


As i walked out one evening dylan thomas

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Count me among those who delighted Dylan won the Nobel Prize today. Only snobbery can explain so many writers' outrage at his victory. If you think that Dylan is not a real poet because he likes to sing his poetry out loud and put it to music, you are denying the history of poetry as an oral form often set to music. Maybe you'd object to Homer getting a Nobel. But it's an instructive form of snobbery. It's interesting how many people are loudly proclaiming that music lyrics, that pop lyrics, raps, are not poetry. It can be very useful to have such a concrete demonstration of such a flawed assumption on such a large scale. It gives us all a chance to ask them the question: Why isn't Dylan a poet? What definition of poetry can you come up that can preclude his work? My guess is that all they'll be able to come up with is that it's set to music (obviously wrong, ie Homer) and that it's a low form enjoyed by too many people (obviously wrong, ie Homer). Here's another tiny, concrete example of why Dylan is clearly a poet. This is based on an exercise I did in my British modernism class last semester. I was looking for a way to teach prosody that wouldn't seem quite boring. So I paired some Yeats poems (super interesting prosody!) with some Kenrick Lamar songs (super interesting prosody!). And I paired Audens As I Walked Out One Evening (1938) with Dylan's As I Went Out One Morning (1967). The question for the lecture was very simple: Is it a coincidence that these two works have such similar titles, or is there a direct influence? Does Dylan match Auden - and if so, how do we know? The first step was to establish that Dylan was reading poetry - and more specifically, modernist poetry. I imagine that a lot of today's outraged writers assume that any pop musician is probably too uncultured to read poetry (especially modernist poetry). It just gives away how uncultured these outraged writers are. Of course, Dylan read poetry. He was obsessed with Verlaine and Rimbaud, as we know from his autobiography - and as we know, duh, from lyricism in 'You're Going To Make Me Lonesome When You Go, Situations Have Ended Up Sad/ Relationships Have All Been Bad/Mine Has Been Like Verlaine's and Rimbaud. Which is a pretty brilliant lyric. And of course he has Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot Fighting in the Captain's Tower in Desolation Row. And then there's his name. He was born Robert Zimmerman. He called himself Bob Dylan. Dylan, like Dylan Thomas. He took his name from a modernist poet. His name! Dylan read poetry. Probably much more than his opponents have read. And poetry was so important to him that he named himself after a poet. So it's not absurd to assume he's read Auden's As I went out one night, and When I went out one morning is somehow an answer to that. In terms of content, the two are fairly similar. Auden's poem is - like almost all his love poems - about the fantasy of romantic love. As Auden's speaker goes out one night, he hears a lover sing about how his love will never die. So the city's clocks offer their answers, saying that love fades, that time always wins out. In one of the more beautiful and more depressing stanzas, Time sings, 'The glacier knocks in the closet, the desert sighs in bed, And the crack in the tea cup opens A bane to the land of the dead. Dylan's song is also about love, but the message is not so clear. When the speaker goes out one morning, he sees a beautiful woman, but she is a little too eager to accept his progress. (Poets, try to express this situation somewhat better than this: I offered her my hand / She took me by the arm.) She's desperate to leave with him, he doesn't want to go, and then a man (Tom Paine) comes to take the woman away with him, apologizing for her indiscretions. (This tale of vicissitudes of romantic love has been read as a parable of the left's overly tight embrace of Dylan as a political prophet. This reading depends on making the connection to Dylan's very strange acceptance of the Tom Paine Award.) In terms of content, the similarities are tempting. But you don't want to prove a connection like that. Fortunately, the two works provide the necessary evidence. Both works (for convenience, can we just call them poems?) are ballads. The anthology I assign to my students, The Broadview Anthology of British Literature, defines a ballad as a folk song, or a poem originally recited to an audience that tells a dramatic story based on legend and history. Sensitive snobs will see that even a respectable anthology explains how the ballad form blurs the already slippery line between poem and song. Ballads are non-snob forms. They are traditional, popular poems with very oral structures, meant to sound nice and to entertain, meant to tell an immersive story. Although we think of Auden as a very tall kind of poet today - no complaints about Dylan's Nobel would have complained about Auden getting it but never did - he was very attached to that kind of poem. He liked rhymes, he liked narrative, he liked poems that people wanted to recite loudly and get stuck in their heads. Why did he feel that way? Probably because of (certain members of) the previous generation's obsession with rejecting the restrictive pleasures of oral verse - rhyme, regular rhythm, etc. How strong did he feel about that? In 1937, a year before he published As I Walked Out One Evening, he edited The Oxford Book of Light Verse, a promotional vehicle for the kind of un-snobby, instantly convincing, poetry that writers like Eliot and Pound had made unfashionable. One of the poems in this anthology, in particular, is The Sailor's Return, the first lines which are, When I went out one night, it's dark all over /The moon showed no light I could detect. So Auden's poem is a ballad - and besides, it makes a very deliberate reference to an earlier, traditional ballad, a special choice example of the kind of low form he wanted to promote. Dylan's poem is also clearly a trouble. But is it a very deliberate reference to Auden's poem? Yes