

Truly Beyond Words

I could not be anything but happy with Dylan's Nobel acceptance speechⁱ, given that it echoed one of my earlier blogs re Dylan and Shakespeare as artists working in popular entertainment with the aim of bringing in and pleasing the paying customer. Yes, he continued with his long-running Shakespeare theme, as I have done with my commentary on both writers (<http://www.a-muir.co.uk/csf/shdyl.pdf>) and, as I wrote last time, that lengthy article is due for a considerable update. Yet every time I go to do that, Dylan adds yet more grist to the mill. How wonderful it would have been to see and hear him deliver this speech as this would have raised it even higher. One only has to think of MusiCares to realise how dramatically he would have put this one across, too. Still, his 'local' Denmark joke was excellent even as it stood and the "human skull" line surely made everyone laugh, I know that we did as we watched it at homeⁱⁱ.

Speaking of viewing it at home, via the live video link, did anyone else sit through the whole thing waiting for the occasional use of English/mention of Dylan? It was a long, old night and a cover of 'Make You Feel My Love' did nothing to shorten it, quite the opposite in fact. Still there were a couple of moments to enjoy both provided by Scots born scientists, as it happens. Firstly, Edinburgh's Fraser Stoddart, (Chemistry) quoting Burns very aptly, and, separately, having a dig at Brexit, Trump and the rise of the far right by standing up for education as a global enterprise. This was soon followed by Aberdonian J. Michael Kosterlitz (Physics) saying that he had been more excited about the possibility of meeting Bob than getting the prize itself.

There was one intriguing part of the speech that strikes me as worthy of investigation and I have not seen it mentioned anywhere else. Nevertheless, it may have been discussed somewhere as it is impossible to keep up with the global outpouring of commentary on Dylan and this award. I am referring to this section:

From an early age, I've been familiar with and reading and absorbing the works of those who were deemed worthy of such a distinction: Kipling, Shaw, Thomas Mann, Pearl Buck, Albert Camus, Hemingway. These giants of literature whose works are taught in the schoolroom, housed in libraries around the world and spoken of in reverent tones have always made a deep impression.

As he moved on from "Hemingway", Pia remarked "oh, no Steinbeck?" No Steinbeck indeed, someone that you might reasonably have expected, especially given the phrases "early age" and "taught in the schoolroom". Pearl Buck, now far from favour, probably occupied a place in one or both of those categories for the young Dylan though again one would be forgiven for thinking fellow Minnesotan, Sinclair Lewis would have been a more obvious choice. Whatever the case of those whose star no longer shines as it once did, in the realm of those you know from an early age, are taught in school, and have not fallen from favour, Steinbeck surely features strongly. However, perhaps Dylan avoided that name due to the relatively recent discovery of the somewhat tawdry reasons behind Steinbeck being granted the award in the first place.ⁱⁱⁱ

Or there may be another reason; after all there are other omissions and inclusions that raise an eyebrow or two. T.S. Eliot would have been as expected as Steinbeck to be in the, albeit very short, list. Perhaps, in true Dylanesque style, this little list tells us much by who is not on it as by who is.

Thomas Mann's inclusion is important given the controversy re foreign literature in the US this last decade or so.^{iv v} Nonetheless, Mann seems a little surprising to me in that he doesn't strike me as someone who is commonly known from an early age. He came after a whole host of European and Russian writers for me and only slipped into my teens at the very end and only then because an older friend, the novelist David Wingrove, sent some volumes to me with a letter saying "you must

read these". This is not to say my reading patterns are anything to do with Dylan's but just to point out that none of my school or university classmates had read Mann, as far as I am aware, at an early age and certainly not until after Camus, Kafka and numerous other foreign writers. It may well have been different back in Dylan's day, of course, and it may just be that I was hankering after a mention of Hermann Hesse whose work seems to be reflected, at times, in Dylan's lyrics. The most specific case being, as John Bauldie pointed out long ago, the reflection of some of Harry Haller's experience in *Steppenwolf* in, for me, Dylan's finest song, "Tangled Up In Blue". In particular this relates to the way Haller's visiting The Black Eagle tavern is mirrored by the "I" of "Tangled Up In Blue" when he 'stops in' at 'a topless place'.

You may well think that the names included or omitted are of no consequence and that Dylan was just naming some past winners off the top of his head. You may well be correct in such an assumption. On the other hand, the more you study Dylan's interviews, liner notes and announcements over the years, the more you get used to picking up important information that is coming at you obliquely. I am still getting that all the time, as happened with a four decades or so old interview I was perusing last week. That's another story, though, for another time – indeed another year as I doubt i will be updating this until 2017.

So, merry festive wishes to one and all and 'see' you next year.

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ⁱ <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/read-bob-dylans-nobel-prize-in-literature-banquet-speech-w455059>

ⁱⁱ It remains funny even though the availability of such an item would have been anything but a problem back in the brutal day. Indeed, there would have been more than one on the stage in that scene alone, as the dialogue makes clear.

ⁱⁱⁱ http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/01/04/no-wrath-but-some-discontent-when-nobel-prize-was-awarded-to-steinbeck/?_r=0

^{iv} <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/02/04/why-americans-don-t-read-foreign-fiction.html>

^v http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/23/arts/a-crowd-thats-seldom-at-a-loss-for-words.html?_r=2