

The following discussion is copied and pasted from the British and Irish Poets discussion list, and can be found in the list's archives, which are displayed publically. The discussion took place between 28 October 2016 and 1 November 2016. I have edited this discussion to improve clarity and to remove various digressions from the topic being discussed.

The discussion subject was titled 'The Problem of Prosody'

At the time of writing this (26 August 2018), the discussion can still be directly linked to at:

<https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A2=BRITISH-IRISH-POETS;5ecec56.1610>

However, it has sometimes been the case that moderators of the British and Irish Poets discussion list have made linking directly to discussions there no longer possible.

Text that appears within square brackets are explanatory additions to this facsimile, to clarify in certain instances to whom a particular response is addressed or for other explanatory purposes.

Jeffrey Side

I've been reading the song and poetry discussion here [referring to a discussion about song and poetry elsewhere on the list] with great interest. Many of its themes have engaged me for many years, and so it's good to see such a discussion (perhaps long overdue) appearing here.

From what I've been able to glean from it, there seems to be two camps of opinion: One camp has Jamie and Peter arguing that song lyrics differ from written poetry in that they don't consist of the various prosodic and metric formulations that are classically associated with written poetry. The other camp has David and Tim arguing that this might be true but it doesn't "devalue" the emotional and aesthetic appreciation of a song lyric—even when separated from the music—because prosody no longer matters in evaluating the worth or not of a poetic text. Have I summarised these positions faithfully?

Regarding the Jamie/Peter camp. I agree that written poetry has historically (at least up until High Modernism) stressed the importance of prosody and metre (though there are some exceptions, such as the poetry of Whitman and Dickinson, and possibly others I'm unaware of) but I don't think that song lyrics necessarily can be devoid of these aspects. Song lyrics by Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen do, indeed, have some prosodic elements (I think Christopher Ricks has looked at this in the case of Dylan), and they also have other poetical elements, such as rhyme, alliteration, allusion, etc. It might be true, as far as I can tell, that song lyrics by these writers don't contain any strictly formal poetical metre, but neither does the majority of contemporary written poetry that is highly regarded in some quarters. Does this, then, suggest that such prosody-lacking written poetry should be evaluated as being more similar to song lyrics than to written poetry, if the lack of prosody in song lyrics is seen (at least by Jamie and Peter—as I understand their position to be) as distinguishing it from written poetry. In other words, is written poetry that does not contain any prosodic elements or metrics really more like a song lyric than written poetry that uses these elements. If so, that would be a very controversial proposition, as it would be dismissing nearly all of the poetry written since High Modernism—including experimental poetry. Of course, I might have misunderstood Jamie's and Peter's position on this, and so am open to correction.

Regarding the David/Tim camp position, I admit, I do have sympathy with it, if only because the Jamie/Peter camp position (if I've represented it faithfully) re-categorises nearly all written poetry that has no prosody, as being distinct from written poetry that does have it. This jettisons much of what has come to be regarded as poetry.

Again, I admit I might have misunderstood both side's positions. The discussion hasn't been that easy to make sense of to be truthful.

Jamie McKendrick

Hi Jeff,

There may be a couple of misunderstandings here, but still the way you've framed this summary is lucid and helpful. Sorry if this reply is just notes but I hope it helps.

“Regular” metrics are not a requirement of poetry—that’s undeniable. (To your example of Whitman could be added the Bible, Smart, and Blake’s prophetic books and a host of others. Dickinson, however, always “engages” with a metrical arrangement, however she bends it, but that’s beside the point.) We agree so far? Again you’re right that Cohen and Dylan and innumerable lesser song writers—pop and other—use prosodic elements as well as rhyme and refrains (which have been taken into poetry via song). There are a great number of common features between song and poem, and quite a few have been mentioned in the exchange.

Here is where the argument becomes more complex, and I’m not sure I can do full justice to it because I lack a musical training and some of the basic knowledge, so you’ll have to tolerate any imprecision and I hope someone better equipped can explain my points more clearly.

I should say that Peter’s argument is different from my own. This at least is how I understand him (and apologies if I’m wrong). He treats song and poem as two aspects of the same impulse, not only historically entwined but also inherently joined, and I believe he sees no useful purpose in a separation. I’ll give three extended quotes, as I think he knows more about the technical aspects of song than I do, and his argument may also offer the kind of summary that Kent was asking for.

‘A song, strictly and traditionally speaking, offer less opportunity for shifting the meaning in performance. The words follow a syllabic and rhythmic pattern dictated by the music, and each verse has to conform to that pattern or it would not fit the music. Extra unstressed syllables etc. can be slipped in but that’s about all. If you speak the lyrics of a song without the music this difference becomes immediately apparent.’

