Shakin' on Your Bones

Bob Dylan and Embodied Experience

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Even before Bob Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016, critics wrote about the inherent tensions embedded in the classification of Dylan's songs as *poetry* or *literature* (Bowden, 1982; Naskos, 2024; Ricks, 2004). Though many regard Dylan's songs as poems, Dylan also questioned the premise in his Nobel acceptance speech, opening with, "when I first received this Nobel Prize for Literature, I got to wondering exactly how my songs related to literature" (Dylan, 2016, para. 1). Dylan and critics agree that in the case of songs, the words written were meant to be sung, performed, heard, and experienced in ways that words (merely) on the page are not. Dylan emphasizes this near the end of his Nobel speech with, "…I hope some of you get the chance to listen to these lyrics the way they were intended to be heard: in concert or on record or however people are listening to songs these days" (2017, para. 48). The point here is that you can read the lyrics to a song, but those lines were meant to be performed and experienced not just as words, but as sounds full of range, breath, tone, hesitation, and other auditory qualities that comprise the embodiment of the words on the page.

Bowden's (1982) book on Dylan's performed literature may be the first to capture the multi-dimensional nature of these songs performed. She considers the sound of the words, how they are voiced when sung, and the instrumentation all interacting. These various components shape the way we experience the song:

> In a poem read silently, the sense of the words is primary, reinforced secondarily by imagined sounds of meter and rhyme and assonance/consonance. But in a performance, sound is primary. The sense of the words is at least partly controlled by their sound, by their meter and vowel/consonant patterns. Furthermore…such word sounds are themselves controlled by Dylan's voice… (p. 63)

Literature, and Dylan's work in particular, often powerfully connects with readers and listeners through embodied experience, or "meaning that is fundamentally grounded in people's ordinary body experiences…" including "felt sensations of their bodies in action" (Gibbs Jr., Lima & Francozo, 2004, p. 1190). Roth (2024) called embodiment "…the experience of the lived body" (p. 4). In this paper I show how Dylan uses embodiment in his work and how this in turn helps explain his wide and enduring appeal, and what fans anecdotally describe as being "seen" or "felt" in Dylan's songs. To support this argument, I'll look directly at Dylan's use of language and performance, the relationship of his language to embodiment, as well and corresponding literary devices that bolster embodiment.

Literature, But Performed

Dylan's words were written for performance. When asked at a 1965 press conference about his writing, Dylan offered some insight:

> Q– Would you say that the words were more important than the music?
> BD– The words are just as important as the music. There would be no music without the words.
> Q– Which do you do first, ordinarily?
> BD– The words. (Østrem, 2024, n.p.)

While this suggests that words may be the inception, or at least the starting point for Dylan's creative process, he's clear that the music is no less important, and this suggests that there's always a performative element (even if the songs are performed only for the record and never performed again, as is the case for many a Dylan song).

The act of reading or singing differentiates the static poem/lyric from the performance and introduces layers of embodied possibilities. For example, Bowden (1982) has written about *oral onomatopoeia*, noting that the performance of the song may echo, enhance, or expand the meaning of the words. Consider how, in his thorough analysis of Dylan's "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," Christopher Ricks (2004) underscores the dying fall sound, stressed only on the first syllable (*Carroll, finger, station, murder*, etc.) repeated in the song, reminding us of the actual dying fall recounted in the true events of the tragic story. Hattie Carroll is, by the time her story is sung, absent (deceased), but her sound, heard in her surname and echoed in Dylan's use of that dying fall sound. This is Dylan's use of sound to

convey an embodied experience. Similarly, listening to Dylan sing "I Threw it All Away" live on the *Hard Rain* album, we hear this bit of advice that is more than words, extended by the embodied experience of singing those words:

> Love is all there is, it makes the world go 'round
> Love and only love, it can't be denied
> No matter what you think about it
> You just won't be able to do without it
> take a tip from one who's **tri-i-i-i-i-ied**
> **(**1969)

While the song is written from the perspective of someone who foolishly lost the love of his life, the cautionary advice provided in the bridge, with the stretched-out word "tried," with the repetition of the "I" sound, conveys through an embodied performance the feelings of one who tried and tried, sadly, over and over. Who tried? Well, *I* tried, again and again. Aye aye aye! And can you see what I've been through? Look with your eye-eye-eyes.

