, fit into the traditional structure of country music, without any allusions to post-modernist experiments from his rock'n'roll phase; in the moment of its creation, the album caused numerous controversies: immediately after the revolutionary 1968, at the moment when the American counter-culture and the new left wing reached their peak, Dylan, outside every stream, recorded an apolitical album in Nashville about love relationships and the idyllic country pastoral. However, through a retrospective reading of the album, in the context of Emersonian utopism, it is possible to recognize that Dylan's apoliticality is in this case also illusory, and that one of the most 'apolitical' of Dylan's albums is possible to read in the clearly ideological key.

However, it should be emphasized that Dylan's pastoral, idealized vision of the romantic relationship is simultaneously one of the most disputable segments of his work: the 'ideal' woman is reduced to the level of an archetype, not rarely of even typical male phantasm; an active woman is bound to the alienation of the machine-like, consumerist culture, and in Dylan's verses she frequently becomes criticized. Dylan's goal is self-reliance, individual freedom and transcending the current conditions of existence, but it seems that this transcendence is reserved only for the male hero. The woman in Dylan's verses is rarely an individual in the real sense, and even less 'the heroine', i.e. the protagonist. She's more a passive mythical image that offers 'shelter from the storm' (as the song of the same name says) to the male, active hero:

The women he praises are almost all ones who have given him shelter from the storm, who are there to allow him to go someplace that is innocent and in which he can escape from the harsh realities of a competitive social world that contains deceit and injustice. But they can do that only by completely removing themselves from the modern world. The way Dylan describes them, the most active thing they do is growing their hair. Beauvoir complains of such women that, 'The curse that is open woman as vassal consists, as we have seen, in the fact that she is not permitted to do anything; so she persists in the vain pursuit of her true being through narcissism, love, or religion'. Of course, Dylan feels safe and relaxed in the company of women who do little else but lie across his big brass bed.¹⁴

¹⁴ Kevin Krein and Abigail Levin, op. cit., p. 61.

In addition, what distinguishes Dylan from the typical machoist perception of the world, which dominated the rock'n'roll in the 1960s, despite the first hints of feminism, is the perception of the romantic relationship in a broader political and social context, with a tendency towards a renewal of the utopian way of thinking.¹⁵ Also interesting is Dylan's period from the mid-1970s when he was gradually leaving the idealistic and pastoral view of romantic love (in order to exchange it for a religious view, by the end of the 1980s): *Blood on The Tracks* from 1975 is a paradigmatic album where the dominant motives in the songs are devastated love, loneliness, misunderstanding and separation, instead of the complete utopia of a realized love relationship; in this case, Dylan associates personal themes with a broader social and ideological context – alienation, instability, and contradictions of historical development have an impact on the complexity of emotional relationships. Despite the evident machoism, Dylan came close to feminist practice at least in one segment: for Dylan, as well as for feminism, the personal is always political.

Utopism of the Judeo-Christian myth

The third segment in which Dylan's utopism can be recognized is the tradition of the Judeo-Christian myth; this religious aspect of Dylan's pastoral can be recognized from the beginning of the 1960s, but it would culminate at the end of the 1970s – on the album *John Wesley Harding* (1967) and partly on *The Basement Tapes* that was recorded during 1967 and published later in 1975, and then on the albums from Dylan's 'Christian phase' from the late 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. The starting point of this religious utopism is the construction of the prophet figure as the basis of Dylan's media image: the prophet is the man chosen by God in order to spread the revelation and to advocate God's will before the people. The prophet is thus a strictly individualized character, who speaks for and on behalf of the community; the prophet is the symbol

¹⁵ According to this, until the emergence of punk, the greatest female names were mostly related to strong, great male authors, and later they were recognized as 'authentic' authors: Wanda Jackson had been standing in the 'shadow' of Elvis Presley (in the context of rockabilly), Joan Baez in the 'shadow' of Bob Dylan (in the context of folk), Emmylou Harris in the 'shadow' of Gram Parsons (in the context of country rock). These female artists had opened a road to female emancipation within rock'n'roll that would really take place in the mid-1970s with punk; in that sense, the key position was taken by Patti Smith's album *Horses*, which seemed to be the first great, truly 'female' rock album. Also see: Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, „Rock and Sexuality“, Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (eds.), *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, Routledge, London and New York, 2006, pp. 371–389; Mark Paytress, *Patti Smith's Horses and the remaking of Rock'n'Roll*, Piatkus, London, 2010.

