

Dylan and the Nobel

Gordon Ball

Allow me to begin on a personal note. I'm not a Dylan expert, nor a scholar of music, or classics, or folklore, or, for that matter, the Nobel Prize. My specialty is the poet Allen Ginsberg and the literature of the Beat Generation; I edited three books with Ginsberg and have taken and exhibited a number of photographs of the poet and his Beat colleagues over the years.

For decades I've admired the work of Bob Dylan, whom I saw at Newport 1965; my memoir *'66 Frames* relates my first contact with his music, and he makes a brief appearance in a recently completed chronicle of my years on an upstate New York farm with Ginsberg and other Beats.

In 1996 I first wrote the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy, nominating Dylan for its Prize in literature. The idea to do so did not originate with me but with two Dylan aficionados in Norway, journalist Reidar Indrebø and attorney Gunnar Lunde. (Also, a number of other professors have supported Dylan's candidacy at various times in the past.) Mr. Indrebø and Mr. Lunde had written Allen Ginsberg seeking help with the nomination. (The nominator must be a member of the Swedish Academy, or professor of literature or language, or a past laureate in literature, or the president of a national writers' organization.) Ginsberg's office called and asked if I would like to write a nominating letter.

In my 1996 nomination, I cited the almost unlimited dimensions of Dylan's work, how it has permeated the globe and affected history. On the basis of his lyrics alone he deserves the Prize, but the dimensions of his artistic accomplishment are even larger because together with a very considerable body of lyrics there is also music and performance.

Examining the criteria for the granting of the Nobel Prize in Literature, I learned that two general standards had been specified early on. The final will of Alfred Nobel in 1895 stipulated that in literature the honoree's work shall have been "the most outstanding . . . of 'an idealistic tendency'"; and that in each field "during the preceding year, [it] shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind" (Frenz 1969b:VII). According to Horst Frenz in *Nobel Lectures: Literature*, the second stipulation was clarified by Nobel Foundation

statutes to mean that awards should be made “for the most recent achievements in the field of culture” and that older works should be considered only in cases where their importance “has not become apparent until recently” (Frenz 1969b:VII-IX).

However, a review of awards and their presentations since 1901 suggests considerable latitude in terms of recent achievement and revised appreciation of earlier work. While some Nobel presentations focus more on an author’s latest creation (or, as in the case of Faulkner, for example, on a new perspective of his entire *oeuvre*), others seem to take in a whole career. In the case of Icelandic novelist Halldor Laxness (1955), the most recent work cited was published nine years earlier. T. S. Eliot was over a quarter-century removed from *The Waste Land* when he received his Nobel recognition.

So the original criteria for granting prizes call for a literature that is idealistic and of benefit to humanity. Though a recent statement from the Swedish Academy emphasizes literary and artistic values (Allén and Espmark 2001:47), in the earliest years Nobel’s “idealistic tendency” was taken to mean that the award was “not primarily a literary prize” but also one recognizing elevating views of humanity (Espmark 1991:10). However, the senses of “idealistic tendency” have varied over time and can even include “uncompromising integrity” in depicting “the human predicament” (Allén and Espmark 2001:47).

Few would challenge Bob Dylan’s “uncompromising integrity” in depicting the human predicament. Yet many may ask whether the Nobel Committee should break with perceived tradition and grant an award to someone seen largely as a writer and performer of song. Is Dylan’s work truly of sufficient literary quality to join that of time-honored masters of the pen? Can an icon of popular culture, a “song and dance man,” be placed shoulder-to-shoulder with literary giants? Bobby Zimmerman alongside Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Gunter Grass?

In 1900 Nobel Foundation statutes defined literature as “not only belles-lettres, but also other writings which, by virtue of their form and style, possess literary value” (Nobel Foundation 2006).¹ In fact, music and poetry have been historically linked, and Dylan’s work has helped significantly to renew that vital connection. The art of poetry is thousands of years old; it began in performance and has survived in good part on oral strengths, and less through the rather recent convenience of moveable type. In our era Bob Dylan has helped return poetry to its primordial transmission by human breath; he has revived the traditions of bard, minstrel, and troubadour.

¹ Available online at <http://nobelprize.org/nobel/foundation/statutes.html>.

