Welcome to the first issue of The Sylvania Review. Our new EWL newsletter gives those of us in the English and World Languages—faculty, administration, and staff alike— an opportunity to share our uniquely personal passions for books, films, drama, and music. Xerox Budget Gods willing, there will be an edition of The Sylvania Review coming out each term this year.

By the way, for the oldtimers here at EWL who remember our division by the old acronym EML, you might have a sense of déjà-vu as you read this newsletter. Where have you seen something like this before? Well, a former colleague of ours, Bill Siverly, produced a similar newsletter called The EMLA (English & Modern Language Association), which had a nice long run within our division. Many of us still here in EWL have fond memories of writing for and reading his wonderful newsletter. The Sylvania Review is a resurrection of Mr. Siverly’s newsletter. Bringing his newsletter back is not only a way of keeping a really good idea going; it allows those of us who worked with Bill to acknowledge his legacy in the English department.

I am currently seeking submissions for the Winter issue. Any instructor, administrator, or staff member within EWL is invited to write a piece for our newsletter. I especially encourage adjunct faculty and staff to contact me regarding a submission. I can be reached at sdionne@pcc.edu or by phone at 503.977.8003. Call or email me your idea for an article! Thank you.

—Scott Dionne

Table of Contents

Paul Theroux’s Dark Star Safari. A review by John Sparks .................. 1
The Devastating Wallace Shawn. By Gretchen Icenogle ..................... 4
It’s Latin for “Behold My Heart.” By Nancy Casciato ....................... 7
Making Goodness Out of Badness: The Idealism of Willie Stark. By Laurie Bernhardt Engberg ............................. 9
Bob Dylan’s Modern Times. A review by Scott Dionne .................... 11


By John Sparks

Cecil John Rhodes, financial magnate and Victorian imperialist, once envisioned a railroad stretching from the Cape of Good Hope to Cairo through colonies colored in British pink. His dream never came to pass, and, of course, the map of east of southern Africa no longer sports those cheery expanses of colonial pink. However, a traverse of the length of Africa still stands as a compelling invitation to those hardy souls with the time and, in these days the gumption, to navigate the
political uncertainties of the world’s most mysterious inhabited continent.

I picked up *Dark Star Safari*, Paul Theroux’s Cairo to Cape travail, upon two false premises: the first, that having avoided this author for a decade or so, I might discover that he had gotten readable again; the second was that proverbial emotional chord – Theroux had been an old Africa hand, Peace Corps (as I was) in Malawi (where I came into the world and spent my childhood). It took less than a chapter to cement the idea that a decade spent shunning this particular author had been based upon sound and irrefutable good opinion. In retribution for this singular lapse in judgment, I steeled myself, donned the hair shirt, and ploughed through *Dark Star Safari* in fits and starts. Not content with having survived to page 485, which is actually the final page of the postscript to the travelogue, I then decided to write this review, the final penance in this sorry sequence.

Theroux was just beginning to appear on best-seller lists as I was heading out to the nether ends of the globe on my own travels. I much enjoyed *The Great Railway Bazaar* (1975), the first of a trademark series of volumes about train travel, soon to be followed by *The Old Patagonian Express* (1979). One of his next travel volumes, *The Kingdom by the Sea* (1983), described his hike around the entire coastline of the island of Great Britain. Theroux as novelist made a great splash with *The Mosquito Coast* (1982), but failed to impress with other efforts, such as *Jungle Lovers* (1971), his ‘Malawi novel’, and *O-zone* (1986), his contribution to post-nuclear holocaust fiction. I dropped him as a fiction writer long before I began to slap myself every time I reached to pick a new travel effort off the library shelves. I survived *Riding the Iron Rooster* (1988), but finally after having spent a year in the South Pacific myself, became so irritated with *The Happy Isles of Oceania* (1992) that I favored myself with the decision not to repeat my errors - that is, until this year.

There is no question that Theroux, despite his multiple residences (Cape Cod and Hawaii) and his continued financial success, is a stalwart adventurer. In *The Happy Isles*, he really does paddle hundreds of miles in canoes. In *Dark Star Safari*, which he completed at the age of 60, there are a couple of memorable and dangerous segments of his route, notably the trip from southern Ethiopia through the bandit-infested wastelands of northern Kenya and then also his journey in a dugout canoe out of southern Malawi and into Mozambique, floating the Shire River to its confluence with the Zambezi. I especially appreciated his affinity with the crew of a freighter that conveys him across Lake Victoria from Uganda to Kenya. He is sincere, and pleasantly balanced, in his descriptions of the Zimbabwean white farmers’ plight under the neo-fascist President Mugabe, exemplified by the stolid soul of Peter Drummond. I also finally obtained the details of Theroux’s expulsion from the Peace Corps: he had assisted in the escape of Malawian intellectual David Rubadiri from the country in the wake of a failed coup against the Banda regime. Rubadiri, in the new “democratic” state, is now Chancellor of the University of Malawi, and is treated with a visit by the author as he wends his way south. It was with the aftertaste of gems such as these that I sustained myself as I perused the exasperating text in-between.

Theroux’s dream is to descend the African continent entirely overland. However, the vast, inscrutable expanse of the Sudan looms as an immovable impediment to this wish, and thus he is forced take an airplane from Egypt into Khartoum and thence, by air again, he proceeds to Ethiopia. From then on,
he remains true to his intentions, with a couple of lapses. He scorns the thought of traipsing around “game reserves” stalking antelope and their predators; nevertheless, by the time he attains the southern end of the continent, he treats himself to an entire chapter on one of those private South African reserves where you get to sip champagne and sleep, “safari style,” to the tune of about $350 a night.