‘I’m definitely of the opinion, Tim, that the skill required to write song lyrics is basically the same as that which is needed to write poems. This doesn’t mean that songs can always be judged by the same standards—it’s a technical skill in handling words and form. Songs can certainly be as effective as poems, when sung or not. And possibly as subtle or ambiguous, though some of that might depend on the performance. It’s unlikely that a “song” as generally understood can reach to the extended seriousness or sublimity that poetry can. The sing-song quality of songs, the closely repeated rhythmic units and rhyme tend to make songs small-scale. Small-scale is fine but not everything.’

Finally:

‘The point, then, (Tim) about the kind of music is that I don’t see how we can deny Jamie’s point that the spoken/read poem offers much greater opportunities for subtle emphases and re-emphases, delicate sub-textual phasing, disturbances such as enjambement etc. A song setting of the same poem cannot possibly retrieve all this, it is too fixed to the temporal dictates of the tune.’

For the purposes of my argument this last point is significant, but also the first. I have to concede (and many counter-examples I’ve given show) that making some impassable division between song and poem is an artificial and doomed project. But these last elements Peter mentions are for me crucial to the way we write and read poems, they are so involved in the way we receive meaning that, my argument goes, to all intents and purposes it’s more useful for us to consider them separately. (I’m choosing my words carefully here—they are not really separate forms but it’s far more sensible, in order to appreciate what they do, to consider them as such.) From the start I’ve said that this view is not going to withstand any philosophical scrutiny, but that it’s still worth considering, otherwise we’ll undervalue what makes poems poems and probably not be acknowledging what songs can do either.

So a simplified answer to your relevant question is that songs and poems both have a prosody (regular or otherwise), but they have (broadly) different approaches to it. (Ok no poem is exactly like another and no song either, but I hope you can see what I mean.) The argument here needs a great deal more detail—which I can supply on the side of poetry but am less confident regarding song, and hope that maybe Peter or Michael could explain better.

I know that in your essay you do quote and comment on a Dylan song, but I was thinking of quoting another one just to illustrate my view. Have to be a later post when I have a bit more time!

Jamie

Jeffrey Side

Jamie, thanks for your explanation. It has cleared up a few things for me. I just wanted to be certain that you were not saying that all poetry that lacked prosody or metre was not poetry, and that song was of lesser artistic or aesthetic value because prosody and metre usually don’t figure prominently in most instances of it.

Jamie McKendrick

Hi Jeff, I'm much relieved that up to this point you follow my argument. Both points you've understood are very decidedly my view. A minor adjustment to the first, however, would be that all poetry (and probably all song) is susceptible of metrical analysis—including Whitman. (Let's assume for simplicity's sake we're talking about English because French might provide another set of problems.) As is prose—susceptible—for that matter, and one or two critics have made the arduous attempt. As is speech if transcribed. But it's easier to scan poems and songs because they are or can be arranged in lines. So yes, this not a peculiarity of poetry, and I certainly don't assume poetry needs to have any regularity in its metrics. The last person who believed this probably died six and a half years ago.

On the second point, again you're absolutely right—I've had a lot of trouble dispelling this assumption which has repeatedly been made about my argument. If I have to say again how much I love Dylan, I'll start hating him! Obviously we can all argue for an aesthetic preference, for Milton over Dylan, for Joni Mitchell over the last two laureates, but none of that follows from my argument.

I still feel I'm missing an essential part of what I've been trying to articulate, which is probably why I'm doggedly pursuing it.

I'm hoping with the Dylan song I mean to post that some of these obscurer elements will become clear. I don't think you'll be in agreement, but that's fine. At this stage, I'd happily just settle for not being misunderstood.

Jamie

Tim Allen

I was out all day yesterday and I couldn't believe the number of posts I've just gone through on this.

Anyway, I've said what I think [referring to a discussion about song and poetry elsewhere on the list] and tried to say why. It's interesting though, because I am not actually all that bothered by the original problem of the poem/song lyric thing. I think it's quite funny. For me it's not a problem that Dylan was given the Nobel, it's completely understandable to me, but it's also completely understandable to me why some people, knowing their views on stuff, should disagree. It's funny because both these views point to bigger and wider problems about literature and value. I disagree quite intensely for example with Jamie's saying that Dylan's lyrics are mostly bad poetry when compared to what he considers good poetry, but again this points to much bigger issues with regard to poetry that lie outside the area of lyric and poem comparison that have formed the subject matter of most posts.

I find it slightly disappointing that on a list such as this it only appears to be only David, Jeff, Mark and myself who have come down on the Dylan side, the lack of comment from experimental (or whatever) poets who are engaged with cross-genre practice is noticeable—maybe it's a generation thing.

