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*Speaking in Tongues:  
Celebrating Walt Whitman  
in Translation*

## **Whitman-Borges-Dickinson-Dylan, and the boundaries of literature**

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**ABSTRACT.** *Five writers blaze the trail of contemporary poetry at the end of the 19th century: Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson in the United States, Arthur Rimbaud, and Stéphane Mallarmé in France, Lewis Carroll in England. Clear passages linking one author to another can be established: among them, the question of subjectivity—individual and collective—the introduction of free verse, the use of colloquial language highlighting the importance of a rhythmical map that links poetry to music and visual arts, the experience and effects of mass-culture, the experimentation with language. If we consider the American poets Whitman and Dickinson, we can see they left a legacy followed by a prolific and eclectic group of worldwide writers. I will focus on poetry from the United States and Argentina. What could the beatnik poets and Sylvia Plath, Alejandra Pizarnik, Jorge Luis Borges, and Bob Dylan possibly have in common? This article tries to establish the existence of connections and passages between their works, following a legacy that Dylan takes to the limit, changing the boundaries of what we call literature.*

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cinq écrivains ouvrent la voie de la poésie contemporaine à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle: Walt Whitman et Emily Dickinson aux États-Unis, Arthur Rimbaud et Stéphane Mallarmé en France, Lewis Carroll en Angleterre. Des passages entre ces auteurs peuvent être mis en évidence : la question de la subjectivité, individuelle et collective, l'importance d'une carte rythmique qui relie la poésie à la musique et aux arts visuels, l'introduction du vers libre, l'utilisation d'un registre familier et de tournures prosaïques, l'expérience et les effets d'une culture médiatique, l'expérimentation avec le langage. Si nous considérons l'impact des poètes américains Whitman et Dickinson, nous constatons qu'un groupe fécond et éclectique d'adeptes se fait entendre partout dans le monde. Je vais considérer prioritairement la poésie des États Unis et celle de l'Argentine. Qu'est-ce que des poètes aussi différents que ceux de la génération beatnik, Sylvia Plath, Alejandra Pizarnik, Jorge Luis Borges et Bob Dylan peuvent avoir en commun ? Cet article se penche sur les correspondances et les liens entre leurs œuvres, en reprenant l'héritage que Dylan développe de la façon la plus radicale pour redessiner les frontières de ce que nous appelons littérature.

**MOTS CLÉS :** poésie, chanson, carte rythmique, frontières, littérature, Dylan

**KEYWORDS:** *poetry, song, rhythmical, map, boundaries, literature, Dylan*

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Five writers blaze the trail of contemporary poetry at the end of the 19th century: Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson in the United States; Arthur Rimbaud and Stéphane Mallarmé in France; Lewis Carroll in England. If we consider the American poets Whitman and Dickinson, we can see they left a legacy followed by a prolific and eclectic group of worldwide writers. I will focus on poetry from the United States and Argentina. According to Walter Benjamin's literary criticism, I will try to read here the *constellations* formed by the *passages* that connect one oeuvre to another: the question of subjectivity, individual and collective, the introduction of free verse and colloquial language highlighting the importance of a rhythmical map<sup>1</sup> that links poetry to music and visual arts, the experience of mass-culture, and the experimentation with language. One of these writers, Bob Dylan, takes the legacy to the outermost boundaries of what we call literature, creating a new artistic field.

The guardians of the literary canon were shocked, in 2016, when Dylan won the Nobel Prize in Literature, an honor denied to the world-famous writer Jorge Luis Borges year after year. Dylan did not attend the Prize Award Ceremony and sent, instead, an acceptance speech in which he explains why his work does not exactly fit into the field of literature. However, in April 2020, Dylan released the audio "I Contain Multitudes," quoting a line from "Song of Myself," as part of his new studio album *Rough and Rowdy Ways*. The influence of Whitman can be traced back to one of Dylan's early masterpieces, "A Hard Rain Is A-Gonna Fall" (2016, 59)<sup>2</sup>, a composition in long lines depicting a macroscopic global scene from an ethical point of view. *Tarantula*, sent to print in 1966, was the only text he wrote as a *literary* text in that early stage. He described it as just "a book of words" (2006,49). As we will see with Whitman, books are not the legacy our poets want to leave. We can also propose horizontal passages between the beatniks and Sylvia Plath, whose writings were mostly influenced by Whitman and Dickinson, respectively, while both legacies seem to converge in Dylan's work. We can expand the constellation connecting Plath, Dylan, and Alejandra Pizarnik, an Argentinian poet: in the early 1960s, their works developed the topics of the question about subjectivity and name in intense lines of a brilliant formal perfection. The core was in Dickinson J288, written in 1861:

I am Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you – Nobody – too?  
Then there's a pair of us! (1955, 133)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> About this concept and the others related to the poetry being composed as upon a score, see Muschietti, Delfina et al. *Traducir poesía. Mapa rítmico, partitura y plataforma flotante*. Buenos Aires: Paradiso, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Released, in 1963, in his second album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, but there are testimonies of live performances of the song already in 1961.

