

 **Liam Gearon**

Oxford University

“No Direction Home”: The Life and Literature of Bob Dylan—From “Desolation Row” to the Nobel Prize

ABSTRACT

Using the Nobel Prize as a prism through which to view the life and literature of a difficult-to-define artist, this article argues that Dylan’s output is one in which life and literature become, and have always been, indistinguishable. It is the life which has made the literature, through years lived in a particular niche of 1960s counter-cultural history; the lyrics gave voice to a man who was never at ease in the formalities of interview. For a supposed spokesman of a generation Dylan spoke very little except through his songs. So too in the more difficult-to-define later decades, little of his life was spoken of except through song, and some samplings of autobiography. Detailing the historically distinctive features of the Nobel Prize, the article shows how Bob Dylan has, through life and literature, broken down the boundaries between the literary and the popular. The article’s title is drawn, of course, from a famous line in Bob Dylan’s era-defining “Like a Rolling Stone,” one which Martin Scorsese used to title a full-length documentary on the life of Bob Dylan. Dylan here occupies the borderlands where art imitates life, and life imitates art. I argue, contrary to critical consensus, that there is a direction home. In Dylan’s lifetime of existentially staring death (political death, the death of romance) in the face, there is some glimpse of home. It is that glimpse which gives the poet’s lyrical output its endurance as literature.

Keywords: Bob Dylan, Nobel Prize in Literature, Sara Danius, Swedish Academy.

INTRODUCTION

In February 2018, when poetry was more prominent than pandemic, I received a pleasant and convivial note from Professor Sara Danius, then Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy: an august body known as the Eighteen, the number of its members, all of whom are appointed for life. It is a mark of considerable national and international intellectual and cultural prestige to be a member of the Swedish Academy. This is not least, perhaps mostly because, the Swedish Academy is responsible each year for awarding the Nobel Prize in Literature. I had written to Sara with an invitation. I was convening a colloquium on writers and their education at Oriel College, Oxford, in September of that year, and had hoped to have a keynote address from the first woman Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy. Also of interest to me was the fact that Sara Danius had been the main driver of deliberations which would lead to the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature being awarded to Bob Dylan. Sara effusively, in principle, accepted the invitation. I was more than delighted to have a message expressing her honour to be asked, and this from the head of the Nobel Committee, not least because the historical Nobel Prize list had so defined my reading since childhood. The opening day of the Oriel Colloquium was also, however, the date of the opening autumn meeting of the Swedish Academy. Sara would check with colleagues and see if it were possible for the Permanent Secretary to be absent from that opening meeting of the Swedish Academy.

I was as much honoured as a little awestruck. A month or so later, I received a letter from the personal assistant to the Permanent Secretary. Things had moved on in the Swedish Academy, and rather rapidly. The scandal that had been brewing since November 2017 had gathered pace. Indeed, Sara Danius was soon after to resign as Permanent Secretary to the Swedish Academy. On Friday 13 April 2018, the Swedish Academy appointed a new Permanent Secretary after Danius's resignation. The Nobel Prize Committee, and the Prize itself, became part of real-life national and international notoriety. Outside of wartime, 2018 was the only year when no Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded. Two prizes were awarded the following year, for 2018 and 2019, one of which drew particular controversy but neither with anything like the literary acclaim of the singer-songwriter awarded the 2016 Prize. In between, in 2018 Sara Danius had herself published, in her native Swedish, a book on the 2016 winner. Her book dealt—as much as is permitted by the fifty-year secrecy rule on Academy decision-making—with the deliberations which led to Dylan's award. The book focused in more detail on the media onslaught following the 2016 Prize. Little could Sara Danius have known that soon after her book's

publication she herself would become the centre of a national and global story which struck at the moral core of the Prize's integrity. The lives of the Academy had encroached on their judgements about art and literature. On 12 October 2019, following a long battle with cancer that turned terminal, the death of Sara Danius itself became world news.

