

Containing Multitudes

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Given my daily work as Professor of Sexology, you can imagine my thrill and excitement when I listened to Bob Dylan's latest album, "Rough and rowdy ways", and discovered that the old master of poetry and rock 'n' roll had made his somewhat unexpected entrance into *my* professional world and field of expertise. Not that Dylan has, in any way, been a stranger to the realms of desire and eroticism — he did, after all, write some of the most beautiful love songs in the history of rock music, not to mention his 1976 album simply entitled "Desire" — but there has always been a certain "line of discretion" with regard to the explicitness of his lyrics: Although hints, suggestions, and atmospheres of sensuality and carnal desires are plentiful throughout his rich textual universe, you won't find the explicit language (or journeys to sexual outskirts) of fellow rock poets such as Lou Reed or even Leonard Cohen. You *will not* hear Bob Dylan sing about "leather drags" or "downtown ferries" like Reed, and Cohen's "give me crack and anal sex" would sound completely foreign coming out of Dylan's mouth.

So, I was pleasantly surprised to hear the seventy-nine-year-old Dylan sing: "I'll break open your grapes, I'll suck out the juice." But I was even more astonished to hear him offer this sensible piece of sexological advice:

Black Rider Black Rider hold it right there
The size of your cock will get you nowhere.

Now, this message — from the chillingly beautiful song "Dark Rider" with its solemn simplicity that brings the late Leonard Cohen to mind — is really at the core of what modern sexology is all about: Removing the focus from genital anatomy, functionality and performance and urging people of all genders and all ages to explore alternative dimensions of sexual pleasure. No sexuality can be reduced to genital mechanics, and to me it is, obviously, liberating that Dylan has included such a strong and straightforward statement of sexual complexity and diversity in such a powerful testament song.

As I mentioned, however, these lines are the exceptions confirming the rule that, most of the time, Bob Dylan is much more subtle and elegant, even humorous, when he enters the world of sexual attractions and pleasures — for example, in a wonderful song like "To be alone with you" from 1969 (in the heydays of the post-Kinsey sexual revolution) where the poet gets his "sweet reward" in the end,

because “nighttime is the right time / to be with the one you love”. Or put a little more bluntly, in “Huck’s Tune” from 2007:

When I kiss your lips
The honey drips.

Having said all of this, my professional fascination of Bob Dylan’s work has really little to do with the presence of intimacy, love, sexual tension, romantic relationships, heartache, and jealousy in his songs — however elegant and noteworthy these topics are often depicted. Rather, like so many others, I use Bob Dylan to recharge my personal and professional batteries. When I was young, I stole “Freewheelin’”, “Blonde on Blonde” and other great albums from my parents’ shelves, and although this was the sound of the previous generation, the songs mysteriously talked to me and somehow helped me straighten out all my youthful problems and confusions. Actually, after several years, I was shocked — and still am — to learn that Bob Dylan is the age of my mom and dad! I had this strange feeling that we were classmates, and that he was singing to (and about) *me*. Dylan was my buddy and my imaginary friend, and whenever I was in trouble with all kinds of confusing romantic emotions, attractions or even real-life experiences, Dylan would be there to lend a helping hand. Things would always settle when Dylan was around. There was nothing that his gentle sandpaper voice could not resolve.

Today, when I get stressed up or lose my way through the increasingly troublesome wilderness of academia and university life, I still turn to Bob Dylan for what he himself has called “peace and tranquility”. It brings me such great joy to enter his landscapes and to realize that everything is much bigger, much more complex, much more undecided than we want it to be — and that this is, as it turns out, the only true meaning of it all, these beautiful cascades of nonsense, ambiguity, rage, horror, and immense delight that you’ll find in Dylan’s songs. “Just do your thing, you’ll be king”, he constantly reminds me. *Do* it, and you’ll *be* it.

Listening to Bob Dylan — or occasionally reading his poems with no music on — is to me recreational and a wonderful way to recharge and get new ideas. When scientific research, for example, is troubling, you can always ask Uncle Bob for advice, just like when you were a teenager. He may not give you a straight answer — but he will certainly provide you with a bunch of new, strange questions.

