

NO COMPLETE UNKNOWN – THE SAGA OF BOB DYLAN’S LITERATURE NOBEL

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Abstract

This essay examines the phenomenon of the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature for 2016 to the US singer-songwriter Bob Dylan (born in 1941) and the worldwide controversy it has given rise to. After consideration of the history of the campaign and the various classes of objection (categorical, aesthetic, individual-centred, hardline left and identitarian), it is concluded that, given also the quality of Dylan’s work, it is legitimate to award a Literature Nobel to a composer of songs.

Keywords: Bob Dylan, Nobel, literature, singer-songwriter, musician.

Resumen

Este texto analiza el fenómeno de la concesión del Premio Nobel de Literatura de 2016 al cantautor estadounidense Bob Dylan (nacido en 1941) y la polémica planetaria que ha suscitado. Después de considerarse la historia de la campaña y las varias clases de objeciones (relativas a categoría textual, estética, situación del individuo, ultraizquierdismo y discurso identitario), se llega a la conclusión de que, también a la luz de la calidad de la obra de Dylan, es lícito otorgar un Nobel de Literatura a un compositor de canciones.

Palabras clave: Bob Dylan, Nobel, literatura, cantautor, músico.

*“But it’s all been done before
It’s been written in a book”*

Bob Dylan¹

¹ Bob Dylan, “Too Much of Nothing” (1967). All quotations in this article from Dylan’s song texts are taken from the volume *Lyrics 1962-2001* (see below).

I

The award of the Nobel Prize for Literature for 2016 to the singer-songwriter Bob Dylan has generated an enormous planetary controversy. Before embarking on any assessment, it is therefore worth pausing to recall the basic facts. The Nobel Prize for Literature is awarded every year by the Swedish Academy pursuant to the will of the Swedish millionaire and philanthropist Alfred Nobel (1833-1896 - best-known as the inventor of dynamite), in parallel to the Nobel Prizes in five other fields, namely Medicine, Physics, Chemistry, Economics and Peace. The US citizen Bob Dylan, born in Duluth, Minnesota in 1941 of Jewish-Ukrainian origin as Robert Allen Zimmerman (he changed his name legally in 1962), thus becomes the 113th winner of the prize since it was established in 1901. Winning the Literature Nobel entails not only worldwide recognition of the laureate's name and work, but also a medal and a sizeable material reward, amounting today to 8 million Swedish crowns (approximately a million dollars). The official citation for Dylan's award is, as it usually is, brief, and simply reads: "The Nobel Prize in Literature for 2016 is awarded to Bob Dylan for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition".² The citation is now accompanied on the official Nobel site by a biographical note, a discography and an extensive primary and secondary bibliography.

Controversy was compounded by Dylan's initial non-recognition of the prize. The award day was 13 October 2016, and a brief mention appeared the same day on Dylan's Facebook page,³ but his official website, www.bobdylan.com, acknowledged the prize only a week later and in the most fleeting fashion. A mention of the Nobel appeared on the site⁴ on 20 October in the official description of a new print edition of Dylan's collected lyrics,⁵ only to be removed six hours after it had materialised (albeit a link from the site to the online retailer Amazon still led to a page carrying the mention). The Swedish Academy, after repeated efforts to locate the new laureate on the phone, had to wait until he called them on 28 October and formally accepted the award⁶ (the site mention, however, was not restored). For a time, Dylan had seemed to be acting like his own character the Jokerman – a clear case of: "Oh Jokerman, you don't show any response!"⁷

That much-awaited phonecall put paid to any notion that Dylan might follow Russia's Boris Pasternak in 1958 or France's Jean-Paul Sartre in 1964 in refusing the prize. In an interview granted to Britain's *The Telegraph* the following day, Dylan greeted the award as "amazing" and "hard to believe", and

² Nobel Prize, official website. Web. 5 November 2016.

<www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/>.

³ Bob Dylan, official Facebook page. Web. 13 October 2016.

<<https://www.facebook.com/bobdylan/>>. That reference was not removed.

⁴ Bob Dylan, official website. Web. 20 October 2016. <www.bobdylan.com>.

⁵ The edition concerned is *Lyrics 1961-2012* (cf. below).

