

Review Essay

The lives and work of Bob Dylan

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The Double Life of Bob Dylan. A Restless, Hungry Feeling (1941–1966). By Clinton Heylin. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2021. 520 pp. ISBN 978-0-316-53521-2

21st-Century Dylan. Late and Timely. Edited by Lawrence Estanova, Adrian Grafe, Andrew McKeown and Claire Hélie. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. 232 pp. ISBN 978-1-501-36369-6

Bob Dylan. How the Songs Work. By Timothy Hampton. New York: Zone Books, 2020. 285 pp. ISBN 978-1-942-13036-9

The World of Bob Dylan. Edited by Sean Latham. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 351 pp. ISBN 978-1-108-49951-4

According to the website *Come writers and critics*, which keeps a running list of all ‘documents related to Bob Dylan printed on paper’, by the end of 2021 (Dylan’s 80th year), there were 829 books about him in English and 723 in 36 other languages (from 175 in German to one each in Bulgarian and Vietnamese).¹ The list is indiscriminate in terms of the various books’ quality, originality or readability, but looking at the bibliographies of the various works I’m reviewing here, it seems that there are at least 50 Dylan books that academic Dylanologists take seriously (and many more journal articles).² From this perspective, my four titles provide a useful cross-section of the most common academic Dylan studies in disciplinary terms: biography, literary criticism, musicology and cultural studies. I should also note that in March 2016 the George Kaiser Family Foundation bought Bob Dylan’s personal archive (for \$22 million according to Heylin) and gave it a permanent home in Tulsa. This has opened up significant new research possibilities. In its own words:

The Bob Dylan Archive® highlights the unique artistry and worldwide cultural significance of Bob Dylan. Housed at the University of Tulsa’s Helmerich Center for American Research at Gilcrease Museum, the archive includes decades of never-before-seen handwritten manuscripts, notebooks and correspondence; films, videos, photographs and artwork; memorabilia; personal documents; unrecorded song lyrics and chords.

¹ <https://www.bobdylan-comewritersandcritics.com> (accessed 18 March 2022).

² This is the figure for English language scholarship. *21st-Century Dylan*, which has French editors and contributors, also draws on a body of French language Dylan scholarship.

Like the writer and composer archives to be found in many university libraries, the Bob Dylan collection is accessible onsite (and by appointment) to 'individuals with qualified research projects', and *The World of Bob Dylan* is, in effect, a celebration of a new era for Dylan scholarship. Its editor, Sean Latham, is the Director of the related Institute for Bob Dylan Studies.³ However, the first book to draw on the Bob Dylan Archive systematically is Clinton Heylin's *The Double Life*.

Heylin has already written seven biographical studies of Bob Dylan and *Behind the Shades*, first published in 1991 and rewritten and updated several times since, is, in his own words, 'the go-to biography for any serious student of the man and his art'. This is the opinion of 'writers I rate highly' (p. 13) and is indeed a view shared by Andrew Muir in his chapter on 'The Biographies' in *The World of Bob Dylan*. Muir notes 'Heylin's obsessive fan's knowledge of session and concert dates' and his years of crisscrossing the Atlantic 'tirelessly researching, listening, and uncovering alternate takes while also conducting an extraordinary number of interviews'. Heylin's 'depth of coverage and attention to detail' and 'the deepening and enriching' of his Dylan narrative by the books focused on the making of various Dylan albums means, 'simply put', that *Beyond the Shades*' 20th anniversary edition (published in 2011) 'is currently the only biography to which to turn' (pp. 27–8).

Heylin himself writes that he had felt no need to write yet another Bob biography until 'one mad March day in 2016', when 'the world of Dylan studies split open and a great gaping hole at the heart of the master's art was filled if not to the brim, certainly well past the half-full glass of the most optimistic Dylan scholar' (p. 13).

This was the day that the *New York Times* ran the first story about 'Bob Dylan's Secret Archive' and *The Double Life of Bob Dylan* is the first volume of Heylin's new biographical project, which will draw on the previously unavailable archive material. Ironically, as Heylin reports, the archive turned out to have little manuscript material from the period of this volume (1941–66), but there were previously unseen outtakes from documentary films, drafts of Dylan's early novel *Tarantula*, and recordings of conversations between Dylan and his Minnesota friend Tony Glover. The new material is integrated seamlessly into Heylin's ever-unfolding Dylan story and other biographies remain redundant.

