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Bob Dylan, Nobel Laureate: Yah-Boo!

John Hughes

Bob Dylan's elevation to Nobel Prize winner is something that has been in the wind for a while you can say, since every year his name is mooted as a candidate, a kind of standing reproach for some to the literary elitism of the Nobel committee. However, as so often with Dylan, the actuality of the prize has been divisive, testifying to his continuing power to stoke controversy over the value of what he does: specifically the literary quality, or even literary status, of his work. On the one hand, poets and writers throng to celebrate the award, and Seamus Perry, Chair of the Oxford English Faculty, makes an enthusiastic claim (with which I find it hard to disagree): that 'Dylan winning the Nobel was always the thing you thought should happen in a reasonable world but still seemed unimaginable in this one'. On the other hand, the briefest glance at the internet or social media shows how actually how totally unimaginable it appears to so many people in fact that it should have been awarded in this world. Above all, the award has just *irritated* so many people who appear bamboozled by it, leading novelist Irving Welsh to claim in an oft-repeated tweet, that it was a 'nostalgia award' wrenched from 'senile, gibbering hippies'.

Yet it is worth pointing out Welsh remains in a tiny minority of literary artists, most of whom welcome the award (even if their own work remains more firmly entrenched in traditional print culture). An anthology of poems, for instance, by seventy poets greeted Dylan's seventieth birthday, and Salman Rushdie, Andrew Motion, and many others (of the usual suspects) have been out and proud, and loud and vocal in the press since Dylan's prize. So is this the Nobel just the occasion for a tiresome rehash of debates that have been going on since the sixties, about the literary qualities of Dylan's work, where different people audition as gate-keepers or custodians of the literary, and squabble accordingly? Undoubtedly yes, to the extent that it is all grist to the newspapers (in fact, the nadir of media coverage was plumbed by the BBC who showed a clip of a Dylan impersonator as the man himself on the 6 o'clock news).

However, even though it is a tired old debate, it is one that is worth considering again briefly, if only to shift the ground and broaden the discussion a little, and to try and work out how we can claim that Dylan is worthy of the prize. Beginning with myself, my book on Dylan, *Invisible Now*, was an attempt to find a way to write about what I saw as the sheer inspiration of his work when he was or is at his best, most undeniably in the mid-60s. But I was all too aware that it would be falsifying to treat it as poetry simply. Equally, it seems true that many poets remain in awe of Dylan's mid-60s prodigality with words, and would give their eye-teeth to be able to do a fraction of what he seemed to do, and with such apparent abandon. So the need for me was to try for an idiom that could register the literary qualities of his work, as well as its cultural influence, and subjective power, and all its other wider contexts and features... For instance: how write about the relation of his songs to the times, to his musical tradition, to the music, to his ways of singing, to the differing performances and so on?

With reference to this discussion about the Nobel, I believe it was this audacity and unbridled creativity with words that was always what other writers acknowledged. And this was often with a kind of amazement or envy that Dylan was able to take possession of popular forms and infuse them with a kind of endlessly transformative linguistic inventiveness that over and over again in different ways was able to depict and contest his society, and to gauge variously its constraints and possibilities for individual expression. In this respect, those writers who have identified Dylan with ancient bardic traditions are surely on to something. More specifically too though, there is the point that it is not just what Dylan's words *mean* that matters as what the words *do*.

And this after all is in the other sense what the songs mean to those who love them. I'll speak personally for a moment. Right from my first listening to his songs, I felt there was an effect of vitality and decompression in his work that was bound up with the words, and that meant that what was important was the listener too; or to put it another way, that the listener needed to be the kind of listener who could, and wanted to, respond to what Dylan, specifically, was doing with words. And while many people do respond enthusiastically to this, one needs to acknowledge, many other people just do not, or in mixed ways. And the bamboozlement or hostility that has greeted his award just speaks to this. In such ways, Dylan was always a divisive figure, and continues to be so, as we have seen. (After all, we all remember the disappointing sensation that the song you just played to your friend left them totally cold...) So the question is not simply whether what Dylan does with words is poetry: to this the answer probably is no (though one wants immediately to add that his work is poetic or literary, and in the truest sense). Rather the more important, if neglected, question is whether one accepts what he does and responds to it, as I say. Which means that the essential thing is whether these songs speak to you, perhaps. So it is not so much 'what does it mean' then, as (to coin a phrase) 'how does it feel?'

