

New Approaches
to Bob Dylan

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Content

- Rita Felski 7
Foreword
- Anne-Marie Mai and Alastair Morrison 9
Introduction
- Stephen Greenblatt 13
Dylan's Shakespeare, Shakespeare's Dylan
- Michael Gray 19
Bob Dylan's Affective Symphony: A Personal Testimony
- Sean Latham 27
It's Not Alright With Me: Thinking Twice about Bob Dylan in the Magazines
- David Gaines 51
Dylan's Literary Fans: The Economy of Prestige and Reading with One Hand Waving Free
- Nina Goss 63
Help Comes Too Late: Authenticity and Inauthenticity and Precarity in "Scarlet Town"
- Rachela Permenter 81
Modern Times, The Trickster, and Shocks of Force: Bob Dylan Answers Whitman with Melville and Dante
- Ludovic Foster 107
Beyond the Horizon: Observing the Queerness within Bob Dylan's Gesture
- Gisle Selnes 129
Dylan Post Nobel: Attachment, Attunement and Tradition

Flemming G. Andersen	149
<i>Though This be Plagiarism – yet There is Method in it: Dylan’s Inspiration from ‘Tradition’</i>	
Jonathan Hodgers	169
<i>Recording Dylan</i>	
John Hay	189
<i>Theme Time: Dylan as DJ</i>	
Jim O’Brien	207
<i>“Señor, Señor”: Bob Dylan and the Myths and Legends of Spanish America and the Old West</i>	
Freddy G. Dominguez	233
<i>Into the Library, Into The Past: Bob Dylan’s Sense of History</i>	
Mark Hulsether	247
<i>Four Levels of Religious Meaning in Bob Dylan’s Music and Why It Matters to Hear Them All</i>	
Robert Reginio	273
<i>Listening to the Other: Bob Dylan and Empathy</i>	
Anne-Marie Mai	297
<i>Bob Dylan’s Attunements: Some Examples</i>	
Horace Engdahl and Anne-Marie Mai	315
<i>A Conversation on Bob Dylan</i>	
Abstracts	325
Biographies of the contributors	335
Index of songs	347
Index of names	355

Foreword

The mission of the Niels Bohr Professorship “Uses of Literature. The Social Dimensions of Literature” is to develop new approaches and methods for exploring the social uses of literature. Drawing on both the humanities and social sciences, the Professorship seeks to offer richer accounts of what literature does and why it matters. Our premise is that literature is distinctive (it has certain qualities or affordances) and also relational (it is connected to many other actors), and that its presence is not attenuated by its relations, but made possible by its relations.

The subject of our first conference, October 4-5 2018, was *New Approaches to Bob Dylan*. Bob Dylan’s songs and art raise many questions that are important to *Uses of Literature*. How can we renew the concept of literature and literary studies? How do we capture the distinctiveness and dynamism of literary works as they move through the world? How can we do justice to the diverse and often surprising ways in which people engage with texts, and the many facets of aesthetic experiences? In what ways do literary works speak to matters of concern, inspire attachments, weave affiliations, or forge collectives?

The first meeting of the *Uses of Literature* group took place on the day that Bob Dylan’s Nobel Prize was announced, October 13, 2016. This coincidence highlighted the great interest of Dylan’s art, the social dimension of his songs, and the attunement of researchers and a world-wide public to the research project. Attachment and attunement, recognition and the social dimensions of the songs, and questions of method were key words in our call for papers. Numerous international researchers responded and contributed to the conference. This publication, *New Approaches to Bob Dylan*, documents the event.

Rita Felski

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Introduction

Anne-Marie Mai and Alastair Morrison

Bob Dylan's songs have been the subject of countless close readings and interpretations. Philological research has identified many of the literary sources of his lyrics, and his work has been studied in relation to the ballad tradition, romanticism, modernism, and postmodernism. Dylan's revisionary approaches to what it means to be a poet have also been widely discussed. His work is one of the fastest-growing research areas within the humanities, and the interest has increased dramatically since Dylan's receipt of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016.

The Swedish Academy's decision rekindled ancient debates, regarding an army of distinctions which the award appeared to defy: text versus performance, "high" versus "popular," the poet versus the singer. On the matter of Dylan's Nobel, if not on the Swedish Academy, some dust has settled since 2016. But the questions raised then continue to afford an opportunity for reimagining Bob Dylan as a social phenomenon, and perhaps for reimagining the dynamic interactive potential of literary art in other contemporary settings.

It was with such a reimagination in mind that we convened the conference "New Approaches to Bob Dylan," hosted by Syddansk Universitet in October of 2018, with the support of the Niels Bohr Professorship project "The Uses of Literature." That conference provides the basis for this book. Our participants, coming from France, Norway, Finland, Ireland, the UK, the United States, and throughout Denmark, met for two days of lively discussion in Odense. The essays gathered here, revised versions of most of the material presented, reflect the insights and problems we were able to uncover together.

There is a distinguished history of scholarly work on Dylan. Textual scholars focus on Dylan's lyrics, parsing out their verbal artistry and identifying their numerous and far-flung sources.

