Was it a mistake to award Dylan a Nobel prize?

What Bob Dylan Means to Literature, and to Song

Carl Eric Scott

The most significant aspect of Bob Dylan's achievement is the revolution he unleashed in songwriting. Prior to Dylan, popular songwriting was far more formulaic, both in its selection of subject matter and its approach to it. This was especially the case with the songs that came from Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and Hollywood, even with the better ones we call the "standards" of the Great American Songbook. Their lyrics avoided literary elusiveness, philosophic depth, and controversial political statement. The love song was the commonest kind of song, and it focused on certain universal features of the love affair without the baggage of confessional reflection.

Folk traditions white and black allowed a substantially greater range of topics and expression, but even here, song patterns were fairly set. True, the most artful songwriters might hint at hidden depths; Dylan suggested, for example, that bluesman Robert Johnson regularly did so.[1] Still, scanning the landscape of pre-1963 songwriting, there were very few songs that confronted the listener, as Dylan's songs did on a regular basis, with prophetic protest, philosophic reflection, psychological analysis, or real poetry.

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In the debate that has unfolded since the awarding of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Dylan, there has been surprisingly little attention to the way Dylan's achievement initiated a new range of possibility for songwriting. And there has been hardly any discussion of how this change brought real artistic costs alongside the obvious benefits. We have reason to continue to worry about these costs, given their connection to certain corrosive cultural trends of democratization and *sophist*-tication. Such worries are probably lurking behind a good deal of the resistance to the prize that has been expressed.

The debate over Dylan's Nobel Prize has instead been shaped by four key questions.[2] First, should Dylan's songs be regarded as poems? Second, if they cannot, doesn't Dylan still count, and in a prize-worthy way, as a "literary figure"? Besides blazing the new path in songwriting, he influenced many aspiring writers of poetry and prose, captured key elements of the zeitgeist, and contributed many widely quoted phrases to our speech.[3] Third, his work is in a new genre of song, call it "literary pop song"; hence, it can be thought of as being on the edges of literature, or as containing elements of it. Isn't that a close enough relation to make it eligible of consideration for the prize? The second and third questions are especially compelling because the literature prize has on five occasions been awarded to writers whose achievements were in genres outside or on the borderline of literature—namely in history, philosophy, journalism, and dramatic monologue.[4] That leads to the fourth question: shouldn't the prize, particularly in times of diminishing attention to literature proper, be used to highlight its most deserving writers?[5] Shouldn't the Nobel Foundation limit the prize to a closed field of genres, consisting of poetry, drama, novel, short story, and certain kinds of essays? Shouldn't literature be properly defined, as it has traditionally, to exclude literary song, oratory/monologue, graphic novel, cinema, and prose accomplishments in the humanities and social sciences?

In my judgment, the answers to these four questions are: no, yes, yes, and no. So despite agreeing that Dylan is not a poet in the strict sense, I do think he deserved the prize.

Now, obviously, there is no debate at all for those who think Dylan's lyrics are unworthy of the kind of closer look we naturally give to works of literature. To these skeptics, we can admit the following. First of all, Dylan wrote many songs that invite little to no literary exploration. Second, he also wrote a number of lyrics embedded in otherwise serious songs, which playfully mocked his audience's complacent expectation of deep meaning. Third, especially during his iconic midsixties period, he sometimes simply botched his efforts to provide depth because he used free-associative techniques that walked the line between literary aspiration and careless play.

In the documentary film *No Direction Home*, Joan Baez recounts Dylan laughingly telling her, "You know, a bunch of years from now, all these people . . . are going to be writing about all this shit I write, and I don't know what the fuck it's about!" And it is easy to find other statements from Dylan over the years that dismiss efforts to closely read his songs. But they all should be taken with a grain of salt. For one, it is easy to find others that suggest just the opposite. For another: what percentage of his opaque lines did he write without either really knowing or having *any* general sense of what they meant? It would be absurd to say 100 percent, although just as absurd to say none at all. Caution in interpretation is thus called for, but not outright dismissal.

