

Bob Dylan  
the poet



# Bob Dylan the poet

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# Introduction

*Bob Dylan the poet* is a book about Dylan's poetic works. The reason behind it is the Nobel Literature Prize awarded to Dylan in 2016. The many discussions that arose out of this award, both before and after Dylan accepted the Nobel Prize, called for a book that looks more closely at Bob Dylan as a poet, and examines the contribution he has made to modern literature. Nomination for the Nobel Prize in literature normally takes place on the quiet – the professors and writers' associations that have the right to nominate candidates are asked by the Swedish Academy not to speak publicly about their nominations. In Dylan's case, this request to remain quiet was not observed. The first time a professor made public his intention to nominate Dylan was back in 1996, when Gordon Ball, Visiting Associate Professor of English, Washington and Lee University, proposed him, apparently at the request of two Norwegian fans of the American poet Allen Ginsberg.<sup>1</sup>

I did not receive any such request to nominate Dylan from the public, but when as a professor of literature I obtained the right to nominate, I immediately made use of it. I have nominated a number of writers, several of them Danish, but I have been most earnest in my suggestion of Dylan, whom I have proposed since 2007, when I made my nomination public. I have always believed that my nomination would be followed, though Dylan's manager, Jeff Rosen, told me at the opening of Dylan's exhibition of paintings at the Danish National Gallery in 2010 that he did not believe it would happen. Rosen asked me if I knew Christopher Ricks, whose work on Dylan's poetry he clearly appreciated. I could only express my agreement with his assessment. Ricks' book, *Dylan's Visions of Sin* (2003), is an excellent monograph, extremely erudite and exciting in its examination of the way Dylan thematises sins and virtues. It is one of the most important works in the large archive of academic literature that Dylan has inspired. But there is still a need for further attention

to Dylan's epoch-making work. Many studies focus on Dylan's biography, and soon there will be no piece of fluff in his pockets that has not been examined through a magnifying glass. The field now called Dynanology has a biographical anchoring, and there is an insatiable interest in the life lived by that artist with the beautiful curly hair and the strong blue eyes. This despite the fact that Dylan rarely gives interviews and prefers to keep his private life well out of the limelight. The story of how Dylan kept his marriage a secret from the public for fifteen years speaks volumes. Another important direction in Dylan research is the textual criticism and comparison. A number of works and reference books, by critics including Clifford Heylin, Greil Marcus, Gisle Selnes and Michael Gray, trace various textual and audio-recorded versions of Dylan's songs and give an account of his numerous literary and musical sources of inspiration. This part of Dynanology increases in size with the ongoing publication of alternate song recordings in the so-called Bootleg-series. Dylan's many fans also make new Bootleg recordings of his concerts, and allow them to circulate among themselves. This activity, though not legal, is impossible to stop, and since Dylan has for long performed up to 100 times a year, the sheer volume of illegal bootlegs is impossible to determine. It is of course important to study various versions of the songs, including textual variations, and it is also good to track down the poets and songwriters Dylan borrows from. But one can ask if mapping and identifying all of these sources and quotations really makes us any the wiser about what Dylan's texts are actually up to. Many people, their voices quivering with triumph, have revealed the Dylan has borrowed bits and pieces from other writers; most recently, Dylan annoyed people by borrowing from the student website Spark Notes in his Nobel Prize lecture, where his remarks on the plot of Melville's *Moby Dick* had certain similarities with the summary of the novel on the website. Connoisseurs of Dylan's poetry were not surprised: he has always borrowed from other people. Indeed, this procedure is part of his poetic method.

It is precisely this poetic method, and the poetic texts that result from it, with which the present book deals. It is my hy-

pothesis that Dylan's songs derive their status as brilliant, sparkling poetry by causing words and expressions to mesh, though they come from widely different places in culture and literature. Dylan's songs are networks of words that reach out for each other, interact and create a new poetic 'mobile' in the language. The particularly fascinating thing about Dylan's poetry is that as listener and reader one senses that the words are shot-through with meaning and history in his interpretation. Thereby, Dylan manages to emphasise that the words are not exclusively fetched from the depths of his own soul or private life. The words transport a larger meaning and history with them.

As one reads or listens to Dylan, one begins to recognize that every single expression and turn of phrase has a past, which now enters into a new mobile of words. Not in the sense that one necessarily recognizes all the references in order to get something out of the text; rather that one is in no doubt that the words have already been used, and that they show a certain amount of wear, while at the same time the poet instils new life in them. Dylan's poetry is always raggedly in motion.