Cheers

Tim

Jeffrey Side

Jamie, [addressing Jamie's previous post] I think we are in agreement on this. My love of song has never been predicated, anyway, on whether it is poetry or not. I think that whatever it is, it has, perhaps, had more relevance culturally since the 1960s than most poetry has had in this period (maybe Ginsberg's poetry was an exception) but that's another matter. I sense you will disagree with that, and that's ok. It's just how I see it.

Jeffrey Side

Tim, [addressing Tim's previous post] is Jamie saying that he thinks Dylan's lyrics are mostly bad poetry compared to what he thinks is good poetry? I haven't been able to make sense of (or follow much) the Lace/McKendrick discussion, so I genuinely don't know if he thinks this or not. Do you think it, Jamie?

I agree with him on his general views about the differences in song and poetry, though. True, I did not hold that view originally, but now that he has given a fuller explanation of his position (and Peter's), I have to say I agree with it. I realise that he and I will probably never agree on many other issues regarding poetry but on this issue I can't find anything I can disagree with. That is not to say that at some future point, someone else might come along and persuade me otherwise.

I think, though, that generally I am more in agreement with you on poetry matters than I am with Jamie; and what you say about the proponents of the avant-garde on this list failing to defend Dylan is true. I have found this also to be the case in other contexts. I no longer find it easy to believe proponents of the avant-garde who say they like Dylan while showing none of his influence in their work—that goes for mainstream poets, too, like Simon Armitage.

Robin Hamilton

Hi, Tim,

I think when you suggest that the support for Dylan on the list is minimal, you're rather downplaying the position of someone like me who feels that Dylan is indeed a major artist and deserves recognition as such. And further, that his work, whatever we call it, is better than (at least) 99% of whatever is found on the page and called a poem today.

But given that this opinion is shared by even such an academically respectable figure as Christopher Ricks, and on the music side by Wilfred Mellers, I hardly think he's under-recognised by whatever we chose to call the establishment.

That said, I feel that the words of his songs alone, read on the page, aren't, to say the least, as powerful as the same words sung by Dylan, and probably neither is as effective as the experience (which I haven't had) of watching Dylan perform live on a stage.

If you want to call what Dylan does, guitar, harmonica, voice, and all, a poem, then all I can say is we're using the word in different senses.

That's no big deal, simply a terminological disagreement over how we slice and dice the Imaginative Experience Cake.

What bothers me much more is, and I may be misreading you here, is an apparent assertion that the words alone are Wholly Admirable. This seems to me to both misconceive what Dylan does, and to diminish him as an artist. Sure, individual lines stand out, and many can stand on their own, but to rip them out of the whole—it's like taking a soliloquy from a Shakespeare play and holding it up for admiration, while ignoring the rest of the five acts. It can be been done, Choice Flowers From Shakespeare, but the end result ain't particularly satisfying.

Hey, did you notice that in the Telegraph interview today, where he bemusedly wondered what the hell the fuss was about—or those may have been the words of the other figure in the dialogue—he referenced "Willie McTell" as one of maybe five of what he thought were his best pieces?

WTG!

Robin

Jamie McKendrick

I don't disagree with this at all, Jeff [addressing Jeff's previous post]. But by "cultural relevance" I think you're talking about both distribution and appreciation. Distribution is involved with a whole industry of promotion and image and sales. (I'm saying what you'll already know.) Appreciation includes a vast swathe of responses from adoration to critical commentary. (I'm not making any evaluation here—though I'm more interested in the latter.) But also something more elusive which we could call "influence"—something that gets into our heads and hearts, colours our perceptions and shapes our way of perceiving the world.

Over here the only poets in the last fifty years who have reached that level of fame that Ginsberg had (has?) are the Liverpool poets. And, interestingly, especially in the case of Roger McGough, being in The Scaffold, the tie-in with popular music was very marked. (Some quite good songs as well.) Since then you could

include Hughes's Birthday Letters as a best seller but whatever its merits I think the breadth of its appeal has had more to do with biographical interest.

What I've called "influence" as a sort of shorthand is in many cases ephemeral as well as elusive. So figures like Dylan, Cohen and Mitchell, to cite a few names that have been mentioned already, have kept influencing their listeners for several generations which makes them especially interesting to look at. (This is kind of saying that, although I'm at odds with your essay [referring to Jeff's essay 'Ambiguity and Abstraction in Bob Dylan's Lyrics'] on Dylan and poetry, I'm very much in favour of your engagement with the whole phenomenon of song-writing in relation to poetry.)