⁶ For the phonecall, see the Nobel site. Web. 5 November 2016. <www.nobelprize.org/press/>.

⁷ Dylan, "Jokerman" (1983).

said he would show up at the Nobel ceremony on 10 December “if it’s at all possible”.⁸ The award is received by the laureate from the hands of Sweden’s monarch, currently King Carl XVI Gustaf; the awardee is also invited to give a commemoration lecture. The Academy has said the lecture could for Dylan be replaced by a concert, but it is not yet known if he will proffer either.

The two weeks between award and recognition seemed a whole odyssey, but Dylan’s Nobel in itself was in reality not a total surprise. It did not come out of the blue: both Dylan fans and Nobel buffs knew that the man from Minnesota had been a Nobel nominee every year for close on two decades. His name was first put forward by two hopeful devotees from Norway, and his candidacy was formally taken up in a letter to the Swedish Academy nominating Dylan for 1997, signed by US academic Gordon Ball, then a professor at the Virginia Military Institute.⁹ In the first year of Dylan’s nomination, the prize went to the Italian playwright Dario Fo, and from then on it was a long and patient wait for Dylan acolytes.

It is by no means always the case that the Swedish Academy awards the Nobel to someone internationally famous, and Dylan has most certainly not been given the prize ‘because he is there’. A brief look at some of the names of the Nobel literature laureates since Dylan was first nominated is illuminative. Among the names on the roster are: Imre Kertesz (Hungary, 2002); Elfriede Jelinek (Austria, 2004); Herta Müller (Germany, 2009); Tomas Tranströmer (Sweden, 2011); Mo Yan (China, 2012); and Patrick Modiano (France, 2014). With all respect to these writers, how many even of those who consider themselves keen readers can place hand on heart and swear that they have read them? Last year’s laureate, Svetlana Alexievich, a woman journalist from Belarus, is not exactly a household name. Nor, indeed, is the first-ever awardee, the French writer Sully Prudhomme (1901), who today is scarcely remembered for anything other than inaugurating the Literature Nobel. Indeed, when in 2010 an internationally known author, Peru’s Mario Vargas Llosa, did win the prize, an Italian newspaper ironically headlined that ‘at last someone we’ve heard of gets the Nobel’.

II

Bob Dylan is certainly – to quote his own “Like a Rolling Stone”¹⁰ – not a “complete unknown”. However, his Nobel is being received in some quarters as a perilous innovation, on the grounds that he is a songwriter and the literature Nobel should be a closed garden reserved for ‘real’ writers, where people who write songs are trespassers. Dylan’s prose writings – i.e. his non-songwriting

⁸ Edna Gundersen. “World exclusive - Bob Dylan: ‘I’ll be at the Nobel Prize ceremony – if I can’”. *The Telegraph*, 29 October 1916. Web. <www.telegraph.co.uk/men/the-filter/world-exclusive-bob-dylan---ill-be-at-the-nobel-prize-ceremony-i/>.

⁹ Ball (2007).

¹⁰ Dylan, “Like a Rolling Stone” (1965).

literary production – amount to two books, the stream-of-consciousness novel *Tarantula*¹¹ from 1966 and *Chronicles Volume One*¹² from 2004, the first (and so far only) instalment of his promised three-volume autobiography. *Tarantula* does not in general have a good press (though some readers might disagree), but conversely *Chronicles* does. At all events, it is clear from the citation that Dylan has been awarded the Nobel not for his prose writings (though they may have been taken into account), but for his songs.