All and all, we must ask those who think that taking Dylan lyrics seriously is fruitless to listen more carefully. They could also benefit from reading what the best Dylanologists, like Christopher Ricks in his *Dylan's Visions*

Does this look like a Nobel laureate?

of Sin and Michael Gray in his *Song and Dance Man III*, can show us about the depths of many of his songs. Their works will convince any fair reader that many Dylan lyrics invite, and reward, close investigation.[6]

Nonetheless, it still matters that the more unqualified defenders of Dylan's Nobel have not emerged as very convincing on the first question, the one about whether his songs should be regarded as poems. The spokeswoman for the prize committee itself, Sara Danius, tried to dispatch this question by mentioning that Homer's verse was designed to be sung. Luc Sante, defending Dylan's prize in the *New York Review of Books*, declared that, for the Elizabethans, "song lyrics and poetry" were "interchangeable concepts," which sounds like it must be correct until you spend twenty seconds thinking about it.[7] The Elizabethans familiar with Latin poets like Virgil and Ovid didn't really think their work was of the same class as the popular ballads. The best reply to these sorts of arguments was provided by Nicholas Frankovich:

> Homer survived on papyrus, parchment, and paper because his work lent itself to literature, too—literature as in "letters," or *litterae*, as the Romans called it. Literature succeeds when sound and sense are woven together seamlessly.
>
> Songs typically have three components: voice, instrumental accompaniment, and lyrics. In Dylan's case, if you mentally supply the first two as you read the third, you can make the lyrics take flight. Unaided, however, what they do when they are forced into the form of the printed word is sparkle sporadically and sputter. . . . Dylan's poetry is in the whole ecosystem of the song, of which no component by itself is self-sufficient.[8]

This is the same sort of argument the rock writer Robert Christgau made back in 1968, in response to the many who were calling Dylan a poet.[9] More recently, the major Dylanologist Michael Gray, while welcoming the prize and saying that Dylan's work had a value comparable to that of a major novelist, similarly insisted that the label "literature" was "an awkward fit" for Dylan's songwriting, which should be seen as a "quite different art" than poetry.[10]

It seems what we really mean when we fall into calling Dylan a poet is that his works

have a serious literary value, that he has been a "literary figure," and that the cumulative impact of his work upon our culture has been significant. Differences of opinion about the overall purpose of the Nobel Prize for literature will inevitably occur, but there is little ground for dismissing the magnitude of Dylan's achievement.

The pop standards' standard

Johnny Mercer might be the man who best symbolizes the main pattern of pop song prior to Dylan. Three of his songs, "Skylark," "That Old Black Magic," and "Come Rain, or Come Shine," are featured on Dylan's 2016 album, *Fallen Angels*, which consists of covers of romance-oriented standards, as did his all-Sinatra 2015 album, *Shadows in the Night*, and as does his just-released album, *Triplicate*. Mercer wrote the lyrics (and in many cases the music also) for many hundreds of songs, and he was also a delightful blues-tinged singer. Others of his best-known songs are "Candy," "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah," "One for My Baby (and One for the Road)," "Too Marvelous for Words," and "Blues in the Night."

Selectively limited, as on *Fallen Angels*, the world of Mercer's song can mainly seem to be one of romance; but more broadly considered, it is one of clichés made fresh. Individual dreams are to be encouraged, yes, but the main patterns of human life are to be accepted. Mercer usually describes these patterns with gentle humor and lightly ironic reserve. His lyrics in "Baby It's Cold Outside" and "Personality," for example, serve up the sex—and the gender stereotypes—but not without wry comment. Or take his "Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive," which would almost seem a straightforward profession of positive thinking but for its beginning with a mock announcement that the singer feels a "sermon comin' on."

We come to Mercer's songs expecting to smile, to catch an infectious melody, and to dance. And sometimes we come to them to sigh or to sing the blues. We don't expect Mercer to be *authentic to himself* so much as we expect him to pull off whatever part he's playing, either through his words or his singing. And it will work better if the part is not a complex one but rather a stereotype. Less negatively, an archetype. From Mercer we expect wit, perhaps even a bit of wisdom, but we certainly do not expect anything terribly serious. We go to the pop standard to get away from that. If it's real depth we're wanting at the moment, the library, museum, and concert hall are just up the avenue. Such was the pre-1963 attitude: popular arts here, fine arts there.