Jamie

Jamie McKendrick

I'm talking too much on this list so I'll keep this one brief. That would be a yes to your question, Jeff [addressing an earlier post by Jeff], but I'd prefer for the moment to leave it a little more suspended than an outright comparison because there are so many elements in Dylan's songs that I appreciate, and some of those have a lot to do with poetry. If this looks like hawing, it's because I want to formulate something a bit more interesting than a statement of my aesthetic preferences (riveting as that may be). Tomorrow when I have some time I'll do what I promised and take an example from Dylan's songbook and try to say a bit more about this.

Just to add, I think I've understood Tim's points. If he hasn't quite understood mine, that's probably my fault as I've been trying to say several things at once and have been having to defend my already dodgy argument from misrepresentation. I don't think the issue maps out at all neatly along some kind of mainstream-avant divide. With conservative mainstreamers being haughty about popular culture and the avant-garde embracing it, or equally vice versa. I think the question touches on issues that equally concern whatever tendency and may even be a fragile bridge between them.

Anyway I'm happy you [addressed to Jeff] see what I've been trying to get at with regard to the differences in song and poetry.

Jamie

Tim Allen

Hummm... well yes I often think that 'the words alone' are 'wholly admirable', but for the life of me I don't see how that belittles anything else. There has been a tendency in these conversation towards an unwillingness to separate off parts—if someone was to praise Dylan's guitar playing on The Good Is Gone album that would not be a belittling of his vocal performance or the strength and mystery of the songs (which were all traditional of course—again with spare and suggestive narratives and imagery which far outshine a good deal of finicky literary poetry that pretends to be doing similar). Of course with someone like Dylan it all becomes one, and is supposed to, and I have never denied that—for me it's just not the point.

Cheers

Tim

Tim Allen

The thing is Jeff I agree, or at least have no argument, with the notion of the difference between poetry and song—at least as it has been argued here by Peter (I found Jamie more difficult to understand on this) but I don't happen to think that such a difference, when it is a difference, and that isn't ALWAYS, is very important with regard to the root of the discussion. If you look at my reasons for backing up the Dylan thing you should see that my argument is not dependant on this lyric/poem thing.

Just a point with regard to "influence" which you mention below. Influences often come at crucial times in our lives, especially in our teens. Armitage came to Dylan far too late for such an influence, however much he likes him. Dylan was a huge influence on me as he was for so many of my generation who liked to scribble words down, and many of those took different aspects of his influence than I did (Dylan has never been all of one, even in the early days) but I doubt very much if Dylan has been such an influence subsequently, which is why I suggested the lack of avant support is probably a generational thing. I just think that if the terms of

the debate were wider (GOD help us) and not just referring to song-writerly lyrics more people might have cottoned on to the implications, with regard to their own practises and those of work they admire and promote, of the arguments against. Not sure if I put that very well—getting tired, need an afternoon snooze....

Cheers

Tim

Jeffrey Side

I agree with this, Robin.

For me, there is no need to measure what Dylan does by the standards of written poetry. Many of his songs simply don't read on the page as powerfully as he sings and performs them. For a long time, I tried to deny this, thinking I was underselling him if I didn't argue that what he is doing is strictly the equivalent of written poetry. By thinking this, I was assuming that written poetry was automatically a superior art than songs are, and that because I valued Dylan so highly, it was my duty as a fan to make sure he was allowed to enter the "hallowed halls of poetry", so to speak. I now see that as a mistaken aim. I now see that even if song and poetry are not the same, one is not better than the other. And so to say that Dylan's art is one of song is not to say that his art is less than poetry. As Robin says, to limit him to written poetry standards diminishes what he actually does.

Tim Allen

Robin—please excuse the fact that I'm going to take things from your post separately, because each in its own way is a separate issue.

I am not suggesting that support for Dylan on the list is minimal—there has been mostly a very positive appreciation of Dylan as a song-writer and performer (the exceptions have been through lack of exposure due to taste, which is quite understandable and reasonable—except it makes it harder for them to understand the counter argument etc). I was saying that support for the idea that there was nothing categorically wrong in Dylan getting a prize for 'literature' has been out-posted by those with a different view.

I never mentioned anything about any "establishment". It's true that I don't give a monkeys about the status (earned or unearned) of the holder of an opinion (not with this arty stuff anyway) but that's a by-and-by. I suppose you are referring to my saying that the argument is at base bigger than the way it has been framed here—yes—but that's not to do so much these days with "establishments"—some of the people I agree with on such stuff are as much an establishment in their own sphere as anybody else—but let's not go there.. please... not now....

What happened to my snooze? Had to do the Hoovering, it woke me up.

Cheers

Tim

Jeffrey Side

Jamie [addressing Jamie's previous post], a few years ago, I would, no doubt, have disagreed with you, but I think my views then were essentially born out of my need to defend Dylan from the charge that he was not a serious artist; a charge that had been levelled against him by many people in (or associated with) avant-garde and mainstream poetic circles.