The Dylan song canon has been estimated as comprising some 500 to 600 originals. Bob Dylan has to date released 37 studio albums dated between 1962 and 2016, plus live albums, compilations and large amounts of archive material. The original songs which have won him the Nobel constitute the harvest of (most of) the studio albums (some consist entirely or mostly of cover versions), a cull further enriched by the ‘non-album’ originals added to the canon over the years via compilations or archive releases. These sung texts correspond (at times approximately, as textual variants are not lacking) to the words-on-the-page texts to be found in the various print editions of Dylan’s lyrics. The most recent widely available edition is the third, from 2004 (*The Lyrics 1962-2001*),¹³ though that is in process of being superseded by a fourth edition, *The Lyrics 1961-2012*,¹⁴ coincidentally slated for release in November 2016 and now available (it was over that book’s online ad that the famous ephemeral Nobel acknowledgment flitted). There is also a scholarly variorum volume, *The Lyrics: Since 1962*,¹⁵ published in 2014 as a limited edition edited and introduced by Christopher Ricks, professor of English at Boston University and one of Dylan’s most vocal academic champions. From these print volumes – or else from the collection of lyrics on the official website – may be read the words of Bob Dylan’s songs in their manifestation as literary text. It may be added that over the years Dylan’s lyrics have been very widely translated into languages other than English – and as standalone text, a circumstance which should bolster his credibility as poet.¹⁶ Equally, the substantive academic and literary-critical analysis of Dylan’s lyrics is hardly new, dating back to 1972, when the first critical study of his work, Michael Gray’s *Song and Dance Man: The Art of Bob Dylan*, appeared.¹⁷

¹¹ Dylan. *Tarantula*. 1966. New York: St Martin’s Press, 1994.

¹² Dylan. *Chronicles Volume One*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004.

¹³ Dylan. *The Lyrics 1962-2001*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004.

¹⁴ Dylan. *The Lyrics 1961-2012*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.

¹⁵ Dylan. *The Lyrics: Since 1962*. Ed. and intr. Christopher Ricks. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014.

¹⁶ All of Dylan’s works – *Tarantula*, *Chronicles* and various permutations of lyrics – have been translated into Spanish. A Spanish-language bibliography may be found on the Nobel site. For Dylan and the Spanish-speaking world, see Rollason (2007 and 2011).

¹⁷ Gray (1972). His study has since gone through two more editions – see Gray (1981 and 2000).

The Nobel is the result of an assessment of a writer’s entire oeuvre (unlike accolades such as the Man Booker Prize which go to an author for a single work – and often in a single genre, such as the novel). It is awarded for a writer’s literary quality and for the presence in the awardee’s work of an ‘ideal’ tendency, whatever that may be. To quote Alfred Nobel’s will, it rewards, “in the field of literature”, “the most outstanding work in an ideal direction”.¹⁸ The worldwide debate since the award of the prize has been over whether the best-selling, hyperinfluential, 75-year-old US singer-songwriter called Bob Dylan deserves it.

The award was hailed by leading politicians (Barack Obama and Al Gore) and, among Dylan’s musical peers, by Bruce Springsteen, Tom Waits and Leonard Cohen. More nuanced was the reaction from the literary community. If writers such as Salman Rushdie, Joyce Carol Oates and Stephen King (the first two themselves long-standing Nobel nominees) lauded the accolade, the likes of Hari Kunzru, Margaret Atwood and – above all – fellow Nobel Mario Vargas Llosa were not amused,¹⁹ while to judge from the reactions on its website the US branch of the writers’ organisation PEN was split down the middle.²⁰ In the academic and journalistic sphere, the decision was praised by all of Dylan’s major long-term critics. The authors of the most important studies on Dylan’s work duly bore witness: Christopher Ricks (*Dylan’s Visions of Sin*),²¹ Michael Gray (*Song and Dance Man*),²² Greil Marcus (*Invisible Republic*),²³ Stephen Scobie (*Alias Bob Dylan Revisited*);²⁴ so too did original proposer Gordon Ball.²⁵

¹⁸ “Alfred Nobel’s Will”. 1895. Translated extract. Web. 30 October 2016. <www.nobelprize.org/alfred_nobel/will>.

¹⁹ For Obama, Gore, Rushdie, Oates, King and Kunzru, see: Devon Ivie. “Celebrities and Authors from Salman Rushdie to Joyce Carol Oates React to Bob Dylan’s Nobel Prize in Literature”. *Vulture*, 13 October 2016. Web. <www.vulture.com/2016/10/celebrities-authors-react-to-bob-dylans-nobel.html>. For Springsteen and Waits, see: Ben Kaye. “Bruce Springsteen, Tom Waits congratulate Dylan on Nobel Prize”. *Consequence of Sound*, 14 October 2016. Web. <<http://consequenceofsound.net/2016/10/bruce-springsteen-tom-waits-congratulate-bob-dylan-on-nobel-prize-win/>>. For Atwood, see: Constance Grady. “Margaret Atwood does not care for Dylan’s Nobel win”. *Vox*, 22 October 2016. Web. <<http://www.vox.com/culture/2016/10/22/13357806/margaret-atwood-bob-dylan-book-link-roundup>>. For Cohen and Vargas Llosa, see below.