Whereas Dylan scholars have taken a focused interest in his lyrics (e.g., Christopher Ricks, Richard Thomas, etc.), biography (e.g., Clinton Heylin, Robert Shelton, etc.), or socio-historical place in the musical tradition (e.g., Michael Gray, Greil Marcus, etc.), critic Paul Williams stands out as one who centered his analysis around Dylan as a performing artist (see his three books, *Bob Dyan, Performing Artist* (*The Early Years*, *The Middle Years*, and *Mind out of Time*)). Williams wrote, "I see Dylan as first and foremost a performing artist, as opposed to a composer or songwriter… (and) his songwriting is best understood as an activity directed by and in service to the needs of the performer" (Williams, 1992, p. xiii). If Williams is correct (and he finds support for his assertion in comments made by Dylan in interviews), then Dylan's body of work can be understood in terms of embodied performance, bringing dynamic life to an otherwise static set of words and notes.

Williams had a knack for using words to describe and explain Dylan's performances, will full awareness that the act of doing so is no small feat (e.g., "the idea of *explaining* a performance is, in a real sense, absurd" (Williams, 1992, p. xiv). Even so, Williams, more so than any observer of Dylan, found a way to show in his collected works that Dylan's performances are indeed embodied. Consider his 1976 review of the live album, *Hard Rain* (republished in 1996 in his *Watching the River Flow* collection), in which he contrasted early works (and how listeners approached them) to mid-1970s live performances:

> Dylan, who is famous for his words, has become in the last few years a master of speaking without words, of communicating messages that are greater than words can hold, and that's what this album is about. Where before—in the first age of Dylan—the words were the final focus of attention, now the performance is everything. The sweat on the man's brow—and you can *hear* that sweat in the singing—speaks more than a thousand songs. (Williams, 1996, p. 51)

Here, Williams advances the idea of the performance as a mode of communication that contains its own distinct meaning that not only enhances the words but communicates new and unique information. He's not alone in this orientation to Dylan's work. For example, in *Keys to the Rain*, Trager (2004) notes that in live performances of *Isis*, "Dylan unleashed one of his most intangibly stark and maniacally talismanic testaments onstage night after night… (p. 312). Even so, Trager seems to have missed the point by calling these embodied performances "intangible," because it's the embodied experience of the songs that make them tangible. It's Dylan's performance that brings the ideas and emotions of the songs to life.

How Does it Feel?

The recurring question asked by the narrator of "Like a Rolling Stone," *How does it feel?,* may signal the central theme of Dylan's vast body of work. Writing songs or poems that connect with feelings certainly wasn't invented by Dylan, and there's hardly anything original about poets and songsters tapping into universal themes of love, loss, and longing. Tom Petty showed great insight into the experience of feeling misunderstood and undoubtedly connected with every adolescent listener (and any listener who went through adolescence) when he sang, "you don't know how it feels to be me." Everyone knows how Petty's narrator feels when he sings that line, and he knows exactly how you feel when he sings, "you don't know how it feels to be me." When a poet or songwriter can transmit a felt experience through words or performance, they've deployed a special alchemy. Dylan knows how to do this by simultaneously taking human emotions and making them feel quite personal and individual. This universality and individuality conjured by Dylan, leaves listeners feeling "ominously divined" (Ricks, 2004, p. 476). For Dylan, the art of connecting to those emotions often centers around *embodied experience*.

In Johnathan Franzen's novel *Crossroads*, one of the characters, Sharon, shows that she understands the way the words conjure emotions, as she tells her boyfriend, Clem, "Words have their own power—they create the feeling, just by the fact of your saying them" (Franzen, 2021, p. 112). Later in the novel, a similar question is raised: "Did words give expression to emotion, or did they actively create it?" (p. 473). And though language is indeed a form of embodiment, the spoken (or sung) word extends this embodiment even further. Bob Dylan has a deep awareness of this power, and as both collector and performer of words, he has shown that he's a master at the craft.

Dylan's *Rough and Rowdy Ways* (2020) album contains the song, "My Own Version of You," in which the narrator, my like Dr. Frankenstein, is assembling body part to create a creature.