Possibly, if someone like Mercer is paired with a romance-oriented composer like Harold Arlen, one and all can leave the merely earthly behind and enter into the sublime heights of love song, where suggestions of what the philosophers said about love's longing for completion and aspiration to the form of Beauty might be at least sensed. Two of the three Mercer songs on *Fallen Angels*, in fact, are ones where the music was Arlen's. Dylan said, "I could never escape from the bittersweet, lonely intense world of Harold Arlen," mentioning him alongside Hank Williams and Woody Guthrie, no less, as songwriters with whom he "felt an emotional kinship."[11] The standards at their best can have an artistry that provides some of the musical balm needed by our souls, even though they in the main serve basic dance-floor and memorable-melody purposes. Dylan was questing for more, and so wound up, after a fling with rock 'n' roll, entranced by folk music and the blues. But his love for these kinds of songs in his old age, the very sort his career pushed aside, is both evident and suggestive.

Rock 'n' roll is sometimes said to have ended the age of the standards, but actually these two types of pop song coexisted on

the charts for nearly a decade. In any case, rock 'n' roll's lyrics were *more* formulaic, even if they were in many cases franker about sexual desire. In terms of songwriting, the real break comes, even though a solid majority of the songs on the charts still rely upon patently formulaic lyrics, with Dylan and then rock.[12]

Breaking through

When deciding what to sing at the ceremony awarding Dylan's Nobel, Patti Smith chose her song well: "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" is the first song in which we hear Dylan moving decisively past the older lyrical patterns, including those of folk music. More than any other song, it represents his breakthrough. "Masters of War," also from *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963), does represent an innovation of a negative kind, the putting aside of the widely accepted taboo against expressive anger in song, but it is lyrically primitive and conceptually adolescent. "Blowin' in the Wind," the lead song on *Freewheelin'*, while certainly not the first protest song sung by a folkie, is innovative in its mixing of modern historicist hope, that is, the expectations of progressivist Marxism, with a strain of philosophy-like and often Bible-based reflection found in a number of the old-time songs. Still, it remains pretty similar to the older songs.

But "Hard Rain" is something else indeed. With the help of the Dylanologists, we can figure out most of its ingredients: the structure of the "Lord Randall" ballad, the Allen Ginsberg–inspired poetic runs, and hints of the Bible, too, but the final result resists full analysis. Various Beats had tried, with ill-fitting results, to pair their poetry with jazz, but how did Dylan figure out that such poetry could with some adjustment be fittingly put into the folk-ballad form?

Some of the other breakthrough songs are found in *Another Side of Bob Dylan* (1964). Its most famous one is "My Back Pages," in which Dylan disavows his protest-song stage through a kind of self-analysis. In many of the album's songs, we detect the influence of the "confessional" trend in the poetry, and most overtly in "Ballad in Plain D," which is something like a psychological summary of a relationship situation put into story-song. But the real stunner, despite its musical sparseness, is "To Ramona." It brings the relationship-analysis mode into what initially seems a love song, and what is more, uses its narrator's gentle recounting of Ramona's flaws to indict all sorts of societal games. These are what cause her dysfunctional sadness; they perhaps include religion and definitely include aspects of '60s leftism:

> *I've heard you say many times that you're better than no-one, and no-one is better than you.*
> *If you really believe that, you know you have nothing to win, and nothing to lose.*

That is a takedown of the democratic relativism increasingly declaring its authority in those times; it is as incisive as the takedowns of overdone dedication to equality and of hateful denunciation of hate found in "My Back Pages."

To my way of thinking, the classic types of love song are Serenade/Seduction Songs, Lamenting of Lost Love Songs, Celebration of Falling in Love Songs, and Praise of the Beloved Songs. "To Ramona" is a new type, one on the borderline of love song, which we may call the "Relationship Analysis Song." It also incorporates social commentary of a sophisticated kind and begins voicing the "don't follow leaders" theme that would run through Dylan's most iconic '60s work. That is *a lot* going on in one song, and we strain to think of previous ones that did anything equivalent.