²⁰ PEN America [multi-author post]. “Should Bob Dylan Have Won the Nobel Prize for Literature?”, 14 October 2016. Web. <<https://pen.org/dylan-nobel>>.

²¹ Ricks (2003).

²² See above for the different editions of Gray’s book.

²³ Marcus (1997).

²⁴ Scobie (2003).

²⁵ For Ricks, see: Christopher Ricks. “Bob Dylan is a genius - but reducing his songs to ‘literature’ is dangerous”. *The Telegraph*, 14 October 2016. Web. <www.telegraph.co.uk/music/what-to-listen-to/bob-dylan-is-a-genius--but-reducing-his-songs-to-literature-is-d/> (despite the title, Ricks hailed the award); for Gray, see: “Bob Dylan Wins Nobel Prize in Literature”. *Radio New Zealand Morning Report*, 14 October 2016. Web. <www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/morningreport/audio/201819928/bob-dylan-wins-nobel-prize-in-literature>; for Marcus, see: Jon Wiener (interview), “Greil Marcus on Bob Dylan’s Nobel Prize”, *LA Review of Books*, 14 October 2016. Web. <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/bob-dylans-nobel-prize>>; for Scobie, see: Douglas Quan. “‘It’s a wonder that you still know how to breathe’: Canadian academics on their favourite Bob

Obama responded: “Congratulations to one of my favourite poets, Bob Dylan, on a well-deserved Nobel”.²⁶ Rushdie, a long-time fan of what might be called the Dylanic verses, affirmed that “Dylan towers over everyone” and that with this award “the frontiers of literature keep widening”.²⁷ Cohen, who was soon to depart this life,²⁸ declared magnanimously of his rival that the award was like “pinning a medal on Mount Everest”.²⁹ Praise rained down thick and fast. However, from the other side objections also poured in, and if we are properly to understand the significance of Dylan’s award it is important to consider those demurrals and where they are coming from.

III

The objections may be broadly classified into five types, namely: generic/categorical (‘I have nothing against Dylan’s songwriting, but songwriting just isn’t literature’); generic/qualitative (‘rock lyrics can’t be poetry and this award dumbs down the Nobel’); individual-centred (‘Dylan doesn’t need the Nobel or the money’); politically correct/‘lefter-than-thou’ (‘Dylan wrote against war, so should refuse the prize’); and feminist/identitarian (‘Dylan is just another white male’).

Regarding the first objection, Dylan’s Nobel citation refers to both “poetic expressions” and the “song tradition”, thus implying that the Swedish Academy believes that song can be poetry and poetry can be song. It is stated, then, that Bob Dylan is part of the American popular song tradition, yes, but - also - of the American poetic tradition, there in the pantheon alongside Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Hart Crane and Robert Frost. It is here that voices are raised affirming that ‘songwriting is a perfectly valid activity but it isn’t literature’. Thus, US author Peter Godwin argued on the PEN site that “read baldly on the page, alone, not much of Dylan’s verse is great literature”, declaring: “I’m a huge fan of Dylan. But Nobel literature laureate? I’m not so sure”. Another writer reacting on that site, Natalie Diaz, went further, claiming that “the element

Dylan verses”. *National Post*, 13 October 2016. Web. <www.nationalpost.com/m/wp/news/canada/blog.html?b=news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/its-a-wonder-that-you-still-know-how-to-breathe-canadian-academics-share-their-favourite-bob-dylan-verses>; for Ball, see: Gordon Ball. “I nominated Bob Dylan for the Nobel Prize more than a dozen times”. *Washington Post*, 14 October 2016. Web. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/10/14/i-nominated-bob-dylan-for-the-nobel-prize-youre-welcome/?utm_term=.532117ac470b>.

