

Bob Dylan as a challenge to modern literary studies

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Bob Dylan turns 80, still active and still the subject of controversy. People love both to hate and to love the old songwriter, musician, and Nobel Prize winner. He is one of the world's biggest celebrities, a riddle who prefers to surprise rather than to live up to the expectations of the audience or the media. His songs have long since become classics in the songbooks of the world, but have we grasped the challenges he has presented not only to the audience but also to the humanities? Do his songs change a prevailing view of literature, and can they give rise to new studies? Research in Bob Dylan's oeuvre is a rapidly growing field, where you easily become a nerd, studying amazing Dylan-details from the time when great-grandmother was young. And I admire all the wonderful and diligent Dylan-nerds. But there is also a need to occasionally step back from being a nerd and blow away the stardust that swirls around Bob Dylan, so you can consider whether his work can, for example, renew the study of literature. Personally, I can hardly bear to hear more about whether or not Dylan slept with an Andy Warhol superstar in the 1960s; but I would like to hear much more about the change in literary culture that Dylan has led.

I was one of the proposers when Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, and I received both criticism and praise for the proposal. Some authors went crazy on social media and thought that the proposal expressed a contempt for literature. Others were happy, believing that the grumpy Nobel Committee had finally understood that literature had broken out of the enclosure of modernism and that song and poetry had been reconnected.

In his Nobel lecture, Bob Dylan tells the audience how, in addition to country and western, rock 'n' roll, and rhythm and blues, literature has been his spiritual luggage. In grammar school, for example, he read Cervantes' *Quixote*, Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*. A lot of heavy books, one could say – but perhaps young Dylan and his schoolmates read excerpts from the books. Dylan describes how school's literature teaching has given him “principles and sensibilities and an informed view of the world” (Dylan, 2017). He has gained “a way of looking at life, an understanding of human nature, and a standard to measure things by” (Dylan, 2017). He rounds up the ideas of his Nobel lecture by a reading of three works that have been particularly important to him: Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Eric Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Homer's *The Odyssey*.

Dylan's reading focuses on the voices of the texts, their many sources of inspiration, their plots, themes, and symbols. But it is also characteristic that he shifts the interest in what the texts mean to

what they do. And he draws the point very clearly at the end of the lecture: So, what does it all mean? Myself and a lot of other songwriters have been influenced by these very same themes. And they can mean a lot of different things. If a song moves you, that's all that's important (Dylan 2017).

Moby Dick's mosaic of characters and culture moves and grabs the readers and makes the readers experience that human beings have different interpretations of the enigmas of life. *All Quiet on the Western Front* moves the readers by using its sensuous realism to engage the readers in the soldiers' experiences, and although *The Odyssey* reaches us from a distant past, it tells us of experiences that human beings of today can identify with.

No one has to bow down in the stardust and ask for Dylan's blessing of his or her ideas for new studies in his opus. And if you try, you will have to wait until doomsday. But Dylan himself opens with his reflections on what literature does, a loading gate for all kinds of new literary studies.

Literary studies have tended to treat Dylan's lyrics as close-reading goodies. We have practiced interpretation and deconstruction of the lyrics, tracing their direct and indirect quotes in long, learned lines, but often we have neglected to look at what they do and which is their creative potential for the audience; we have overlooked that interpreting is fundamentally about creating a connection to the text, and that it is actually exactly what members of the audience have done for ages and what they still do when they review Dylan's songs in social media. Many of the Amazon reviewers express how they have been moved by Dylan's 2020 album, *Rough and Rowdy Ways*; one of them, Brandon Carson says: "Dylan erupts with words that evoke feelings of confusion, chaos, anxiety, and our/his never-ending desire for love and meaning and purpose" (Carson 2020).

In the 60s and 70s, some of the fans and followers of Dylan connected to the songs by defining Dylan as a prophet or a spokesman of his generation. Dylan himself has always rejected this by referring to his songs: "If you examine the songs, I don't believe that you are going to find anything in them that says I'm a spokesman for anybody or anything [...] They must not have heard the songs" (Ed Bradley Interview, 2003). This contradiction or opposition between Dylan and some of his fans is interesting to study. Using professor Rita Felski's concepts on the mobility and instauration of artworks (Felski 2015), you might say that songs are mobile and can be instaured by for instance the media and the fans in ways that oppose the instauration that the songwriter intended. But this is also part of the complex discussion of what songs do and what they create.