This vital connection between music and poetry had been especially weakened, at least in the United States, from the 1930s into the 1960s by the application of the New Critical emphasis on poetry as written text to be explicated, thus de-emphasizing its orality. In revitalizing this connection it is as if Dylan had heeded Ezra Pound's observation (1913:91) that

. . . both in Greece and in Provence the poetry attained its highest rhythmic and metrical brilliance at times when the arts of verse and music were most closely knit together, when each thing done by the poet had some definite musical urge or necessity bound up within it.

And Pound referred to poetry and music as "twin arts" (91). Greek lyric poetry is said to have been sung and accompanied; indeed, even the figure of Homer singing with harp or lyre (as some conceive) may not be as distant from the blue-eyed son prophesying with his guitar as the millennia between them suggest. For Pound (1913:39), so important was the musical aspect of verse that he proposed:

For practical contact with all past poetry that was actually *sung* in its own day I suggest that. . . universities combine in employing a couple of singers who understand the meanings of words. . . . A half-dozen hours spent in listening to the lyrics actually performed would give the student more knowledge. . . than a year's work in philology.

Let me be clear: I don't mean to say that the Greek "singer of tales" and "the vagabond who's rapping at your door" share an interchangeable identity. Homer was primarily an epic poet (whose "very medium . . . is pervaded by lyric quality," as translator Robert Fitzgerald has noted [1963:490]); Dylan can be seen as much a lyrical one. The music we might associate with the entity or "consciousness" called Homer may have been more elemental: perhaps he intoned, rather than sang; Fitzgerald himself claims not to know the precise relationship between voice and verse and instrument (489). Other scholars, including Robert Fagles and Bernard Knox, conjecture that Homer may have made use of "a rudimentary form of writing" (Fagles 1990:ix), though Knox allows that Homer "probably did sing in performance" (1990:7). In any case, the link between poetry and music is historic. As W. B. Stanford tells us, "In Greek and Roman education music and poetry were kept together in the discipline called *mousiké*" (1996:26). He also asserts that, "poetry's earliest name in Greek . . . primarily meant 'song'; and the poet was called a singer . . . long before he was called a maker" (*idem*).

As to whether Dylan is first a poet or first a musician, the question is open for discussion, as it has been, evidently even in Dylan's mind—as

Christopher Ricks (2003:11-12) has shown in his citations of Dylan's own words on the subject. To excerpt, and place in chronological order:

"The words are just as important as the music. There would be no music without the words." (1965)

"It's the music that the words are sung to that's important." (1968)

"It ain't the melodies that're important, man, it's the words." (1971)

"I consider myself a poet first and a musician second." (1978)

My point, then, is rather modest: that poetry and music share time-honored ground, that the two arts are often bound closely together, and that Dylan's great gifts may be appreciated within such a performative lineage. Poetry and music aren't mutually exclusive.

Moreover, some of the Nobel awards of the past demonstrate that media overlap and merge, yet deserve this highest recognition. The Prize has gone to nine dramatists, whose work depends on performance by others skilled in a mixed-media range of arts and crafts: lighting, acting, set design, music, and dance. Even the literature prize given to Winston Churchill—one of two historians to have received it—was awarded in part for his "brilliant oratory in defending exalted human values" (Frenz 1969:487).

In 1997 the Nobel went to Italian playwright Dario Fo. Some observations by Burton Feldman in his *The Nobel Prize: A History of Genius, Controversy, and Prestige* may apply (Feldman 2000:87):

. . . many consider [Fo] not a dramatist but a writer of scripts for his own performances. He is a vivid and popular actor of farce and satire. . . . In each performance he improvises at will, so that his scripts are never quite available in permanent form, but remain prompt-books. He is the first modern "playwright"—or performance artist—in the Nobel list.