> All through the summers, into January
> I've been visiting morgues and monasteries
> Looking for the necessary body parts
> Limbs and livers and brains and hearts
> I'll bring someone to life, it's what I wanna do
> I wanna create my own version of you
> (2020)

One could have any number of motivations driving the impulse to build a body from components, but in this case, the narrator gives some clues as to what drives him:

> I'll bring someone to life, someone for real
> Someone who feels the way that I feel
> (2020)

How does it feel? And how do two individuals connect to have a shared experience of how it feels? The answer, in Dylan's work, may be found in embodied experience. Whether taken literally or as metaphor, "My Own Version of You" centers on the body as the site of feeling and knowing. The vehicle or device to foster mutual feelings and understanding exists in the body, which here is constructed with limbs, livers, brains, and (of course) hearts. As with Frankenstein's creation needed electricity, Dylan's narrator needs more than just body parts

to animate a being that can really feel. What's also needed is an intangible quality that must inhabit the body:

> You got the right spirit, you can feel it, you can hear it
> You've got what they call the immortal spirit
> You can feel it all night, you can feel it in the morn'
> It creeps in your body the day you were born
> One strike of lightning is all that I need
> And a blast of electricity that runs at top speed
> (2020)

What's striking about Dylan's use of the body in "My Own Version of You" is the organizing principle of creation, in which the narrator, with deliberation, selects parts for assembly to create a form, and then infuses that form with a spark of life (one that, according to the song, typically ignites at birth). All of this activity and energy originates in the need to have someone feel that way that he feels, and that's accomplished by creating another body that can have the same bodily sensations. What does my heartache feel like? You have to experience it to know it. Only someone with this kind of pain can truly feel what, 45 years prior to "My Own Version of You," Dylan wrote and sang about in "You're a Big Girl Now" (1975):

> I'm going out of my mind, oh, oh
> With a pain that stops and starts
> Like a corkscrew to my heart
> Ever since we've been apart
> (1975a)

In writing about embodied experience, Roth (2024) explains that the way we come to know and understand our world is shaped, in part, by our bodies' experiences. As such, Dylan's work lies at the intersection of language (which also serves an organizing function) and experience. Dylan's at his best when he conveys emotions through the physical and visceral use of embodied experience. He turns to the body when the chasm between two individuals impedes empathy and understanding. Consider the outright repudiation of emotional connection in "Idiot Wind" (1975):

> You'll never know the hurt I suffered nor the pain I rise above
> And I'll never know the same about you, your holiness or your kind of love
> (1975b)

Not only does the narrator insist that he and the person he's addressing don't know/understand each other's feelings, but even worse, that they will never be able to empathize with each other, presumably because they're incapable of doing so. Something is off, and it's concerning the body, but more specifically the face:

> I can't remember your face anymore, your mouth has changed, your eyes
> don't look into mine
> (1975b)

This is a haunting image, in part because it's a lack of image of another's face. Here the narrator can't recall how the addressee looked, but also detects something different (changed mouth) and a lack of eye contact. These body parts (face, eyes, mouth) are foundational ways in which we engage empathically (though those with visual impairment and blindness have other ways of connecting).

The embodiment of "I Don't Know You Anymore" is through a face that's forgotten, distorted, or inaccessible. Throughout "Idiot Wind," the narrator tells his addressee that she's an idiot, with an idiot wind blowing just about everywhere, including through her bedroom curtains and down the roads. Interestingly, that same idiot wind seems to be swirling around and within bodies:

> Idiot wind, blowing every time you move your teeth (everything that comes out of your mouth is idiotic)
> --
> Idiot wind, blowing through the flowers on your tomb (where the body will rest)
> --
> Idiot wind, blowing like a circle around my skull (head/brain enveloped in this idiocy)
> --
> Idiot wind, blowing through the buttons of our coats (feel that wintery wind as it enters?)
> (1975b)

As the song progresses, the narrator shifts from a vindictive *you* to a recognition that it's *us*, encompassing *his skull*, *our coats*, and the final declaration that we're both idiots, and perhaps everyone is as well, bound in bodies that feel but struggle to feel what it's like to be someone else. When the dust settles, we see a narrator who was initially frustrated by a perceived inability to have shared understanding of feelings but is ultimately resigned to the idea that we're living "a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound a fury, signifying nothing" (Shakespeare, 1623/1992, Act V, Scene V).