When I was reading Riding the Iron Rooster, almost 20 years ago now, I distinctly remember an ineluctable frustration. The author’s formula, which had worked well in his first travel volumes, was becoming, well, akin to the monotonous clickety-clack of a night train, the repetitions inducing, not a soothing sense of familiarity, but a teeth-grinding insomnia: get on a train, talk to a passenger, make wild and vast extrapolations about the society as whole, curse the whole lot of them, and move on to the next place. In Dark Star Safari, Theroux, perhaps realizing that he has repeated himself a little too often in previous tomes and lest the reader forget his high intellectual credentials, casts his embarkation in Egypt with a cameo appearance by Naguib Mahfouz. Little do we know that he has in store for us the unique technique of bookending his travelogue by recounting two visits with another Nobel Prize winner, Nadine Gordimer. This last encounter (Gordimer is an old acquaintance) overshadows most of what Theroux might have to say about post-apartheid South Africa; instead, we are treated to one of the author’s characteristic whinings: someone stole his bag from the hotel storage room, an event which Ms. Gordimer feels constrained to commiserate with him on at her own husband’s funeral. Along the journey, the petulant Theroux lashes out at African food (“my bowels exploded”), the stark white Landrovers of the foreign NGO workers (They would never stop to pick him up when he was thumbing a ride, instead whipping by in a cloud of choking, and humiliating, dust) and the U.S. Embassy in Malawi, which neglects to sign him up as a guest speaker (He offered his services for free, but the fools probably didn’t even recognize his name).

Generally, Theroux is fascinated by the political, but he only begins to scratch the surface in Sudan and Ethiopia; in both places, he focuses on dissidents from the intellectual class. By Kenya, he is ready to underscore the refrain we will be bombarded with for the duration of the saga: the petty corruption of the baksheesh-driven bureaucracies, the dependence on foreign aid organizations, the oppression of entrepreneurial whites and Indians, the development of an effete intellectual class that cannot outsmart the ruling thugs. Most annoying is his petulance at all the inconveniences thrown his way as he blunders down the continent on a course that no sane local, knowing the hazards and the roadblocks, would entertain attempting. Thus, the harsh strain continues as we proceed into Uganda, then south through Tanzania, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and into the south.

Theroux is most revealing, however, when he exposes himself as the fatuous, ethnocentric ruminator that he really is. He seems surprised to encounter everywhere a new, sometimes unpleasant, African order, or disorder, of things (Don’t you read the news, Paul?). There is a palpable nostalgia for the trappings of the bygone imperial age, which had still been in place when Theroux had gone out in the Peace Corps: you can sense the man longing for the bwana days of starch-shirted, deferential house servants, colonial lawns trimmed with beds of zinnias and carnations, and the shady avenues of flame trees and jacarandas, now in many places hewn down for firewood. He visits the school in Blantyre where he taught as a Peace Corps volunteer, and plaintively expostulates at the sight of his old house: succeeding generations of Malawian teachers, true to their own culture and traditions, have planted his flower garden with maize (You can’t eat petunias, Paul). He finally feels he has reached “civilization” again when he enters Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe, still a bastion, even under Mugabe’s oppression, of the old order of neat
streets, clean pavements, and sidewalk cafes. The rest of Africa “smells.” Like the delusional jingoists who foresaw a tidy Western democracy astride the Tigris, Theroux hankers for the familiar and offers slight insight into a factionalized continent, reeling from the AIDS epidemic, where half the population is school age with small prospect for adequate employment.

I turned away from *Dark Star Safari* resolving once again not to read another curmudgeonly, episodic Theroux travelogue. A larger questions looms, however: Where have all the good travel writers gone? I might still recommend Redmond O’Hanlon (*Into to the Heart of Borneo, Congo Journey*) for sheer pluck in the face of drooping lianas and jungle ooze, and without all the gadgets of modern “extreme adventurers,” or Dervla Murphy (*On a Shoestring to Coorg, Cameroon With Egbert*), whose Wikipedia entry begins: “In the midst of a record-setting blizzard in 1963, Dervla Murphy packed a pistol aboard Roz, her Armstrong Cadet bicycle and accomplished her first international bicycle tour - a completely self-supported solo trip from Ireland to India.” Pico Iyer, Jan Morris and Jonathan Raban pen brilliant vignettes at times, but often seem strained. In the main, however, the genre, perhaps inevitably in this age of deadlines, is becoming the province of hacks like Theroux and only the faintest whiff of the lyrical or the truly humorous and self-effacing, exemplified by erudite and intrepid souls such as Eric Newby, Alexandra David-Neel, Freya Stark, and Bruce Chatwin, lingers in the productions of the living exponents in the field.

･････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････････
engenders both laughter and horror, the twin hallmarks of the grotesque. He is comfortable enough with the awful distance between his splendid mind and its less splendid (dwarflike, larval, lisping) casing to make a living by it: from his first film appearance, as Diane Keaton’s “devastating” ex in Manhattan, he has traded on a popular, though decidedly limited, fascination with the contradictions he embodies.

Moral grotesquerie, into which Shawn was also, helplessly, born, has been more difficult for him to assimilate. The distance between the comforts of the privileged and the suffering of the dispossessed remains, for him, utterly horrific; his stubborn rejection of humorous detachment as an admissible response to others’ misery supplies the murmurous, irregularly beating heart of his plays.

