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Writing hard: The poetics of candour in Dylan and Shakespeare

Katharine A. Craik

Bob Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016, the year which marked 400 years since the death of William Shakespeare. Dylan mentioned Shakespeare in his acceptance speech which was delivered by Azita Rajil, US Ambassador to Sweden, at the Nobel Banquet on 10th December: ‘I began to think about William Shakespeare, the great literary figure. I would reckon he thought of himself as a dramatist. The thought that he was writing literature couldn’t have entered his head.’ Dylan goes on to describe Shakespeare’s attentiveness to the more mundane matters involved in making art: ‘Is the financing in place? Are there enough good seats for my patrons? Where am I going to get a human skull?’ Dylan reminded his audience that he, like Shakespeare, is shackled by everyday chores such as finding the right musicians, choosing a recording studio, and figuring out whether songs are in the correct key. For both artists, the pressing question is not ‘is it literature?’ but how to keep pushing past the practical obstacles which are always threatening to prevent the work from reaching an audience. As Dylan concluded, ‘Some things never change, even in 400 years’ (Nobel 2021).

Shakespeare was indeed a pragmatist and a businessman as well as a playwright, and no doubt a resourceful prop-hunter when he had to be. And it’s true that the term ‘literature’ meant more or less nothing when *Hamlet* was written, not least because plays were regarded in Shakespeare’s time as ephemera in much the same way that popular songs are in ours. Dylan claimed in his speech that the main credential he shared with Shakespeare was a willingness to graft. At the same time, he made clear that the calibre of his own work was on a par with that of the western world’s most famous dramatist. Dylan’s songs contain many direct and indirect references to Shakespeare’s plays, especially the late tragedies, and he said in a 2015 interview

with Robert Love that he had been ‘trying for years to come up with songs that have the feel of a Shakespearean drama’. Dylan’s acceptance speech certainly created some drama, and the line about finding a human skull packed a particular punch. Suddenly the assembled company found themselves alongside Hamlet in the graveyard, looking death straight in the eye. Taking this moment as its starting point, the present chapter considers Shakespeare and Dylan not as ‘literary greats’ but instead as writers who embrace the strangeness and discomfort which can be found in language. It does so by reading Shakespeare’s Sonnet 66, first published in 1609, alongside the lyrics of the 1962 song which Patti Smith performed at the Nobel Banquet in Dylan’s honour and absence: ‘A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall’.

Dylan has rightly emphasized that Shakespeare’s plays are best encountered in performance, just as his own songs are meant to be heard rather than read. At the same time, he has pointed out that the act of reading involves musicality when the inner ear is properly attuned. In an interview with *Time* magazine in 1985, he remarked that ‘if I read poems, it’s like I can always hear the guitar. Even with Shakespeare’s sonnets I can hear a melody because it’s all broken up into timed phrases so I hear it’ (Muir 2019:357). Recent recording artists including Rufus Wainwright have found inspiration in the sonnets, several of which invite musical interpretation since they talk so directly about melody, singing, and even keyboard playing. But while Shakespeare’s sonnets are remarkably melodious in form (fourteen lines, three rhyming quatrains, one rhyming couplet) they are not uniformly melodious in content. Instead their language, like the language of Dylan’s songs, finds multiple ways into unease. Through unexpected juxtapositions of words, stripped-back expression and extraordinary candour, both writers find ways of saying what was previously unsaid or unsayable. Whether or not Shakespeare’s sonnets provided Dylan with a direct source, both artists certainly know how to disturb any easeful acceptance of the way things have to be.

Like many of Dylan’s best-loved songs, Shakespeare’s sonnets deal with youth, age, death, memory and the passing of time. And like Dylan, who often responded at the start of his career to earlier folk artists, Shakespeare was working intensively with lyric traditions which preceded his own. Sonnets had been circulating since the thirteenth century, but Shakespeare re-wrote the rules of this traditional, courtly form by writing about the humiliations involved in erotic infatuation, jealousy, rejection and despair. Meanwhile ‘A Hard Rain’ draws on the

question-and-answer form of the traditional Scottish ballad ‘Lord Randall’ while expanding this pared-down, domestic story of a lover’s betrayal into a powerful song about existential threat and the possibility of action. Sonnet 66 in particular has many formal similarities with ‘A Hard Rain’. Both work through repetition, and both have the directness of a spoken conversation. Each verse of ‘A Hard Rain’ starts out by addressing the ‘blue-eyed boy’ and ‘darling young one’ who, in the lines which follow, tells where he has been, what he has seen, what he has heard, whom he has met – and, finally, what he will do. Shakespeare’s addressee is less clear, but most readers agree that the first 126 sonnets are addressed to a beautiful young man. In Sonnet 66 and the sonnets immediately preceding, Shakespeare thinks about how the beauty of a beloved youth may be harmed by, or may persist through, the devastating effects of time passing. But neither ‘A Hard Rain’ nor Sonnet 66 devotes much attention to these young men. Instead they both offer a wake-up call, through repeated acts of witnessing, to a world which is terribly depleted by untruthfulness, prejudice, carelessness, cruelty and neglect.