The news coverage of the Nobel prize had little to say about this important, perhaps essential, aspect of Dylan's work – that it highlights differences *between* its listeners. And this can lead to another equally neglected and important feature: the way the work also produces differences *within* a listener. This is not simply a way of saying that his work is inspiring to those who like it or 'get' it, but that very often really immersing oneself in his work (or 'liking it' and 'getting it') will mean that you are changed as a person. Many admirers of Dylan's work will remember a formative kind of immersion in his songs (and his image, and his persona, etc etc) that left them feeling they were never quite the same person afterwards. At this point A. J. Weberman embodies some of the most extreme features of Dylan fandom, where one's appetite for Dylan detail can seem at times like one has been infected with a kind of mania, so that reading the latest biography or blog is like peeking through a keyhole down upon your knees...

Given how multi-faceted, individual and transformative are the effects of Dylan as an artist, then, and how various are his own artistic mutations over the decades, it is unsurprising that so much of the recent coverage has fallen back on all the usual tiresome framings and uncomprehending clichés that have long been trotted out as reportage. After all, it is much easier to try and explain Dylan's importance in terms of his historical or political context than to describe the strange alchemy of his art. So since the Nobel, we have heard Dylan's significance depicted in terms of the usual quarter-truths, explaining and contextualizing the significance or value of his work by identifying it with the topsy-turvy

ferment of the 1960s: (again) (and again) we hear that he was the spokesman of his generation; that he was the writer of the great anthems of the Civil Rights movement; that he was the person who inspired the counter-culture from the mid-60s onwards; and the supreme antagonist to the Vietnam war, and so on. And connected to this, his work becomes identified with a few songs that make sense in these terms, and which in turn provoke the twitterati to retaliate in disbelieving tones: ‘you mean he won a Nobel prize for ‘Blowin’ in the Wind’, ‘The Times They Are A Changin’’, and ‘Mr Tambourine Man’?

Of course, even though readers of *The Bridge* will know that all of these media claims are highly questionable, it is worth briefly spelling out why: Dylan was never any kind of tub-thumping spokesman (the idea would be pure anathema to him). Indeed, it was the subtlety, indirection and obliquity of his early (undeniably) politic songs that both made for their power and prevented them being easily pinned down to a single message, or even to a single time. (For instance, a moment’s reflection shows you can link ‘Blowin’ in the Wind’, or ‘Hard Rain’ to the end of ’62 and the Cuban crisis, but the songs and their language elude it too...). Again, we all know, that Dylan never really wrote another song about the Civil Rights struggle after about October 1963, in fact: when he was only 22 years old, and just hitting his artistic stride... Again, so far from being any kind of hippy during the summer of love and so on, in fact he spent the second half of the 60s holed up as a recluse in his rural retreat in New York State, raising his family and writing songs that owed more to the Bible or Hank Williams. Lastly here, there is no mention anywhere of the Vietnam war in his 60s and 70s work, aside perhaps from a cryptic verse in ‘Tombstone Blues’:

The king of the Philistines his soldiers to save
Puts jawbones on their tombstones and flatters their graves
Puts the pied pipers in prison and fattens the slaves
Then sends them out to the jungle

These familiar points lead on to the important point here (and offer a way of drawing my various threads together), in that these clichés show how journalism, like nature, ‘abhors a vacuum’, since it is the abiding paradox about Dylan that the man himself, and his work, obey a certain refusal to be pinned down, and involve an essential dynamic of futurity. Dylan is an artist whose work involves a subtraction of the self from its social co-ordinates, and its past. As such, I have seen him as a singer close to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s notion of the tie-in between social and personal transformation in his essay ‘History’, which identified historical change with an individual’s historically transformative, exemplary, pursuit of the ‘unattained, yet attainable self’. Now, that idea connects again with the kinds of response Dylan can produce in the right kind of listener, but it also offers a way of making sense of Dylan’s life and career precisely, as turning on his rejection of the clichés that offer settled versions of who one is. Again, if one wants from a social or historical point of view to understand Dylan’s significance and enduring value, in such terms, I would say, it is because of the ways he and his art turned also on refusing history, and transmitting an embrace of self-uncertainty that became potentially liberating for his listeners, offering through art a way of fighting free of social clichés or inherited fictions of identity, and also embracing new, as yet invisible, social contexts. So someone like Dylan makes history by refusing to accept it, and maybe that is how truly historical figures work, breaking with history – whether written or experienced – in order to remake it. And to do the same, by raising a genuinely popular form to the condition of art,

and utterly transforming it and its audience in the process: that is surely an achievement worthy of the Nobel prize.

John Hughes's book, *Invisible Now*, has just been issued in paperback by Routledge/Taylor and Francis at 19.99.