

Gary Browning

The Philosophy of Modern Song / by Bob Dylan

BOB DYLAN'S *The Philosophy of Modern Song* (2022) eponymously declares itself to be philosophical, but it is not clear if or how it is a philosophical work. The Guardian's review talked of it being "a high-flown and slightly misleading title", while the description of the review in *Esquire* doesn't mince words: "Bob Dylan isn't done lying to us just yet – *The Philosophy of Modern Song* as a title is almost entirely untrue."

Certainly, the title of the book is never explained within its pages, and remains as enigmatic as Dylan's songs and identity. The truth is that the book is not easy to categorise. It goes hither and thither in discussing over sixty modern songs, offering seemingly rambling anecdotes and one or two sharp comments about the human condition. For Dylan the songwriting matters, but so does the singer, and Dylan gives credit to great singers such as Frank Sinatra, Bobby Darin, and even Perry Como. The songs discussed do not themselves conform to a pattern. Rockabilly, rock and roll, country and western, and folk songs mix with the blues, pop songs, and novelty numbers. It seems a random and personal collection. But is it philosophical?

While others are uncertain or argue against the label, I would say, "Yes it is". Yet it is philosophical in an idiosyncratic way. It does not offer considered and elaborate criteria on what constitutes the essence of song. Its aesthetic ideas are instead expressed in bits and pieces of commentary which resonate with what makes Dylan's own songs so powerful. I suggest that it is the refusal to set up criteria for an aesthetic which paradoxically makes for, and marks out, Dylan's distinctive philosophical aesthetic.

As it is for Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (1960), for Dylan aesthetic creation involve many players, and judgments are multiple and contentious. Above all, listeners are involved in interpreting what is going on. But Dylan rules out exclusive meanings and fixed identities. For Dylan a good song holds our attention by being open and maintaining a porous narrative that draws us in, allowing us to fill in gaps and interpret a song in multiple ways. He points to the interpretive openness of a song as making us want to listen. Jimmy Webb's 'By the Time I Get to Phoenix', for instance, allows us to imagine what the narrator and his girlfriend are feeling in the hours in which he is travelling further away from her. And the country song 'There Stands a Glass' is taken by Dylan, against all expectations, to be about a Vietnam veteran in a bar back home, recalling the barbarities of war.

Dylan's Songs & Philosophy

The *Philosophy of Modern Song's* case for interpretive openness and a lack of closure in song-writing reflects back tellingly on Dylan's own songbook. At the outset of his career Dylan was catapulted to fame by his timely finger-pointing songs signalling injustice and wrong-doing. But at whom was the finger pointing? And exactly what did it signify? Dylan left the interpretation open. Dylan's politics were never closed. That was the point. It was for his listeners to interpret them. For instance, 'Blowin' in the Wind' (1963) was taken to heart by the civil rights movement, but the song did not spell out what was to be done and it was up to listeners to interpret what was meant. Likewise 'A Hard Rain's A Gonna Fall' (1963) is searingly evocative in its reference to a looming apocalypse. But what is meant by the 'hard rain' in the title? Many took it to refer to the Cuban Missile Crisis and the imminence of nuclear war, yet it was written before the crisis. In conversation with the sociologist Studs Terkel, Dylan denied that it was about nuclear war, and suggested it stood for a looming crisis arising out of the confusion and darkness of contemporary life.

In the mid-sixties Dylan asserted his own recalcitrant identity in contrast to the political identity that was being foisted on him by fans. This identity was expressed negatively: 'It Ain't Me Babe' (1964) denies the expectations of others, but refrains from saying what the singer actually stands for.

Likewise, Dylan left open who were the culprits of the political crimes his songs focus on. In 'Who Killed Davey Moore?' (1963), which mourns the death in the ring of a boxer, Dylan reviews a host of candidates in turn: the boxer who landed the blow, the referee who might have stopped the fight, the journalists who built up the atmosphere before the fight, and the crowd who bayed for blood. No answer is given; again, it's for the listeners to interpret, and to consider their own role. 'The Times They Are A 'Changin'' (1964) proclaims a time of change in which the social order will be reversed; but no specific claim is made about what will happen. Instead, the meaning is shaped by the rhythm and the insistent voice of the singer. In recent years, Dylan has slowed the tempo in which he sings it, and the song now seems more a requiem for hopes that have passed rather than a battle cry.

A songwriter does not determine how a song is to be taken. Dylan's songs characteristically express paradoxes and invite listeners to engage with their meaning. His early love song, 'Don't Think Twice, It's Alright' (1963), for instance, declares that the singer is over the pain of lost love; yet the very elaboration of the song invites the listener to recognise the irony of the title. Likewise, a later love song, 'Most of the Time' (1989), declares that the singer is feeling fine most of the time – and this begs questions about what happens at the other times.