<sup>3</sup> There are two different editions of Emily Dickinson's complete poems, the kind of book she never thought of publishing during her lifetime. These two editions mainly differ from each other by their chronological classification of the texts. The first was edited by Thomas Johnson in 1955, the second

Plath wrote in “Tulips,” one century later, quoting Dickinson: “I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions” (Plath 2018, 160). In 1962, an enigmatic poem from Pizarnik explains the two sides aspects in a short poem, “explicar con palabras de este mundo/ que partió de mí un barco llevándome (2000, 115)<sup>4</sup>. In “Spanish Harlem Incident,” Dylan sang, in 1964, a paradoxical “If I am really real” (Dylan 2016, 115), with a similar inquiry about the self.<sup>5</sup>

In his “Introduction” to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Harold Bloom notes: “The ‘I’ and the ‘You’ in Whitman are neither separate nor unified” (2005, XVII). He also enumerates the poets who continued the new tradition (John Ashbery, Fernando Pessoa, Wallace Stevens, D.H. Lawrence), declaring that none of them went further than Whitman. In the poem quoted above, Dickinson links the personal pronouns “I” and “You” to a significant name “Nobody,” with implication we will develop later. Dylan released, in 1965, in his *quasi* Rock & Roll period<sup>6</sup>, “Ballad Of A Thin Man,” considered a classic already, in which the use of “you” and “I” is combined with a deliberate confusion between personal and possessive pronouns, designing with irony a rhythmical map leading to existential questions related to the self-inquiry again:

You raise your head  
 And you ask, “Is this where it is?”  
 And somebody points at you and says  
 “It’s his”  
 And you say, “What’s mine”  
 And somebody else says, “Where what is?”  
 And you say, “Oh my God,  
 Am I here all alone?” (2016, 174)

Pizarnik, and Dylan raise the main questions about name and subjectivity. In 1956, Pizarnik wrote a poem, which she dedicated to Emily Dickinson, followed by “Sólo un nombre” [“Just a name”] (2016, 65). In this text, her first name is written

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by Ralph Franklin in 1967, followed by reconsiderations until 1998. I quote from Johnson’s edition, the one Sylvia Plath and Alejandra Pizarnik did read, and Silvina Ocampo used for her translation.

<sup>4</sup> A possible translation would be: “how to explain with words of this world/ that a ship departed from me taking me away.” Sylvia Plath also quoted Whitman in her poem “The Sleepers” (2018, 117).

<sup>5</sup> There are many lines in Dylan’s work about this inquiry: “I and I,” from 1983 (2016, 474); “I’ve been deceived by the clown inside of me,” and “Everybody’s wearing a disguise,” in “Abandoned Love,” from 1975 (2016, 371), “I fought with my twin, my enemy within,” in “Where Are You Tonight?,” from 1978 (2016, 395), the title of the album *Another Side of Bob Dylan* (1964), among many others. We can connect this topic to the ubiquity of the “mask” and the “disguise” in Dylan’s work related to social scenes: “I can see through your masks,” in “Masters of War” (1963) (2016, 55), “take the rag away from your face,” in “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” from 1964 (2016, 95), the film *Masked And Anonymous*, from 2003, directed by Larry Charles, to whose script Dylan contributed. In *The Rolling Thunder Review* (1975) he controversially sang on stage with a plastic mask or a mime artist’s white make-up on his face.