of truth, and he stands for the feeling of continuity, i.e. a utopian projective relationship between the present and the future. In other words, the prophet acts within the dialectical tension and between criticism of the present moment and projectivity, i.e. the prediction, that is to say, between sin (alienation) and salvation. For his audience, since the earliest days, Dylan has been some kind of poet-prophet: the audience has always experienced his music as a form of almost mystical knowledge that reveals the truth about the corruption and alienation of America, suffering, class and racial inequality; all this implies the presence of a strict, almost moralizing perception of the world. The sources of Dylan's 'prophetic' utopism are, firstly, the Hebrew tradition, and then a specific heritage of the American Christian-oriented Romanticism. According to Stephen Scobie,

The Hebrew prophet took on a public role, speaking about the moral and political health of a whole community. 'A constant characteristic of Hebrew prophecy', writes Peter Southwell, 'was its concern with matters of national morality and social justice, with the character of God and his purposes for Israel and mankind.' At various stages in his career, Dylan's prophetic stance has been inflected in different ways: through his involvement with the civil rights movement of the early 1960s; through his explicitly Christian preaching of the late 1970s; and through the tradition of American music which gives him the words to proclaim, in 1994, that we live in a 'world gone wrong'. Always, however, the concern is public and, in a broad, nonpartisan sense, political.¹⁶

In that sense, the basis of the whole of Dylan's work is the movement between a projective and a critical 'analysis' of the current social order; his image of society is simultaneously utopian and apocalyptic, and it exists between the vision of the ideal, but still not attained future, and the dystopian present.

On the other hand, the figure of the prophet is also a part of the specific American heritage, founded primarily on the Christian tradition of the 17th century American Puritans, as well as the poetic tradition of Anglo-American Romanticism, outlined by 19th century writers such as William Blake, Walt Whitman, and Henry Thoreau, and taken over in the 20th century by Allen Ginsberg, Woody Guthrie and Dylan himself. However, at the very centre of this tradition is, again, Ralph Waldo Emerson and his individualistic, anti-institutional views on religiousness, which are some kind of non-canonical reinterpretations of the utopian philosophy of St. Augustine. This relationship between Emerson and Augustinian utopism, that can directly be applied to the understanding of Dylan's pastoral, is underlined by Harold Bloom; the Emersonian vision of the world rests upon the duality between the apocalyptic vision of reality, i.e. the individualized vision of sin and messianism, i.e. the progressive improvement

¹⁶ Stephen Scobie, *Alias Bob Dylan Revisited*, Red Deer Press, Alberta, 2003, p. 27.

of the self. For Emerson (as well as for Dylan), the apocalypse and utopia are the constituent elements of the 'American sublime':

Augustine's vision of the Fall, as Brown also shows, had changed from an early, quasi-Platonian belief, which was that Adam and Eve had 'fallen' into physicality: 'that the prolific virtues they would have engendered in a purely "spiritual" existence had declined, with the Fall, into the mere literal flesh and blood of human families'. In the mature Augustinian doctrine, the dualizing split in human consciousness is no technical descent to a lower degree of being, but is the most willful and terrible of catastrophes. How does this compare with the catastrophe theory in Freud, and in Emerson? Do all three doctors-of-the-soul, Augustine, Emerson and Freud agree fundamentally that consciousness, as we know it, cannot inaugurate itself without a catastrophe?

(...)