²⁶ For Obama, see *Vulture* site above.

²⁷ For Rushdie, this reaction is from: [unsigned] – “‘Dylan towers over everyone’: Salman Rushdie, Kate Tempest and more pay tribute to Bob Dylan”. *Guardian*, 13 October 2016. Web. <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/oct/13/dylan-towers-over-everyone-salman-rushdie-kate-tempest-and-more-pay-tribute-to-bob-dylan>>.

²⁸ Leonard Cohen died on 7 November 2016.

²⁹ For Cohen, see: [unsigned] – “Leonard Cohen: Giving Nobel to Bob Dylan like pinning a medal on Everest”. *Guardian*, 14 October 2016. Web. <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/oct/14/leonard-cohen-giving-nobel-to-bob-dylan-like-pinning-medal-on-everest>>.

of reading was taken out of the prize category this year”, asking rhetorically: “When was the last time you read song lyrics”?³⁰

Over this argument, I beg leave to differ. The Nobel has been awarded often enough to dramatists, from Ireland’s George Bernard Shaw (1925) through the American Eugene O’Neill (1936) to the UK’s Harold Pinter (2005) and, indeed, the recently deceased Dario Fo (1997). Writing for the theatre is perfectly comparable to songwriting since it combines verbal text with expression through a different medium, namely the stage. As I see it, the analogy is perfectly legitimate and I therefore do not consider the categorial objection to be valid. If theatre is words-plus-another-medium, so too is songwriting.

A precedent for Dylan’s award has been claimed insofar as India’s Rabindranath Tagore, the 1913 laureate and first non-Western author to win the Nobel, was among many other things a prolific songwriter. Indeed, Tagore composed no less than 2230 songs – far more than Dylan has authored! – in his native Bengali, which remain part of the local repertoire to this day. Several commentators, notably in India, have invoked Tagore as a predecessor.³¹ However, the analogy is not complete, as Tagore, poet, novelist, short-story writer, essayist and songwriter, was awarded the prize primarily for the work of his best known outside India, in other words his poetry. The precedent does, though, partially stand.

Like the categorial objection, the qualitative objection relates to genre, but evaluatively rather than descriptively. The argument here is that popular song is an inherently substandard or inferior genre which cannot be put on the same footing as literature. That argument today may look old-fashioned, but still has its advocates. A journalist by the name of Tim Stanley, writing in *The Telegraph*, went so far as to call the award a “dumbing down of culture”, and was approvingly quoted in India.³² The French writer Pierre Assouline, a member of the prestigious Académie Goncourt, declared: “Je trouve que l’Académie suédoise se ridiculise. C’est méprisant pour les écrivains” (“I think the Swedish Academy has brought discredit on itself. This is an act of contempt towards writers”³³). Even harsher was the critique emitted by no less a figure than Mario Vargas Llosa, who dismissed Dylan’s Nobel as a concession to “la civilización del espectáculo” (“showbiz culture”) and asked indignantly: “si el próximo año

³⁰ For Godwin and Diaz, see the PEN site as cited above.

³¹ See, for example: Sanchari Pal. “Bob Dylan Isn’t the First Lyricist to Win the Nobel. Rabindranath Tagore is”. *The Better India*, 20 October 2016. Web.

<www.thebetterindia.com/72438/bob-dylan-rabindranath-tagore-nobel-prize-literature>.

³² Quoted in: Babatdor Dkhar. “Why Bob Dylan didn’t deserve Nobel Prize for Literature”. *Hindustan Times*, 14 October 2016. Web. <www.hindustantimes.com/music/why-bob-dylan-didn-t-deserve-nobel-prize-for-literature/story-3dHU8ESqoaYRSeFZQoVw5M.html>.