Absent and/or Formless Bodies

Embodiment can be very much present in literature even when bodies are absent (Roth, 2024). Consider the "bodily instability" (Z. Roth, personal communication, July 23, 2024) that Dylan deploys using the idea of *form*, or the absence of it. For example, on "She's Your Lover Now," a song that never made it on an official album release, but was recorded in 1966 during the *Blonde on Blonde* sessions (consider how the album title, as noted by Coyle and Cohen (2009), may be an acronym for Bob, another *form* of Bob), Dylan sings:

> My voice is really warm, it's just there, it ain't got no form, but it's just like a dead man's last pistol shot baby. (1966/1991)

Here we have a narrator telling us that his voice lacks form or substance, perhaps like an amorphous ghost (an image that gets reinforced with the image of the dead man at the end of the line). Here we have a disembodiment, a voice that has some aspect of life ("really warm,") but simultaneously formless, and perhaps irrelevant (what good is a dead man's last pistol shot?). One year prior, Dylan recorded "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue," which also featured a gun and, perhaps a similar irrelevance:

> Yonder stands your orphan with his gun
> Crying like a fire in the sun.
> (1965)

A fire in the sun offers little but redundancy, so the orphan's tears, like the warm voice in "She's Your Lover Now," also appears formless. Yet in both cases, they are understood through bodily experiences of crying without being acknowledged and voicing warmth

without being recognized. Embodiment may be operating on another level, in which the song, by virtue of being sung, gives form to a voice that declares itself voiceless (Z. Roth, personal communication, July 23, 2024).

The idea of bodily form (or its absence) arises again on Dylan's 1975 *Blood on the Tracks* album. The structure of "Shelter From the Storm" builds around the contrasting sites of wilderness and civilization, storm and shelter, danger and safety (much like the ballad "Lord Randall," poisoned by his lover in the woods and nurtured in bed by his mother) from which Dylan constructed "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" (Portelli, 2022). "Shelter From the Storm" begins in the past, with the narrator set in the wilds:

> 'Twas in another lifetime, one of toil and blood
> When blackness was a virtue and the road was full of mud
> I came in from the wilderness, a creature void of form
> "Come in," she said, "I'll give you shelter from the storm"
> (1975c)

Blackness, mud, and void all suggest the world before creation, before life was formed. A creature must be created (both words have a shared etymology), and as if in an alternative Genesis, a goddess mother, "with silver bracelets on her wrists and flowers in her hair," takes in the formless man to provide shelter and wholeness. In "Shelter From the Storm," the absence of form is reconciled or resolved. The room in which she restores him may even be a womb:

> Try imagining a place where it's always safe and warm
> "Come in," she said, "I'll give you shelter from the storm"
> (1975c)

What could be more embodied than our first bodily experiences of feeling warm and safe inside the womb? In "Shelter From the Storm," the narrator goes from the past, when she first took him in, to the present, where he longs for that safe space again:

> If I could only turn back the clock
> To when God and her were born
> (1975c)

Here we have the narrator, formless, but with the help of the nurturing goddess, embodied (at least temporarily). Creation may be the ultimate embodiment, creating something out of nothing.

The Death and Rebirth of Poetry, Embodied

In the 1980s, writers and critics bemoaned the death of poetry, claiming that it has moved from public spaces to elite, academic settings that were largely inaccessible to a general audience (Laird, 2019). Around this same time, a new expression of poetry emerged as a rejection of the esoteric, stuffy, poetry-for-professors-of-poetry trend: slam poetry. Laird credits former construction worker Mark "So What" Smith as the creator of slam in Chicago, 1985. Laird's description of slam captures the active, engaged, and theatrical nature of the form: "The poets *performed* their poetry, making wild gesticulations, often accompanied by a single musician or even a full band" (p. 29).

And…

> …slam poetry also relies heavily on the body of the poet. On top of memorizing the words of their poems, slam poets also memorize certain gestures to go along with those words. Like an actor, slam poets use blocking, and the movement of the poet's body as well as the volume and inflection of his or her voice becomes part of the performance. As a genre, slam thus becomes a cross between theater and poetry…In this way, their bodies become just as important as their words in communicating the experience of their identity (p. 33).