The irony is that Dylan would probably look at my defence as being meaningless, as I don't think he even sees what he does as being essentially equivalent to written poetry. He would see himself as a performer and singer first.

Tim Allen

I think you are right on that Jeff. If Dylan was on the Nobel committee Dylan would not have been given the prize. But that's just his opinion, I or anyone else can have another. Comes back to how much Sean [in a

discussion about song and poetry elsewhere on the list] has got it wrong in his assessment of Dylan as an “ego”—just because you have an ego it doesn’t mean that you can’t look at that ego from a distance—hey, I quite like that.

Jeffrey Side

Tim, sorry for not responding to your posts. They have been coming rather quickly and I will need time to read them.

Robin Hamilton

Hi, Tim

We’re never going to agree on this, I suspect, but unteasing why we’re coming from wherever is maybe useful.

Deep down, we’re probably seeing different Dylans. When I look at him, I see (among other things) the inheritor of a particular tradition, the young Dylan sitting beside the aged Blind Willie McTell, both with their guitars, both singing the blues. Sure, he extends the tradition, but he’s still part of it, and I get the sense, perhaps unfairly, that you want to do to him what was done to Shakespeare, rip him out of his context and set him up on a pedestal as an object for Unique Adoration.

As to the Nobel issue...

Frankly, comes down to it, Dylan is bigger than the Nobel, and even if he hadn’t got the Nobel, he’d outlast many who have. It’s a useful publicity exercise for under-rated writers, but I suspect that when the Awarders get it right, it’s mostly by accident. At least when it comes to “literature”. Chemistry, Physics, and Physiology on one side, with Economic Sciences stirred in later, while we have Literature and Peace on the other, you might as well divide all human life between War and Peace, while you’re at it.

As for the approval of the Establishment—I’d rate that with the weight I give to the number of disks sold, one balancing the other. Sure, both Popular Judgement and Consensus Acknowledgement have some sort of significance, but neither is a guarantor of truth.

Ooof ...

Robin

Jeffrey Side

Tim, I’m reading all your posts and will gather my responses in one forthcoming post.

Jamie McKendrick

His relation to a tradition of song is something I believe Dylan also holds dear, and that informs the words as well as the music. He often gets spoken of as an absolute singularity, and the Nobel merely adds to that, so for me the image of him singing beside Blind Willie McTell is really important. I mentioned two of his most obvious and often noticed influences earlier—Woodie Guthrie and Harry Smith’s Anthology of American Folk Music. But Dylan from the very start has been astonishingly eclectic and I think that has contributed to the breadth and durability of his appeal. Earlier, Mark [in a discussion about song and poetry elsewhere on the list] (I’m not quoting exactly) argued that he was always a better artist than the “folkies” were. I take this, in part, to be a reference to the 1965 Newport Folk Festival where he was benightedly booed by a section of the audience for going electric. But the American folk tradition which obviously and crucially includes Blues, and I would say Jazz as well, is one of the glories of world, not just US, culture, so seeing Dylan within it is not in anyway to diminish him.

Jamie

Jeffrey side

Tim, not all of your posts were addressed to me, so I'll respond to those that don't as well as to those that do. I'll put my responses beneath quoted passages by you.

'There has been a tendency in these conversation towards an unwillingness to separate off parts—if someone was to praise Dylan's guitar playing on The Good Is Gone album that would not be a belittling of his vocal performance or the strength and mystery of the songs (which were all traditional of course—again with spare and suggestive narratives and imagery which far outshine a good deal of finicky literary poetry that pretends to be doing similar). Of course with someone like Dylan it all becomes one, and is supposed to, and I have never denied that—for me it's just not the point.'

Personally, I'm willing to separate parts of Dylan's art. There are, indeed, distinct elements of it in play. Each can be appreciated separately in my view, but it is the gathering together of them in one performance that makes them effective. I've read his lyrics on the page, and though they do have striking turns of phrase, and utilise poetic ambiguity far more effectively than much of modern mainstream written poetry does, the naked text on the page seems sparse and dry. Maybe this isn't the case with all his lyrics—how could it be; he's written so many of them, that many will compare favourably with written poetry when read as texts. His lyrics are, indeed, poetic and do contain poetic elements like metaphor, allusion, symbolism etc. It is only that the placement of the words and phrases on the page, don't read as smoothly, as, say, Eliot's 'Prufrock'. To say this, isn't denying that they are not poetic or literary, etc. just that they don't read as pleasingly as they sound when sung. A poor comparison (I can't think of a better one) is that between the performance of a play and the text of the play being read as a story. Or the watching of a film with the sound turned down and the colour (if it is in colour) removed. Both art forms need their other elements to fully be effective, as does Dylan's art.