Yet while this is an essential reference work (and we can look forward to the further volumes to come), Heylin's Dylan books are not exactly pleasurable reads. Andrew Muir points to one reason: the 'misplaced and distracting attacks on others, especially other authors' (p. 28). In *The Double Life*, for example, Heylin writes that 'what he [John Lennon] knew about song-publishing law could be written on a penny black stamp and still leave room for the collected insights of [Beatles biographer] Philip Norman'. Such graceless sneering seems gratuitous but it reflects, I think, a generic problem of the journalist's assumption that the pursuit of 'truth' involves the systematic exposure of deception and hypocrisy. This is the way

³ The year 2022 will also mark the opening in Tulsa of 'the world-class Bob Dylan Center', which will exhibit to a paying (rather than researching) public a selection of 'the more than 100,000 exclusive cultural treasures created and owned by Bob Dylan over seven decades. These include handwritten lyric manuscripts to some of the world's most treasured songs, previously unreleased recordings, never-before-seen film performances, rare and unseen photographs, visual art and other priceless items spanning Dylan's unparalleled career as one of the world's most important cultural figures'. See <https://bobdylancenter.com/>.

Heylin opens his new Dylan story: 'It starts with a lie. The first time Dylan's name is mentioned in print in the context of his music, he is already peddling the legend that he is "Bob Dylan, of Gallup New Mexico"' (p. 17).⁴

As this suggests, Bob Dylan, whose career has always involved misleading people about himself, is a perfect subject for the journalistic skill of writing exposés, and such truth telling can, indeed, be both fascinating and necessary – Heylin's most significant contribution to Dylan scholarship has been to debunk the many Dylan myths that have had media traction. I am less convinced, though, that to accumulate the factual details of musicians' lives is somehow to get to know them or tells us much about their art. In his essay on 'The Blues' in *The World of Bob Dylan*, Greil Marcus writes that

When *Time Out Of Mind* [appeared], the kind of people who reduce all art to biography – because, as John Irving once put it ... people without an imagination can't imagine anyone else could have one – knew exactly what it was. It was a breakup album – and the only real question was to find out who Bob Dylan had broken up with. (p. 85)⁵

While this may be unfair to Heylin's undeniable love of Dylan's music, his drive to demystify its composer does give his writing that odd newsroom combination of nobody-gets-one-over-me cheery boastfulness and a rather sour sense of disillusion.

The writers in *21st Century Dylan* take a different approach: not exposure but collusion. The provenance of these papers is a conference held at the University of Artois in France in December 2018. Most of the authors are literary scholars and the book can be read as a celebration of the most famous of all Eng. Lit. Dylanologists, Sir Christopher Ricks. If Dylan's love of masks made him the ideal subject for Heylin, his love of lyrical allusions made him the ideal subject for a literary critic celebrated for close reading and a remarkable textual memory. As Adrian Grafe puts it here, 'the slightest phrase of Dylan's can produce reams of intertextual reminiscences from Ricks's unbelievably well-stocked mind' (p. 211). Ricks's own brief contribution thus shows how T.S. Eliot, Bob Dylan and Ricks himself collude in their reading and writing, and other essays here (Jean Du Verger on 'Dylan's late style'; M. Cooper Harriss on 'Dylan's sense of an album's ending'; Simon McAslan on 'Dylan's editorial decisions' and the problem of 'the definitive text') straightforwardly draw Dylan's works into familiar debates among literary scholars.

In his concluding essay, Grafe suggests that without the critical work that Ricks devoted to the singer, 'Dylan might well not have won the Nobel' (p. 205). It was Ricks, it seems, who certificated Dylan's high cultural credibility. I have a number of problems with this argument. For an entertaining account of how the Nobel Prize committee actually makes its decisions, for example, see James F. English's essay on 'The Dramaturgy of Consecration' in *The World of Bob Dylan*. And while several authors here note that Ricks's writing about Dylan (2003) had the same sort of snooty literary establishment response as Dylan's Nobel award, the fact is that Ricks is, in cultural terms, a decidedly conservative critic. What he values is literary tradition, the cultural heritage shared by (and alluded to) within a particular social group, and as an educated white Anglophone man, Bob Dylan is not really much of a threat to this reading club. I couldn't help noticing that the literary figure

⁴ This description was in *New York Mirror*, 6 August 1961.

⁵ *Time Out of Mind* was released in 1997.