I'd like to say more, a little later, on literary aspects of Dylan's work, and on the relationship between poetry and music. But I began by citing the two original criteria for the Prize, and would like to return to them. Idealism and benefiting humanity often, of course, go hand in hand, and Dylan's idealistic, activist songs have changed the world we live in. In 1963 the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee gave Dylan the Tom Paine Award. (An earlier recipient, Bertrand Russell, was one of three philosophers—not counting Sartre—to have won the Nobel Prize in Literature.) Dylan's award came on the strengths of "Blowin' in the Wind," "Oxford Town," and other

compositions, as well as his going in-person to centers of voter registration in the Deep South (“In the days when you could get shot for it,” Mississippi novelist Barry Hannah has observed [2004:283]). And soon the world was hearing much more: “The Times They Are a Changin,’” “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” and “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll.” An attitude expressed in his 1965 “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)” —“but even the president of the United States / Sometimes must have to stand naked” (Dylan 2004c:157)—may have helped revise the American perspective on presidential authority, encouraging inquiry into what became the Watergate scandal of the 1973-74 Nixon White House.

For a generation raised in a time of conformity, Mr. Dylan validated the imagination and independence of thought; his work was central to the creativity of the 1960s in the United States, and has affected others elsewhere. In a *Der Spiegel* interview a few years ago, German Foreign Minister Joshchka Fischer, when asked if growing up in Germany he had an “American dream,” replied, “Not an American dream, but my very own dream of freedom. That was for me the music of Bob Dylan” (Noack 2002:32-35).

Nor has Dylan’s idealism been limited to just one period, as later songs have shown: the sentimental fatherly idealism of “Forever Young”; the extraordinary songs of religious idealism such as “Every Grain of Sand”; the expression of an aesthetic ideal—against a torched historical landscape—in the brilliant but fated blues singer Blind Willie McTell, who would recognize that “. . . power and greed and corruptible seed / Seem to be all that there is” (Dylan 2004c:478); the search for a classical character trait, “Dignity.”²

To return to the relationship of poetry, music, and Dylan’s literary value, Rabindranath Tagore (Nobel winner in 1913) set many of his own poems to music. Yeats, quoting a Bengali speaker as he introduced Tagore’s *Gitanjali*, reported that “he is as great in music as in poetry, and his songs are sung from the west of India into Burmah wherever Bengali is spoken”(1916:viii). And the 1923 presentation to Yeats himself noted that in his verse, “There is a greater element of song than is usual in modern English poetry” (Hallstrom 196).

If there is a recognition of this vital linkage of poetry and music in the case of past Nobel winners, the question then arising is whether Dylan’s works—on the page—can rest companionably with enshrined works of literature. The answer is decidedly positive. Dylan’s ability to evoke an entire milieu with a few swift words is reminiscent of Chekhov. The opening of “Just Like a Woman” with its succinct evocation of a whole social scene (“Nobody feels any pain / Tonight as I stand inside the rain” [Dylan 2004c:202]) brings

² I refer here to both the trait and the title of the song.

to my mind that of “The Lady with the Pet Dog”: “A new person, it was said, had appeared on the esplanade . . .” (Chekhov 1968:412). Dylan’s view of life as a journey, as well as his assuming the role of prophet, seer, or *voyant*, recalls the visionary Arthur Rimbaud. And Dylan’s prophecies have been borne out time and again. For example, consider a line from “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” in terms of inner city or even suburban conditions in the United States in recent years: “I saw guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children” (Dylan 2004c:59). From the same composition, is it hard to find a locus for “Where the pellets of poison are flooding their waters” (Dylan 2004c:60) throughout our world today?

Dylan’s eclecticism and inventiveness can be compared to Yeats. That is, in Yeats the Celtic and the English coalesce; in Dylan, linguistic and musical idioms of ancient folk music and contemporary rock ‘n’ roll become one: in Bob Dylan, Scots balladeers meet Little Richard. That his imagery has resisted numerous attempts at schematization by hosts of scholars (“People *dissect* my songs like rabbits,” Dylan once remarked [quoted in Brown 1990:20] testifies, above all else, to its power as poetry. Just for arrestingly vivid imagery consider “Tombstone Blues”: “The geometry of innocence flesh on the bone” (Dylan 2004c:170). “Desolation Row” (181) begins:

They’re selling postcards of the hanging
They’re painting the passports brown
The beauty parlor’s filled with sailors
The circus is in town.

Here social criticism joins with surrealism: Dylan’s verse is marked by an eclecticism that moves swiftly from one mode to another, as if intended to keep ever ahead of us. “Desolation Row”—the concept—seems to be a kind of night journey or Dark Night of the Soul, a supra-realistic critical mass of depression that may at best afford the “wisdom that is woe,” as the great American writer Herman Melville once put it (Melville 1967:335). “Don’t send me no more letters no,” our singer concludes, “Not unless you mail them / From Desolation Row” (Dylan 2004c:183).