And by the next album, *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965), the possibilities for song

lyrics become even more manifold. The amazing sequence of "Mr. Tambourine Man," "Gates of Eden," and "It's All Right, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" indicates that the most fundamental way-of-life questions are on the table, that they can oblige us to go to the very edges of human comprehension, and that sometimes they *have* to be discussed in an elusive mythological/symbolist language:

> *...at times I think there are no words, but these to tell what's true.*

That's from "Gates of Eden." Again, Dylan took this language too far at times, which taught rock some bad habits about taking recourse in *obscurity* as a way of pretending to intellectual depth. But it is important to see that Dylan did not simply *add* intellectual concerns and poetry patterns to his rootsy music but began to explore more thoroughly how the language of the blues and such could be drawn upon for his questing lyrical purposes. This eventually resulted in, as Michael Gray shows, the reworking of his lyrical approach "towards a new simplicity," culminating eventually in the triumph of 1974's *Blood on the Tracks*.[13] This more straightforward lyrical style, nonetheless still open to vast possibilities of allusion and interpretation, is what we mostly encounter on latter-day Dylan albums like *Slow Train Coming*, *Time Out of Mind*, and *"Love and Theft."*

Taking stock

What have we gained, and what have we suffered, with the revolution in songwriting that followed Dylan's example? (Admittedly, it is right to think that something like it would have happened eventually without his example—although it is impossible to imagine that it would not have been significantly less artful.) One thing we have gained is that the resources of the fine arts for self-examination, expression, and inspiration have been brought more into the reach of the ordinary person. Dylan put it this way in 1965:

> Great paintings should be where people hang out.... The only thing where it's happening is on the radio and records, that's where people hang out.... Music is the one thing that's in tune with what's happening.... All this art they've been talking about is non-existent. It just remains on the shelf.[14]

Dylan did pen a number of cheap-shot lines against higher education, but correctly understood, they are lines against its abuse. His artistry, full of various literary allusions, was not about smashing the distinction between the popular and the fine. He saw folk as superior to pop, including rock 'n' roll pop, precisely because it was not as bound to formula. Pop deliberately *kept its distance* from the intellectual and fine arts side of life, but the old-time folk was distant from it simply because it had never been acquainted with it. Dylan's innovation was to remain connected to the old and folky through musical forms but increasingly seek out subject matter and lyrical modes in tune with the concerns of fairly educated modern persons. Following in his footsteps "[rock] emerged in the mid-1960s as a means of...creating higher and lower levels of popular music."[15] The clear line between popular and fine art was blurred, but a certain sense of the higher and the lower was nonetheless retained.

Alexis de Tocqueville said that the poets of modern democratic times "wished to illuminate and enlarge certain still obscure sides of the human heart," but as anyone who has understood Plato's concerns about poetry and his account of the psyche knows, there are strong reasons to question the desirability of artistically exploring and "enlarging" every aspect of the human soul. The revolution in songwriting frontally challenged this

notion: rock and related forms like hip-hop would eventually demand expression not simply of sexuality in all its myriad forms but also of unmediated anger, of outright despair, of madness, and even of what Plato called the "lawless and tyrannic desires." Part of what the older formulaic songwriting did was to erect fences against such direct expression. Consider the implicit blues prohibition against voicing suicidal or unstoic reactions to adversity:

> But [Robert] Johnson makes it just as clear that if despair is allowed to rule in small things, it will rule in large: "If you cry about a nickel / You'll die about a dime." . . . The blues involves . . . a communal, ritualized reenactment of extreme emotional states. But . . . the purpose . . . is to *return* from those states—to *survive* trouble, not succumb to it.

So argues Martha Bayles, and Dylan once said something very similar.[16] Unfortunately, his overall example suggested that no limits upon expression ought to exist, and again, he played a direct role in breaking down the taboo against self-indulgent expression of anger.[17]

The positive side of this, however, is that any literary pop songwriter of our day has a lot of options before her. She can put into song anything she judges worthy of sharing. If she feels she does need to explore extreme emotions, she may; if the moment comes when something political or intellectual needs to be said, she may; and thanks to Dylan's example particularly, if she wants to sing about the teachings of the Bible or any other religious book, and not in the old-time way confined to doctrinally preapproved language, she may also do this.[18]

As the twenty-first century unfolds, we are going to need our artists, whether fine, popular, or in some way mixed, to step up to its challenges. The more intellectual young artist may be grateful to and inspired by Dylan's example, but she might nonetheless decide that the whole "literary pop song" avenue is not going to be the best way for her. Maybe some other mode of bringing literary insight to "where the people hang out" is needed, or maybe she will decide that a more rigorous attention to the demands of literature as traditionally defined is what the times most require. In any case, the genre of literary pop song is now there for her to use if she wants, and in the main, our response to that ought to be one of gratitude. While semiliterary pop music has drawn away some of the natural audience for literature proper, literature's champions should keep in mind that it can also serve as a bridge to it. And more important, they should recognize that even when it remains a merely middling phenomenon, it can serve real needs in a worthy manner.