Ricks mocks for his dismay about Dylan's Nobel win is the 1986 Prize winner, Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka (p. 200), while Adrian Grafe writes that 'the 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature went to Wislawa Szymborska: although just over twenty years on, one wonders whether she is much read nowadays outside her native Poland' (p. 205), a singularly crass remark which suggests that the Nobel Prize for Literature (and literary scholars generally) should be primarily concerned with authors' popularity in the English-reading world.⁶

Grafe suggests that, by writing about a popular cultural icon, Ricks found a readership the size of which most literary critics can only ever dream of (p. 211), but I found Ricks's *Dylan's Vision of Sin* unreadable.⁷ The problems with it were well expressed by Sean O'Hagan's review in *The Observer*:

From the off, Ricks dives headlong into Dylan's lyrics, putting all his faith in close readings of the texts, and the texts alone. Dylan's cultural context is paid the scantiest regard, likewise his development as an artist over four decades. Instead, the songs are rounded up, and shoe-horned into fitting the schematic model of the book. (O'Hagan 2003)

Or, as Colin MacCabe (2017, p. 145) puts it, 'Anyone who tries to take the measure of Dylan's greatness as an artist by focusing only on the words has simply missed the point'.

Yes of course the best songs, like the best poems, are rich with allusions to other texts, but songs necessarily include musical allusions too, and in Dylan's case refer not just to what listeners hear (or think they hear), but also to the ways in which listening is shaped by popular cultural circumstance. Appreciating Dylan's work involves a different process than the close reading of the classics, a point that is made by the sheer range of connections explored by *The World of Bob Dylan*. Compare, for example, M. Cooper Harriss's awkward literary essay on Dylan's 'sense of an album's ending', with its assumption that an album can be treated as a stable narrative text, with Keith Negus's nicely personal essay in *The World of Bob Dylan* on 10 Dylan singles, 'a playlist for framing Dylan's recorded art'. On the other hand, the best essay in *21st-Century Dylan*, Charles Bonnot's 'No Direction Home: When Dylan Does Look Back', a very smart piece of comparative film analysis, raises questions about artistic treatments of history and memory that *The World of Bob Dylan* does not address.

I'll return to Sean Latham's collection. Immediately, I want to turn to a book by another literary scholar, Timothy Hampton, Professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of California at Berkeley. *Bob Dylan. How the Songs Work* is the best analytic study of the songwriter's craft that I have ever read. Hampton is a close listener rather than a close reader. His focus is on 'how Dylan gets his job done' (p. 11) and his starting point is that

As a master of citation, a combiner, a collagist, a paster, a thickener, Dylan is able to add a new density to song. His singing persona functions as a kind of medium or vehicle through which a listener can glimpse or hear the sonic landscape of some other moment or territory where

⁶ Szymborska is actually an extremely readable poet even in English translation and was a popular cultural figure in Poland, working with jazz and rock musicians and film makers. Her lovely poem 'Love at First Sight' inspired Krzysztof Kieslowski's film *Three Colours: Red*.

⁷ For a pioneering lit. crit. approach to Dylan I much preferred Michael Gray's *Song and Dance Man*, originally published in 1972, although best known in its 1981 edition.

'Bob Dylan', the composer, seems to roam ... He turns again and again to the relationship between the 'now' and the 'future', on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the archaic, the premodern, the quaint. To a degree unrivaled by any popular modern artist Dylan is a miner of old forms, an expeditionary heading back into the hoary world of predigital models of expression – old songs, old sentences, old images, old chords. (p. 16)

Hampton's analyses have a similar kind of density, a similar offer to the reader to go roaming in Dylan's songworld, to meet with Woody Guthrie, Arthur Rimbaud and Bertolt Brecht, to eavesdrop on Plutarch and Kerouac, St Augustine and Jay Gatsby. Hampton argues that Dylan's work 'unfolds through a shifting set of innovations and discoveries – different "poetics" if you will – that often involve engagement with other types of writing or singing' (p. 22). He traces the development of Dylan's craft through a loose chronology: folk song and the search for style; protest and the art of adaptation; modernism and the visionary song; memory, desire and the poetics of escape; the poetry of conversion; the place of art in a disenchanted world; late style and the politics of citation. Dylan's changing approaches to song reflect not what was happening in his personal life but issues thrown in his way by cultural and political upheaval. These are the problems Dylan seeks to understand through songwriting: community and commerce; sincerity and fame; memory and history; belief, stability and change. In following Dylan's developing song forms and musical techniques, we follow 'diverse and changing meditations on the relationship between the social world and the individual ... Dylan is present in his songs both as protagonist and as maker' (pp. 225–7).