Dylan can be as grim in his examination of the human condition as Nobel winner William Faulkner; indeed, much of his work (“Visions of Johanna” and “Most of the Time”) displays “the human heart in conflict with itself” that Faulkner, receiving his Nobel, identified as requisite for “good writing” (Frenz 1969:444). Surely in its experimentalism and variety Dylan’s work is as rich as Mr. Faulkner’s fictional narratives: there are love songs that range from bittersweet poignancy (“Most of the Time”) to shocking realism (“Ballad in Plain D”); lean parables on the human condition (“I Dreamed I

Saw St. Augustine”); adaptations of medieval and Renaissance ballads, including “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” (the inspired revision of “Lord Randall’s Son” that captures the sense of doom in the fall of 1962). There are works that seem chiefly aesthetic, or about the power of art, such as “Mr. Tambourine Man”; songs of wisdom (“My Back Pages”); and, as we’ve noted, songs of social protest and songs of prophecy.

One of Bob Dylan’s recent releases, so to speak, is *Chronicles: Volume One*, a finalist for the 2005 National Book Critics Prize in Biography and Memoir and winner of the 2005 Quill Book Award in biography/memoir. I know a little about memoirs; I’ve read a few and have published two. And so I was intrigued to learn of Dylan’s, eager to examine it with certain basic questions in mind. Will I find some of the obfuscation that colored certain earlier autobiographical depictions of his life (especially in interviews)? Will someone who seems not merely to value but to cherish privacy reveal *anything* of significance? He’s invited familiarity in the lines “You may call me Bobby, you may call me Zimmy” (Dylan 2004c:402)—but that’s in song, where we recognize the principle of persona. In memoir, we may like to think, we can get closer to truth.

Overall, I find the value of *Chronicles: Volume One* extraordinary. Although true to form Dylan denies being “the conscience of a generation” (2004a:115), here are accounts from the center of the whirlwind: the unknown nineteen-year old driven from the provinces by a sense of destiny into the heart of New York’s folk music scene; the star in his late twenties, a hostage to fame, shocked at being asked by well-known performer Robbie Robertson, “Where do you think you’re gonna take . . . the whole music scene?” (117).

The early period is especially presented with remarkable recall of vivid detail in personal and historical dimensions alike: the discussion of his early reading, including Thucydides’ *The Athenian General*, “a narrative which would give you chills” (36); the extended portrait of Mike Seeger, “the supreme archetype” of the folk musician who “could push a stake through Dracula’s black heart” (69); the effect on Dylan (“the bells went off”) when first he read Arthur Rimbaud’s formulation of the shifting, unstable nature of the self: “Je est un autre” (288).

The 1953 Nobel award cited Sir Winston Churchill, along with his oratory, “for his mastery of historical and biographical description” (Frenz 1969:487); perhaps Dylan’s three volumes, when completed, will constitute a lasting and complex personal, historically central, and cultural record that only he could offer. As the Nobel presentation to Churchill claimed, “. . . there is something special about history written by a man who has himself helped to make it” (Frenz 1969:490).

Having sketched some of the idealism and the benefits to humanity of the works of Mr. Dylan, having considered them within the context of poetry, having brought his lyrics shoulder-to-shoulder with literary masters before him, and having examined his most recent publication with reference to an earlier Prize, we might note one other concern associated with the granting of a Nobel: that the work so honored meet the test of experience or the examination of experts (Nobel Foundation 2006). Dylan, of course, has satisfied both criteria. As for the former, it is apparent today that Dylan's work has not merely survived over the course of forty-five years, but that—as Faulkner in Stockholm in 1950 predicted of mankind (Frenz 1969:445)—it has prevailed. Just a few of the countless indications: Dylan's performing for the Pope and 300,000 others in 1997, with John Paul quoting from a Dylan song already then a quarter-century old; his appearing on a major American news magazine interview program in Fall 2004, with interviewer Ed Bradley insisting—despite his guest's disclaimer—that in the minds of many people Dylan has been gifted with special insight on the level of a prophet³; his 1974 “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door” being adapted for a 1996 Scottish anti-gun campaign in response to the massacre of over a dozen schoolchildren by a single gunman. Indeed, one can see that Yeats’ prediction about the future of the verses of Tagore (“ . . . travellers will hum them on the highway and men rowing upon rivers. Lovers . . . murmuring them” [1916:xv]) has been realized many times over by Dylan.