Also, when it comes to understanding and appreciating the turmoil of late-modern sexuality, gender, and social interactions, I find Bob Dylan a source of great help and inspiration. I have, obviously, seen him on stage on countless occasions, and I am always impressed by his ever-changing appearances and his post-modernistic approach to his own character that began long before post-modernism was even a word. Bob Dylan is a living example of late-modern *performativity* — this is a man who *is*, what he *does*, he seems to only be real when he sings, and on stage he not only transforms

his persona all the time, he even scrutinizes, deconstructs and reinvents the melodies and the lyrics of songs that were already masterpieces in the first place.

Ever since the sixties, Dylan's songs have been a work in progress, and this constant reinvention and re-enchantment combined with sixty years of plain refusal to "be someone" makes it so much easier for me to grasp and explain the changeability and flexibility of contemporary existence: You are not predestined to *be* someone, it all depends on social scripts and contexts — your persona is under life-long construction, and you might as well live your life (as the French philosopher Michel Foucault once put it) "as a piece of art". Nothing is settled, nothing is inherent, nothing is determined once and for all. Even our greatest melodies and most precious lyrics must eventually change in order not to petrify. Just like Bob Dylan, we are — each and every one of us — human beings of "many moods". We all "contain multitudes".

Like most of you, I'm sure I don't distinguish between work and spare time, and I would be devastated if I could no longer consider science and teaching my hobbies. To me, there is no such thing as a work-life balance — working *is* living, and what I do professionally informs my private life, just as my private life is a precondition for professional growth. And with no comparison, whatsoever, I believe that Bob Dylan thinks the same way — there are no boundaries between man and work; he *is* what he *does*, and so, his songs are not *about* him, they *are* him. In that sense, Dylan's whole existence is what the Germans call a "Gesamtkunstwerk", a "total work of art" that contains all the dimensions of a human experience: a dynamic interplay of doing, feeling, and being; a continuous dialogue with a social audience; a narrative that can (and will) transform itself on a daily basis.

Once in a newspaper article, I called Bob Dylan "the greatest risk factor in rock 'n' roll", and what I meant was that with Dylan, you never know "which way the wind blows" — and all answers are, as he told us early on, "blowing in the wind". His moods on stage are ever-changing: he may be sweet and talkative (maybe even utter five or six words), he may be introvert, irritated or straight-out rude — he may sing like a little rock 'n' roll angel or he may sound like a filled ashtray in some run-down nightclub. There may be moments of pure euphoria and moments of pure misery. The point is that *you never know*. Going to a Bob Dylan show is like being an unexpected guest in the middle of someone's living room. Maybe things work out, maybe it will be an evening in hell. You can't know, and this is what makes it so real, so human, so alive. What you see is what you get. It is all happening right here and right now. It is living and spontaneous. It is unedited and honest. It is enigmatic. And like life itself, it is risky business, and it is beautiful. At least that's what I tell myself whenever I have a bad teaching day: I hope that my students will appreciate it, just like I appreciate a bad Bob Dylan concert.

As you will know by now, I'm a devoted fan of Bob Dylan, but I have always avoided the urge to become a "Bob Dylan nerd" or a "Bob Dylan scholar", and although I have often been tempted to dig deeper into a more professional approach to Dylan's work, I have reminded myself to keep our relationship fresh, joyful, and free of homework and academic compulsions. It is important to me to

keep Bob Dylan in my life, as I keep any other old friend in my life: no commitments, no bad conscience, no duties, no analyzing — just the sheer joy of knowing that there is someone out there who “gets it” and who is always ready to let you in.

I am truly amazed that Bob Dylan is still vital and relevant to me and to so many others, and I find it highly encouraging that someone who is turning eighty is still creatively in such good shape and even having enough wisdom of the aged to provide his listeners with sexual advice. The first time I heard Bob Dylan *live* was in the Danish national arena in 1984 together with my dad. And the one thing that I vividly remember from that concert was that the rain was pouring down in a very decisive Danish way until the moment when Dylan entered the stage. At that time, the sun came out and for several minutes, Dylan had a beautiful rainbow emerging (or perhaps ending) in his huge hair. Right then, I knew that magic could happen anytime around this guy — and magic *has* happened so many times since then.

My life (and my professional life in sexual research) would be so much more boring without Bob Dylan, and I thank him for years of wonders and inspirational perplexity, for hitting all the right notes (and quite a few of the wrong ones too). I am happy to say congratulations, dear sexological colleague, on your eightieth birthday.

May you build a ladder to the stars

And climb on every rung

May you stay forever young.

I know that you will.

References

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