

The Vandals Took the Handles

by Theodore Dalrymple

“Whereof one cannot speak,” said Ludwig Wittgenstein at the end of the *Tractatus*, “thereof one must be silent.” Speaking of his Nobel Prize for Literature, Bob Dylan said that it “was truly beyond words.” There are, of course, different senses in which things can be beyond words. Dylan’s sense was not Wittgenstein’s.

Beyond words also was the speech by Horace Engdahl, one of the members of the Swedish Academy that made the award, to introduce the absent prizewinner to the audience. When Dylan started writing songs, Engdahl said, “All of a sudden, much of the bookish poetry in our world felt anaemic.” But if it required Dylan to make much bookish poetry seem anemic to Engdahl, he couldn’t have been reading much poetry. One might not like or approve of Alan Ginsberg’s *Howl*, but it is hardly anemic. It has great rhetorical force:

*I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,
starving hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn
looking
for an angry fix*

Nor is this, from Philip Larkin, anemic:

*Boys dream of native girls who bring breadfruit,
Whatever they are,
As brides to teach them how to execute
Sixteen sexual positions in the sand.*

Are the lines of another Dylan, Dylan Thomas, anemic?

The hand that signed the treaty bred a fever,

And famine grew, and locusts came;

Great is the hand that holds dominion over

Man by a scribbled name.

Engdahl's words, then, are those of an award in search of its justification: or "sentence first—verdict afterwards," as Lewis Carroll's Red Queen put it. There were many poets active at or about the time Bob Dylan first wrote his songs who were far from anemic. How good they were is another question; what is certain is that many of them were incomparably better than he.

Engdahl, who is a literary critic, then gave us the following critical gem: "He panned poetry gold, whether on purpose or by accident is irrelevant He gave back to poetry its elevated style, lost since the romantics." I know nothing of Swedish poetry, but since Dylan writes in English, presumably Engdahl was speaking of poetry in English; and to speak of the romantics in this context must mean Wordsworth and Coleridge.

So here is the recent history of "the elevated style" in English poetry according to the Swedish Academy: Wordsworth and Coleridge, and then a fallow period of nearly a century and a half until Dylan arrived, like a Daniel come to judgment. No Tennyson, no Longfellow, no Browning (husband or wife), no Matthew Arnold, no Swinburne, no Gerard Manley Hopkins, to name but a small handful. Comment is redundant.

Dylan had a humbler estimate of his own worth: "If someone had ever told me that I had the slightest chance of winning the Nobel prize, I would have to think that I'd have about the same odds as standing on the moon." The sentiment is

unimpeachable. The award belongs more to the history of cultural pathology than to that of literature.

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