This backstory has all the more significance to the considerations of this article in which the life of one Bob Dylan, born Robert Zimmerman, has provoked controversy, from the time of protest songs in the 1960s to the Nobel Prize in Literature. There is, for Dylan, whose real-life name and persona have always been masked by his lyrical output, a special, additional current and ongoing significance in 2020. That is, when Minneapolis, the major city of his home state of Minnesota has (even as I write) been suffering several days of burning, looting and rioting; and for causes not unlike those which the youthful protest singer had written and sung about decades ago. Obviously notable here are "Blowing in the Wind," "The Times They Are A-Changin'," "Hurricane" (about an African American boxer falsely charged with murder), and lesser known songs such as "Oxford Town," about Dylan's perceptions of prejudice in the American South at the time of the civil rights movement, in Oxford, Mississippi. So now an Oxford academic, of Oxford, England, writes here in retrospective reflection on the life and literature of a singer-songwriter who had for so many of my own generation—I was born in the same year as Sara Danius—defined the manner in which popular songs could transcend the transience of entertainment and at least seek the endurance of art. The artistic fires burn still, as do the American cities.

In the context of a *Text Matters* special issue on "Literature Goes Pop," or popular, this article frames the beyond-frame life of Bob Dylan as a songwriter, author and cultural icon, an individual who for over sixty years has traversed the boundaries of "literary" and "popular" art. With the award of the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature to Dylan, popular has gone distinctly literary. Using the Nobel Prize as a prism through which to view the life and literature of a difficult-to-define artist, the article argues that Dylan's output is one in which life and literature become, and have always been, indistinguishable. It is the life which has made the literature, through years lived in a particular niche of 1960s counter-cultural history; the lyrics gave voice to a man who was never at ease in the formalities of interview. For a supposed spokesman of a generation he spoke very little except through his songs. So too in more difficult-to-define later decades, little of his life was spoken of but through song, and some samplings of autobiography. Detailing the historically distinctive features of the Nobel Prize, the article shows how Bob Dylan has, through life and literature, broken down the boundaries between the literary and the popular.

The article's title is drawn, of course, from a famous line in Bob Dylan's era-defining "Like a Rolling Stone," one which Martin Scorsese used to title a full-length documentary on the life of Bob Dylan. Where it seems Dylan here occupies the borderlands where art imitates life, and life imitates art, there is "no direction home." I argue, contrary to critical consensus, that there is. In Dylan's lifetime of existentially staring death (political death, the death of romance) in the face, there is some glimpse of home. It is that glimpse which gives the poet's lyrical output its endurance as literature.

THE NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE

The Nobel Prize in Literature is distinctive because of its much-contested blend of aesthetic criteria and moral judgement, by, according to the 1895 Will of Alfred Nobel, making the said award "to the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work in an *ideal direction*" ("The Nobel Prize"). The Swedish Academy is the body responsible for making these judgements. The Academy has interpreted the "ideal direction" in diverse ways since the Prize's origins, from aesthetic, cultural and socio-political perspectives. In many such intertextual senses, the Nobel Prize in Literature in its early twentieth century origins—the first award was in 1901—anticipates in unexpected ways the breaking down of divisions between literature (or any artistic output) and life (meaning here the entirety of human experience), particularly the moral lessons of literature. Never more evident than in a contemporary context, present-day cultural tensions are thus ever more fraught between national literary traditions and global or world literatures (Casanova; Said). In conjunction with these tensions, what we may define as the increasing democratization of the arts—the breaking down of historic aesthetic distinctions between popular and "high" art in literary, musical and visual forms—is part of this egalitarian move, an ever-evident backdrop to discussions of literary output since Aristotle's *Poetics*. What this special issue has determined as a prospective "crisis of literature" as artistic outputs take on merely different and (in an historical sense) unconventional forms is but part of a millennia-old interplay of the political (in the widest societal and cultural senses) and the aesthetic (defined, too, in the broadest sense of any attempts to materially represent the world of human experience).

A truncated extract from the Nobel Foundation's outline of Dylan's biography shows how his literary and musical output, and his life, too, have made him culturally iconic over the decades:

Bob Dylan [the Nobel citation uses the name of artistic persona rather than Robert Zimmerman] was born on May 24, 1941 in Duluth, Minnesota. He grew up in the city of Hibbing. As a teenager, he played in various bands and with time his interest in music deepened, with a particular passion for American folk music and blues. One of his idols was the folk singer Woody Guthrie. He was also influenced by the early authors of the Beat Generation, as well as by modernist poets. Dylan moved to New York City in 1961 and began to perform in clubs and cafés in Greenwich Village. He met the record producer John Hammond, with whom he signed a contract for his debut album, *Bob Dylan* (1962). In the following years, he recorded a number of albums which have had a tremendous impact on popular music: *Bringing It All Back Home* and *Highway 61 Revisited* in 1965, *Blonde On Blonde* in 1966 and *Blood On The Tracks* in 1975. His productivity continued in the following decades, resulting in masterpieces like *Oh Mercy* (1989), *Time Out of Mind* (1997) and *Modern Times* (2006). (“Bob Dylan Biographical”)