Laird's description of slam poetry looks a lot like embodied experience that's at the intersection of poetry and theater, in part because it's poetry that wasn't intended for the page, but rather the stage. But I'd like to take this further and suggest that, at least during periods of his career as a performing artist, Dylan has also demonstrated the embodied nature of his work through theatrical elements. Paul Williams (1990) saw this both in Dylan's screen acting, notably in Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid, but also in Dylan's concerts, noting that the performances on film are, "consistent with the gifts he displays in his musical performing: the ability to assume, move around within, and project an affecting, incomprehensible, and somehow vitally relevant presence" (p. 284). Dylan's gift goes beyond reciting the lines and singing the words, and elevates to a level of embodiment because he inhabits the art.

Enlisting the help of playwright Sam Shepard and director Jacques Levy in the 1970s, Dylan began to write and perform in new ways that evoked theatrical performance. Many of

the songs on the *Desire* album were co-written with Levy, and the director's mark is evident. Consider the opening of Hurricane, which sounds a lot like stage directions found in a script:

> Pistol shots ring out in the barroom night
> Enter Patty Valentine from the upper hall
> (1976)

Levy and Shepard joined the Dylan entourage on the Rolling Thunder Review tour, on which Dylan wore masks or white face paint, evoking both carnivalesque and theatrical tropes. In the performances, many of which were filmed and appear in both Dylan's film, *Renaldo and Clara*, and Martin Scorsese's *Rolling Thunder Review*, Dylan embodies his songs.

Earlier I suggested that Dylan's stage presence aligns with Laird's description of slam poetry, and here I make this explicit by pointing to Dylan's *Rolling Thunder* performances of "Isis" in 1975 at Madison Square Garden in New York (the video can be seen on YouTube here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cii3aF2a8oE).

Laird's description of slam poetry	**Dylan's performance of "Isis"**
"…slam poets also memorize certain gestures to go along with those words." (2019, p. 33)	Dylan's fists clenched and crossed at the wrists as he sings, "I said a quick prayer and I felt satisfied…" (around 3:20 in the video)
"Like an actor, slam poets use blocking, and the movement of the poet's body…" (2019, p. 33)	Arms rising and hands quivering while singing, "she was there in the meadow where the creek used to rise…" (around 3:40) Withdrawing behind musicians and returning as if blocking a performance (around 4:10)
"…as well as the volume and inflection of his or her voice becomes part of the performance" (2019, p. 33)	Metered, rhythmic vocalizations with emphasis on the last word of each line.

This is not to suggest that Dylan is a slam poet, nor that he somehow invented the art form. Rather, the point here is to recognize the common elements to further the idea that Dylan's work is at times the embodied expression of his songs. Williams (1992), though writing about Dylan's live performances of "Isis" a full twenty-seven years before Laird's description of

slam poetry, understood that Dylan transformed the song into theater with his embodied performance: "Never before or since has he so consciously and successfully played the part of an actor on the stage" (2019, p. 52). But surely this is more than merely acting, as there's other key elements in Dylan's performance that align with Laird's descriptions of embodiment in slam poetry readings. Laird emphasizes the use of voice as central to the performance (as opposed to the voiceless word of poetry on the page), and Williams too understands that it's Dylan's use of voice (in collaboration with other musicians) that achieves the same embodied effect:

> It's about the way every syllable of the song is driven in as if with a hammer, and the way the guitars and rhythm section wrap themselves around and support and repeat and augment the singers' phrasing, so that each word and note of the tune impresses itself on the listener's consciousness… (1992, p. 66-67).

Williams understands that, like the slam poet, the performance is embodied because Dylan uses his voice, as well as his body, in such a way that expresses and communicates "automatic flow of sensation" in a way that can only be done by a performer who is in a state of presence (p. 66). Ultimately, Dylan's "Isis," when performed as an embodied, contains the gestures, vocal qualities, and use of body and voice that make the song more than the sum of its parts.

That being said, the act of singing a song may be necessary but insufficient to be considered embodiment. What Dylan has demonstrated through live performance is the embodiment of his works through the deliberate use of his body, breath, vocal control, and movement to actively embody the songs he wrote. To see Dylan perform is to experience embodied literature, poetry in motion, and songs brought to life.

Given the varied reactions to Dylan's Nobel Prize, there will likely remain no consensus regarding the classification of songs as poetry or literature (Naskos, 2024). Though the question may be unresolved, what seems clear is that Dylan, through words and performance, embraces embodied experience. Throughout his 60-plus years as a writer, singer, painter, actor, and sculptor, Dylan has made art and meaning by utilizing the lived experience of the body.

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