This, I now assert, is the distinguishing mark of the specifically American Sublime, that it begins anew not with the restoration of rebirth, in the radically displaced Protestant pattern of the Wordsworthian Sublime, but that it is truly past even such displacement, despite the line from Edwards to Emerson that scholarship accurately continues to trace. Not merely rebirth, but the even more hyperbolic trope of self-rebegetting, is the starting point of the last Western Sublime, the great sunset of selfhood in the Evening Land.¹⁷

For Bloom, this tension between alienation and salvation is not only a part of Emerson's political vision of society, but a much more typical, Emersonian conception of subjectivity that Bloom associates with Freud's 'catastrophe', i.e. 'the Fall' is an element in constituting the subject, which is split between the process of repression and sublimation. In other words, the dialectic of 'apocalypse' and 'deliverance', criticism and projections, but within the process of individuation, are the constituent elements of the Emersonian vision of transformative subjectivity, i.e. the vision of the 'attainable, but still not attained self', in keeping with the principles of 'moral perfectionism'.

That is how it is relatively easy to understand the changes in Dylan's political program; Dylan's utopia moved from a traditionally, Marxist political utopism that was cherished in the American folk revival from the beginning of the 1960s, to the utterly individualized, anti-collectivist, Emersonian utopism from the late 1960s, resting upon the rejection of all grand, collectivist, political projects, that were cherished in both folk and the American new left-wing and counter-culture, on the whole. His early folk songs have a clear program

¹⁷ Harold Bloom, 'Introduction: The American Sublime', Harold Bloom (ed.), *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Emerson's Essays*, Chelsea House Publishers, New York, 2006, pp. 4, 8.

structure, and one can comment that they are often examples, in the true sense of the word, of ‘engaged’ political song; social criticism in them is almost never satirical, but Dylan binds the apocalyptic vision of modern America with politics, i.e. with the social role of the poet and the musician. The dominant themes he deals with are universality of individual freedom, i.e. the themes of political, class and racial equality. A turnabout followed in the mid-1960s, and his rejection of the ideology of the American New Left culminated in the albums after his ‘electric phase’, when he came nearer to the tradition of American country music. Utopism in *John Wesley Harding* is more religious than political, more individualist than collectivist, more mystical than programmatic. However, *John Wesley Harding*, perhaps, has the ‘cleanest’ structure where the mentioned dialectics between the critical and projective aspect of Dylan’s music are in question: the album is not directly political, but it is ideological criticism transposed into the language of biblical parables – the A side of the album is dominated by songs with motives of sin, alienation, temptation and death, while the B side offers the motives of deliverance and projection. Seth Rogovoy points out this individualistic character of Dylan’s utopism from the end of the 1960s, on the example of *The Basement Tapes*:

Beginning with the songs on *The Basement Tapes*, Dylan’s interests around this time shift from the merely prophetic toward the mystic. It’s hard to separate the two, as the prophetic experience is at heart a mystical one – a Prophet, inspired by the divine, has undergone something of a mystical experience. And much of the basis of Jewish mysticism comes in the form of prophetic visions of the Godhead, for example, Ezekiel’s chariot, and in vivid descriptions of the end of days and the Messianic era. It is precisely this aspect of the prophetic tradition – call it prophetic mysticism – which now engages Bob Dylan intensely, more so than, say, that of social criticism. This corresponds with a sense that with time and maturity Dylan has grown concerned with personal matters and less with social critique, although, as we shall see, the pendulum will swing back before settling somewhere in between the two polarities.¹⁸

Between utopia and nostalgia: *The Basement Tapes*

The Basement Tapes is a 1975 album that consists of a series of recordings which were released during 1967 by Dylan and the members of the band-to-be The Band; the recordings had been circulating as bootleg, and later the album comprised dozens of recordings that had originally consisted of covers of traditional folk songs, improvisations and completely new songs, many of

¹⁸ Seth Rogovoy, *Bob Dylan: Prophet, Mystic, Poet*, Scribner, New York, 2009, p. 123; cf. also: Christopher Ricks, *Dylan’s Visions of Sin*, ECCO, New York, 2005.