Shawn’s lineage as an artist in the grotesque mode is long, and more or less distinguished. As a critical concept, the grotesque has a history that spans nearly five hundred years; as a mode of artistic expression, it is considerably older. The term dates from early in the sixteenth century, when excavations in Italy uncovered murals of provocative strangeness painted in the early years of Christianity. These murals fused human, animal, and vegetable forms in combinations unknown to nature, and inspired a brief vogue in ornamental painting (of which Raphael was one notable practitioner). The new paintings were labeled grottesco for their resemblance to those found in the Italian caves (grotte). The term quickly migrated across boundaries of language and genre, useful as it was for describing a confusion of form that had effects both comic and horrific.

In its wanton mixture of human and animal qualities, the grotesque speaks to our horrifying double fate, as we strain toward divine apprehension while humping our mortal bodies graveward. The late psychologist and synthesist Ernest Becker has given a particularly lucid account of that struggle in his book The Denial of Death. By Becker’s

---


2 Ibid., 51.

3 Ibid., 178.

well. As a playwright, however, he is more ambitious and therefore more exposed.

As with his early favorite Dostoevsky, the eternal problem that sets Shawn’s olfactory nerves abuzzing is the problem of suffering. Like Ivan Karamazov, he rejects suffering as a necessary element of a divine creation; it is “too grotesque even for me.” One suspects that he would, like Ivan, most respectfully return God the ticket. The price of harmony is too high. Ivan Karamazov does not reject the possibility that pain might serve a divine purpose, but he denies absolutely the possibility that it might serve a good purpose. In the absence of any redemptive principle, our capacity to inflict pain, or to stand idly by while others inflict it, emerges as merely brutish. No sturdy refuge remains for the tender conscience.

Shawn finds that his own conscience is better developed than he’d like: “I realize that as long as I preserve my loyalty to my childhood training I will never know what it is to be truly comfortable, and this is why I feel a fantastic need to tear that training out of my heart once and for all so that I can finally begin to enjoy the life that is spread out before me like a feast.”

Still he refuses the temptation, however much his choice isolates him, as more and more of his friends “blossom” with their acceptance of human nature as predatory and cruel. Furthermore, though he is likely to humor them to their faces, in his writing he exacts a certain revenge: “My style as a human being is to indulge people who need to escape. Yet I insist on confronting them as a playwright. It’s quite embarrassing, it’s quite unpleasant, it’s quite awkward.”

These mixed impulses clearly inform *The Fever* and *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, the two plays I would suggest as an entry into Shawn’s work. The first is an extended monologue that Shawn first performed himself in various New York living rooms. This lone speaker, an American and self-described aesthete, has fallen violently ill in an unnamed country where a civil war is in progress. Shivering by the toilet, he finds his physical nausea shading into moral nausea; fever suddenly lays waste to the fiction that the dislocation between rich and poor is a matter of justice, or even of chance. It has been won, and it remains defended, through unspeakable violence. The speaker tells us, “here, from my spot on the bathroom floor, I can see through the window, gorgeous in the moonlight, the gorgeous mountains of the poor country, soaked with the blood of the innocent, soaked with the blood of those shy faces, battered shy faces.”

The play describes an internal revolution, as the speaker confesses to himself and to us how deeply the beauty he reveres is stained by suffering.

While Shawn played a “bad guest” in *The Fever*, he presents us with an equally unnerving hostess in *Aunt Dan and Lemon*. As she greets us, Lemon showers us with endearments: “Hello, dear audience, dear good people who have taken yourselves out for a special treat, a night at the theater.” Almost immediately, however, a hint of aggression gives tooth to her flattery: “Hello, little children. How sweet you are, how innocent. If everyone were just like you, perhaps the world would be nice again, perhaps we all would be happy again.”

Lemon soon dispels any illusions that we might briefly have entertained about her gentility when she tells us that detective novels no longer work to lull her to sleep: “Lately I’ve been reading about the Nazi killing of the Jews instead.” She then delivers a cool assessment of the Nazis’ “work”: “Today, of course, the Nazis are considered dunces, because they lost the war, but it has to be said that they managed

---

7 Ibid., 96.
9 *Four Plays*, 178.
10 *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, 1.
11 Ibid., 2.
to accomplish a great deal of what they wanted to do. They were certainly successful against the Jews.” Her frank admiration opens the question that gives *Aunt Dan and Lemon* its dramatic suspense: what is Lemon’s idea of success, and by what strange path did she arrive at that idea? Our own passage down that path offers a serious test for our epicurean detachment.

It’s Latin for “Behold My Heart”

**By Nancy Casciato**

I.

About five weeks into the term, after having experimented with all kinds of small group activities, large group pedagogical gymnastics, and even would-be mind-reading via a midterm evaluation, I finally decided I would never figure out what made this particular Writing 121 class tick. Then one morning I grabbed a boom box on the way to class and arrived, saying, “I’m just going to play the music that was in my head this morning.” Withholders to a person, my students allowed a wee glimmer of interest; a few recognized John Coltrane, though most didn’t, but the haunting and hypnotic strains of “A Love Supreme” seemed to loosen something up in all of us. At the end of class I announced that I’d keep bringing the boom box to class and anyone who wanted to could bring a CD. A couple of classes went by, and no one offered to play, so I stopped bringing it. The very next class period, someone said, “hey, where’s the CD player? I’ve been bringing my CD to class every day!” So, back it came, and since then, we’ve heard Belle and Sebastian (Scottish pop), Modest Mouse (rock, I think), some Korean hip-hop (immediately catchy), John Mayer (easy to dance to), and there’s more to come. What I am starting to wonder is this: will I bring in the new Paul McCartney album, “Chaos and Creation in the Backyard”? Will I risk the eye-rolls and the inevitable “you pathetic Boomers never get over yourselves” looks from my students (which, incidentally, save for a slight variation in sympathy, match those I get from certain colleagues—you know who you are). If I’m lucky, I think, I’ll get these looks. If I’m not, I’ll get “who?” Or, as one of my students asked innocently about fifteen (!) years ago: “Was Paul McCartney in a band before Wings?” Talk about seeing your life, not to mention several decades’ worth of bad fashion decisions, pass before your eyes.