I have gained inspiration from the sociologist and anthropologist Bruno Latour's discussion of 'actor-network' theory in my reading of Dylan's poetry.<sup>2</sup> Latour (b. 1947), who belongs to Dylan's own generation, is one of the most significant present-day thinkers. His ideas concerning the renewal of sociology are beginning to be of importance in other disciplines, including comparative literary history. Latour's idea that social phenomena arise in a complex network, or worknet, where both people and nonhuman agents influence each other, opens up new approaches to the study of literary texts. This means that Dylan's texts can be seen as a mobile concern, rather than a fixed, delimited outer object of study that the public and the critics stand either outside of or opposite to. With Latour in mind, it becomes possible to see how the text is formed in an exchange and interweaving with other texts, and how it becomes a collaboration or a concern that circulates among fans, critics, artists and the originator himself.

Words and expressions in Dylan's songs can be thought of as actors – things that collaborate in action – and the mode of their

interactions needs to be described as such. “Actor-network-theory”, according to Latour, is not really a theory, but rather a method of describing phenomena, and I use it as a point of departure in my readings. I am more interested in Dylan than in Latour, but gladly use Latour’s discussions of actors, things, concerns and states, since it provides an inclusive and dynamic way of thinking about Dylan’s work. Just as one can understand the words as actors in the text’s network of meanings, and the songs as actors in the network of literary culture, one can also describe Dylan the poet as a network with a number of actors that create and fuel the Dylan phenomenon with their contributions. I will attempt to provide such an understanding in the following presentation, which will also draw on the highly comprehensive academic literature, which ranges from Christopher Ricks’ watershed analyses of Dylan’s Vision of Sin to the Norwegian literary expert Gisle Selnes’ painstaking comparative studies in *Den store sangen* (The Great Song).

I begin with a description of Dylan the poet as a actor in the worldwide Dylan network, a ‘Dylan thing’ or a ‘Dylan case’, whose actors or participants include the biographical originator of the songs, managers, fans and supporters, other artists, critics, researchers, museums, libraries, websites – and many, many more.

After that, I look more closely at the actors of the songs: the words, the rhymes, the gallery of characters, the places frequented and the fans of the songs. I do not enter into a large-scale systematic and chronological reading of all of Dylan’s work. Such a reading has already been done a number of times. I move more lightly around the vast oeuvre, using the songs that best illustrate the various relations and matters of interest: choice of words, rhyme, characters and places. Here I have been inspired by Latour’s network considerations, but I do not follow him programmatically, an approach which would anyway be completely alien to his mode of thought. In Latour we do not find a theory that can be used on an object, but a series of challenging reflections about how people, the outside world, nature, and culture are interwoven, which can set one’s thoughts in motion when

analysing literary texts. Latour's way of thinking quite simply creates a better eye for the complexity and the many actors involved in and around Dylan's songs.

Few artists have entranced an audience as worldwide as Dylan's. But what is it that so appeals to Dylan's many fans and followers? Why does one become hooked, returning to Dylan's oeuvre for the rest of one's life? The task of examining the fan-culture around Dylan is a large study area in itself. One can lift a small corner of the stage curtain by considering how buyers of one of Dylan's albums, *Blood on the Tracks* (1975), describe their fascination with the songs. This album was voted his best album in 2012 by readers of *Rolling Stone*. In the chapter, 'Attunement', I examine what gives fans the pervasive feeling that the songs of this album are on their wavelength, and I also look at one of Dylan's own experiences of being fascinated by a song – that of Pirate Jenny in Brecht and Weill's *Dreigroschenoper*. Dylan's own description provides a good impression of the many actors that come together when we feel captivated by a work of art. Dylan's description of the Brecht song is also a source of inspiration for the method used in the present study.

Two chapters round off the book. In the first of these, I tell of a trip I made to Dylan's childhood home area in Minnesota in the spring of 2017. It was no devout pilgrimage, but a trip in order to personally observe the towns and the iron mine that are such players in Dylan's poetry. The trip was to become an important part of the work on this book, and it is described in the chapter 'Back to Z'.

The other chapter is an encore about one of the Dylan texts I am most fond of. Dylan has never played it at any of his concerts, but "Red River Shore" is allowed to round off my presentation.