³³ [unsigned], “‘Affligeant’: des écrivains protestent contre le Nobel de Bob Dylan”. *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 13 October 2016. Web. <<http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/en-direct/a-chaud/28809-dylan-nobel-affligeant-ecrivains-protestent-contre-nobel.html#>>.

no le van a dar el premio a un futbolista” (“if next year they won’t give it to a footballer”).³⁴

Nonetheless, the most superficial glance at Dylan’s work makes it clear that while his songs refer back to other popular songs from various genres, they are also replete with literary references. Quotations from the King James Bible are all over his work. His epic song from 1965, “Desolation Row”, alludes to the Old and New Testaments, Shakespeare, Victor Hugo, Franz Kafka, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. Songs on Dylan’s more recent albums have taken inspiration from classical Roman writers (Ovid and Virgil), from Edgar Allan Poe, and from writers as obscure as Japan’s Junichi Saga or forgotten American Civil War poet Henry Timrod. However, the best refutation of the ‘dumbing-down/lowbrow/playing to the gallery’ argument is the simple fact that it is precisely the work of Bob Dylan and its critical reception that has made the study of popular music lyrics an acceptable academic pursuit. Dylan’s writing has shifted the cultural goalposts, and if the Nobel was to go to a songwriter, it makes entire sense that it should be to Dylan.

The argument that Dylan ‘doesn’t need the Nobel’ was voiced at the annual Miguel de Cervantes festival in Guanajuato, Mexico, by the Spanish writer and academician Antonio Muñoz Molina. The speaker argued that the Nobel should go not to the already rich and famous but to the deserving poor – that being indigent and little-known (plus, admittedly, also being a good writer) should qualify someone for the Nobel: “Cuando el Nobel se le da a alguien que ya tiene todo, a quien no le hace ninguna falta, me parece superfluo” (“When the Nobel is given to someone who already has everything, who doesn’t need anything, I find it redundant”).³⁵ The objections here are, first, that the Nobel does in fact often go to obscure writers (as in the list I cited above), and second, that – to refer only to Latin American laureates - such a criterion would count out the likes of Colombia’s best-selling Gabriel García Márquez (the 1982 winner), or, indeed, Bob Dylan’s nemesis Mario Vargas Llosa. It is surely not a crime to sell large amounts of one’s work and be able to live from one’s creative activity: in Dylan’s case no-one can deny that the man is rich, but that does not invalidate his songwriting - and in any case any laureate has the option of refusing the prize money or donating it to a good cause!

The ‘lefter-than-thou’ argument was spearheaded by British writer Will Self, who argued in *The Guardian* that Dylan should “follow Sartre and refuse the award”. Self claimed that “it cheapens Dylan to be associated at all with a prize founded on an explosives and armaments fortune”.³⁶ He is presumably

³⁴ Quoted in: Mar González. “Vargas Llosa, crítico del Nobel a Dylan: ‘El próximo año lo darán a un futbolista’”. *ABC*, 20 October 2016. Web. <www.abc.es/espana/castilla-leon/abc-vargas-llosa-critico-nobel-dylan-proximo-daran-futbolista-201610201414_noticia.html>.

³⁵ Quoted in: Verónica Espinosa. “El Nobel no le hace falta a Dylan, critican en la FIC”. *Proceso*, 19 November 2016. Web. <www.proceso.com.mx/459404/nobel-le-falta-a-dylan-critican-en-fic>.

³⁶ In: [unsigned] – “‘Dylan towers over everyone’: Salman Rushdie, Kate Tempest and more pay tribute to Bob Dylan”, *Guardian*, 13 October 2016. Web.

implying that because back in 1963 Dylan wrote the song “Masters of War” against arms manufacturers he should refuse Nobel’s money today. “Masters of War”, though, however influential, is one song out of hundreds, and Self’s argument if taken to its logical conclusion would mean that every living laureate (and especially all Peace Prize winners) should hand back their Nobel, all executors of dead laureates should return theirs too, and all six Nobel prizes should be abolished forthwith. Such an ‘everything-must-fall’ option might today gratify certain interest groups or campus iconoclasts, but it has very little to do with Bob Dylan as individual laureate and may therefore be dismissed.