which would remain unfinished 'sketches'. I shall not go into a close reading of the mentioned recordings, but I am going to focus on the interpretation offered by Greil Marcus, one of the most significant American interpreters of Dylan's work, in the book entitled *Invisible Republic*, which was created from the 'side notes' for the mentioned Dylan album. Generally speaking, Marcus's approach is certainly unique when it comes to the interpretation of rock music: he is a critic with nomadic principles who functions on the border of musical journalism, musical criticism, and literature, but also 'serious', i.e. philosophically grounded cultural theory. Marcus treats pop phenomena as *symptoms* within Western culture, putting them into inter-textual relations with painting, art, social movements, i.e. material practices within a certain historically given society. In his book, Markus does not offer 'the analysis' of the album released by Dylan and The Band, but the writing that steps into the already mentioned inter-textual relationship with music, practically complementing it in its own medium; the book functions almost as a paraliterary 'stream of consciousness' that has related Dylan's album to phenomena such as American folk music, Calvinist Christianity, mining trade-union movements from the early 1900s, and the American politics of the second half of the 20th century. So, this book is on the edge of criticism, literature and theory; in its very centre dwells the notion of utopia.¹⁹

In Marcus's interpretation of Dylan's album it is possible to recognize the double determination of the notion of utopia – first of all, the determination of utopia as a pastoral vision of the ideal city; in that sense, utopia is viewed as an ideal place, or non-place, i.e. 'a place without the place, we see ourselves where we are not, in the imaginary space that opens up, potentially, from the other side of its surface, we are there where we are not, and what is more important, we see ourselves where we do not exist'.²⁰ Marcus uses the metaphor of an ideal city in order to describe Dylan's relationship towards the vision of a better, more perfect society, that emerged through the musical and cultural dialogue with the folk heritage that was collected by Harry Smith in his famous *Anthology of American Folk Music*; Dylan's world, i.e. the vision of the world presented in *The Basement Tapes* is some kind of experimental reflection of the social pastoral that Smith's anthology sketches. In the paraliterary, parasurrealistic key, Marcus sketches two ideal cities, two possible visions of a better, more humane community, which society constructs as the answer to the antagonisms of the current order. The view of Smith's folk world (which Marcus describes with the

¹⁹ Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes*, Picador, London, 1998.

²⁰ Branislav Dimitrijević, „Heterotopografija“, Irina Subotić (ed.), *Umetnost na kraju veka*, Clio, Belgrade, 1998.

metaphor of a city under the imaginary name of Smithville) is a nostalgic view of an idealistic, rural community uncontaminated by industrialization and mechanical civilization; Dylan's world (a new ideal city named Kill Devil Hills) is the actualization of the utopian impulse in the moment when American society, under the wave of the Vietnam War, imperialism and consumerism, has departed from the principles of universal freedom and equality. The two ideal cities are related to each other as the head and tail of the same utopian vision; the view of the past gives directions for an emancipating vision of the future:

Each time a new key opened a door, America opened up into both the future and the past – and it is perhaps only a progressive notion of time that leads one to presume that when Dylan spoke of an America that was wide open, he meant open to what was to come, not to what had been, open to the question of who and what Americans might become, not to the question of who and where they came from. There is no nostalgia in the basement recordings; they are too cold, pained, or ridiculous for that. The mechanics of time in the music are not comforting. In the basement, the past is alive to the degree that the future is open, when one can believe that the country remains unfinished, even unmade; when the future is foreclosed, the past is dead. How the future depends on the past is more mysterious.

(...)

in the basement you could believe in the future only if you could believe in the past, and you could believe in the past only if you could touch it, mold it like the clay from which the past had molded you, and change it.

(...)