As for meeting the examination of the experts, various academic textbooks, including the Norton *Introduction to Literature* (2001) and the *Portable Beat Reader* (1992), have reproduced his lyrics. The enlarged edition of the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* includes an entry on the “Rock Lyric” (Preminger 1974:979-80), with specific songs by Dylan given as examples of the incorporation of “elements of modern poetry”:

Alienation as objectified in a dissociated modern sensibility . . . Dylan's “Desolation Row” (which refers specifically to Pound and Eliot) . . . Surrealism—used . . . to render a sense of social chaos (Dylan's “Memphis Blues Again”) . . . Highly complex wordplay and intricate themes: Dylan's “Subterranean Homesick Blues.”

Four decades ago, critic Ralph Gleason declared Dylan “the first American poet to touch everyone, to hit all walks of life in this great sprawling society” (1966:28). More recently, Danny Goldberg's *Dispatches from the Culture Wars* concluded with a warning to the American Left that

³ See Dylan, Bob. “Interview with Ed Bradley.” *Sixty Minutes*. WBRA, Roanoke, VA. 5 Dec. 2004.

demonstrates the timelessness of a Dylan theme: “Bob Dylan’s message of four decades ago still works: ‘You better start swimming or you’ll sink like a stone, for the times they are a changin’”(2003:312).

Poet Andrei Codrescu once exclaimed, “Dylan? He’s the best living American poet there is, man!” (quoted in Spitzer 2006⁴) In 1996, poet and distinguished professor Allen Ginsberg told me that Dylan’s works were “prolific and memorable, and memorableness is a mark of great poetry.”⁵ Recommending him for the Literature award, Ginsberg (1996)⁶ wrote:

Dylan is a major American Bard & minstrel of XX Century, whose words have influenced many generations throughout the world. He deserves a Nobel Prize in recognition of his mighty & universal poetic powers.

Ginsberg has spoken of first hearing the young Dylan on Allen’s 1963 return from India, when he was moved to tears by “A Hard Rain”: “it seemed that the torch had been passed to another generation.”⁷ In 1971 he wrote, “for Dylan’s genius . . . one of his greatest works [is] ‘September on Jessore Road.’” And Ginsberg—who had begun composing music himself after the Chicago convention 1968—dedicated his 1975 volume of lyrics, *First Blues: Rags, Ballads & Harmonium Songs*, to “Minstrel Guruji [little guru] Bob Dylan.” Every third line of Dylan’s, he once told me, is one of genius.

The 2000 Polar Music Prize, presented in Stockholm by the King of Sweden, cited Dylan’s “musical and poetic brilliance.”⁸ Mr. Andrew Motion, British Poet Laureate, has noted “the concentration and surprise of his lyrics. . . the dramatic sympathy between the words and the music. . .” (Kelley 2000:7).

Equally important—and a more direct sign of how Dylan has enriched our collective experience—are the many phrases from his lyrics that have become part of our everyday lexicon: “The times they are a-changin, I was so much older then / I’m younger than that now”; “Nobody feels any pain.” According to Professor Daniel Karlin, who also endorsed Dylan’s Nobel candidacy, Dylan “has given more memorable phrases to our language than

⁴ Available online at <http://www.jackmagazine.com/issue7/essaysmspitzer.html>.

⁵ Personal communication.

⁶ See Ginsberg, Allen. “Letter to the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy.” 20 Nov. 1996. [Note: this unpublished letter is one page long.]

⁷ Quoted in Scorsese’s documentary film, *No Direction Home* (2005).

⁸ See “Polar Music Prize.” Royal Swedish Academy of Music. 5 Dec. 2004. Available online at <http://www.polarmusicprize.com/newSite/2000.shtml>.

any comparable figure since Kipling” (Indrebø 2002⁹). Most recently, editor David Lehman, explaining the presence of the lyrics to “Desolation Row” in his *Oxford Book of American Poetry*, wrote that unlike “Some Enchanted Evening” and other standards, “the lyrics have an existence apart from the music” (2006:xix).