'If you look at my reasons for backing up the Dylan thing you should see that my argument is not dependant on this lyric/poem thing.'

Can you explain this? I must have missed that part of the discussion.

'I think you are right on that Jeff. If Dylan was on the Nobel committee Dylan would not have been given the prize. But that's just his opinion, I or anyone else can have another.'

I'm not against him having a Nobel—though I know you aren't saying I am. I'm just stating that for the record. He does, indeed, deserve to have one. I do regard what he does as being "literature", as that term accommodates (or perhaps should) all art forms that operate with words, and songs do.

As I said to Jamie, a few years ago I would have been in full agreement with you. But I don't see Dylan as needing to be defended anymore regarding his needing to be recognised as a "written poet", as I don't see written poetry being superior to song.

Tim Allen

Sorry Robin [addressing Robin's previous post] but I really do not understand your second sentence below—particularly the pedestal thing, and as for 'unique adoration', well, this is so far from the truth it's ridiculous and I don't know what I've said here that makes you think it.

One of the biggest problems with the way lists like this function is the way we often have to repeat something we said a lot earlier in the exchanges, and when there is a lot of it and followed by hundreds of other posts it just gets lost.

Near the start of the discussion I mentioned the fact that I had very mixed and complicated feelings regarding Dylan, both the man and the output, and I think I even said somewhere that I never put anybody on a pedestal, ever. The fact that culturally Dylan is on a pedestal has got nothing to do with me, but of course I will have opinions regarding that fact. So, what the hell are you talking about?

Regarding the "ripping him out of his context"? Which context? Dylan it seems to me has always questioned and ripped himself out of "contexts". Are you saying that the tradition Dylan walked into is the only context that is important? And so much could be said about that so-called "tradition" at the time anyway, the folk boom of the early 60's America, with its various colours and disparate roots, let alone the way it evolved in urban liberal coffee houses frequented mainly by young, white, radically political and culturally liberal middle class "folk", that it is just meaningless to refer to Dylan as some sort of "inheritor" of anything.

Where you are exactly coming from Robin, on this topic, needs clarification.

Cheers

Tim

Tim Allen

Yes to everything in your long paragraph Jeff [addressing Jeff's previous post].

I also need to say that I got the title of the album wrong, it's Good As I Been to You, which along with World Gone Wrong was a brilliant performance of traditional songs with just Dylan on guitar and harmonica. (I hope that by saying brilliant I haven't put the man on the pedestal, Robin—it's just the way we show our appreciation of something good.) Somebody else might use the word boring or god-awful—so it goes, it's not important.

But going back and explaining why my argument does not rely on the lyric/poem thing is more difficult—I'd have to go back and find the bits and reform them (which I might if I get the time). In a very general way it's my way of explaining why I agree with your sentence below [addressing Jeff's previous post]—'I do regard what he does as being "literature", as that term accommodates (or perhaps should) all art forms that operate with words, and songs do'.

Thanks to what Peter was saying [in a discussion about song and poetry elsewhere on the list] about what Denise Riley says I am in full agreement about that same distinction between the possibilities of poem and song that you have come around to. The distinction might be endlessly compromised but nevertheless for a certain type of poetry on the page it holds true.

Cheers

Tim

Jeffrey Side

Tim, once I'd got over my mistaken view that written poetry was automatically superior to song (how I got that view is a mystery: probably it was due to reading some reviews by poetry traditionalists in various little magazines in the 1980s), I could begin see the two arts (written poetry and song) as not needing to be in competition with each other. Of course, there are inevitable similarities between them: the most obvious being that they are both dependent on words (leaving aside visual poetry, which relies less on words for its effectiveness—I'm aware, though, that this point might be contested).

Speaking for myself, I find song more "powerful" than written poetry, as it has the advantages of having melody, singing and musical accompaniment (usually) as factors. These aspects (if of some quality—we can recognise bad melodies, bad singing and bad musical accompaniment), for me at any rate, heighten the emotional significance of the words. Written poetry (mainly that of the last 60 or so years), by and large, seldom does this for me, and largely engages me only intellectually, similar to the way reading philosophy or literary criticism does. This is one of its major disadvantages, despite it having more intellectual/philosophical discursiveness (in some cases) than song has. I accept that this is probably an eccentric view, and is expressed here as purely an opinion.

Tim Allen

I'll attempt to restate the reason why I think the use of words within what we call a song and the performance of that song is just as much "literature" as the use of words in a poem or novel.

To begin with this has absolutely nothing to do with the differences, either in quality or manner, between the poem/lyric/words on the page and the same in a song e.g. it has nothing to do with the quality of a Dylan lyric compared with a page poem. Secondly it is not at base to do with how good or bad we think Dylan is as a wordsmith because it is possible to agree with what I am going to say below while still thinking that Dylan doesn't deserve the prize because he is not good enough.