Hampton ends his book with a discussion of Dylan's version of the 1953 song, 'Young at Heart', on *Fallen Angel*, the second of his trilogy of albums exploring American standards. Hampton suggests that Dylan approached these songs as a musicologist, reshaping tradition, 'turning songs that were initially taken to be the very opposite of "folk songs" into folk songs' (p. 231).⁸ As for 'Young at Heart', 'it is difficult to hear the recording without hearing Sinatra's version echoing in the background, like a ghost'. Dylan 'follows Sinatra's arrangement almost exactly' while giving the song a different sensibility: 'Sinatra's version swings with the optimism of the post-war generation ... Dylan's version is stately and serious' (pp. 231–2). Yet 'the mark of the Dylanesque' for Hampton is how he sings the song's final word:

This is where Dylan turns language against itself. Opening it up to a new message, a message in which word and music are bound together into a form of communication that is both and neither. On the highest note, when the breath falters for an instant and the voice wavers, he remakes the word, cracking it open to reveal the life inside of 'alive'. He summons his vocal imagination to leave a mark on the language, on rhythm, on sound itself. And so, at last, he delivers the song, sending it out towards the stars. (p. 233)

Although he ends with a cover version, Hampton's argument throughout his book is that Dylan's creative art is writing songs. The key to the connection between words and music is *sound*, the sound of words, the sound of voices. In terms of technical analysis, Hampton is therefore as much concerned with the musicology of song

⁸ No-one who has read Hampton's book will be surprised to read the announcement from Simon and Schuster that, in November 2022, they will be publishing a new book by Bob Dylan, *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, 'a masterclass on the art and craft of songwriting'. See <https://about.simonandschuster.biz/news/bob-dylan-modern-song/>.

performance as with lyrics. He is particularly acute in his analysis of Dylan's ever-changing singing voice as an instrument of meaning (as illustrated by the example of 'Young at Heart'). Further, he understands that sounds in performance, whether on stage or in the studio, involve other people – musicians, audiences and, for most of Dylan's career, sound engineers. The success of a successful songwriter involves the movement from imagination to collaboration. The public world in which songs must take their place matters as much to their meaning as the private world in which they are initially conceived.

Dave Gibbons (Gibbons and Moore 2014, p. 6), who with Alan Moore created the famous graphic novel *Watchmen* (1986–1987), writes that

It began with Bob Dylan.

For me, a couplet from his 1966 masterpiece *Desolation Row* was the spark that would one day ignite WATCHMEN.

At Midnight all the angels
and the superhuman crew

Come out and round up
everyone who knows more than they do.

It was a glimpse, a mere fragment of something, something ominous, paranoid and threatening. Yet something that showed that comics, like poetry or rock and roll or Bob Dylan himself, might feasibly become part of the greater cultural continuum.

This greater cultural continuum is explored in *The World of Bob Dylan*. In editor Sean Latham's words:

The twenty-seven essays gathered here each offer a different way of understanding the depth, complexity and legacy of Dylan's music, while at the same time setting out an entirely new agenda for writing, research, and invention. (p. 2)

The purpose of the book is to establish the 'extraordinary' mark Dylan has made on US culture and to suggest new research possibilities opened up by his 'extraordinary' archive. The chapters are organised under five headings: creative life; musical contexts; cultural contexts; political contexts; and receptions and legacies. As in most such Dylan essay collections, there is a fair degree of repetitive Dylanolatry (particularly in the opening chapters), and a recurrence of the scholarly self-congratulation found in *21st-Century Dylan*. In the essay on Dylan's paintings, for example, Raphael Falco suggests that Dylan 'expects his best listeners . . . to recognise his revisions and imitations of pre-existing music and lyrics' (p. 194). Are philologists really Dylan's *best* listeners? As Colin MacCabe (2017, p. 142) once remarked, many Dylan fans have a quite different listening experience:

'Far between sundown's finish and midnight's broken toll we ducked inside the doorway as thunder went crashing'. I remember well where I was when I first heard those lines, I remember the radio from which they issued and the exact angle of my body to the source of the music: I was lying on my bed. Actually I am not sure I do remember because it would be remarkable if I could make out every word on first listening. One of the great pleasures of buying a Dylan record was that his clipped nasalised pronunciation made it extraordinarily difficult to make out all the words on first hearing. It was only after repeated plays, often with friends, that the songs yielded their rich verbal harvest.

Dylan's 'best listeners' are collaborators rather than exegetes and I have my own such Dylan memories. In Summer 1965 I was hitchhiking in Europe and arrived in Vienna. My long hair attracted the attention of similarly long-haired locals who invited me to come and listen with them to the newly released *Highway 61 Revisited*. We sat in excited silence. I was the only person in the room who spoke any English.