The American poet Michael McClure has written, “Bob Dylan is a poet; whether he has cherubs in his hair and fairy wings, or feet of clay, he is a poet” (1974:33). “Dylan,” he explains, “has slipped into people’s dream baskets. He has been incorporated into their myths and fantasies” (34).

Many are the writers who have titled their works with phrases from Dylan, or made dedications to him. For novelist Barry Hannah, author of *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*, Dylan is “a master of spiritual geography” (2004:283); fiction writer Joyce Carol Oates has dedicated her most frequently reproduced short story, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” to him; activist publisher Raymond Mungo titled his personal history of the 1960s Liberation News Service *Famous Long Ago* (1970).

Recent years have witnessed a surge of new books on Dylan’s work, including a new edition of Michael Gray’s remarkable exploration, *Song and Dance Man III: The Art of Bob Dylan* (2000) and Christopher Ricks’ provocative study, *Dylan’s Visions of Sin* (2003). Though Professor Ricks and I have debated the issue of whether Dylan should be accorded the Nobel, his volume offers, among other things, one of the most extended expositions of Dylan’s poetic gifts I’ve seen. Years ago he reflected (quoted in Brown 1990:20):

Dylan is an artist of a kind we have very few of now. He is like Shakespeare or Dickens—great writers who communicated across class. He has a Shakespearean size and ambition in the themes he explores and what he achieves. I don’t think there’s a British or American poet today more sensitive and imaginative about how he uses language than Dylan is.

Ricks’s summing up of the situation is perhaps better than anyone’s: “If the question is does anybody use words better than he does, then the answer in my opinion is no” (Glaister 1996:1).

At this point I’d like to introduce two further considerations, the second more extended than the first. Late in 1996, after our Nobel Prize nominations were in, Ginsberg remarked to me, “I don’t think Dylan particularly cares about it.” So I’d like to offer a little perspective here: Dylan doesn’t have to win the Nobel. He’s won so many accolades and awards; will winning or not

⁹ Available online at <http://www.expectingrain.com/dok/art/nobel/nobelpress2.html>.

winning one more really matter? If he were to win, of course that would be occasion for great joy and celebration for many—and maybe even Dylan would be pleased. But with or without the Nobel, his work remains triumphant.

According to Ginsberg, novelist William Burroughs once said that the habit of denial, the refusal to acknowledge anything other than the official version of reality, was so strongly ingrained in America several decades ago that if an elephant had appeared on the dais at the inauguration of President Roosevelt and made deposits before walking off, it would not have been reported.

In *Chronicles: Volume One*, Bob Dylan tells us (2004a:5-6) that

things were pretty sleepy on the Americana music scene in the late '50s and early '60s. Popular radio was at a sort of standstill and filled with empty pleasantries What I was playing at the time were hard-lipped folk songs with fire and brimstone servings, and you didn't need to take polls to know that they didn't match up with anything on the radio, didn't lend themselves to commercialism

The songs that affected the young Dylan recently arrived in the Village would, as he puts it, “make you question what you'd always accepted, could litter the landscape with broken hearts, had power of spirit” (14). “Folk songs,” Dylan recalls, “were the way I explored the universe . . .” (18). He further stipulates (34):

Songs about debauched bootleggers, mothers that drowned their own children, Cadillacs that got only five miles to the gallon, floods, union hall fires, darkness and cadavers at the bottoms of rivers weren't for radiophiles. There was nothing easygoing about the folk songs I sang. They weren't friendly or ripe with mellowness. They didn't come gently to the shore. . . . They were my preceptor and guide into some altered consciousness of reality. . . .

I mean to say that Dylan was, first in the folk songs he chose, soon and for decades thereafter in songs he composed, singing of “real” things, regardless of “official” or commercial reality. As William Carlos Williams once said of Allen Ginsberg, “he had something to say” (Breslin 1985:30). That's been one of Dylan's great strengths—telling us what we may not want to know, or what many haven't acknowledged; defying the protocol of accepted discourse, whether it be that within the American folk song community of the 1960s, or within legions of followers who think they have, as Eliot's Prufrock worried, gotten him “formulated, sprawling on a pin” (1962:

line 57), “pinned and wriggling on the wall” (line 58). He has surprised us, moved us, and altered the way we think, feel, speak, and imagine. He has, as the saying goes, moved mountains, helped change the course of history in the United States. He’s not merely a decorative artist, a pretty versifier, but a singer of great substance reviving and re-creating some of our most time-honored poetic traditions as he gives us melody matched by matter; he has inspired, enriched, and disquieted us.