The thing about McCartney songs is this: they are designed to lift us up, even, or especially, at moments when they threaten to take us down. At worst these uplifting songs are silly and too sweet; at best, they are relentlessly utopian in their belief in the power of a beautiful line of melody to remind us of our human potential to love and thus conquer sadness, maybe even death. Melodic phrases that refract off each other in familiar but suddenly unexpected ways flirt with sorrow, disappointment, and loss; as Rolling Stone critic Anthony DeCurtis notes in his review of “Chaos and Creation,” “the album’s theme [is] an autumnal assessment of the things that fade and the things that last.” Because he is who he is, “for McCartney . . . what lasts is love—the engine of creation mentioned in the title, the ultimate weapon against chaos.” Yes, Virginia, he was in a band before Wings, and if in those days, he could fly, in these days, he can remember like nobody’s business why any of us ever wanted to.

---

12 Ibid., 3.
II.
In his review of the world premiere at Carnegie Hall of Sir Paul’s new Oratorio, “Ecco Cor Meum (it’s Latin for “Behold My Heart”), New York Times critic Bernard Holland writes that McCartney “is known, to grossly understate his reputation, for songs of graceful melodic equilibrium, a plaintive quietness and above all a civility uncommon to either the rough edges of rock ‘n’ roll or the pervasive cruelties of postwar classical music” (NYT Arts Section Nov. 15, 2006). Holland’s unabashed tribute mirrors the thrilled-to-pieces quality of NPR Performance Today’s Fred Child’s voice as he and John Schaefer of radio station WNYC prepared to interview Sir Paul during the intermission of the premier, the two announcers breathlessly recounting tales of fans gathered all day at the stage door entrance with hopes of seeing the man himself before the concert. As I listen to them, I decide to review the new CD of this performance instead, until I remember that not only do I know nothing about sacred English choral music, I do know something about the Paul who has sung to me almost since I can remember, the “Blackbird” Paul, the “Yesterday” Paul, the “In My Life” Paul, the “I’ll Follow the Sun” Paul, the “Till There Was You” Paul. It’s not that in my formative years I fell in love to Beatles’ songs, it’s that I fell in love with Beatles’ songs, and Paul’s voice singing them, until falling in love and hearing these songs became one and the same thing.

I reflect on this alchemical miracle as I listen to “Chaos and Creation,” with all the familiar McCartney tropes: the afore-mentioned paeans to the power of love (“How Kind of You”, “Follow Me”); the marriage of hope and melancholy (“Jenny Wren,” “At the Mercy,” “Too Much Rain”); the jaunty calypso beat ballad (“A Certain Softness”); the unmistakable tribute to John Lennon (“Promise You Girl”), and, ok, this is new, even a hip-hop bass line (“Fine Line”). For me, though, the real power of Paul makes its unmistakable appearance on cut number twelve, “This Never Happened Before.” Suddenly, as if resolving all the earlier strains of feeling and sound, the opening piano solo’s sweet sad lead blooms, full-heart, into round soul-holding chords that claim the listener’s allegiance by asserting, simply, “this is the way it should be.” As Bernard Holland concludes in his review of “Eecc Cor Meum,” Sir Paul’s strong suit is “simple songfulness, whether in a choral line or an oboe solo.” For Holland, “in moments like these Mr. McCartney can’t quite fly free of all the piece’s gravity, but at least his wings are in motion.”

III.
Attentive to our motion—winged or otherwise—and our stillness, gravity supports both our grievous falls, and our precipitous leaps. Sir Paul’s gravitational pull, deriving as it does from deep somatic faith in the solidity of the bass guitar, propels his leaps into the atmosphere on bell-toned vocals, assuring his place in our collective solar system. Maybe he’s not the sun pulling us inexorably into his orbit—that’s Dylan; see Scott’s review in this issue. But he remains an insistent star, whose light, reaching us first from its supernova past, burns in the wake of that distant heat, and then out of it, creating fresh brightness by which to reveal new corners of the sky.

No, he’s not esoteric, not dark, not a searing, introspective or pointed political lyricist, and not even Radiohead producer Nigel Godrich can make Sir Paul McCartney edgy. But, no matter, say I, ecco cor meum: behold my heart, shaped as it is by a musical language that promises to bring the discordant experiences of life into harmony. Promises, and delivers. On an earlier solo album, appropriately named “Off the Ground,” Paul sings a cheerful refrain, calling us to “hope for deliverance/from the darkness that surrounds us.” Remembering this lilting songline makes me suddenly certain I’m ready to suffer pitying looks and eye-rolls, because “Chaos and Creation in the Backyard” is now officially on the Writing 121 play-list. The least I can do, it seems to me, is point out to my students Sir Paul McCartney’s place in our musical, not to say, cultural firmament. After all, isn’t it the...
Making Goodness Out of Badness:  
The Idealism of Willie Stark

By Laurie Bernhardt Engberg

Late this past summer the film All the King’s Men, a remake of the 1949 film, was released to decidedly mixed reviews. Both films, of course, were based on Robert Penn Warren’s 1946 novel about the southern politician Willie Stark, whom all recognize as the fictional counterpart of the Louisiana populist politician of the 1930s, Huey P. Long. The current film, starring Sean Penn as Willie, was promoted vigorously for months before its release, and it is probably more than coincidence that, with Democratic strategist James Carville as one of its Executive Producers, its release date coincided with the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. In fact, Carville himself has called Penn Warren’s novel the greatest work of American political fiction, which it well may be.