The mobility of the songs is part of a new literary culture that Dylan himself helped create when he combined rock, modernism, folk and romanticism and got the songs out to a worldwide audience. And mobility should also be part of a discussion of what Dylan's songs do and what they create. Literary critics have made thick and learned readings of songs. This applies, for example, to "It's alright Ma (I'm only bleeding)" from 1964 with the enigmatic opening stanza:

Darkness at the break of noon
Shadows even the silver spoon

The handmade blade, the child's balloon
Eclipses both the sun and moon
To understand you know too soon
There is no sense in trying
(Dylan 2016, 158)

The song's references to Elvis Presley and Arthur Koestler as well as Jesus have been traced by learned literary scholars. It is important and relevant, and I would not want to do without these close readings and intertextual analysis that make us learn more about the song; but it is also important to look at what the song is doing, what it creates and connects to.

Maybe you should pay more attention to how the complex imagery overwhelms the listener, to how the use of o- and a- vowels draws the listener into a dark universe where a few i- vowels flashes through the listener's consciousness. A gloomy mood, where one loses orientation, spreads.

The difficult poetic song became known and loved by a worldwide audience that was not necessarily familiar with the literary high modernism or the surrealistic visual art with which the song is related. The song's striking and alluring musicality of course does its part to make it accessible, but the song's impact also lies in the fact that it combines its complex imagery of war and its personification of abstract concepts with relatively simple slogan-like sentences about authorities and freedom which link to the 1960s but still have a timelessness about them:

For them that must obey authority
That they do not respect in any degree
Who despise their jobs, their destinies
Speak jealously of them that are free
Cultivate their flowers to be
Nothing more than something they invest in
(Dylan 2016, 157)

Dylan's lyrics are often a network of modernist and romantic imagery, of everyday speech, ballads, folk songs, classical poetry, slogans, and commercial language (Mai 2017), and as such, his lyrics have contributed to change of literary culture and made a rich and experimental poetry known to a wide audience. Complex modernist poetry is with Dylan no longer reserved for an academic audience, and its medium is not primarily the book, but also the album, the rock concert, the festival, the social media, and the movie. A contrast between high and low culture, which characterized the first half of the 20th century, is not as firm as it has been. This does not mean that the academic culture of reading and its deconstructive and close reading critique end up as a closed chapter, but something has changed.

The many reviews by lay people of the streaming version on Amazon of “It’s alright Ma (I’m only bleeding)”, highlight the song as poetry, and one of them writes: "It is like getting a glimpse into the answers of the riddles of the universe" (Rock 2012).

The awarding of the Nobel Prize to Dylan testified to the change of literary culture which implies that even songs that are not meant to be read but to be sung belong to literature. As Dylan quotes Homer as saying, “Sing in me, oh Muse, and through me tell the story.” The song, the narrative, and the lyrics are connected and draw on sources that are older than modernity. Professor Sara Danius pointed to a return to the old tradition for “ear poetry” in classical poetry in her essay, *Om Bob Dylan* (Danius 2018, 14).

But Dylan's challenge to literature studies also concerns biographies and biographical analyses. Literary scholars have mostly practiced a traditional biographical interpretation of the artist Bob Dylan, where we have asked for the person behind the songs and listed causal connections that perhaps say more about our own preferences than about Dylan.

It seems that digitalization has meant that the media and the public are trying to abolish the old backstage position where one could meet the artist outside the spotlight. Backstage has become the frontstage, but audiences still appreciate the intersection of the performative personality, interpretations of personal life in media documentaries, and the living human being. The result is often that a thick biographical media fog is spread. The artist might end up as a virtual zombie, a living dead whose hologram haunts everywhere. Over the years, Dylan has become more and more interested in ghosts – and perhaps the old-fashioned ghosts are his way of opposing the media holograms. But to Dylan ghosts are more connected with sounds than with images; maybe that is why he made his Theme Time Radio Hour a few years ago, where he, as a voice in the night, sneaks up on his audience and at the same time keeps an insurmountable distance. He has become an artist who has abolished the frontstage/backstage positions. He takes neither the front nor the backstage and is yet completely present in his own enigmatic sphere, almost like a ghost.