it is. Here's how we know. Not only are Auden's and Dylan's poems both ballads, they both also share a property of trouble stanza, in that they both consist of four-line stanzas (quatrains) rhyming abcb. So there it is. More strangely, they both share the same very unusual metric pattern. Neither is very consistent in the number of syllables nor even stresses in a line, but they always follow the same strange pattern of end-line stress: Lines 1 and 3 of each stanza end with a trochee - a stress followed by a stressed syllable. Listen to Dylan sing MORN-ing and DAM-sel - it's trochees. But lines 2 and 4 of each stanza end with an iamb - the opposite pattern, a stress followed by a stressed syllable (empty PAIN'E's and in chains). So both poems have the following decidedly weird stanza structure with the same alternating pattern of end-line stress: Yadda yadda yadda TROCH-ee Yadda yadda i-AMB Yadda yadda yadda troch-ee Yadda i-AMB Maybe it's a coincidence that Dylan came up with such a similar title to Auden's. But there's no way it's a coincidence that he came up with a similar title and made his poem a ballad and then gave the same weird metric pattern. This alternating end-line stress thing is really strange. It sounds strange when Dylan sings it as if he is incriminating to squeeze the words into his awkward reversing pattern, especially in the line quoted above, I offered her my HAAAAA-nd. (There's an advantage Dylan has over Auden: since its orality isn't optional, you can always really, viscerally hear the weird meter.) There is no way he would come up with that if he hadn't read Auden's poem, noticed his strange alternating stress pattern, and decided to make his own version of it. What is the meaning of the pattern? I'm not sure. Perhaps the alternating stress is an attempt to reflect the reverse vicissitudes of romantic love, the eternal/for now of Auden's lover, Dylan's speaker's attraction/repulsion to the needy virgin. But on some level, poets want to leave these kinds of questions to us. They don't need to know what it means to use a form as an alternating stress pattern. They should just like it as an element of A fun technical challenge to take on and give a shot at. Or they just use it as a sign of respect - a shoutout to someone who meant something to them. The alternating stress pattern is a way for one poet to associate his work with someone else's. It's a high five, through 29 years of literary history, from one poet deserving of a Nobel Prize to another. Update: Since posting this a few hours ago, an editorial has appeared in the New York Times under the title Why Bob Dylan shouldn't have gotten a Nobel. Anna North, the author, writes: Yes, it is possible to analyse his texts as poetry. But Mr. Dylan's writing is inseparable from his music. As I hope I've shown above, all poetry is inseparable from its music. Even a poem by a real writer like Auden depends on his music (its sound patterns) to work its magic. That's how poetry works. That's what poetry is. Separated by only seven years, Dylan Thomas and W.H. Auden had what could be called a friendly rivalry, at least from Thomas' point of view. The hard-drinking Welsh poet once wished Auden a happy 70th birthday - on his thirties. It's a typical comment, writes biographer Walford Davies, expressed with the attractive brio of a younger brother. Thomas wrote of his admiration for the mature, religious and logical fighter, but discouraged the boy bushranger in the older, more reserved Auden. Whether we take these assessments as gentle ribs or - as another Thomas biographer Andrew Lycett writes - contempt, it doesn't seem that Thomas felt such antipathy for Auden's poetry. You'd think the opposite to listen to him read Auden's As I went out one night, above. Thomas, Lycett tells us, endorsed by Auden's propensity for radical cultural change, but disapproved of the way his political bathtub was pounding got in the way of his poetry. Thomas uses his globe-wise voice in a theatrical way that fits Auden's stately verse. This voice became a regular feature for several years on the BBC, for whom Thomas recorded broadcast after broadcasting readings and radio plays in the late 1940s. As we have described in a previous post, he made many recordings of his own work as well, including of his best-known poem, Don't Go Gentle Into That Good Night, which he reads in sombre, measured tones. Above, in a reading of Auden's September 1, 1939, Thomas takes a strained, almost affected, tone, perhaps evincing some aversion toward the political bathtub-pounding in Auden's poem. His breathing is worked and he was, in all likelihood, intoxicated. He usually does, and he suffered from a breathing condition. Thomas sadly drank himself to death, while Auden, who didn't quite see seventy, lived on twenty more years, and recorded his own treatments of As I Went Walking and 1, 1939. Both the latter Auden poem and the one Thomas reads above, Song of the Master and Boatswain, begin in bars: the speaker on September 1 sits in one of the/on Fifty-Second Street. Song of the Master and the Boatswain opens At Dirty Dick's and Sloppy Joe's, where we drank our spirits straight. Except these settings have nothing in common. Master and Boatswain are almost obnoxious, but end on a cynical note. Written days after the event and closely with philosophical and classical allusions, September 1 laments Germany's invasion of Poland, the effective beginning of what would become World War II. Thomas was a more anarchist, less reluctant poet, and Auden, the more educated and disciplined, of the two. But one can certainly say that they shared a similar sensibility in a taste for the tragic. To immerse yourself in Auden and Thomas' poetry, download copies of Collected Poems: Auden and The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas: The Original Edition. Related content: Dylan Thomas Recites 'Don't Go Gentle Into That Good Night' and Other Poems September 1, 1939 by NH Auden Josh Jones is a writer and musician based in Durham, N.C. Follow him @jdماغness on @jdماغness

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