‘A Hard Rain’ is, among other things, a song about innocence confronting the worst of the world. Its power lies in the straightforward clarity of its vision:

I saw a newborn baby with wild wolves all around it
 I saw a highway of diamonds with nobody on it
 I saw a black branch with blood that kept drippin’
 I saw a room full of men with their hammers a-bleedin’
 I saw a white ladder all covered with water
 I saw ten thousand talkers whose tongues were all broken

Innocence encounters menace in a series of tableaux sketched in vivid, stark colours (black, white, red). The images keep multiplying, and become increasingly threatening as they capture the banal power of multitudes (‘ten thousand talkers’) who are bluntly indifferent to the vulnerable. The speaker’s own innocence is captured through the plainness of his expression: ‘I saw... I saw... I saw...’ He simply says what he sees, and seems completely alone in these acts of beholding. Even the landscape has disintegrated: the highways are crooked, the forests are sad, the oceans are dead. While the song surely evokes something of the calamitous political

context in which it was written, including the Cuban missile crisis which escalated the Cold War, its compass seems more generally existential. The poet is dead in the gutter, and the clown is crying in the alley – but the young one keeps demonstrating the force and intensity of telling the truth.

Now let's turn to Sonnet 66 which, like 'A Hard Rain', expresses a ruined world through a cascade of stark images:

Tired with all these, for restful death I cry:
 As to behold desert a beggar born,
 And needy nothing trimmed in jollity,
 And purest faith unhappily forsworn,
 And gilded honour shamefully misplaced,
 And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,
 And right perfection wrongfully disgraced,
 And strength by limping sway disabled,
 And art made tongue-tied by authority,
 And folly (doctor-like) controlling skill,
 And simple truth miscalled simplicity,
 And captive good attending captain ill.
 Tired with all these, from these would I be gone,
 Save that to die I leave my love alone. (Burrow 2002:513)

Senseless folly has seized control, and those who are most deserving will stay as beggars. Everything that is pure in private or public life has fallen into corruption. Again it is the mindless multitude which destroys precious things – especially art and truth – by strumpeting forth, and by exerting banal forms of disciplinary control. The complexities of skill and virtue are resolved into meaningless similitude, so that even straightforward truth-telling looks tarnished: 'simple truth [is] miscalled simplicity'. Here the sonnet calls to mind not only 'A Hard Rain' but also another early Dylan song, 'My Back Pages', where life's rich complexities are flattened by a

dishonest form of speaking which seems akin to death itself: ‘Lies that life is black and white spoke from my skull’.

‘A Hard Rain’ is a young man’s song, written when Dylan was around twenty-one. Sonnet 66 is an older man’s poem, probably written when Shakespeare was in his mid-thirties. At its conclusion, this sonnet turns inwards as the speaker contemplates ‘restful death’. The awkward final rhyme (gone/alone), and the sonnet’s sinking back into its own early phrase ‘Tired with all these’, suggests that even the act of speaking has become exhausting. The sonnet’s weariness chimes with Dylan’s more recent, reflective ‘Not Dark Yet’ where ‘I can’t even remember what it was I came here to get away from.’ ‘A Hard Rain’ on the other hand keeps its focus outwards, on the wider world, expressing the possibility for change – or at least for a more accurate vision of things. The young one is ‘a-goin’ back out ’fore the rain starts a-fallin’ with a determined sense of what has to be done. In the final verse, set in ‘the deepest black forest’, the scene is bleak as poison floods into water, home blends into prison, and nothingness spreads over everything. And yet the candid voice persists:

And I’ll tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it
 And reflect it from the mountain so all souls can see it
 Then I’ll stand on the ocean until I start sinkin’
 But I’ll know my song well before I start singin’
 And it’s a hard, it’s a hard, it’s a hard, it’s a hard
 It’s a hard rain’s a-gonna fall.

Like Sonnet 66 which deplores ‘art made tongue-tied by authority’, ‘A Hard Rain’ ends with the difficulty of expression. It will take a messianic miracle to keep speaking, against the odds (‘I’ll stand on the ocean’) – and the coupling of ‘I start sinkin’ with ‘I start singin’ suggests the risk that such expression involves. Telling the truth seems both unstoppable and precarious in a vast and always indifferent world.

In ‘Stuck inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again’, Dylan evokes an over-familiar Shakespeare ‘in the alley / With his pointed shoes and his bells’. But Shakespeare has always meant more to Dylan than cosy English heritage. All avant-garde art is vulnerable to

being co-opted by the establishment, as both Dylan and Shakespeare knew, and perhaps this was why it was impossible for Dylan to attend the Nobel Banquet in person. But these two writers have more in common than their sheer prominence in western culture. Sonnet 66 and ‘A Hard Rain’ draw on a shared set of formal features including repetition, poem-as-drama, and direct speech. Both candidly address the ruinous state of the world. Both think hard about the precarity of youth. And both reflect on the difficulties involved in writing and singing, achieving virtuosic self-expression even as they describe being tongue-tied – or of sinking while singing. Perhaps both writers, as the Nobel Prize committee would have it, were creating ‘literature’. But if they were, both seem mindful that any such creation is difficult, risky, and cannot last. As Hamlet laments, in the episode Dylan evoked in 2016, ‘That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once’.

References

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