His controversial tours of 1965 and 1966 are mentioned—when, in a single concert at Newport, Dylan moved from the acoustic folk music with which he had been associated, eliciting coordinated audience cries of “traitor” for his use of electric guitar—or as the Nobel Foundation states, these “attracted a lot of attention” (“Bob Dylan Biographical”). Always aware of his legacy, Dylan had permitted film maker D. A. Pennebaker to document his life at this period in what would become the film *Don’t Look Back* (1967). His work as a painter, actor and scriptwriter is also cited, as is his work of prose poetry (*Tarantula* from 1971) and his 2004 autobiography, *Chronicles*, importantly detailing his major influence at the heart of popular and counter-culture. In short: “Dylan has the status of an icon. His influence on contemporary culture is profound, and he is the object of a steady stream of literary and musical analysis” (“Bob Dylan Biographical”).

The Nobel Prize remains the world’s most prestigious intellectual honour for achievements in Chemistry, Physics, Medicine, Economics, Literature and Peace. With Albert Einstein and his Princeton legacy providing the quintessential correlation between academic distinction and scientific achievement, there tends (perhaps naturally) to be a noted preponderance in the literature on the formative processes of discovery in the *sciences*. This is evidenced in Rothenberg’s 2014 *Flight from Wonder: An Investigation of Scientific Creativity*. Clear too is the context of celebrity and elite studies, instanced by Ganetz’s 2016 “The Nobel Celebrity-Scientist: Genius and Personality” or Krauss’s 2015 “Scientists as Celebrities: Bad for Science or Good for Society?” The Nobel Prize in Economics arguably found its greatest celebrity in John Nash through

Nasar's 2002 biography, *A Beautiful Mind*, the subsequent Hollywood film giving glamour to academic brilliance. Nobel Laureates in Literature are themselves, however, rarely associated with current university positions or academic life, even if university professors of literature are eligible to submit nominations for the Prize. Braun's work on authors and the world has here given much needed attention to literary celebrity, including the Nobel, but addresses the wider question of where the world places its writers in terms of societal context (Braun and Spiers). This becomes important when we see that the Nobel Prize in Literature is distinctive in being awarded precisely for recognizing the contributions of authors to the worlds in which they live.

Kjell Espmark's 1991 (and long-predating Dylan's award) "Nobel's Will and the Literature Prize" identifies progressive shifts in the awarding committee's interpretation of the "ideal direction": "A Lofty and Sound Idealism (1901–12)"; "A Policy of Neutrality (World War I)"; "The Great Style (the 1920s)"; "Universal Interest (the 1930s)"; "The Pioneers (1946–)"; "Attention to Unknown Masters (1978–)." This has, according to Espmark, culminated in the "Prize becoming a Literary Prize." Academy Secretary Lars Gyllensten noted that nowadays the "ideal direction" is "not taken too literally . . . that on the whole the serious literature that is worthy of a prize furthers knowledge of man and his condition and endeavours to enrich and improve his life [sic]" (qtd. in Kjell Espmark). Other useful sources—Feldman's 2013 *The Nobel Prize* or Worek's 2011 *Nobel*—show how year-to-year the Prize reflects often current ideal aesthetic, cultural and socio-political perspectives in authors' outputs. Also indicated here is the power of the Swedish Academy to present to the world what such ideals are, and which geo-literary contexts are deserving of such recognition. In its history to date (2020), the Nobel Prize in Literature has been awarded 102 times to 116 awardees and its interpretation of the "ideal," as well as literary-intellectual merit has rarely been far from controversy. The Nobel Prize in Literature is particularly known in its early years for its neglect of world-renowned literary figures. As Vinocur has it: "The Swedish Academy's official ledger of the immortally ignored includes James Joyce, Leo Tolstoy, Henry James, August Strindberg and Joseph Conrad. Add Honore de Balzac: if the Nobel Prize in Literature existed when he was alive, he would have been passed over, too" (25). The vast majority of awards have also been made to writers in English (29 awards), and other European languages (14 in French; 14 in German; 11 in Spanish; 7 in Swedish; 6 in Italian; 6 in Russian; 5 in Polish; 3 in Norwegian; 3 in Danish; 2 in Greek; and 1 each in Czech, Finnish, Icelandic, Portuguese and Serbo-Croatian). With only 2 Prizes in Chinese, 1 in Arabic, Bengali, Hebrew and Yiddish,

it is possible to indicate a strong Anglo-Saxon and Eurocentric tendency in the Prize's history, though the difficulty of the Swedish Academy in assessing literatures in a multitude of languages as the Prize has globalized has been recognized. Such geo-cultural literary variants provide a rich seam of comparative data in considering correlations between writers and their education.