The feminist/identitarian objection is that Bob Dylan is a white male, is therefore privileged by definition, and accordingly neither needs nor deserves an award like the Nobel. It may be represented by Australian writer and academic Natalie Kon-yu, who claimed, again in *The Guardian*, that “honouring Dylan is simply a return to the status quo” and said she found it “galling” that “people are calling this radical, a breath of fresh air from an otherwise stuffy institution”. In her view, “Bob Dylan's Nobel prize isn't radical. He's just another white male writer”. For Kon-yu, the prize should have gone to a woman, preferably a woman of colour.³⁷ Taking that line of thought further, on the PEN America site the poet Amy King called on Dylan to reject the prize and to “publicly admit that we don’t need another white guy status quo affirmation in a world full of writers of colour penning their lives and ideals”.³⁸

It remains the case, however, that the purveyors of this line cannot quite reduce Bob Dylan to the negative stereotype of ‘white Caucasian male’, as he happens to be Jewish. They also conveniently forget the solidarity with beleaguered or victimised black individuals expressed by Dylan in songs like “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll”, “George Jackson” or “Hurricane” (or would they dismiss those songs as appropriative tokenism)? The argument of Dylan’s identitarian critics boils down to the fact that there have to date only been 14 women Nobel literature winners as opposed to 99 men, from which it may be deduced that they would prefer to see the prize either abolished or awarded in future only to women. In fact, the Nobels for 2015 and 2013 both went to women - Svetlana Alexievich, as seen above, and Canada’s Alice Munro - which suggests the Swedish Academy is in fact redressing the balance. Meanwhile, women writers are not lacking who have praised Dylan’s award – among them Joyce Carol Oates, as we saw, and Mexico’s feminist veteran Elena

<<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/oct/13/dylan-towers-over-everyone-salman-rushdie-kate-tempest-and-more-pay-tribute-to-bob-dylan>>.

³⁷ Natalie Kon-yu. “Bob Dylan’s Nobel prize isn’t radical. He’s just another white male writer”. *Guardian*, 14 October 2016. Web.

<<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/oct/14/bob-dylans-nobel-prize-isnt-radical-hes-just-another-white-male-writer>>.

³⁸ For King, see the PEN site as cited above.

Poniatowska, who welcomed the award as “una ampliación de los criterios” (“an enlargement of horizons”).³⁹

There is also the argument that if the prize went to a songwriter, it should have been a woman songwriter, and here Kon-yu asks rhetorically whether “a female songwriter would ever be elevated to Dylan’s height”. Those taking this line might name, perhaps, Canada’s Joni Mitchell (feminist), or the US’s Tracy Chapman (black), or the British-Caribbean Joan Armatrading (black and lesbian). However, it would be hard to find a living woman songwriter who has had anything like Dylan’s influence, and the feminist/identitarian objection to the award, like the lefter-than-thou objection, may be considered to have little to do with Dylan as individual writer or with the actual merits of his songs. Indeed and curiously, in their articles neither Kon-yu nor King, though they might have been expected to, actually scours the lyrics for lines that they as feminists might disapprove of.

Objections on grounds of cultural hegemony do, however, touch on a valid point if one takes account of the linguistic geopolitics of both literature and popular music. Dylan is the 27th English-speaking Nobel literature laureate and the eleventh American to be awarded the Nobel (the US has now scored more laureates than any country but France), though he is the first US awardee since the (be it noted) black and female novelist Toni Morrison in 1993. Beyond that, it was predictable that if the Nobel was ever to go to a songwriter, it would be to a songwriter in English. Dylan’s international prestige as singer-songwriter reflects not only his (remarkable) merits, but also the dominant position of Anglophone popular music worldwide. The extent of that phenomenon is sometimes exaggerated, but however large the domestic audience of, say, Indian or Chinese popular music, they are not genres with a global projection. The only living singer-songwriter from anywhere in the world other than Dylan who might conceivably have received the Nobel was (though history has now decreed otherwise) the late Leonard Cohen, who was Canadian. Going into the past, there could have been a case for Belgium’s Jacques Brel, Portugal’s José Afonso, or Chile’s Violeta Parra, singer-songwriters known beyond their own language communities. However, none of those three is with us today, and at this moment it would be hard to find a living non-Anglophone songwriter having anything like the global projection accruing to Bob Dylan. In that respect it may be legitimate to see this Nobel as transmitting unequal power-relations, but Bob Dylan did not create that and the circumstance should not detract from the deservedness of his award.