Like the records Smith collected, the known and unknown basement tapes together make a town - a town that is also a country, an imagined America with a past and a future, neither of which seems quite as imaginary as any act taking place in the present of the songs.²¹

The vision of the ideal city that functions as a *corrective* narrative within the current historical moment is related to the vision of utopia as a transitory instance, as a project of incessant transformation, i.e. the perception of utopia as a processuality: at this point, Marcus associates *The Basement Tapes*, i.e. the fragmented, unfinished structure of the tapes from Woodstock, their bond with the past, and their critical relationship towards the present (where 'art, religion, and politics' are parts of the same process), with a great utopian project that was sketched by Walter Benjamin in his unfinished work *Passagen-Werk*. It is one of the most ambitious, in the true sense, utopian theoretical essays of the 20th cen-

²¹ Greil Marcus, op. cit., pp. 70, 128.

tury: Benjamin starts from the motive of the 19th-century Paris, around which he arranges a critical image of the whole bourgeois culture, building a synthetic analysis of the capitalistic relations of the production. During a long period of time, Benjamin complemented his work with a series of fragmented images, depictions, the accompanying texts that very often had only distant matching points with the main 'theme' of his monumental study. Benjamin's 'magnum opus' between 1927 and 1940 became some sort of personal obsession with collecting, archiving and collaging, which would, in the end, as a utopian tendency for the 'total' work of philosophy, remain unfinished. This is a typical, modern work of philosophy with processuality in its centre; similarly, Smith's anthology and the monumental collection of poems, improvisations, sketches, and covers that include tapes from Woodstock, are examples of ongoing, never finished, Utopian-progressivist projects; like Benjamin's work, *The Basement Tapes* remained an unfinished album, which is more a sketch, a draft that binds the past with the utopian vision of the future, and not a complete unit that would attain at least a pseudo-ideal form.

Conclusion: Dylan, pop culture and the criticism of American democracy

Finally, one must ask a question considering Dylan's radical individualism and pastoral utopism, regarding the social and historical context in which it emerges, and that context is a project of American liberal democracy of the second half of the 20th century. Dylan's work rests upon the idea of permanent criticism of all the 'official' institutions of the liberal capitalistic society – starting from the university, the political institutions, political parties, to the capitalistic economic order: in Dylan's poetry, the institutions of American liberalism are presented as essentially corrupt and incapable of guaranteeing the individual, the principles of freedom, equality and the individual development of their personality. Dylan's utopism is an answer to a sort of 'contamination' of the American democratic order. However, if Dylan's utopism is not leftist-collectivist, if Dylan changes the language of the materialistic analysis of equality, within the American capitalistic system, for the idealized language of the rural pastoral, should it be written off as naive idealism, or as a form of radical individualist elitism, in which a contempt for all collective emancipating projects is built?

This is one of the central questions that Stanley Cavell asks with regard to Emerson's individualistic moral perfectionism: can we use Emerson, in the current postmodern environment, as a relevant reference for critical reflection on modern democracy? Here Cavell enters a dialogue with the American liberal theorist John Rawls, who treats Emerson as a form of elitist, i.e. teleological

philosophical and ideological platform. Radical individualism, at worst, implies the demand to reject all the institutions of the liberal order, i.e. there is a platform which demands the totalitarian suspension of all democratic principles (the extreme form of individualism); at best, in its moderate, Emersonian option, individualism is a teleological political platform that rests upon the ideal idea of maximization of the potential of the individual, or certain (often privileged) classes in keeping with the concept of 'high culture': 'In the moderate version, it is merely one principle amongst others and directs society to arrange institutions and to define the duties and obligations of individuals so as to maximize the achievement of human excellence in art, science and culture.'²² On the other hand, Cavell rejects such a teleological interpretation of Emerson, and puts his moral perfectionism into the centre of democratic debate, i.e. of what Rawls determines as 'the debate on justice'. For Cavell, moral perfectionism is the individualist, but not the atomist, i.e. the elitist ethical position: Emerson also takes over Plato's assertion, according to which, in order to constitute real democratic social relationships, it is necessary to walk the path from the principle of 'being one' to the system where the individual is a representative of society as a whole:

I might at once declare that the path from the *Republic's* picture of the soul's journey (perfectible to the pitch of philosophy by only a few, forming an aristocratic class) to the democratic need for perfection, is a path from the idea of there being one (call him Socrates), who represents for each of us the height of the journey, to the idea of each of us being representative for each of us – an idea that is a threat as much as opportunity.²³

In that sense, moral perfectionism is the practice of *criticism of democracy within democracy*; the freedom of practicing radical individualistic utopism is possible only within the democratic order:

If there is perfectionism not only compatible with democracy but necessary to it, it lies not in excusing democracy for its inevitable failures, or looking to rise above them, but in teaching how to respond to those failures, and to one's compromise by them, otherwise than by excuse or withdrawal. To teach this is an essential task in Rawl's criticism of democracy from within.²⁴

Emerson's moral perfectionism and his thesis on 'self-reliance', i.e. Dylan's pastoral utopism as the objectification of Emerson's thesis within the cur-

²² Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998, p. 267.