Certainly, both versions of the film are about the workings of a political machine. However, whether the film should be read as a political drama or as something more is worth reconsidering. Fortunately, part of the film’s promotion was Harcourt Press’ reissue of the novel. Many of the film’s critics—and I am afraid that I must point out those critics were primarily Yankee critics—dismissed the film as disjointed and unfocused, complaining, in fact, that the remake dealt more with character and place than with exposing the moral corruption of a political demagogue. Actually, the remake is a more accurate representation of the novel for just those reasons. The film’s lush and languid cinematography suggests much of the grace, poetry, and wit of Penn Warren’s prose. But, more importantly, the film acknowledges that the novel has two main characters: Willie, of course, but also—and equally as important—Jack Burden, Willie’s trusted aid, who is also the novel’s narrator. While the novel can be read as an examination of a basically good man’s successful challenge to a corrupt and elitist political machine, and his own subsequent compromises and ultimate demise, the novel is much more than a novel about politics.

More profoundly, the novel is the story of two men’s differing, yet intertwined, idealism and their differing abilities to comprehend their worlds. One of the men, Willie—whom Penn Warren portrays much more sympathetically than historians have portrayed Huey Long—understands human behavior perfectly and uses this knowledge to his advantage. Jack, however, is the novel’s true protagonist, the one who only comes to understand and accept his connection to his world and his history through his relationship with Willie.

For his part, Jack Burden is a son of southern aristocracy, and as his name suggests, carries the burden of that past. His family has lived for generations in the gentile surroundings of Burdens Landing. He began his career as a historian, editing the papers of a distant ancestor, Cass Mastern. Mastern owned a plantation and slaves, but walked away from his property and freed his slaves after a personal transgression. During the Civil War, he joined the Confederate Army as a mere foot soldier. He carried a weapon but refused to use it, accepting his guilt and viewing his wretched death as inevitable and just. Jack abandons the dissertation when he realizes that he could not understand Mastern’s actions. As Jack
explains, “I tried to discover the truth and not the facts. Then, when the truth was not to be discovered, or discovered could not be understood by me, I could not bear to live with the cold-eyed reproach of the facts” (236). At this point in his life, Jack calls himself an idealist, although he, in truth, is an empty man who lives in despair, although he does not understand why. For Jack, “If you are an Idealist it does not matter what you do or what goes on around you because it isn’t real anyway” (45). He is, in fact, more of a nihilist. At one point, he recalls spending many aimless days in bed:

I would lie there and know I didn’t have to get up, and feel the holy emptiness and blessed fatigue of a saint after the dark night of the soul. For God and Nothing have a lot in common. You look either one of them straight in the eye for a second and the immediate effect on the human constitution is the same (150).

Eventually, Jack becomes a journalist, which is, after all, a career that only requires reporting facts and not the moral responsibility of interpreting them. It is during this point in his career when he first meets Willie Stark, a self-taught backwoods lawyer and small-time politician who aims to do good. Jack reports on Willie’s first failed campaign for governor, but after Willie orchestrates his second successful campaign, Jack comes to work for him, using his skills as a researcher to dig up dirt on Willie’s adversaries. In contrast to Jack, Willie truly is an idealist, although one whose idealism is grounded in pragmatism and reality. As Willie explains to the man he wants to run his new medical center,

Goodness. . . . Well you can’t inherit that from anybody. You got to make it, Doc. If you want it. And you got to make it out of badness. Badness. And you know why, Doc? . . . Because there isn’t anything else to make it out of (386).

Willie accurately understands human nature and accepts its failings. After instructing Jack to find the dirt in Judge Irwin’s past, which he is certain exists, Willie reasons, “Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption and he passeth from the stink of the didie to the stench of the shroud. There is always something” (75).

And, of course, there is something to find, which is not disturbing to Willie, but just the way things are. Willie even understands Jack better than Jack understands himself. When Jack is reluctant to find the indiscretion in the Judge’s past, he tells Willie, “I don’t know why I work for you, but it’s not because I love you. And not for money.” Willie laughs at him: “No, . . . you don’t know why you work for me. But I know. . . . you work for me because I’m the way I am and you’re the way your are. It is an arrangement founded in the nature of things. . . .There ain’t any explanations. Not of anything. All you can do is point at the nature of things. If you are smart enough to see ‘em” (288). Willie also understands that some level of graft and corruption is necessary to get anything worth doing done, again, which is just in the nature of things. Eventually, Jack comes to see Willie’s position as possibly the only workable approach. After rejecting his own views as too abstract and theoretical, Jack begins to see Willie as a nearly-Promethean figure, as he speculates, “Maybe you had to get chained to the high pinnacle with buzzards pecking at your liver and lights before you could see it. Maybe it took a genius to see it. Maybe it took a hero to act on it” (593).