Historians and biographers try to clarify the details of Dylan's life, and the chronologies that link him with other notable figures and movements. Social scientists, meanwhile, have focused on the cultures inspired by Dylan, the institutions and communities of fandom and appreciation which surround him. Our goal is to break down the disciplinary silos that have kept these lines of work so separate, to think about how lyrics, performances, personal history, and mass movements all coincide and shape one another.

This book's opening and closing contributions, both authored by canonical figures in literary study, address the open question of Dylan's own canonicity. Building on the apparently offhand comparison between himself and Shakespeare which Dylan made in his Nobel address, Stephen Greenblatt considers the rich chain of association between these two figures, and their relatedly dynamic roles in live and changing cultures. Horace Engdahl of the Swedish Academy, who presented the motivation for Dylan's award, is interviewed by Anne-Marie Mai, discussing Dylan's persistent renovations of his own poetic mode, as well as the larger renovation he represents of the figure of the poet in Western society.

Other essays examine Dylan's exchanges with interlocutors and the public in contemporary society. Mixing criticism with the autobiographical recollections of a teenage fan, Michael Gray explores how the 1960s Dylan drew on, and then reshaped, both the conventions of popular music production and the cultures of fandom and musical connoisseurship. Where Gray's approach is personal and recollective, Sean Latham's approach is archival; drawing on the collections of the University of Tulsa's Bob Dylan Center, Latham shows how the early Dylan phenomenon emerges from interpenetrations of the folk circuit, the popular press, and the artist himself. David Gaines takes a more chronologically broad look at Dylan's reception, but similarly emphasizes the interactive, suggesting that the most "literary" moments in his work do not separate him from popular culture, but in fact provoke and involve his most zealous admirers.

The question implied here, of just who listens to Bob Dylan

and why, is central to several contributions. Gisle Selnes considers the generational politics of Dylan's Nobel, rejecting claims that the award was plausible only to baby-boomers and making a case for Dylan's relevance to listeners of all ages. Less polemically, Mark Hulsether discusses Dylan's uptake within various Christian communities; charting the ways in which, emboldened by Dylan's prophetic stances, reworkings of scripture, and sometime self-identification as a Christian, various denominational groups in the United States have interpreted Dylan's lyrics. The essay provides fascinating links between these patterns of interpretation and the ways of using and relating to popular music which are habitual to religious communities. Two further essays take up themes of interaction or connectivity with regard to Dylan's songs themselves. Robert Reginio argues that the pull of Dylan's songs is inextricably linked with the question of empathy (or its refusal) with their subjects. Anne-Marie Mai, meanwhile, focuses her assessment on the concept of attunement, the fortunate coincidence whereby the qualities of a work of art resonate with the attitude, outlook, or emotional state of a listener, allowing appreciation, even love. This process is, Mai suggests in a reading of Dylan's autobiography, not just crucial to why people enjoy Dylan, but also to his own work process.

Other essays here consider Dylan's relationships to history, either as a body of knowledge to be drawn on and restaged or as an ongoing process within which we find ourselves. In light of Dylan's habit of restaging figures and tropes from throughout American history, Freddy Dominguez asks whether Dylan can be fairly described as a historian himself. Jim O'Brien, meanwhile, illustrates Dylan's politically pressing explorations of the colonial history of Hispanophone America. For others, the question has less to do with material and more to do with how Dylan orients listeners towards time. Nina Goss suggests that Dylan's work affords a crucial insight into the historical condition of precarity – a condition Goss sees as a neither-nor between autonomy and community. Rachela Permenter contends that the heart of the Dylan corpus is a disruption of chronology, a way of making the past – and especially past atrocity – urgently present. Ludovic

Foster shows a pattern of lyrical and performative references to queerness in Dylan's work, arguing that these references line up with an orientation towards the future, and a sense of selfhood, which is never stable or finished, is achieved.

Other contributors show how a full sense of Dylan's artistry requires an expanded sense of the media through which he works. Flemming Andersen explores Dylan's many borrowings from the rich tradition of British folk ballads, showing how Dylan has enlivened and continued this tradition in a way markedly different from the folklorist's frequent insistence on preservation and authenticity. Jonathan Rodgers offers a nuanced reading of Dylan's use of recording technology and studio space, suggesting a style of performative "liveness" through which the recordings draw listeners in. John Hay's contribution focuses on Dylan's Theme Time Radio Hour, a mix of performance, musical curation, and citational poetics (the disc-jockey's practice of "sampling" works literally and metaphorically here) which – and here Hay resonates with other contributors – makes it hard to separate past from present, or artist from artifact.

It is only appropriate that this collection, whose core theme is interactivity, should itself have emerged from a process of interaction. The essays presented here often cross the borders of disciplinarity, and many have been generously excepted from ongoing book projects in the name of enriching this collaborative and conversational effort, to look at Dylan's work, persona, and reception as parts of one, continually shifting and unfolding process. We think this might be a good way to look at other poets too.

Assistant professor Alastair Morrison
Professor Anne-Marie Mai

Organizers of "New Approaches to Bob Dylan"