

BOB DYLAN'S NOBEL PRIZE

BY TONY BECKWITH



Tony Beckwith, a writer, translator, interpreter, poet, and cartoonist, is a regular contributor to Source.

*I would not leave anything to a man of action
as he would be tempted to give up work;
on the other hand, I would like to help dreamers
as they find it difficult to get on in life.*
Alfred Nobel

Alfred Bernhard Nobel (1833–1896) was a Swedish chemist, engineer, inventor, businessman, and philanthropist. When he died in Sanremo, Italy, in 1896 his last will and testament revealed that he had left the bulk of his fortune to the establishment of the Nobel Prize, a decision inspired by a simple twist of fate. A few years earlier, following the death of his brother, Ludvig, Alfred's obituary was accidentally published in a French newspaper instead of Ludvig's. The newspaper called him "The Merchant of Death" for

having invented dynamite (in 1867). That characterization upset Nobel and prompted him to ponder his legacy.

Alfred Nobel was very wealthy and was also something of a Renaissance man, with a broad range of interests. Despite his lack of formal education, he learned to communicate fluently or at least comfortably in French, Russian, English, German, and Italian. His library housed an eclectic selection of literature in several languages, and he turned to writing fiction in his later years. After reflecting on the newspaper's negative description, he decided he would sponsor a way to honor those who "have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind." He created five prizes, to be awarded annually to men and women from all over the world, for outstanding achievements in physics, chemistry, physiology or medicine, literature, and the quest for peace.

The project was launched in 1901, when Sully Prudhomme¹ (1839–1907), the French poet and essayist, became the first person to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature "in special recognition of his poetic composition, which gives evidence of lofty idealism, artistic perfection, and a rare combination of the qualities of both heart and intellect." The Nobel Prize in Literature is awarded in five categories: drama, history, philosophy/essay writing, poetry, and prose. An unhurried scroll through the list of recipients generates an emotional roller-coaster of memories². The Literature Prize has so far been awarded 109 times to 113 Nobel Laureates³ (four prizes were shared), 14 of whom were women. Prudhomme was the first of the 33 poets who have, to date, been awarded the prize. Most of those Laureates wrote or write in English (28), followed by French (14), German (13), and Spanish (11).

Under the terms of Alfred Nobel's will the Literature Prize was intended for the person who, according to the Swedish Academy, had produced "the most outstanding work in an ideal direction" (*i idealisk riktning* in Swedish). The Academy's statutes defined literature as "not only belles-lettres, but also other writings which, by virtue of their form and style, possess literary value." There is an unsatisfactory vagueness in the terminology (an ideal direction? literary value?) that has led to a constant struggle to interpret an imprecisely worded will and to reflect the Academy's evolving sensibility.

Space will not permit an exhaustive review of the changing interpretations of terms such as “an ideal direction” over the course of the Prize’s lifespan. Suffice it to say that standards and criteria have fluctuated as they do in any field or institution, given sufficient time. Evolving aesthetic tastes, greater international communication, wars, social advances, and political trends have all influenced opinions one way or another, leaving behind a rich catalogue of the world’s literature. Former Academy Secretary Lars Gyllensten pointed out that, in his day, the term was “not taken too literally. It is realized that on the whole the serious literature that is worthy of a prize furthers knowledge of man and his condition and endeavors to enrich and improve his life.” The Nobel Prize is, ultimately, not given to an attitude towards life, a set of cultural roots, or the substance of a commitment; it is awarded to honor the unique artistic power by which the human experience has been shaped into literature.

But, what is literature? The Nobel Foundation’s definition is mentioned above. *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* has several definitions of the word, such as: “knowledge of books: literary culture.” Others include “writings in prose or verse, especially writings having excellence of form or expression and expressing ideas of permanent or universal interest,” and “the aggregate of musical compositions, specifically compositions of regional or historic significance, or for any particular instrument or group of instruments.” Most people seem to agree that, very broadly, literature means something written, fictional or not, that transports readers out of themselves to a different experience or understanding.

To get a better idea of the Swedish Academy’s perspective, it is interesting to read the citations that have accompanied the award. Here is a sampling:

For his work which, rich in ideas and filled with the spirit of freedom and the quest for truth, has exerted a far-reaching influence on our age (Jean-Paul Sartre, 1964).

For the human understanding and subtle analysis of contemporary culture that are combined in his work (Saul Bellow, 1976).

For her novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import that give life to an essential aspect of American reality (Toni Morrison, 1993).

For poetry that, with ironic precision, allows the historical and biological context to come to light in fragments of human reality (Wisława Szymborska, 1996).

To this list we must now add the citation for the winner of the 2016 Prize: “For having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition” — Bob Dylan⁴.

Which brings us back to the question, what is literature? And more specifically, what sort of literature deserves to win what is arguably the most prestigious literary award in the world? Both these questions, it would seem, led many to scratch their heads and ask: “Really? Bob Dylan?”

I should state right away that, though I no longer listen to his music as I once did, I have been a fan of Dylan’s work for decades, and have often predicted that he will be remembered as one of the greatest poets of my generation. Leonard Cohen (1934–2016), who died just the other day, is surely another contender, but I don’t think his influence has been as universal as Dylan’s. Some might wonder if a so-called “singer-songwriter” can be considered a poet, but I think a look at Dylan’s lyrics will convince even the most skeptical critic that they are poetry, set to music. Whether one likes this particular poetry is another question altogether, but it is one that applies to every other poet, even those 33 who share the distinction of being Nobel Laureates. Every reader’s reaction to poetry, and literature in general, is entirely subjective. How could it be otherwise, when the criteria involved are so vague?