In 'Ballad of a Thin Man' (1965), the spirit of the Sixties is announced in the line 'There's something happening here, but you don't know what it is, do you Mr Jones?' This sense of 'something happening' indicates how something important may be indeterminate but matter a lot, and this fact is lost to sophisticated types like Mr Jones, who are closed to their and others' feelings. Dylan revels in the indeterminacy of feelings just as French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, in *The Differend* (1988), presses the case for the indemonstrable: 'Is It Happening?'

The Sonic Sublime

Perhaps Dylan's most celebrated songs are those which deal with the creative process itself. 'Mr Tambourine Man' (1965), 'Visions of Johanna' (1966), and 'Blind Willie Mctell' (1983), explore the expression of creativity in music, or appreciating a sonic sublime that defies description, often also seen in the blues. 'Mr Tambourine Man' celebrates the mesmeric quality of a restless musical spirit. Or Johanna's beauty cannot be registered, but we know that Louise, for all her charm, only makes it clear that Johanna is not here. It is in the remorseless expression of what falls short of beauty that the transcendence of 'Visions of Johanna' emerges. And the tragedy of American history is played out in the songs of the great Delta blues man Blind Willie Mctell, to which Dylan the singer, cannot aspire; and yet the song 'Blind Willie Mctell' is itself an arresting modern blues song, and in performing the song Dylan miraculously does justice to the contemporary malaise, and to the history of the Delta Blues.

These songs express Dylan's aesthetic. They are confessional in disclaiming the capacities of the songwriter to express what is wonderful and moving in music, beauty, and in particular, the blues. The irony is that it is in the very performance of these songs that a feel for these ineffable things is expressed. The performer's denial of his ability to explain or express the form of creativity is in turn denied by the performances themselves!

These songs performing aesthetic creativity rest upon and express paradoxes, because creativity, beauty, and musical movement resist defining terms. They can only be expressed in song itself,

which intimates bewitching creativity, movement, and love. In this way Dylan follows the aesthetic of Lyotard's *Lessons of the Analytic of the Sublime* (1994) and Iris Murdoch's 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' (1959), which worked with Immanuel Kant's aesthetic of the sublime to develop an aesthetic sense in what cannot be captured in determinate rational discourse.

Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), described the power and the ineffability of sublime experiences. The immensity of a mountain or the waves of a tumultuous sea exceed all descriptive powers. Likewise, for Murdoch, a novel cannot simply rehearse the identities of characters; it deals with the immensity of setting out a story of characters freely imagined and interacting in ways that defy classification and the conventions of artistic form. Like Kant, Murdoch sees the aesthetic intimating of meaning as a realm beyond reason. Likewise, Lyotard's postmodern philosophy respected 'differends', recognising that distinct standpoints cannot be brought together or captured by an overarching philosophy. Identity is elusive and indeterminate, and yet may be intimated in sublime art, just as for Dylan 'beauty walks a razor's edge', but can be intimated in a song such as 'Shelter from the Storm' (1974), from which that phrase is taken.

Dylan & Philosophy

Is Dylan a philosopher, then? For many the answer is 'no'. Philosophers have been trained in the subject. They also tend to be systematic in their reasoning, and specify precisely the conditions under which concepts operate. Dylan is untutored in philosophy and is irregular in his treatment of the philosophy of song. His riffs on particular songs express mixed sentiments. He rants against divorce lawyers and expresses heartfelt empathy for human suffering and the fate of Native Americans.

His interpretations of songs are maverick responses rather than instances of an applied systematic form of appraisal. This irregularity, however, is the point; and it is a point that bears upon Dylan's own songs and philosophy. For Dylan, songs are open. Their meaning is indeterminate and depend upon songwriters, musicians, and listeners. Meanings are never fixed.

Dylan's own songs are themselves hard to pin down, and his performances of his own songs are famous for their variation. A Dylan song is rarely performed in a standard way, and Dylan's audience reacts to his interpretations in unpredictable ways. New versions of songs have even been greeted by booing; yet Dylan has not seemed too bothered by adverse reactions. The variety of performance is central to his philosophy of song.

Dylan's suggestive yet non-systematic approach to writing about the philosophy of song fits well with his sense of the aesthetic as indeterminate and his resistance to clear-cut rational determination. This aesthetic of indeterminacy is not isolated in the history of philosophy, though. He is in good company. He is aligned with Kant, Murdoch, and Lyotard.

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