As for a more music-oriented young artist, he may likewise revere Dylan, and particularly for all his musical innovations (and preservations), but he might nonetheless decide that his own songwriting is going to have to regenerate certain formulaic limits that the older masters worked within, the better to develop its power, and the better to be able to engage with, and indeed to bring about, a popular audience in our fragmented social space. This fellow might know, for example, that a return to more widely shared and civilized patterns of social dance, something consistently championed by the films of Whit Stillman, would do so much more to brighten prospects for our young folks than yet another string of idiosyncratic literary pop song albums. Like the Violet character in the Stillman film *Damsels in Distress*, he might think that "starting a new dance craze" is not an ambition to be sniffed at, and like the Dylan of *Fallen Angels*, he might think that Johnny Mercer, who took a *year* to complete the three-minute love song "Skylark," was not wasting his time. ☨

NOTES

1 Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 281–88.
2 For an overview of the debate, see Christopher Rollason, “No Complete Unknown: The Odyssey of Bob Dylan’s Literature Nobel,” on his *Bilingual Culture* blog, October 30, 2016.
3 For more of the “literary figure” argument, see Jon Pareles, “Bob Dylan, the Musician: America’s Great One-Man Songbook,” *New York Times*, October 13, 2016.
4 Respectively, Theodor Mommsen (1902) and Winston Churchill (1953) won for history, Rudolf Christoph Eucken (1908) and Henri Bergson (1927) for philosophy, Svetlana Alexievich (2015) for journalism, and Dario Fo (1997) for dramatic monologue.
5 Anna North, “Why Bob Dylan Shouldn’t Have Gotten a Nobel,” *New York Times*, October 13, 2016.
6 Christopher Ricks, *Dylan’s Visions of Sin* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004); Michael Gray, *Song & Dance Man III: The Art of Bob Dylan* (London: Continuum, 2002).
7 Luc Sante, “Dylan’s Time,” NYR Daily, *New York Review of Books*, October 13, 2016.
8 Nicholas Frankovich, “Bob Dylan and the Sound of Music,” *National Review Online*, October 16, 2016.
9 Robert Christgau, excerpt from “Rock Lyrics Are Poetry (Maybe),” *Studio A: The Bob Dylan Reader*, ed. Benjamin Hedin (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 63.
10 Interview with Michael Gray, “Bob Dylan Wins Nobel Prize in Literature,” Radio NZ, *Morning Report*, October 14, 2016.
11 Dylan, *Chronicles*, 49.
12 The oft-denied difference between rock ’n’ roll and the rock music that grew out of it has been a topic dealt with in my blog essay series *Carl’s Rock Songbook*. See numbers 12, 19, 44, 59, and 113—links are available in “Carl’s Rock Songbook No. 100: The Songbook at a Glance,” Carl Eric Scott, *National Review Online*, July 25, 2014. See also Martha Bayles, *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music* (New York: Free Press, 1994), ch. 7 and 14.
13 Gray, *Song and Dance Man III*, ch. 5.
14 Bob Dylan, interview by Nora Ephron and Susan Ephron (1965), published in Craig McGregor, *Bob Dylan: A Retrospective* (London: Picador, 1975).
15 Lee Marshall, “Bob Dylan and the Academy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan*, ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 105.
16 Bayles, *Hole in Our Soul*, 189–190, 217.
17 Peter Wood, *A Bee in the Mouth: Anger in America Now* (New York: Encounter Books, 2006), 134–39. Cf. my “Carl’s Rock Songbook No. 8, Bob Dylan, ‘Masters of War.’”
18 Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry, “Bob Dylan’s Biblical Imagination,” *The Week*, October 14, 2016.

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