By the end of novel, after Willie’s assassination, Jack comes to understand his own burden of history. While he used to believe there was no connection between actions, that things just happened, he recognizes the flaw in that theory of history. Instead, he finally learns, “if you could not accept the past and its burden there was no
future, for without one there cannot be the other... for only out of the past can you make the future” (656). Ultimately, Jack finds some peace in accepting these burdens: The distant, historic ones—that his ancestors owned slaves, and that only one of them, Cass, felt guilt because of this—as well as the personal ones—that Judge Irwin was, in fact, is father and that Jack had a role in the Judge’s suicide, that Jack misunderstood his mother and the man he took to be his father, and that he, himself, does have responsibilities in this world.

So, All the King’s Men is much more a truly Southern novel than a political one. It is also one that should not be lost to time, as it has been since Robert Penn Warren’s death in 1989. Having said that, though, it also worth noting in today’s political climate—where Bush-style fake populism rewards privilege at the expense of the unprivileged and in this post-Katrina world where the whole country learned that incompetently built levees failed a city and local Louisiana politicians horded relief supplies in their garages while people only a few miles away suffered—that the political reality of the novel is very much alive today and, probably, always will be. After all, the fictional hospital Willie fought to build for all the State’s citizens has its roots in fact. Back in the 1930s, Huey P. Long built Charity Hospital in New Orleans, the very hospital that became the symbol of human misery and the last refuge for many poor people after Hurricane Katrina. Many days after Katrina hit, that hospital was finally evacuated, and it will not be rebuilt.

Works Cited
Warren, Robert Penn. All the King’s Men. (1946). Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2005

By Scott Dionne

"I don't know anybody who's made a record that sounds decent in the past 20 years, really. You listen to these modern records, they’re atrocious; they have sound all over them. There's no definition of nothing, no vocal, no nothing, just like static...CDs are small. There's no stature to it."

“All times in my life the only place I have been happy is when I am on stage.”

--Bob Dylan

The difficulties of recording an album can lead some bands to consider abandoning the struggle (Steely Dan) or cause such tremendous inter-relational strife amongst the musicians that the bands threaten to disband altogether (Pink Floyd, The Rolling Stones, Guns-n-Roses). With solo artists, the myriad creative and technical labors involved in the process rest heavily on the shoulders of the individual, making the process seem especially futile. Although Bob Dylan as a solo artist has been prolific, recording thirty-one studio albums to date, the recording process to him can seem a little like Joseph K’s plight to arrive at the Castle. Part of this has to do with the native instinct of the folk artist to regard music as an essentially performed art, giving the act of recording an inauthentic, other-worldly feel. (Dylan once commented that he recorded music simply to have something to play on stage.) But part of it also has to do with Dylan’s luddistic attitudes towards technology.

Dylan’s strained relationship with the recording studio has, understandably, affected his recorded music. The effect in the beginning was minimal, but it was there. Throughout the
sixties and seventies, for example, he allowed producers to hire studio musicians to back him, not even bothering to vet the artists before the recordings began. Dylan did have his favorites—Charlie Daniels, who recorded with him on Nashville Skyline and two other albums, being one of them—but he generally didn’t take the trouble to even voice recommendations to his producers. Because every album was in essence a dress rehearsal for a newly formed band, there was generally very little experimentation with the rhythm sections on these albums. As well, he usually devoted no more than three or four weeks to the making of a single album, trying to record, on average, two songs per week—a frantic arrangement when you consider how difficult it is to perform music with people you’ve just met.

Surprisingly, this indifference towards recording did not prevent Dylan from making the occasional great album. Indeed three of Dylan’s earlier albums—Bringing It All Back Home, John Wesley Harding, and Blond on Blond—represent a turning point in folk music, giving it a new direction that to this day it continues to follow.

By the 80s, however, when studios converted from the old analog technology of the 64- and 128-track tape to digital, Dylan’s apathy towards the new technology really takes the wind out of his creative sails. By 1983, we find him showing up in New Orleans to record Infidels having forgotten to bring along his guitar. This would be like Ansel Adams hiking into Yosemite only to discover he’d forgotten his 8 x 10 camera in the trunk of his car. Dylan eventually found an old banged up Telecaster in the back of the studio, which he used to record the entire album. (Had Dylan originally envisioned the album as an acoustical work?) About halfway through the making of this same album, he found out that Eartha Kitt, whose hit song “Fever” he admired, was performing in a club just down the street from the studio. Dylan decided to walk there after work one night to invite her to sing on his album. When he showed up at the club, the doorman informed him that Kitt had the night off but she would be back to work the following evening. By the time Dylan had gotten back to his apartment that night he’d already forgotten all about Eartha Kitt. Had he persisted just a teenie weenie bit, pop music might’ve been blessed with a very special marriage between Ms. Sultry Voice and Mr. Twang.

Dylan’s work of the 80s and 90s is generally considered his weakest. Most of the blame goes to over-production, a symptom of the times as well as Dylan’s lack of engagement in the process. But he also had to contend with the new visual paradigm of MTV. The new generation had voted with its eyes: Flock of Seagulls was in, John Wesley Harding was out. MTV was hard on folk music, particularly its chosen leader.

Modern Times, Dylan’s 31st studio album, is perhaps his best post-analog album in that it does not sound, to borrow from his own parlance, “small.” This album, along with Dylan’s previous one, Love and Theft, rescues Dylan from a two-decade-long tailspin into mediocrity. Credit can be given to the producer, Jack Frost (aka Dylan). This is Dylan’s second album that he has self-produced. As a producer he has sought a simple, direct sound, one unencumbered by digital trickery. This album comes probably as close to sounding as actual live music as a digital recording can get and serves as a model for other artists who, like Dylan, find digital recordings high in technology but low in fidelity.