Literature appears to be that area of human activity concerned with the purposeful use of words above and beyond utilitarian communication, recording and information giving. It is part of the larger concept of art. It involves itself both with the seemingly true and the seemingly unreal and is closely associated both with story

telling, personal expression/exploration of feelings and opinions and imaginative invention. (I'm sure any of us would be able to provide their own general definition such as this one).

In order to work, to be presented, literature needs form, but there is no predetermined form for literature in general. Different uses of literature seem to require different forms and these forms developed and changed over time. Literature's most common forms today, particularly in what we call the 'west', are poetry, fiction, song lyrics and scripts (feel free to add to this list). Poetry and fiction as they appear on the page are unaccompanied language (I say 'appear' because there is no such thing as unaccompanied language, it is just that in these instances there is no immediate accompaniment, such as music or pictures or voice). However, they developed INTO those forms. Literature did not develop OUT of those forms. They are a part of literature, but they are not the only part. The novel for example is a particular type/form of fiction/story telling which has been very successful, but at heart it is an artificial form of language use. Poetry is a far broader and far more problematic form of literature than the novel because of the huge variety of purposes and contexts in which it has been written. Form-wise, very broadly speaking, fiction developed out of oral story telling while poetry developed out of singing and chanting, but the details of these developments, though very interesting, have no bearing on the main issue. Any higher status and priority given the 'unaccompanied word' forms of literature does not disqualify the other forms from adhering to the general definition of literature I gave above. If so then this points to a much narrower and much more recent and westernised idea of literature, one which would in fact require a different definition. As an aside I don't think it would be a definition which would go down very well in the wider culture. It would be seen, quite rightly, as retrogressive and elitist.

As a writer of the stuff they call poetry, and as that poetry is written first and for-most on the page and for the page, of course I recognise its differences and possibilities compared with lyrics written to be sung. But this has got absolutely nothing to do with the above argument.

Despite the above statement re writing poetry, there is in fact no way of knowing or judging the actual strength of a particular art form as it operates/impinges (whatever word you want) on an individual sensibility. While it is not important to my argument above I still think it has relevance when trying to understand the reasons behind the counter arguments—which is what draws me in this case towards a type of reception theory. I don't go along with the post-modern cultural levelling theories, but I can see where they come from and why they are so appealing. I have always found the patronising judgements on another's individual capacity for experience which are made by those artists, writers, critics and cultural philosophers with a hierarchical notion of art not just unpleasant but, more importantly, entirely unprovable.

Apologies for the length but it was unavoidable.

Cheers

Tim

Jeffrey Side

Tim, would it be fair to summarise your position as being encapsulated in your following statement: 'In order to work, to be presented, literature needs form, but there is no predetermined form for literature in general'. And do you mean by this, that all forms that have developed in order to make literature manifest are only arbitrary, and, as such, are of no significance when it comes to evaluating the validity or importance of any one of these forms over the other? And, therefore, the form that gives shape to what we call "poetry" is the same as that which gives shape to what we call "song"; and, as such, it would be a mistake for anyone to make qualitative and aesthetical distinctions between them, given the arbitrary nature of their formation. Is this in essence your position? Or have I assumed too much? If it is your position, it seems a reasonable one.

Kent Johnson

Jeffrey, your endorsing paraphrase of Tim's New Historicist-like take directly contradicts your statement earlier today (how quickly things change!) that song is immanently superior to poetry.

Robin Hamilton

Kent,

You say:

'Tim's New Historicist-like take'

I wouldn't see Tim's position as particularly New Historicist, and he himself describes his position (I'm quoting from memory, so Tim will correct me if I'm wrong), as '(something like) Reception Theory'.

And which branch do you mean? Greenblatt's Cultural Materialism (which uzyins disdainfully described as, 'anecdotal history'), or [Real] New Historicism, which sees its paternity in Foucault and Lever's Tragedy of State?

Enquiring Minds Wish To Know.

:-)

Robin

Kent Johnson

Hi Robin, nothing complicated here, really.

As I said, 'New Historicist-like'... I was simply referring to Jeffrey's paraphrase of Tim's position, which in the most generic ways seemed to echo Foucault, in the corniest sense. I probably shouldn't have bothered to use the term, one types quickly before a whole afternoon of the Packers and the Cubs on TV. I'm sure Jeffrey's post was very quickly typed too.

Your distinction between Foucault and Greenblatt seems a little too pleading, under the circumstances. All in perspective!

salud,

Kent

Jeffrey Side

Kent, you might have missed it, but I started my paragraph with: 'Speaking for myself, I find song more "powerful" than written poetry', and ended the paragraph with: 'I accept that this is probably an eccentric view, and is expressed here as purely an opinion'. I wasn't stating it as an absolute.