The Prize has been shared in four award years: 1904 (Frédéric Mistral, José Echegaray), 1917 (Karl Gjellerup, Henrik Pontoppidan), 1966 (Shmuel Agnon, Nelly Sachs) and 1974 (Eyvind Johnson, Harry Martinson). To 2017, only 14 women have won the Nobel Prize in Literature, the first being in 1909 (Selma Lagerlöf), most recently Olga Tokarczuk in 2018, notable others including Toni Morrison (1993), Doris Lessing (2007; the oldest awardee at 88) and Alice Munro (2009). No individual has (unlike other Nobel Prizes) been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature twice, and only two have renounced the Prize: Boris Pasternak (1958), under pressure from the then Soviet authorities, and Jean-Paul Sartre (1964), since, as he stated, he never accepted honours. When Albert Camus was awarded the Nobel (1957) (the second youngest Laureate after the 1907 award to a 41-year-old Rudyard Kipling), Sartre allegedly said that Camus was "welcome to it." Though political motivations for the Prize have often been denied by the Academy, Cold War cases such as Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn (1970) often brought considerations to bear on the Laureates' politics as much as their writing.

Given the notion of the "ideal direction," some of those awarded the Prize have been especially controversial. The 1920 award of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Knut Hamsun brought some disrepute to the award, as well as the author when Hamsun in subsequent decades welcomed the Occupation of Norway, openly supported the Nazi cause, had a personal (if fraught) personal audience with Adolf Hitler, writing a well-publicized eulogy for the Führer on news of the latter's death, and, following a warm personal series of meetings with the Reich Minister of Propaganda, actually sent Josef Goebbels his Nobel Medal. On a lesser scale, the ideals of the Nobel award might also have been said to have been brought into question when the 1972 awardee and President of International PEN, Heinrich Böll, gave open support for the Baader-Meinhof terrorist group. Writers, on the other hand, have themselves been the target of political opposition from states, often their home nations. Two still living holders of the Nobel Prize in Literature live in exile, that is Mo Yan, and Gao Xingjian. Svetlana Alexievich, of Belarus, has been subject to some high-profile political criticism for her views of current Russian foreign policy. Mario Vargas Llosa has been active in Peruvian politics. Orhan Pamuk has not been without high level political opposition from government sources in

Turkey. The 2017 recipient, Kazuo Ishiguro, might be classed as positively apolitical by comparison. The 2019 recipient Peter Handke shows that, despite the 2017 scandals, the Swedish Academy has not steered away from political controversy. In political terms, the 2016 award to Bob Dylan was not contentious. But it did spark widespread discussion around the definition of literature and the Nobel “ideal,” just as the Nobel Prize in Literature often raises questions which are as moral and political as they are aesthetic and literary.

These matters are far from arcane or abstract. That all totalitarian movements of the twentieth century saw the arts as critical to shaping political systems indicates the power of literature in modernity (Adamson). Thus, writing played an important political role in post-Revolutionary Russia. The All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers was part of this. It later formed the basis for the Union of Soviet Writers, formed by the Central Committee of the Communist Party on 23 April 1932. The first (1934) Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers demanded not only a literary style (Socialist Realism) but a political, that is revolutionary, purpose to literature. Here Andrei Zhdanov conveyed Stalin’s Soviet aesthetic: writers were to be “engineers of the human soul” (Garrard and Garrard). The same decade saw the infamous Nazi-instigated but academic- and student-endorsed book burnings in German University cities; and Joseph Goebbels coming to prominence in Nazi Germany as Minister of Propaganda (Thacker; Longerich). Set in Oxford and Arctic Norway, a novel published in 2019, and narrating the deliberative act of one Henrik Strøm to reduce the earth’s human population to that of the Stone Age through the bacteriological infection of the world’s paper, its books and its libraries, has as its literary backdrop Knut Hamsun’s fraught relationship with the master of Nazi propaganda (Gearon).