Another factor that probably had something to do with the aforementioned head-scratching is that, generally speaking, there are “book people” and there are “music people.” Sometimes they overlap, sometimes they don’t. The gap is at its widest when the music in question is what we call “popular music” as opposed to what we call “classical music.” While pondering this phenomenon I remembered that my local classical FM radio station is often at pains to “remind listeners

that all music was once new.” The same could be said of “classical” poetry and prose; how many works, and writers, were once rejected by the Swedish Academy on the grounds that they did not “further man’s knowledge and condition or enrich and improve his life,” only to be welcomed with open arms (and prizes) some years later when tastes had changed and taboos had softened or shifted? Anatole France and George Bernard Shaw, for example, were both passed over in the early years of the twentieth century, but became Nobel Laureates in 1921 and 1925, respectively. In every age we have had “serious literature” and “popular literature,” but over time some works and authors have migrated from one category to another.

I would also venture to say that perhaps some of us are so set in our views about what constitutes literature that we can sometimes be blind to the literary qualities of what we might dismiss as works of lesser value. I have fallen into that trap myself, and feel slightly embarrassed whenever I think of my short-sightedness on occasion. So, in considering Dylan’s work, I return to the definitions stated above and ask myself whether it transports me out of myself to a different experience or understanding. The answer is a resounding *Yes!* Here are a few examples.

During a dark, sad time in my life I was moved, and comforted, by these lines:

‘Twas in another lifetime
One of toil and blood
When blackness was a virtue
The road was full of mud
I came in from the wilderness
A creature void of form
Come in she said I’ll give ya
Shelter from the storm⁵

Dylan explained that “When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose” and asked:

How does it feel
To be on your own
With no direction home
Like a complete unknown,
Like a rolling stone?⁶

When immersed in frustration and despair, these lines have lifted me up and introduced me to a broader perspective:

How many years can some people exist
Before they're allowed to be free?
How many times can a man turn his head
And pretend that he just doesn't see?
The answer my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind⁷

Sometimes, saying it simply says it best and, in so doing, gets it off your chest:

Broken bottles, broken plates,
broken switches, broken gates
Broken dishes, broken parts,
streets are filled with broken hearts
Broken words never meant to be spoken
Everything is broken⁸

Taking the high road is usually the best course, but sometimes I've needed someone to remind me to do so:

I ain't saying you treated me unkind
You could have done better but I don't mind
You just kinda wasted my precious time
But don't think twice, it's all right⁹

Dylan seemed to understand the plight of those who feel invisible:

Why wait any longer for the world to begin?
You can have your cake and eat it too.

Why wait any longer for the one you love
When he's standing in front of you?¹⁰

Being uprooted and displaced can be hard physically, mentally, and emotionally. It's soothing to hear about getting to the end of the line:

Throw my ticket out the window
Throw my suitcase out there too
Throw my troubles out the door
I don't need them anymore
Cause tonight I'll be staying here with you¹¹

And of course, what became an anthem of the 1960s and is still relevant today:

Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon you'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you is worth saving
Then you better start swimming or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changing¹²

These are just a few samples of Dylan's songs; it is not possible to convey here the full range and power of the works that have "created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition." He has written hundreds more, and is still writing and performing. He has won Grammys, an Academy Award, a Golden Globe, and a Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor the United States has to offer. As far back as 1963, TIME magazine noted that "he has something unique to say, and he says it in songs of his own invention that are the best songs of their style." His roots run deep in the American folk, country, and blues traditions. As a young man he was influenced by Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and the Beat Generation. He rose to fame as part of the protest movement of the early 1960s, singing deceptively

simple songs that were provocative dissertations on the social and political problems of the day. But he has always gone his own way and, by his own admission, is no mainstream artist. In 1972 the critic Ralph Gleason called Dylan “the first American poet to touch everyone, to hit all walks of life in this great sprawling society.”

His lyrics stand on their own but they are composed as songs and are more moving when we hear him sing them, despite the fact that, in my opinion, his voice is not his strongest suit. Often written in the register of the man in the street, some are raw expressions of cynical contempt (“All the money you make will never buy back your soul”), bitter acknowledgements of life’s conflicts (“You’re right from your side, I’m right from mine”), and sage advice from a world-weary wanderer (“Every pleasure’s got an edge of pain, pay for your ticket and don’t complain”). Others are poignant ballads to love lost (“She was born in spring, but I was born too late, blame it on a simple twist of fate”) and love found (“If not for you, winter wouldn’t hold no spring, couldn’t hear a robin sing, I just wouldn’t have a clue, if not for you”). There is a wry wisdom in many of his songs that set them apart from what we tend to define as popular music: “You don’t need a weatherman to tell you which way the wind blows.” But the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature was not awarded on the strength of his words alone. What the Academy said of Sartre could just as well apply to Dylan; his work, “rich in ideas and filled with the spirit of freedom and the quest for truth, has exerted a far-reaching influence on our age.”

NOTES

1 Sully Prudhomme was the pen-name of René François Armand Prudhomme.

2 See: http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/index.html

3 The word “Laureate” is a reference to the laurel wreath, a crown made of bay laurel leaves and branches. In Ancient Greece laurel wreaths were awarded to victors as a sign of honor, in athletic competitions and poetic events.

4 Born Robert Allen Zimmerman in 1941

5 “Shelter From the Storm” 1975

6 “A Rolling Stone” 1965

7 “Blowin’ in the Wind” 1963

8 “Everything is Broken” 1989

9 “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right” 1963

10 “Lay, Lady, Lay” 1969

11 “Tonight I’ll Be Staying Here With You” 1969

12 “The Times They Are A-Changing” 1964



Bob Dylan in Barcelona, Spain, 1984