Regarding my "summary" of Tim's position; it could be incorrect. I might have been assuming too much in it. I'll have to wait for his reply to find out. I don't think that if it is correct, it necessarily rules out the possibility of personal preferences to be made regarding how individuals approach songs or poetry. At least, I don't think that is what Tim is suggesting.

Kent Johnson

Jeffrey, I fully realize you were speaking for yourself. My point was that you were contradicting yourself! No big deal. I am fully conversant with self-contradiction...

Kent

Jeffrey Side

Kent, I could only be contradicting myself if my summary of Tim's position led to the conclusion that personal preferences regarding whether individuals prefer songs to poetry or vice versa should be ruled out. I don't think it does. At least, I hope it doesn't.

Jamie McKendrick

Tim [addressing an earlier post by Tim], I feel a certain responsibility for having set off this mad hare about "literature" with my first post about Dylan—which I meant as a slightly self-parodying gesture without knowing (as someone/yourself said) this had become a hot topic on Facebook, so it was already wound up and ready

to course. I'm afraid for me the word "literature", apart from being a handy heading for academic courses, is almost a term of abuse. The Greeks managed pretty well without it. There's poetry, and then there's... the rest—no, I'm just messing.

All of this anyway is helpfully clear, unlike my own contributions.

I think you've made a good case throughout as to why, for you as a reader/listener as well as a practicing poet, there's just no point in making any distinction between song and poem. I've made my case for the difference in that the rhythms of speech on which poetry relies, but not exclusively (as, for example, "sprung rhythm" at least to my ear reads like a brilliant, deliberate synthesis of speech rhythms and song) make poetry a form whose effects have happily veered away from what is possible in song (usually a lot less on the level of language)—a divorce, if you like, which has been very much to the advantage of poetry's resources, quite a few of which I've mentioned. I've made the case but I don't think it has convinced many people. Someone with more knowledge about beat and tempo in music might have made it more convincingly.

Rather than trying to prove poetry's superiority to song, my impulse was to defend the poetry's autonomy (its sad world of "fandom" and academics as someone belittlingly said)—for which I'm not really concerned about the perception of elitism which has been mentioned. I consider that largely misrepresentation. I'm more galled by the idea that poetry is to be seen as insignificant beside the grand idols of popular music and should try to make itself more like them, without, of course, the aid of the huge commercial industry that underwrites them.

I don't think that we greatly disagree on that last point.

Jamie

Tim Allen

Not quite [addressing the earlier post by Jeff summarising Tim's position regarding literary form], because of course people are going to find [quoting from that earlier post by Jeff] 'significance when it comes to evaluating the validity or importance of any one of these forms over the other'. But such evaluations are not going to be always determined by the same thing, the point is that they all partake in the same general area of language use. And similarly there are always going to be aesthetic distinctions, how can there not be, but again, such distinctions are not going to be agreed upon by all and fixed in stone, they are probably as fluid as are the opinions about them.

Anyway, enough. Some other posts here today have reminded me of how stupid people can be about this list sometimes. Depressing.

Cheers

Tim

Tim Allen

Kent [addressing the earlier post by Kent criticising Jeff's summary of Tim's position regarding literary form], I have no objection to my argument being called New Historicist. As far as my limited knowledge goes of it I can see how it might be called that. I've been trying to think about how my argument could be put without historicising (is that a word?) and it's very difficult.

Cheers

Tim

Jeffrey Side

Tim, Kent meant that my paraphrase of your position was 'New Historicist-like', as he puts it, not actually New Historicist. He seemed to be using the New Historicist-like tag to connect it to Foucault in order to say it was reminiscent of him but in a corny way. I wasn't conscious of Foucault when I wrote it, but whether it is 'New Historicist-like' or "corny", probably matters little to its content, which Kent thought contradictory to my

earlier statement about my personal preference for song over poetry (because, for me, words on a page are not as “powerful” as words sung).

But as I said to Kent earlier, it could only be contradictory if my paraphrase led to the conclusion that personal preferences regarding whether individuals prefer songs to poetry or vice versa should be ruled out. As it transpired, my paraphrase was not an accurate one, as you pointed out to me, but as a “standalone” statement I don’t think it contradicts my statement about liking songs more than poetry.

In my statement about liking songs more than poetry, I don’t think I was making (to quote from my paraphrase) ‘qualitative and aesthetical distinctions’, merely saying that I personally found songs more “powerful” than written poetry. It could be, though, that Kent understood “powerful” to be equivalent to ‘qualitative and aesthetical distinctions’, I don’t know.
