

# Bob Dylan: The Music Travels, the Poetry Stays Home

**Tim Parks**

No one has been a fiercer critic of the Nobel Prize in Literature than I. It's not the choices that are made, though some (Elfriede Jelinek, Dario Fo) have been truly bewildering; it's just the silliness of the idea that a group of Swedish judges, always the same, could ever get their minds round literature coming from scores of different cultures and languages, or that anyone could ever sensibly pronounce on the best writers of our time. The best for whom? Where? Does every work cater to everybody? The Nobel for literature is an accident of history, dependent on the vast endowment that fuels its million-dollar award. What it reveals more than anything else is the collective desire, at least here in the West, that there be winners and losers, at the global level, that a story be constructed about who are the greats of our era, regardless of the impossibility of doing this in any convincing way.



*Associated Press*

*Bob Dylan performing with Tom Petty in  
Modena, Italy September 13, 1987*

At times I have even thought the prize has had a perverse influence. The mere thought that there are writers who actually write towards it, fashioning their work, and their networking, in the hope of one day wearing the laurels, is genuinely disturbing. And everyone is aware of course of that sad figure, the literary great who in older age eats his or her heart out because, on top of all the other accolades, the Swedish Academy has never called. They would be better off if the prize did not exist. As for the journalists, one might say that the more they are interested in the prize, the less they are interested in literature.

All that said, this year I have to admit that the judges have done something remarkable. And you have to say, *chapeau!* For they have thrown the cat among the pigeons in a most delightful manner. First they have given the prize to someone who wasn't courting it in any way, and that in itself is cheering. Second, in provoking the backlash of the purists who demand that the Nobel go to a novelist or poet, and the diehard fans who feel their literary hero has been short changed, they have revealed the pettiness, and boundary drawing that infests literary discourse. Why can't these people understand? Art is simply not about a solemn attachment to this or that form. The judge's decision to celebrate a greatness that *also* involves writing is a welcome invitation to move away from wearisome rivalries and simply take pleasure in contemplating one man's awesome achievement.

But the most striking thing about the choice of Dylan has little to do with his primary status as a musician rather than novelist or poet. Far more interesting, at least from my point of view, as a long-term resident in Italy, translator, and teacher of translation, is that this prize divides the world, geographically and linguistically, in a way no other Nobel has done. Which is quite something when you think that the Nobel was invented precisely to establish an international consensus on literary greatness.

Why? Because while Dylan's greatness seems evident in English-speaking countries, even to those scandalized that he has been given the Nobel, this is simply not the case in all those places where Dylan's music is regularly heard, but his language only partially understood. Which is to say, in most of the world.

When the prize is given to a foreign poet—Tomas Tranströmer, Wisława Szymborska, Octavio Paz—whose work one perhaps has not read, or is not even available in English, one takes it on trust that the judges know a thing or two. For however arbitrary and absurd the prize might be, the judges themselves no doubt take it seriously and do their best. Even in those cases where there are translations, those few people who read and think about poetry are usually sophisticated enough to realize that a poem in translation is not, or only rarely, the real thing. More a shadow, a pointer, a savoring of impossibility.

But everyone has heard Dylan, everyone who has a radio or watches television, worldwide. In this sense the jury has exposed itself as never before. And they have heard him in the pop culture mix alongside other musicians and bands whose lyrics are perhaps banal and irrelevant. Outside the English-speaking world people are entirely used to hearing popular songs in English and having only the vaguest notions of what they might be about. They do not even ask themselves whether these are fine lyrics or clichés, just as we wouldn't if we heard a song in Polish or Chinese. Even those who do speak English to a certain level and have heard "Mr. Tambourine Man" a thousand times, will very likely not react to it in the same way that a native English speaker would.

Though you might hear laughing, spinning, swinging madly across the sun  
 It's not aimed at anyone  
 It's just escaping on the run  
 And but for the sky there are no fences facing  
 And if you hear vague traces of skipping reels of rhyme  
 To your tambourine in time  
 It's just a ragged clown behind  
 I wouldn't pay it any mind  
 It's just a shadow you're seeing that he's chasing.

Dylan sings the words clearly enough. But for the foreign listener this is hard work. He doesn't see them written down. He can't linger over them. He doesn't know if they exhibit great facility or are merely nonsense. In particular, when he gets three verbs in a row ending in "ing"—laughing, spinning, swinging—it isn't clear to him whether they are gerunds or participles. How to parse this phrase? And how to understand the charm of "But for the sky there are no fences facing," if you don't immediately grasp that in English we can say that fences "face" each other.

Let's not even begin to imagine the difficulties with "Subterranean Homesick Blues."

When we read poetry on the page we take time over it. We puzzle over it. We relish it. When we hear poetry sung, and sung intensely as Dylan sings, drivingly, with a snarl and a drawl, which is also a sophisticated form of irony, how can we, if we are not native speakers, be expected to appreciate it?

So we have this fantastic paradox. Of all Nobel winners, Dylan is surely and by far the best known worldwide. Hurrah. But only known in the sense that people have heard the songs, not understood, not relished the words. So, barely an hour after the Swedish Academy made its announcement, I was receiving messages and mails from Italian friends, of the variety, "I've always loved Dylan, but what on earth has he got to do with literature?" And these are people who know English fairly well. Until finally someone wrote, "I've always suspected Dylan's words were something special." And in this message there was an element of pride, in knowing English well enough to recognize this.

Needless to say, there are some translated versions of Dylan in Italy. In 2015 the excellent singer-songwriter Francesco De Gregori came out with an album *Amore e furto*, (Love and Theft), which has some fine renderings of Dylan, or "stolen" from Dylan, in Italian. He calls "Subterranean Homesick Blues" *Acido Seminterrato* and does his best to keep up with Dylan's mad rhymes:

*ragazzino cosa fai  
 guarda che è sicuro che lo rifarai  
 scappa nel vicolo,  
 scansa il pericolo  
 nel parco uno con un cappello ridicolo  
 ti dà la mano*

*vuole qualcosa di strano*

But this kind of virtuosity is the exception that proves the rule, and even then, one is mainly marveling at De Gregori's getting so near, while remaining so far away. For the most part cover translations are just a trite dumbing down of the original, entirely at the whim of the music's rhythm and the need for rhyme. I would argue that they actually undermine rather than enhance the singer's reputation.

We should hardly be surprised then if outside the English-speaking world the controversy over this Nobel is even fiercer than within it. For the award has laid bare a fact that international literary prizes usually ignore, or were perhaps designed to overcome: that a work of art is intimately bound up to the cultural setting in which it was created. And language is a crucial part of that. Quite simply Dylan's work *means* more and more intensely in the world that produced Dylan. To differing degrees, and in the teeth of internationalism and globalization, this will be true of every literary work.

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