



Review of Timothy Hampton, *Bob Dylan's Poetics: How the Songs Work*.

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Published in:
Journal of American Studies

DOI:
[10.1017/S0021875821000219](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875821000219)

Publication date:
2021

Citation for published version (APA):
Bone, M. (2021). Review of Timothy Hampton, *Bob Dylan's Poetics: How the Songs Work*. *Journal of American Studies*, 55(2), 1-2. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875821000219>

Journal of American Studies, 55 (2021), e18. doi:10.1017/S0021875821000219

Timothy Hampton, *Bob Dylan's Poetics: How the Songs Work* (New York: Zone Books, 2019, \$29.95). Pp. 285. ISBN 978 1 9421 3015 4.

The controversy around the award of the 2016 Nobel Prize for Literature to Bob Dylan reanimated old debates about the “literary” value of his songs. Such debates date back to the early 1970s, and Dylan’s adoption by English professors who liked the look of his lyrics. No one, though, has made the case for Dylan’s “poetics” quite as compellingly as Timothy Hampton does here. For one thing, *Bob Dylan’s Poetics* avoids the familiar pitfall of reading Dylan’s words in isolation: he attends to the “intersection of lyric, music, and performance” (9). (It is worth noting that the Nobel citation commended Dylan not merely for his lyrical prowess, but “for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition.”) Furthermore, Hampton distinguishes his approach from both biographical criticism and the subfield of Dylanology that – indebted to myth-and-symbol American studies – stresses the theme of “Americanness” (11).

Bob Dylan’s Poetics appears conventional in its chronological approach to recognizable periods. The six chapters focus on the early “folk” material, the mid-1960s “trilogy” culminating with *Blonde on Blonde*, the regenerative *Blood on the Tracks* and “its companion piece, *Desire*” (121), the overtly Christian albums, and the “late period” inaugurated by *Time Out of Mind*. The first two chapters cover especially familiar territory, partly because they “begin with the lyrics” (21) and Dylan’s earliest renditions of “American English and American space” (22). Hampton is convincing on Dylan’s modernist, individualist reworking of Woody Guthrie’s communal, political “ramblin’ man” archetype, but his aversion to biography leads to at least one oversight. When “Talkin’ New York” concludes “Howdy, East Orange,” it may well parody the American mythology of “western skies” (54), but it also alludes to the young acolyte’s own visits to the convalescing Guthrie at Bob Gleason’s East Orange apartment. The analysis becomes considerably more interesting when Hampton identifies Bertolt Brecht as the source for an alternative (but still leftist) vision through which Dylan began to confront, rather than commune with, his folk-revival audience. The third chapter pushes this further, deftly demonstrating how Dylan’s “visionary poetics” (85) drew on Arthur Rimbaud as another European alternative to Guthrie.

Chapter 4 reverts to a more specifically American literature and landscape, mapping the imaginative geography of *Blood on the Tracks* vis-à-vis Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. Having said that, Hampton demonstrates that Dylan and Kerouac alike were indebted to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*; moreover, the dense verses of “Tangled Up in Blue” draws upon the Petrarchan sonnet. Hampton also articulates an unease I have long felt, without fully fathoming, about *Desire*: seeking “experiences that haven’t already been domesticated or commercialized” (145), “Mozambique” and “Romance in Durango” veer into verbal and musical exoticism. (Though unremarked by Hampton, there are parallels here with *On the Road*’s depiction of Mexico.) The dilemmas of racialized performance recur in chapter 5, which proposes that Dylan’s “affectation” of African American vernacular English in songs like “Slow Train” becomes – rather dubiously, it seems to me – “an allegory for his marginalization as

a Christian rock star" (168). Surprisingly, perhaps, Hampton does not pursue how Dylan's shift "from the vocabulary of erotic love to the vocabulary of spiritual devotion" (172) reversed the trajectory of black musicians such as Sam Cooke who crossed from sacred (gospel) to profane (soul). Hampton does develop a deft reading of deep cut "Blind Willie McTell" as an epic narrative of US racial history that foregrounds its own limitations: the song stresses that "the white singer [cannot] approach the power of the black singer [McTell]" (190).

Hampton's suggestion that *Infidels* indicts a society "being retooled for the full onset of neoliberalism" (186) anticipates the final chapter, which argues that Dylan's "late style" addresses not only a "crisis of cultural form" but also a "crisis of the neoliberal self" (196). The former is met by Dylan's poetics and "politics of citation," from *The Great Gatsby* to (controversially) Confederate poet Henry Timrod; the latter is confronted in "Workingman Blues #2," which does more than merely reference Merle Haggard's "Workin' Man Blues." Dylan challenges Haggard's equation of "self-respect" with "work ethic" by insisting that, "in the world of globalized capital, *everyone* is an exile" (219–20, original emphasis). By this point, Hampton has guided us way beyond Bobby the Woody wannabe. *Bob Dylan's Poetics* makes Dylan's work "speak in new ways" (13): beyond "the great American song tradition," as part of international modernism, and to globalized late capitalism.

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