²³ Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1990, p. 9.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 18.

rent postmodern pop culture are in the very centre of what Cavell determines as the ethical debate on justice and the just society, i.e. democracy. Cavell approaches the reflection on democracy through reflection on morals and morally correct action, in Wittgenstein's spirit, from radically anti-essentialist positions; for Cavell, there is no transcendental, metaphysical foundation of moral values; ethics is founded in language, and as such, it rests not upon the universal ethical imperatives, but on grammatical rules defined by the community, through the process of communication. The question of ethics is thus the question of procedures and not conclusions; ethics is a dynamic debate between the members of a community, and not a static and unchangeable facticity. Thus, for Cavell, there is no morality by itself, but the conditions of ethically correct action are defined through the relationship with another: 'In effect, participation in this practice involves declaring something about oneself and discovering something about others; moral discussion is an arena for the revelation of oneself to another.'²⁵ Or as Cavell puts it,

the point is to determine *what* position you are taking, that is to say, *what position you are taking responsibility for* – and whatever it is, one I can respect. What is at stake in such discussion is not, or not exactly, whether you know our world, but whether, or to what extent, we are to live in the same moral universe. What is at stake in such examples as we've so far noticed is not the validity of morality as a whole, but the nature or quality of our relationship with one another.²⁶

In other words, to act politically within a certain social context means to speak on behalf of others, and to leave the possibility for others to speak on behalf of us; the constitution of a political identity is the practice of self-knowledge through a relationship with other members of a community. However, the moment when the ideals of the community, defined through the practice of moral debate between their members are abandoned, the individual is left with the possibility to 'withdraw consent' in terms of political participation in that community. This is exactly the practice of Dylan's utopism that appears in the moment when the ideals of universal equality become abandoned; this is in fact a demand not for the elitist privatization of political speech, but a demand for the redefinition of the 'polis', i.e. of society as a whole. The 'withdrawal of consent' in the process of political participation is a demand for the reconstruction of the principle of universality, and not its deconstruction, it is a criticism of democracy within democracy, and not a demand for its abolition:

Dissent is also an attempt to speak for others, and if it involves rebuking some who claimed to speak for the dissenter, it is intended to bring them back to a position in

²⁵ Stephen Mulhall, op. cit., p. 41.

²⁶ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, quoted from Stephen Mulhall, *ibid.*, p. 41.

which they can continue to do so; it is an attempt to restore or redefine the nature and extent of the polis, not an attempt to move beyond its bounds.

(...)

When citizens such as Thoreau resort to civil disobedience, they are not attempting to privatize their political voice, to transform it into something non-political, but are rather using it to rebuke their fellow citizens in the name of something to which they are jointly committed.²⁷

This is exactly Dylan's position: the pastoral, utopian withdrawal from the political community is a tendency towards the reconstruction of the original ideals of equality and egalitarianism that the community abandoned, as well as the tendency to define the position from which the individual speaks on behalf of others; i.e. withdrawal from the political community, in keeping with the principles of self-reliance and moral perfectionism, means defining a new form of universality which is founded on the exception. In that sense, Dylan's individualistic utopism is not the elitist rejection of democracy, but exactly the opposite – Dylan is an example of how pop culture functions as the *necessary internal corrective* of a democracy. In other words, Dylan is a typical product of the American liberal project, but also the place of its radical utopian criticism.

Translated by Ivana Marjanović

²⁷ Stephen Mulhall, *ibid.*, p. 63.