Pop music can sound good when ragged around the edge; not so with the lyrics. Although in interviews Dylan has identified himself more a poet than a singer, his lyrics have always been his Achilles heel. Any close survey of his songs suggests that Dylan writes out of the Allen Ginsberg’s “first word, best word” approach to versifying. The diction can seem rough drafty, the imagery overly abstract and incoherent, the figures of speech. For every “Tangled up in Blue” and “Blowing in the Wind” there is a “Just like a Woman”: 
Nobody feels any pain
Tonight as I stand inside the rain
Everybody knows
That Baby's got new clothes
But lately I see her ribbons and her bows
Have fallen from her curls.
She takes just like a woman, yes, she does
She makes love just like a woman, yes, she does
And she aches just like a woman
But she breaks just like a little girl

Surely the creepy parallelism of aching woman / breaking girl would not have survived the revision process, had there been one. *Modern Times* is full of Dylanesque lyrical faux pas, the kinds one expects to see in student poetry but not in the work of an artist generally regarded as a genius. A random selection from the album illustrates a typical sort of problem with his lyrics. Here is the opening stanza of “Beyond the Horizon”:

Beyond the horizon, behind the sun
At the end of the rainbow life has only begun
In the long hours of twilight 'neath the stardust above
Beyond the horizon it is easy to love

Only in a Dylan song do rainbows happen beneath stardust, and the space between a horizon and the back side of the sun can be bridged with a single comma. One could argue that the image intended to be surreal, I suppose. To me it just resembles the kind of hyper-cosmic abstraction we teach against in poetry workshops. One more example, this one from Thunder on the Mountain,” the song receiving the most airplay:

Thunder on the mountain, and there’s fires on the moon
A ruckus in the alley, and the sun will be here soon

Today’s the day, gonna grab my trombone and blow
Well, there’s hot stuff here and it’s everywhere I go

I was thinking about Alicia Keys, couldn’t keep from crying
When she was born in Hell’s Kitchen, I was living down the line

Those first lines of the second stanza arrest your attention unlike any others in the song. When I first heard this song, I thought I was imagining things. What? Alicia Keys? Did I hear that correctly?” And why does thinking about her make him cry? And what’s the reason for noting that he was living in New York the same time she was born? What’s being implied here? And is she the “good woman” mentioned later in the song, the one whom the singer wants “to do just what I say”? By situating her inside his old timely landscape of exhausted tropes—a Dylan trademark these days—, where people live “down the line” with their “pistols poppin,” and barns a burnin, he has, in a single line of verse, frozen this remarkable young artist in his anachronistic view of the American landscape. A lively, colorful contemporary artist stuck in an amber of fossilized sepia. The song concludes with the singer assembling a ragtag army of “tough sons of bitches” from orphanages while he sucks “the milk out of a thousand cows.” It isn’t clear by this point in the song whether Alicia Keys has joined Dylan’s army at Teatfest ’06 or whether she’s been left behind to defend Hell’s Kitchen against Sherman’s army.

Joan Baez, who collaborated closely with Dylan during the mid-sixties, contends that his lyrics became more and more surreal as a result of outside influences, such as The Beatles and modernist poetry `à la Eliot and Pound. A valid claim, considering the source. Baez has a soft spot for Dylan as an artist, however, and might be giving him more credit than is due.
In folk as in rap, appropriation is the norm. The difference lies in how you appropriate: the borrowing in rap usually assumes the form of quotation, a literal sample; with folk, the borrowing tends towards tropes used as touchstones of tradition and homage. In Dylan’s “Ain’t Talking,” for example, his lines “Ain't talkin', just walkin'/ Eatin' hog eyed grease in a hog eyed town” make use of an old American South metaphor that appears in jigs and blues songs dating back to the American Revolution. Dylan has said that folk is “handed down” music. Borrowing plays a vital role in maintaining aural traditions in folk music. Tropes, words and phrasings, tonalities—all are passed on like an old pair of boots just too good to throw away. As Dylan evolves, his repertoire of borrowings grows too, making any new album seem comfortable and familiar like a handmedown jacket.

In a few places on this album, though, the borrowing can seem uninspired, such as “Workingman’s Blues # 2,” a song that lyrically has very little to do with the plight of the working man (unless you count a gunslinger as an alienated worker). The song seems to be a nod in the direction of Merle Haggard’s excellent “Workin Man Blues.” But Dylan’s piece is not meant to be an homage; there isn’t the slightest trace element of recognition that Haggard’s song of the same name exists. To me the title just seems sloppily chosen. Too bad, for this is perhaps the best song on the album in terms of imagery—a song where for once the different images do not seem to at odds with one another. Dylan takes the gunslinger character from his “Knocking on Heaven’s Door” and rides him back into town for a little more TV Western angst. It ain’t original, but it works.

A couple of critics have taken Dylan to task for over-borrowing from the obscure Civil War poet Henry Timrod (one critic has found at least ten actual borrowings). I find no evidence that any actual plagiarism has occurred. What I see happening instead—and Dylan in his memoir Chronicles admits as much—are examples of one of his most favored conceits, ‘modernist montages,’ whereby the poet-songwriter swamps out his work with a mosaic of ready-made images, which in turn create a composite of the inner-working of a Portrait of an Artist as a Jung Man. Several of the songs on this album do seem to be very specifically modeled after Timrod’s poetry, it is true, which accounts, perhaps, for this album’s southern feel and nineteenth century perspective. Not until I was made aware of the Timrod connection did I know why I was sensing a strong tie with historic New Orleans in the music. But the album also appropriates phrases and imagery from such sources as the Old Testament, Robert Johnson, and Blind Lemon Jefferson. The problem, if one wishes to view this issue as a problem, which I do, is in execution. When T.S. Eliot, say, appropriates Conrad in his poem “The Hollow Men,” the reader is fully aware of how the borrowing undergoes a surprising transformation—how Heart of Darkness is made to seem more central to the times as an expression of modernity’s moral collapse. When Dylan appropriates, there is slight trace of transformation, leaving the listener left wondering whether the songwriter is too reliant on the original text for his own good.