<sup>6</sup> I use the italics *quasi* because Dylan takes this musical style into another dimension.

with no capital letters, as happens in some of Dylan's early poems, the complementary gesture to Whitman's and Dickinson's free capitalizing. In Dylan, the situation is more complex because he changed his last name in 1960.<sup>7</sup> His name appears, of course, with capitalization as the author of his work, although in some case his lines can appear to be anonymous, as we will see later. In 2004, he released *Chronicles I*, a book of memories received with excellent literary reviews. However, the genre of the memoir, linked to the name of an author and his biographical narrative, seems to have been reinvented. The narrator does not use a regular chronology, but a technique closer to poetry than to prose: cinematographic flashbacks, with long lists of the names of other artists, and a style of long-suspended rhythmical enumerations in descriptions of places, objects, and landscapes. Dylan privileges detailed poetic descriptions, and the verbs in present, past and future, are modified by a profusion of deictic adverbs ("here," "there," "now," "today," "tomorrow"), with no clear references. As a result, the reader frequently loses track of the time and the place from which the narrator speaks: where exactly is he now, which year is he talking about? The effect is the movement of a continuum with no clear start or end. In fact, the last chapter of *Chronicles I* is placed in "New York City, midwinter, 1961" (2004, 258), when the story of Bob Dylan, the singer, started. Dylan makes the invisible visible as declared by Whitman in his Preface to the 1855 edition: "Past and present and future are not disjoined but joined" (2005, 13).<sup>8</sup> The descriptive cinematographic eye and the long enumerations are part of Whitman's legacy, as well as the rhythmical writing bringing prose closer to poetry.

In the constellation under consideration, Borges is important as an early translator of Whitman's work into Spanish: he, too, considered musical and visual rhythm as the main traits in poetry. His translation of *Leaves of Grass* appeared in 1969, but he was already working on Whitman's poems in 1942. Borges, a fervent admirer who compared Whitman to Shakespeare, was able to hear the new sound created by Whitman, and Dickinson. In fact, Borges was Silvina Ocampo's advisor while she was translating Dickinson's poems, and he prefaced her translation (published in 1985 after years of preparation) with a controversial piece in which he

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<sup>7</sup> He was born Robert Allen Zimmerman, in 1941. After he changed his name to Robert Dylan on his ID card, and he signed his works as Bob Dylan, the nametag kept being an issue. In 1986, in Australia, he told reporters "Who's Bob Dylan? I'm only Bob Dylan when I have to be Bob Dylan. Most of the time I just be myself" (<https://alldylan.com/bob-dylan-sydney-press-conference-1986-video/>). In "Gotta Serve Somebody," from 1979, another sharp ethical song seeming to describe how we are trapped by some tricks of our contemporary world, he plays ironically with the nametag "You may call me Terry/ You may call me Bobby, you may call me Jimmy/ You may call me R.J., you may call me Ray/ You may call me anything but no matter what you say/ You have to serve somebody, yes, indeed" (2016, 402).

<sup>8</sup> See also the lyrics "Let me forget today/until tomorrow" (2016, 153), in "Mr. Tambourine Man," from 1965. Or the more explicit and philosophically complex "Well, the future/ for me is already a thing of the past" (2016, 586), in *Bye and Bye*, from 2001. In "My Back Pages," the interesting enigma of the line "I'm older than then now" (2016, 125) is open to different possible meanings.

praises what we cannot read in Ocampo's work<sup>9</sup>: she did not respect the form of the original. In 1942, he found the same failure in León Felipe's translation of "Song of Myself". When he compares Felipe's choices with his own, using the contrast "Whitman escribe" ["Whitman writes"] and "Felipe traduce" ["Felipe translates"] (2016, 301-303), Borges holds the position of an *invisible translator* trying to reproduce an echo of the breathing of the original, as Benjamin proposed in his article of 1923, so what we have is Whitman speaking through Borges' voice. On the contrary, Felipe adopts the position of a writer making his own Spanish voice audible, instead of abiding by the rhythm of the original. Borges hears in Felipe's work some echoes of classic Spanish poetry, with the addition of onomatopoeias Whitman does not use and the changing of the length of Whitman's lines. Borges notes that Felipe transforms the song in Whitman, which he relates to the long lines of the psalms, into the shorter kind of shouting sounds typical of the flamenco song called *cante jondo*.

We only have the text, and we must accept the challenge of keeping the weirdness, the enigma of rhythm in poetry, which is crucial to its beautiful and powerful *way of saying*, as Benjamin said (1923). Rimbaud wrote that finding a language is the task of a poet (1975, 171), working with the common language and the previous poetry tradition. Whitman speaks of a "new tongue," "a uniform hieroglyphic" (1997, 32). Dylan says the goal was to create a new form or line (2006, 85). According to Tinianov's theory (1979), a poem has a specific form, which makes it possible to read a line inserted in a context but at the same time endows the same line with enough power to be isolated, spreading rays of sounds, graphemes, and meanings to all the zones of the poem-map. The rhythm is the key that links words or even syllables or letters, by their position in the line through rhyme, alliteration, parallelisms, and oppositions. Then the poem has its own specific rules for breaking the rules of common language.<sup>10</sup> Contemporary poetry and free verse make it even clearer that the meaning, too, can be considered as tone or color: the poem forms a musical and visual design working with the blank space at the end of the line like a silence, that the translator must respect.