As I have detailed in now extensive publications on literature and security, the West too, often covertly, sought to engineer the arts to political purpose. Here, Linda Risso’s *Propaganda and Intelligence in the Cold War* was a pioneering study, as are Sarah Miller Harris’s 2016 *The CIA and the Congress for Cultural Freedom in the Early Cold War* and Frances Stonor Saunders’s 2013 *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*. The interest in security and literature is unabated, as evidenced by Joel Whitney’s 2018 *Finks: How the C.I.A. Tricked the World’s Best Writers*. Peter Finn and Petra Couvee’s 2015 *The Zhivago Affair* details the CIA involvement with the Russian translation of Boris Pasternak’s *Dr Zhivago*, highlighting the Nobel as a cultural reflection of Cold War tensions, as again with the 1970 award to Solzhenitsyn. What Aron described as “the age of total war” and Hobsbawm “the age of extremes” overlaps the history of the Nobel Prize in Literature and ingrains our sense of the importance

of literature in times of peace as in times of war, and further underpins the impetus to understand the formative influences on the writer as much as their literary-political impact on the world.

Mindful, then, of contemporary aesthetics and the political sensitivities which now surround literature and the humanities (Benjamin; Bhabha; Carroll and Gibson; Cascardi; Hagberg and Jost; Jameson; Said; Small), and noting the originating colonial contexts of the Nobel Prize in Literature itself (Rudyard Kipling was awarded the 1907 Prize), we see that the aesthetic is rarely distant from the political. In this historically shifting literary moral milieu, the aesthetic life is never far from the domain of politics. Thinking “literature back into the bigger picture of society” (Braun and Spiers 449), Bob Dylan’s life was then, as now, as important as his output. Though, as always, Dylan uses the latter to define the former, the elision of the singer-songwriter’s life and literature are what has made for his iconic status for a generation and, half a century later, the highest levels of literary acclaim. As with all enduring poetry, it is enigma of interpretation which refuses easy definition for either the life or the literary output of Bob Dylan.

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NO DIRECTION HOME: BOB DYLAN’S 2016 NOBEL PRIZE

The Nobel Prize in Literature, too, brings or enhances literary fame and celebrity (Braun and Spiers). For Bob Dylan, the 2016 award was received with seeming indifference. He had for weeks refused even to answer the famous telephone call from the Swedish Academy. Their awe of the cultural icon was evident early the next year when 12 members of the Swedish seemed—despite the apparent earlier snub—to host a private party at a secret Stockholm location for Bob Dylan. A leading UK quality newspaper cited the Swedish Academy’s Permanent Secretary Sara Danius’s blog post, stating that: “Spirits were high. Champagne was had . . . Quite a bit of time was spent looking closely at the gold medal, in particular the beautifully crafted back, an image of a young man sitting under a laurel tree who listens to the Muse” (“Bob Dylan Finally Accepts Nobel Prize in Literature”). For those not classically educated, she adds that the motto is taken “from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the inscription reads: ‘*Inventas vitam iuvat excoluisse per artes*,’ loosely translated as ‘And they who bettered life on earth by their newly found mastery’” (“Bob Dylan Finally Accepts Nobel Prize in Literature”). Despite the awestruck excitement of the party, the recipient had not yet fulfilled the requirement for the award’s prize money of eight million kronor (837,000 euros, \$891,000).

When in 2017 Bob Dylan did fulfil this requirement his eight-minute speech, available in full on the Nobel Foundation's website, was satisfactorily literary in reference and orientation. He made little or no reference to his own work, highlighting a curiously disparate range of Greek epic poetry, a nineteenth century novel of gargantuan intertextual scope, and a renowned work of German post-First World War fiction (one much castigated by Hitler for its un-German spirit), respectively: Homer's *Odyssey*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Dylan had curiously, too, mentioned his "grammar school" education where he had encountered other literary greats: "*Don Quixote, Ivanhoe, Robinson Crusoe, Gulliver's Travels, Tale of Two Cities*" ("Nobel Lecture"). Uniquely in the Nobel Prize in Literature's history, the awardee wonders how his *oeuvre* relates to any contribution to literature or the Prize: "When I first received this Nobel Prize in Literature, I got to wondering exactly how my songs related to literature" (Dylan, "Nobel Lecture"). It is precisely his attitude to the context of his learning of literature, "typical grammar school reading that gave you a way of looking at life, an understanding of human nature, and a standard to measure things by," reading that "I took . . . with me when I started composing lyrics. And the themes from those books worked their way into many of my songs, either knowingly or unintentionally," wishing as he did "to write songs unlike anything anybody ever heard, and these themes were fundamental" (Dylan, "Nobel Lecture"). Indeed, there are innumerable literary references throughout many of his (especially earlier) lyrics—in "Desolation Row," the eleven-minute closing acoustic song of *Highway 61 Revisited*, the references are (much in the manner of T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land") as diverse as they are indirect, from Giacomo Casanova to Shakespeare. In his Nobel speech he begins with *Moby Dick*, and the myths it contains, "the Judeo-Christian bible, Hindu myths, British legends, Saint George, Perseus, Hercules, integrated into a story of whaling." Dylan himself shows how this classic work of nineteenth century American fiction itself breaks down the boundaries between high and low art:

Whale oil is used to anoint the kings. History of the whale, phrenology, classical philosophy, pseudo-scientific theories, justification for discrimination—everything thrown in and none of it hardly rational. Highbrow, lowbrow, chasing illusion, chasing death, the great white whale, white as polar bear, white as a white man, the emperor, the nemesis, the embodiment of evil. The demented captain who actually lost his leg years ago trying to attack Moby with a knife. ("Nobel Lecture")

Dylan himself cites Melville's "[q]uotable poetic phrases that can't be beat": Ahab's response to Starbuck's idea that he should let go of past resentments ("Speak not to me of blasphemy, man, I'd strike the sun if it insulted me"), and the eloquences of Ahab's own poetic mindset: "The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails whereon my soul is grooved to run" ("Nobel Lecture").

For a songwriter renowned for early songs of protest even prior to the Vietnam War, Dylan's interpretive rendition of Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* as "a horror story" seems like home territory. He declaims the achievements of classical philosophy and literature, all the refinements of the Greeks (he mentions Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles), asking "what happened to it?": should it not "have prevented this"? He reminisces here on his own life, with thoughts that "turn homeward," the fear of "some miscalculable [sic] thing that might happen. The common grave. There are no other possibilities" ("Nobel Lecture").

The journeying of *The Odyssey*, a "strange, adventurous tale of a grown man trying to get home after fighting in a war," arguably draws together the two great themes of Dylan's own life, the conflicts of the world and the search for a never-to-be-found place of solace, a place (emotional, intellectual, social, political) where one can feel at home:

So what does it all mean? Myself and a lot of other songwriters have been influenced by these very same themes. And they can mean a lot of different things. If a song moves you, that's all that's important. I don't have to know what a song means. I've written all kinds of things into my songs. ("Nobel Lecture")

But being Bob Dylan, he is "not going to worry about it—what it all means" ("Nobel Lecture"). And he wonders whether authors like Melville worried either when he "put all his old testament, biblical references, scientific theories, Protestant doctrines, and all that knowledge of the sea and sailing ships and whales into one story, I don't think he would have worried about it either—what it all means" ("Nobel Lecture").

Dylan's award surprised few who had over the decades—perhaps since Princeton's award to Dylan of an honorary doctorate in 1970—engaged at a formal academic level in deciphering his literary significance. A good bibliographical source, Evan Goldstein's 2010 article "Dylan and the Intellectuals," published appropriately enough in the *Journal of Higher Education*, remains the best summary guide to this pre-Nobel Prize intellectual and cultural significance. The flurry of books at the time was to mark Dylan's seventieth birthday. Kevin J. H. Dettmar's *The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan* got there early in 2009. There are collections

of essays on Dylan by Greil Marcus, the “dean of Dylan critics,” there are serious historical analyses of Dylan in America (Wilentz), yet more biographies, one in a book series of cultural icons (Yaffe), the other—a work in progress which seems not to have come to fruition—placing Dylan in the context of Jewish life (Rosenbaum). Others, such as Richard F. Thomas in *Why Bob Dylan Matters*, view Dylan’s work in relation to the classical poetry traditions of ancient Greece and Rome. Dylan himself alludes to such connections in the Nobel lecture. Christopher Ricks is unarguably important here, however, in getting to the existential root, not simply the literary exterior. It is Ricks who most powerfully shows not only the classical depth and the Shakespearean scope of Dylan’s output but its *theological* import. Like the sixteenth century Shakespeare, the twenty-first century poet, has (to date, at least—will Dylan be read and performed in four centuries as Shakespeare is four centuries from his time?)—all the signs of an endurance which is based on universal existential import. This, dare one say today, is defined in Dylan’s life and work by a religious sensibility rooted in Jewish heritage and Christian sympathies, a morality whose theology goes beyond earthly judgement, as intimated in the title of Ricks’s book, *Dylan’s Visions of Sin*.