³⁹ [unsigned] - “Elena Poniatowska opinó sobre Premio Nobel a Bob Dylan”, *El Comercio*, 24 October 2016. Web. <<http://elcomercio.pe/luces/libros/elena-poniatowska-dijo-esto-sobre-premio-nobel-bob-dylan-noticia-1941335>>.

IV

There is a vital aspect of Dylan’s career that transcends ideology. It may reasonably be claimed that if there is a key value that Bob Dylan represents, it is artistic freedom – and it may be here, rather than in any individual song, that he has best fulfilled Alfred Nobel’s requirement of an “ideal direction”. Time and again across his career Dylan has confounded his followers – abandoning protest song and going electric in the mid-60s, turning to country music in the late 60s and to religion in the late 70s, returning to acoustic folk in the mid-80s and, most recently, covering standards made famous by Frank Sinatra. The range of his songs’ subject-matter and of their language registers is remarkable, and Dylan may be seen as an artist who has explored American popular music from multiple directions, as well as enriching it by dialogue with the literary tradition. Artistic freedom as manifested by Dylan may be seen as emblematic of human freedom as such.

There is no Nobel award for music (perhaps there should be), and Bob Dylan has been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Any judgment as to the deserving or otherwise nature of his award must, then, be based on the examination of Dylan’s written output (essentially, therefore, the song texts). It cannot be forgotten that Dylan’s innumerable concerts form a huge part of his total artistic creation. However, from the point of view of the Nobel the concerts should probably be seen as back-up material, and qualitative analysis will best be concentrated on, first, reading the lyrics and, second, listening to the songs in their original studio versions.

For those who feel they may have to justify the Swedish Academy’s choice to the sceptical, the best strategy may be what Dylan himself has called “bringing it all back home”⁴⁰ - to take it all down to the words on the page (or screen). A list of Bob Dylan’s best or most important song texts – to read first, and then listen to on record - might include, from the world-famous to the obscure but meritorious, the following 40: “Blowin’ in the Wind” (1963), “Masters of War” (1963), “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” (1963), “Bob Dylan’s Dream” (1963), “The Times They Are A-Changin’” (1964), “Ballad of Hollis Brown” (1964), “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” (1964), “With God on Our Side” (1964), “Lay Down Your Weary Tune” (1964), “Chimes of Freedom” (1964), “Gates of Eden” (1965), “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue” (1965), “Farewell, Angelina” (1965), “Like a Rolling Stone” (1965), “Desolation Row” (1965), “Visions of Johanna” (1966), “Too Much of Nothing” (1967), “This Wheel’s On Fire” (1967), “All Along the Watchtower” (1968), “George Jackson” (1971), “Tangled Up in Blue” (1975), “Simple Twist of Fate” (1975), “Hurricane” (1976), “Isis” (1976), “Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)” (1978), “Every Grain of Sand” (1981), “Caribbean Wind” (1981), “Jokerman” (1983), “I and I” (1983), “Blind Willie McTell” (1983), “Brownsville Girl” (1986), “Man in the Long Black Coat” (1989), “Shooting Star” (1989), “Dignity” (1989), “Not Dark Yet” (1997), “Things Have Changed” (2000), “High Water (For Charley Patton)”

⁴⁰ See the title of Dylan’s album *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965).

(2001), “Workingman’s Blues No 2” (2006), “Forgetful Heart” (2009), “Tempest” (2012) - and there are many, many more.

V

The exceptionally high quality of Bob Dylan’s songwriting is beyond all doubt. He has coined phrases that have enriched the language and has redefined the boundaries between high and low culture. It is striking that, post-Nobel, the anti-Dylan camp do not seem in general, as might have been expected, to be resorting to doing the actual lyrics over to find fault with them: Dylan’s merits as songwriter seem to be a given even for opponents of his award. By looking in this article at the objections to his Nobel I hope to have helped better to establish the case in favour. However, in the end that case can only rest on Bob Dylan’s song texts, and in the wake of the Nobel, I invite those who do not know his songs to discover them, and those who know them to return to them – to read the words first, and then listen to the texts as sung. For as Dylan wrote in 1964, “I can’t think for you – you’ll have to decide”!⁴¹

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⁴¹ Dylan, “With God on Our Side” (1964).

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