In his 1968 Lectures,<sup>11</sup> Borges coincides with this point of view, speaking about poetry as "the music of the words" (2002, 85), and "the music of silence" (2002, 61).

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<sup>9</sup> He said Ocampo respected Dickinson's form, for example, but we see her translation suppresses Dickinson's experimental capitalization. Dickinson was given the advice to stop using it, which she dismissed. One of the first editions of her poems, a selection published in Boston by her niece Martha Dickinson, in 1914, completely cancelled that formal feature, but Johnson's edition, used by Ocampo, reproduces Dickinson's manuscripts. Ocampo chose to ignore that innovation; Borges's translation, instead, respected the capitalization in Whitman.

<sup>10</sup> Dylan goes further even on this point. He said that he is in the territory of *nowhere*: he does not break any rule because he does not see "any rule to break" (2006, 85). "It's always silent where I am" he said in 1965 (2006, 69), and silence can also be the territory where everything becomes possible, the blank page where poetry awaits to be written: "Weirdness is exactness" (Dylan 2006, 192).

<sup>11</sup> In all the quotations from Borges's texts written in Spanish, the translations into English are mine, but these lectures were given in English at Harvard University, collected in *This Craft of Verse* (2002).

We say the poet composes a design with every kind of *repetition*, a *rhythmical map* which is also a *floating musical score*. Dylan seems to consider these two levels, in 1965, “The words and the music, I can hear the sound of what I want to say” (2006, 56).

Sylvia Plath, in her *Journals*, adopts a similar perspective:

Every word can be analyzed minutely—from the point of view of vowel and consonant shades, values, coolnesses, warmths, assonances and dissonances. Technically, I suppose the visual appearance and sound of words, taken alone, may be much like the mechanics of music... or the color and texture in a painting. However, uneducated as I am in this field, I can only guess and experiment (1998, 32).

Dylan also describes his work as “mathematical music, vision music” (2006, 63), far away from the label “folk-rock” or “protest songs,” which critics were trying to tack onto his work.<sup>12</sup> He also said, in 1963, “Anything worth thinking about is worth singing” (2006, 10).

Since Whitman calls his most important poem a *Song*, and Borges relates Whitman’s lines to the psalms, we can see how Borges properly read body and soul united in the singing voice, as when Whitman declares:

I am the poet of the body,  
And I am the poet of the soul (2005, 50)

Then, Whitman and Dickinson innovate in a similar way, considering the different aspects that converge in the I that speaks in poetry. In fact, the ethereal impulse coming from one mind, from one invisible soul, turns into a voice coming from a body, at once a breathing and a material articulation of rhythmical sounds, which also goes into a visible sequence of graphemes. As Dylan said, in 1965, talking about poetry: “There is a certain kind of rhythm in some kind of way visible” (2006, 49).

As for Borges, his description alludes to a duplicity in Whitman’s voice, who speaks and sings at the same time, mixing the modernity of the irregular prosaic line he inaugurates with the rhythmical sound that comes from the origins of poetry and goes into religious and popular music. Whitman never forgets that entangled unison,

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<sup>12</sup> He rejected the press labels from the beginning with honesty. In the early radio interview of 1962 with Cynthia Gooding, he separates himself from the folk circles and says about his work: “I just call them contemporary songs” (2006, 3). And he was consistent, later, in 2003: “I didn’t like that sound Folk-Rock whatever that means, had nothing to do with me” (in Scorsese 2005, Part II, 43:36-42). Many times, he could transform the labels into another dimension, as in London, in 1966, when asked why he was not singing protest songs anymore, he replied, “Who said that? All my songs are protest songs [...]. That’s all I do, is protest” (in Scorsese 2005, Part II, 4:01-15). In the 1966 Swedish interview with Klas Burling, asked how he could call his style, he gave a revealingly simple answer: “I don’t know. I’ve never heard anybody that plays or sings like me, so I don’t know.” When the reporter insisted, he replied, “Mathematical music” (<https://www.interferenza.net/bcs/interw/66-apr29.htm>), as he did earlier in 1965 (Dylan 2006, 63).