Allow me to close with some personal perspectives. Broadly, literature in my view is aesthetically charged language, and poetry depends on oral performance. Of course there are exceptions and complications and matters of degree, but that’s how I see poetry’s vital core. Though I don’t deny the considerable effect (fortunately) that Ginsberg’s *Howl* has had on the page alone, what’s on paper may only be an approximation, sometimes a dim one, of what’s in the air, in the poet’s—the singer’s—voice. America’s Beat Generation was born overnight, so to speak, at a poetry reading at the center of which was Ginsberg’s first public reading of *Howl*. According to Jack Kerouac in his novel *The Dharma Bums*, it was “wailed” by the poet, “drunk with arms outspread,” and “everybody . . . yelling ‘Go! Go! Go!’ (like a jam session). . .” (1976:14). A decade later, *Howl* did not come alive for me until I heard Ginsberg declaim it.

Poetry and music have shared common ground, from the Greeks to Pound to Ginsberg. Categorize Dylan’s work as you will, but its literary qualities are exceptional; its artful idealism has contributed to major social change, altering and enriching the lives of millions culturally, politically, and aesthetically; the voices acclaiming it are many and distinguished. The Nobel Prize for Literature, which in over a century of being awarded has covered a territory broad and diverse, is a deserved form of recognition for such extraordinary accomplishment.

Department of English and Fine Arts, Virginia Military Institute

References

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| Allén and Espmark 2001 | Sture Allén and Kjell Espmark. <i>The Nobel Prize in Literature: An Introduction</i> . Stockholm: Swedish Academy. |
| Booth et al. 2001 | Alison Booth, J. Paul Hunter, Kelly J. Mays, and Jerome Beaty, eds. <i>The Norton Introduction to Literature</i> . Eighth edition. New York: Norton. |

- Breslin 1985 James E. B. Breslin. "The Presence of Williams in Contemporary Poetry." In *Something to Say: William Carlos Williams on Younger Poets*. Ed. by James E. B. Breslin. New York: New Directions. pp. 5-37.
- Brown 1990 Mick Brown. "Messiah of the Twentieth Century? It Ain't Me Babe." *Sunday Correspondent*, Feb. 4:20.
- Charters 1992 Ann Charters, ed. *The Portable Beat Reader*. New York: Viking, 1992.
- Chekhov 1968 Anton Chekhov. *The Portable Chekhov*. Ed. by Avrahm Yarmolinsky. New York: Viking.
- Dylan 2004a Bob Dylan. *Chronicles, Volume One*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Dylan 2004b _____. "Interview with Ed Bradley." *Sixty Minutes*. WBRA, Roanoke, VA. Dec. 5.
- Dylan 2004c _____. *Lyrics 1962-2001*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Eliot 1962 "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." In *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. New York: Harvest/Harcourt. pp. 3-9.
- Espmark 1991 Kjell Espmark. *The Nobel Prize in Literature: A Study of the Criteria behind the Choices*. Boston: G. K. Hall.
- Fagles 1990 Robert Fagles. "Translator's Preface." In Homer's *The Iliad*. New York: Penguin. pp. ix-xiv.
- Faulkner 1969 William Faulkner. "Acceptance." *Nobel Lectures: Including Presentation Speeches and Laureates' Biographies: Literature 1901-1967*. Ed. by Horst Frenz. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1969. p. 444-45.
- Feldman 2000 Burton Feldman. *The Nobel Prize: A History of Genius, Controversy, and Prestige*. New York: Arcade.
- Fitzgerald 1963 Robert Fitzgerald. "Postscript." In Homer's *The Odyssey*. Trans. by Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Doubleday. pp. 465-507.
- Frenz 1969a Horst Frenz. *Nobel Lectures: Including Presentation Speeches and Laureates' Biographies: Literature 1901-1967*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.