There are good essayists in *The World of Bob Dylan*, intelligent, instructive and properly sceptical Dylan guides, such as James F. English (on Dylan's Nobel Prize) and Mark A. Davidson (on Dylan's archives), who usefully situate Dylan in broader narratives of literary awards and legacies. Or Devon Powers (on Dylan the brand) and David Shumway (on Dylan the star), who pin down Dylan's long engagement with music marketing. Or Keith Negus (on Dylan's singles), who combines close listening and a well-honed pop sensibility to suggest a neat analytic framework: stories in songs, their content; stories about songs, their performance; songs in stories told to themselves in many different ways by their many different listeners (p. 57).

For me, though, the most revealing essays focus on what Dylan learned from other people.

Greil Marcus's chapter on 'The Blues' (the transcript of a talk), in its lightly worn knowledge of the byways of American musical history, its emotional sensitivity and sense of anger, could have been presented by Bob Dylan himself. Gayle Wald's essay on 'Gospel Music' starts from the premise that 'of all the musical genres with which Bob Dylan has engaged in his long career, gospel is least examined and, in many ways, the most poorly understood' (p. 88), and for many Dylan fans his turn to Christianity was, indeed, baffling. Wald approaches Dylan's conversion not by scouring lyrics but through the music, gospel, the sound of 'world weariness and determination' (p. 98), performed significantly by black women whose voices in performance 'pushed [Dylan] to be a better – that is, more spirit-infused – singer' (p. 94). Damian A. Carpenter describes

The consistent way in which Dylan interacted with the theatre throughout his career, from his early attempt at acting in *Madhouse on Castle Street* [a 1962 BBC TV drama] to his affinity for Brecht, who also made use of songs as an alienating break from the drama, and his collaborations with [Jacques] Levy and [Sam] Shepard. Far from an interesting side note to his growth as an artist, Dylan's interest in the theatre is, in the end, essential to understanding his work as songwriter and performer. (p. 192)⁹

Kevin Dettmar, in a *tour-de-force* essay on 'Borrowing', challenges Greil Marcus's description of Dylan's 'You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go' as 'phony' (p. 208). For Dettmar, the song

is less about a breakup or two (never mind that one of them hasn't happened yet), than it is about breakup songs – and the echo/allusion/quotation (take your pick) to Hank Williams is the way he achieves this affect. (p. 211).¹⁰

My favourite essay, though, is Ann Powers's mischievous and witty meditation on Bob's body: the soft body of the young would-be bohemian; the mod body of the emerging rock pin-up; the star body of the fans' love object; the mortal body of

⁹ *Madhouse on Castle Street* was transmitted on 13 January 1963 and wiped by the BBC in 1968. No pirated tape of the play has emerged yet.

¹⁰ One could say the same of Hank Williams songs themselves.

the living legend. The body we have gazed upon, like the voice to which we have listened over the years, is also a site of Dylan's shifting self-consciousness, from the confidence of fame-to-come through the anxiety of public attention to the realisation that the body will not always live up to expectations.

It is a tribute to the scope of *The World of Bob Dylan* that my first impulse on finishing it was to list the topics not covered: the jazz context; the management of the Dylan business since Albert Grossman's demise; cover versions. In her essay on 'American Literature', Florence Dore notes that Don DeLillo (in *Great Jones Street*) and Jonathan Lethem (in *The Fortress of Solitude*) both drew on Dylan for inspiration, and quotes Michael Chabon's comment that Dylan's lyrics 'have influenced my own writing as much if not more than the work of any poet apart from [Frank] O'Hara and maybe Edgar Allan Poe' (p. 148). However, Dylan's presence in writers' imagination is not confined to 'serious' literature. I have already noted his impact on *Watchman*, and Dylan's explorations of his own fictional identities have been a model for many different kinds of writer. See, for example, Juliane Werner's interesting analysis of three fictions featuring Bob Dylan himself:

The Rich Man's Table (1998) by American novelist Scott Spencer introduces an unacknowledged son desperate to get to know his famous father. *Catfish, Ein Bob Dylan Roman* (2014) by German journalist Maik Brüggemeyer accompanies a fan traveling to New York to capture Dylan's spirit, and *Die Köchin von Bob Dylan* (2016) by German singer-songwriter Markus Berges follows a young woman who, as a chef, joins Dylan's tour crew. (Werner 2022, p. 286)

What is apparent, in conclusion, is that the flow of words about Bob Dylan is not about to slow down even at this late stage of his career. And what is also clear to me is that what we know least about is what matters most: not Dylan's life as a mask wearer, a shape shifter, a genius or an enigma, but as somebody more mundane, a working musician among other working musicians.

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