while his translators frequently do. On the other hand, while Whitman calls his main poem “Song of Myself,” Dickinson composes on the piano strange and experimental melodies of her own, according to the memories of her friend Kate Scott Anthon. However, in our reading of Borges’s phrase, we can develop even more implications. As we said, both Whitman and Dickinson make the body visible which, in the 19th century, was carefully hidden under the dominance of the Christian concept of Soul. In the letter J261, of 26 April 1862, to her supposed literary guide, T.W Higginson, Dickinson separates herself from her family’s beliefs: “They are religious—except me—and address an Eclipse, every morning—whom they call their ‘Father’” (Dickinson 1986, 404).<sup>13</sup> On the same page, she mentions Whitman: “You speak of Mr. Whitman—I never read his Book—but was told that he was disgraceful.” If she never read him, she never knew how close they were in their ways of experimental poetry. The ironic start of her short and complex poem J288, quoted earlier, displays the visibility of the body as Whitman does, but she somehow masks the direct mention of the word, going deeper into gender issues:

I am Nobody? Who are you?  
Are you – Nobody – too?

Dickinson seems to play ironically with the words: “Nobody” can be paired with *Nothing* and also can be read as *No-body*, showing the (self-) censorship of the Victorian culture in which she grew up. It is interesting to note the difference with the I in Whitman, who proclaims the attachment of his voice to Body and Soul, with a new freedom that took time for a woman writer to express, at least until Sylvia Plath appeared in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It is necessary to remark as well that we can connect the word Soul with a type of music called “Spirituals” or “Negro Spirituals,” traditional songs created by African people and their descendants, called “Negroes” until the early 1960s in the United States. The name of that music came apparently from the translation of *King James Bible*: “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (*Ephesians* 5:19). In June 1867, *The Atlantic Monthly* published an article by T.W. Higginson, in which he transcribes with great interest some of those singings by *negroes* whom he had heard in the South. He said they accompanied their songs with a “rhythmical barbaric dance” (1867, 685). So, paradoxically, the Spirituals were also linked to a denied Body. *Negroes* represented the body of the lower social rank in the American culture of those years and were legally enslaved until 1863, when Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation during the Civil War (1861-1865). In 1962, when segregation still existed, Dylan performed live a touching version of the Spiritual “No More Auction Block” (first published in the United States in 1867), taking the voice of a slave proclaiming his liberation after many years of cruel

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<sup>13</sup> The Johnson-Ward edition respects Dickinson’s form: she wrote her letters like her poems, with the same original use of dashes and capitalization. We can say that Dylan speaks in his interviews as he writes, using repetitions, parallelisms, oxymoron, oppositions, visual images.

exploitation. In 1963, Dylan recorded the early masterpieces “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” and “A Pawn in Their Game” about the inequality of the Law at a time when peaceful “negroes” were murdered by white people<sup>14</sup>. In Whitman, there is no doubt about the voice of liberation proclaiming equality for all Bodies. In section 13 of “Song of Myself,” he describes a “negro” figure as magnificent, tall, “calm and commanding:”

The negro holds firmly the reins of his four horses, the block swags underneath on  
its tied-over chain,  
[...]  
I behold the picturesque giant and love him, and I do not stop there,  
I go with the team also. (1973, 39).

In section 10, Whitman tells how “The runaway slave came to my house and stopt outside,” “limpsy and weak” (1973, 37), how he hosted him, gave him food and water, nursing his injuries:

And remember putting plasters on the galls of his neck and ankles;  
He staid with me a week before he was recuperated and pass'd north,  
I had him sit next me at table, my fire-lock lean'd in the corner (1973, 38).

In “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” Dylan reaches similar heights in the humble figure of the black maid killed by a rich and negligent young white man.<sup>15</sup> But, in his composition, the compassion-effect appears to be growing in the eyes/ears of the reader-listener, contrasting the humble domestic task pacifically done by the maid with the young man’s arrogance and carelessness. In the stanza quoted below, our attention is drawn to a detail about Hattie Carroll’s situation, highlighting a sympathy similar to Whitman’s compassionate attitude:

Who carried the dishes and took out the garbage  
And never sat once at the head of the table  
And didn’t even talk to the people at the table  
Who just cleaned up all the food from the table (2016, 95)

The three repetitions of “the table” at the end of the last three last lines of the stanza (as opposed to the previous “the garbage”), contribute to throw into relief,

<sup>14</sup> In 1963, Dylan sang another of his great ethical compositions live, which he never recorded in a studio album, “Who killed Davey Moore?” (2016, 73). The song projects the image, never said, of the boxer killed in the boxing ring, surrounded by all the groups related to that difficult sport/business (the referee, the manager, the sporting bet gamblers, the family, the sport reporter): as in a Brechtian Greek chorus, we hear they deny in each stanza the responsibility of what had happened there.