- Frenz 1969b Horst Frenz. "Introduction." *Nobel Lectures: Including Presentation Speeches and Laureates' Biographies: Literature 1901-1967*. Amsterdam: Elsevier. pp. VII-IX.
- Ginsberg 1975 Allen Ginsberg. *First Blues: Rags, Ballads, & Harmonium Songs, 1971-1974*. New York: Full Court.
- Ginsberg 1996 _____. "Letter to the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy." Nov. 20. Unpublished personal communication.
- Glaister 1996 Dan Glaister. "It's Alright, Ma, I've Just Been Nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature." *The Guardian* [London] Sept. 28:1.
- Gleason 1966 Ralph J. Gleason. "The Children's Crusade." *Ramparts*, 11 (March):27-34.
- Goldberg 2003 Danny Goldberg. *Dispatches from the Culture Wars: How the Left Lost Teen Spirit*. New York: Akashic Books.
- Gray 2000 Michael Gray. *Song & Dance Man III: The Art of Bob Dylan*. New York: Continuum.
- Hallstrom 1969 Hallstrom, Per. "Presentation." In *Nobel Lectures: Including Presentation Speeches and Laureates' Biographies: Literature 1901-1967*. Ed. by Horst Frenz. Amsterdam: Elsevier. pp. 194-198.
- Hannah 2004 Barry Hannah. "Constant Time for Bob Dylan." *Studio A: The Bob Dylan Reader*. Ed. by Benjamin Hedin. New York: Norton. pp. 280-84.
- Indrebø 2002 "Bob Dylan nominated for the Nobel Prize (Press Release Number 2)." Rev. May 24. Online at <http://www.expectingrain.com/dok/art/nobel/nobelpress2.html>.
- Kelley 2000 Tina Kelley. "Keats with A Guitar: The Times Sure Are A-Changin.'" *New York Times*, Jan 9, sec. 4:7.
- Kerouac 1976 Jack Kerouac. *The Dharma Bums*. New York: Penguin.
- Knox 1990 Bernard Knox. "Introduction." In Homer's *The Iliad*. Trans. by Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin. pp. 3-64.
- Lehman 2006 David Lehman, ed. "Introduction." In *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. vii-xxi.

- McClure 1974 Michael McClure. "The Poet's Poet." *Rolling Stone*, March 14:33-34.
- Melville 1967 Herman Melville. *Moby-Dick*. New York: Norton.
- Mungo 1970 Ray Mungo. *Famous Long Ago: My Life and Hard Times with Liberation News Service*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970.
- Noack 2002 Hans-Joachim Noack and Gabor Steingart. "Ein unheimliches Gefühl." *Der Spiegel* 18 May: 32-35.
- Nobel Foundation 2006 "Statutes of the Nobel Foundation." Nobel Foundation. 12 Dec. <http://nobelprize.org/nobel/foundation/statutes.html>.
- Polar Music Foundation 2004 "Polar Music Prize." Royal Swedish Academy of Music. <http://www.polarmusicprize.com/newSite/2000.shtml>.
- Pound 1954 Ezra Pound. *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. Ed. and Introduction by T. S. Eliot. New York: New Directions.
- Ricks 2003 Christopher Ricks. *Dylan's Visions of Sin*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Preminger 1974 "Rock Lyric." In *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Ed. by Alex Preminger. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. pp. 979-80.
- Siwertz 1969 Siwertz, S. "Presentation." In *Nobel Lectures: Including Presentation Speeches and Laureates' Biographies: Literature 1901-1967*. Ed. by Horst Frenz. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1969. 488-492.
- Spitzer 2006 Mark Spitzer. "Bob Dylan's *Tarantula*: An Arctic Reserve of Untapped Glimmerance Dismissed in a Ratland of Clichés." *Jack Magazine*, 7. <http://www.jackmagazine.com/issue7/essaysmspitzer.html>.
- Stanford 1967 W. B. Stanford. *The Sound of Greek: Studies in the Greek Theory and Practice of Euphony*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Yeats 1916 William Butler Yeats. "Introduction." In *Gitanjali (Song Offerings)*. By Rabindranath Tagore. New York: Macmillan. pp. vii-xxii.

Filmography

No Direction Home. Dir. Martin Scorsese. DVD. Paramount, 2005.