There has been no shortage of stories about Bob Dylan’s personal life. He has told how people address him asking “Are you who I think you are? Are you really him? No, You are not him?” and these questions go on and on (Ed Bradley Interview, 2003). New details emerge, old friends, colleagues, and supporters report. Dylan himself is mostly silent. But in Scorsese's film *Rolling Thunder Revue* (2019), he takes part in the creating of a funny autofiction, where fictional characters as Stefan van Dorp and episodes become part of the story of the show.

Dylan's memoirs *Chronicles* (2004) are also something else than the story of the man behind the songs. They are more about the man with the songs and about his interpretation and imagination of the musical and artistic environments and events that gave his art its direction. *Chronicles* has a broken and incomplete chronology and jumps back and forth in time within the broken timeline and still shows a surprisingly sensuous richness of details.

The structure of the memoirs and the details indicate that they are based on the author's narrative desire and skills. *Chronicles* is not intended to be some kind of true mirroring the past. Memoirs never are, and the style shows that Dylan is fully aware of this. *Chronicles* points to the narrative delight of the author, his imagination, and empathy at different times and in different environments and places. The main character of the story is not Bob Dylan, but the artistic process. *Chronicles* is not based on a romantic notion of the artist's individual personality and biography. Dylan manages to shift focus so that *Chronicles* is about how events, people, relationships, stories, and conditions in the author's understanding intertwine, "the way circles hook up with themselves" (Dylan 2004, 288), as he puts it. He portrays himself as a young man with a vision but without false hopes, attending events at the beginning of an age and captured by a feeling that fate is looking at him.

A concept of destiny sometimes appears in Dylan's interpretation of his story. Most often, destiny is described as a personal feeling, an inner self-image, which it is important to be true to (Wiley 2005, 31). But sometimes also as a feeling of the presence of an outer unknown power, "the chief in command" as he has put it.

Chronicles does not bring the individual and the outside world into one formula but understands the human being in relation to himself and others and is interested in how relationships surprisingly work together. *Chronicles* sees the artist as a network of connections and fiction.

To wrap up my points of view: Bob Dylan's songs are a challenge to literary studies – they demand from literary scholars that we do not only study what a work of art means, but also what it does, what feelings it awakes and what relations to other people and other artwork it creates, and how it changes the literary culture. We should not leave out the intertextual studies of the text, the close readings, and the literary critique, but we also need a study of how the songs are used.

Dylan's autobiographical writing challenges a traditional understanding of biographies and autobiographies as studies of life and work, of the more or less private man or woman behind the work of art as scholars have put it. Clinton Heylin's new biography, *The Double Life of Bob Dylan* (2021), is a most interesting answer to the challenge. I have not finished studying his book and we are still waiting for volume 2 and 3, but I look forward to the continuation.

Chronicles invites us to a discussion of a possible biographical turn in history and literary studies, which several researchers have opened. Concepts are introduced such as performative biographism (introduced by the literary scholar Jon Helt Haarder). Performative biographism refers to how the artist might use the fictive as well as the real in an aesthetic interaction with readers and the public. You could also mention the concept polyphonic biography. This concept refers to how biographical material is used to tell stories through different themes, conflicting interpretations, and conflicting sources. We have new concepts on autofiction and on different types of biographies. But *Chronicles* also challenge us to think of how we can use biographical material in the academic study and teaching of Bob Dylan's songs and artwork.

Dylan's *Chronicles* puts the genre up for discussion, and special emphasis is placed on how people, things, imagination, and circumstances “hook up”, as Dylan puts it. *Chronicles* expresses a peculiar existential humanism, where fate is often perceived both as a feeling and a personal understanding, but also as an external unknown power. Maybe a complete contradiction, but as Dylan sings on his 2020 album: “I'm a man of contradictions and a man of many moods”, and we can count ourselves lucky to have him!

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