In one place on the album the borrowings come awfully close to resembling stolen goods. Many reviewers have credited Dylan for his prescience in “The Levee’s Gonna Break” for foreshadowing Katrina—

If it keep on rainin', the levee gonna break
If it keep on rainin', the levee gonna break
Everybody saying this is a day only the Lord could make.

But I can’t get past its resemblance to Kansas Joe McCoy’s “When the Levee Breaks,” here in reworked form by Led Zeppelin —

If it keeps on rainin', levee's goin' to break,
If it keeps on rainin', levee's goin' to break,
When The Levee Breaks I'll have no place to stay.
Line, tercet, caesura—a perfect trifecta.

Don’t get me wrong—I like this album. I have listened to it on an almost daily basis since buying it several months ago. It’s become my go-to CD after a long day of giving C-s on papers and explaining why Wikipedia is not a primary source to Ipods with students connected to them. Besides, how hard can you be on an album that causes your two-year-old daughter to dance her own “Hog-eyed Grease Jig” whenever she hears it?

I grew up in a family that listened to country music in a serious fashion. We watched the Grand Ole Opry on TV like it was the State of the Union address. Folk music was part of my musical education and Dylan was on the turntable throughout my high school days. I long ago made peace with Dylan’s lyrical shortcomings. Perhaps because I respect him as much as I do, I have problems with the “genius” label. Dylan’s work is too often too much not his own to warrant the wreath of genius. Both in terms of songwriting and musical composition, Dylan has in the past two or three decades been seriously challenged to keep pace with some of his sixties peers—artists like Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, and Richard Thompson. Of these, Dylan seems the most dependent on outside help to sustain his work.

If one were to shell out the thirteen bucks for this album—and I guess I’m saying to go ahead and do this—it would be to experience Dylan’s voice at its best. Forget the lyrics; they’re mostly forgettable. It’s the voice you’ll remember. A voice that now belongs to the Valhalla of great American voices—Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Hank Williams, and Ray Charles. As a singer, Dylan has few rivals. He understands the technical aspects of singing far better than many popular singers working today. Listening to him patiently work a caesura, to stretch out a syllable on an end-stop-line like angry steam rising up in a kettle, or to dive deep into his diaphragm for a bottom-of-the-river note to go with a song’s bottom-of-the-river imagery—reminds the listener how few singers working today actually understand the merits of singing with conscious intent. One of my students told me the other day after class that she’d been disappointed in the recent Dylan concert at the Rose Garden because she couldn’t understand the words to his songs as he was singing. “It’s just mumbling,” she said. All I could think to do at the time was shrug my shoulders in agreement. Later, it struck me that she was, of course, right—it is just mumbling. To an ear eager for it, though, it sounds a lot like the twittering reed of a very sad wood instrument.

In a recent interview, Dylan mentioned that he “owned the sixties,” referring to his reluctant ownership of the counterculture movement. I have always felt that Dylan had less to do with the 1960s than has been credited him, however—surely no more than, say, Joni Mitchell, or David Crosby. But the sound of his voice on particular songs, such as “Blowing in the Wind,” “Masters of War,” and “Like a Rolling Stone,” have come to represent part of the soundtrack for our era.

Modern Times is a very good example of what Dylan as an artist is capable of when he is finally comfortable in the studio—an album that seems to capture exactly where American folk music is at the moment of recording. What qualifies Modern Times as one of his best post-sixties albums is its sound, a marriage of
Dylan’s voice to a backup band that seems vowed to uphold it. Dylan has said of his newly formed band that it is the best to date, which is strong praise indeed when one considers the rolcall of musicians Dylan has played with in the past—Johnny Cash, Joan Baez, Tom Petty, Roy Orbinson, Charlie Daniels, Jerry Garcia, Michael Bloomfield, Al Kooper, Judi Collins, Robbie Robertson….

Like his others, Dylan recorded this album in less than a month, immediately after concluding a 110-date tour with this band. The album has a loose, improvised feel to it that comes from doing some serious tour duty with this band. Dylan seems comfortable with this band, particularly with the bass player, Tony Garnier, who has been with Dylan’s backup band since ’89, a long time in Dylan years. On songs such as “Rollin and Tumblin,” Dylan allows Garnier to walk his bass well out in

front of his own guitarwork, which is a nice compositional arrangement, for the bass as an instrument works better as an accompanist to Dylan’s voice than Dylan’s own guitar. This technique, of striding a bass down a song’s path beside Dylan’s gravelly voice, is well worth exploring on further albums.

Dylan has said recently that he sees himself at the halfway point in his career. For him, Modern Times represents the second of a trilogy of albums (he tends to make albums in clusters of three), so we can expect to see at least one other studio album in the next few years. I of course eagerly anticipate it. His voice is my generation’s, and I will miss it when it is gone. Even if it means having to borrow ideas for songs from obscure nineteenth century poets and British heavy metal bands from the seventies, I wish him a longer career.

..................

**Coming in Winter Issue….**

**Why this man should be the patron saint of popular music.**