CONCLUSION

The life and the literature began with a quest for meaning: to put it simplistically, with a young man whose songs of protest from the Greenwich Village of New York City’s Lower Manhattan defined a counter-cultural era which did not begin but which found its global fruition in the 1960s. Thus for the 2016 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature the links between literature and lyric are those of human experience seeking but never quite being able to rationalize meaning, only to tell the story of the search. It is a living thing: “Our songs are alive in the land of the living. But songs are unlike literature” (*Dylan, “Nobel Lecture”*). If there is a difference in textual form—lyrics are “meant to be sung, not read”—the differences are arguably superficial. It is merely a difference in form and not the existential drive which in both cases gives rise to the expression of disquiet at the elusive meaning at the heart of all literary forms, even the most commonplace of narratives. The form of the text matters less than what the text says, what it communicates and coherently shares about the messy quest for meaning.

For the Jewish-born Robert Zimmerman as for the artist Bob Dylan, however, there is always an existential dimension to his life and to his output, even an apocalyptic one. To my mind, it is not the social and the

political which ultimately define Dylan but his sensibilities of something beyond them. His only work of autobiography, *Chronicles*, is on the surface a mere telling of those intense days of childhood and youth and early acclaim in the music industry. In the Hebrew Bible *Chronicles* is a single text, in the Septuagint Greek of Christian tradition it is divided into two books. In both it is a story of kings, or political leaders, and of prophets, of messengers who delivered often unwelcome messages from God when the people had gone astray. It is a story which redirects the people when they have lost their sense of true home. Dylan's songs may borrow widely from a plethora of sources, the classical and the contemporary, but for the self-framing of his own life, Dylan chose the grand-narrative of salvation history.

Though politically engaged, it is not politics which is ultimately important. Though human passion may be thwarted, life is greater than the disappointments of love. Thus, in verse, everyday existential despair is contained as much as it is constrained by the lyrical structure of sentiment. This is as much evident in the songs of his years of conversion to Christianity in *Slow Train Coming* as in those later lyrics such as "Not Dark Yet" in which Dylan gives love and romance an existential, even mystical edge. Death is ever-present but Dylan always keeps despair at artistic distance. Even when persistently misunderstood, he gives a humourous twist to the outlandish sadness of circumstance. Closely related to this sense of a man whose authorship has been marked by a detachment from the travails of this world, much like the New Testament author of *Letter to the Hebrews* (13:14), who writes in those chapters of a destination beyond struggle, with a visionary knowledge that "we have not here an abiding city." In his later works, such as *Time Out of Mind*, where once politics had vied with romance for centre-stage now metaphysics comes to the fore. In "Not Dark Yet," the man and the artist stand at the existential edge of life and lyric, the poet declaiming, "It's not dark yet, but it's getting there."

Yet it is the Dylan of his first decade of acclaim which still defines the life and the literature. Here, to close with a personal diversion, my own favourite lines from Dylan's entire output, are those surfacing at the end of "Desolation Row." Arguably this song and its framing title suggest the most seemingly hopeless in lyric and life. The cultural importance of this song, out of all Dylan's lyrical output, is indicated by its inclusion in David Lehman's revised edition of *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*. Yet here, even in the most desperate, the most desolate, of times, the transient somehow hints at the transcendent. The political and personal are passing shows. "Desolation Row" opens with the former and closes with the latter: "They're selling postcards of the hanging / They're painting the passports brown"—with all its resonances of Fascism—ending nine minutes later in

the sung version with the ever-quotable lines, “When you asked me how I was doing / Was that some kind of joke.” For Dylan, emotion always stands at the gates of eternity.

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Liam Gearon is a Senior Research Fellow at Harris Manchester College, and Associate Professor at the University of Oxford. He also concurrently holds posts as Conjoint Professor at the University of Newcastle, Australia, Visiting Professor MIC, Limerick, Ireland, and Extraordinary Professor, North-West University, South Africa.

ORCID: 0000-0002-9381-0103

liam.gearon@education.ox.ac.uk