<sup>15</sup> That was a true story that appeared in the newspapers in 1963. Dylan never said in the song that the maid was a black woman, but it emerges clear in the context by the contrast between the two figures. He slightly changed the names of the characters and sang the song until 2012 on stages all over the world. That man, who died in 2009, only got a six-month sentence and always expressed publicly his disdain and violent anger for the song in which Dylan told the truth.



as a symbol of the whole situation, the image of a territory reserved for powerful people, while the poor can only approach that space to serve them in silence, coming from the humblest places of the kitchen (“never sat once,” “didn’t even talk”). The whole composition deserves to be analyzed as an example of Dylan’s baroque style, with the profusion of rhetorical devices such as oxymorons, parallelisms, paradoxes, repetitions, oppositions, negation-affirmation, rhyme, alliterations in the design of a rhythmical map. In “Maggie’s Farm,” released in 1965, Dylan expands the notion of slavery to any kind of power exercised to submit others in any type of humiliating work, with the ironic key line “They sing while you slave and I just get bored” (Dylan 2016, 144). In this concise sentence, the personal pronouns draw a scenario where “you” and “I” are united in opposition to “They,” who have the power to submit others.<sup>16</sup> The chorus proclaims the speaker’s liberation, “I ain’t gonna work on Maggie’s Farm no more,” which consequently includes the you-listener in the impulse for freedom, showing one of the great qualities of Dylan’s work: to make a particular situation a subject of universal social interest and applicable at same time to everyone’s life. In 1965, one reporter asked Dylan if the characters in his songs represented “real people.” He replied: “Particular people? Sure, I’m sure you’ve seen all the people in my songs—at one time or another” (2006, 66).

On the other hand, Borges was never able to follow in the experimental footsteps of his admired Whitman, who describes the New World, the big city, the energy of American men and women, nature, and democracy. Only once, in 1936, did Borges write a poem called “Insomnio” [“Insomnia”], in which he followed Whitman’s legacy. He describes Buenos Aires in long free lines on course to becoming a big modern cosmopolitan city. This sociological-cinematographic eye was never to appear again in his work, composed later in a metaphysical style. In “Insomnio” we find the hesitation with which he faced the socio-cultural change in the city and the experimental form in his writing: he chooses to stand in the old village of the past. Indeed, in other texts, Borges seems to disapprove of the cosmopolitan city which Whitman describes with exultation.<sup>17</sup> He didn’t include, in the selection he made from *Leaves of Grass*, for example, Whitman singing the beauty of the modern machine in “To a Locomotive in Winter,” or the Babelism of the increasing New York population in “Manahatta”:

The down-town streets, the jobbers’ houses of business, the houses of business of  
the ship-merchants and money-brokers, the river-streets,

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<sup>16</sup> In some live versions, like the performance in Newport Folk Festival 1965—where he was famously booed by the audience because of his new sound, playing electric musical instruments—, Dylan adds a word that introduces a twist in the ruthless attitude of the powerful people: “They say sing while you slave.” Many times, to follow Dylan’s poetry is a challenging task, especially considering the frequent changes in the lyrics he makes in different versions performed on stage.

<sup>17</sup> Maybe we can also read some naivety in Whitman’s enthusiasm. There were some dark aspects in the development of the big cities, which Dylan later envisioned: see especially the images in “A Hard Rain Is Gonna A-Fall” (1963); and in “Highway 61” (1965), in which he sarcastically represents modern society of our times.

Immigrants arriving, fifteen or twenty thousand in a week,  
 The carts hauling goods, the manly race of drivers of horses, the brown-faced  
 sailors,  
 The summer air, the bright sun shining, and the sailing clouds aloft (1973, 475).

Borges did, however, include “Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd,” one of the first poems describing the anonymous multitude in the big cities, but none of the exaltation of the immigration waves appears in his work; on the contrary, immigration is seen in Argentina like a sort of invasion against the purity of the Spanish language.<sup>18</sup> Then, despite his admiration, Borges could not follow Whitman’s path. Other poets did: Oliverio Girondo wrote from Paris, in 1922, *Veinte poemas para ser leídos en el tranvía*<sup>19</sup>, later published in Buenos Aires, in 1925. However, Borges chose to translate Whitman into Spanish, and his legacy remained through Borges’s voice for the generations to come. In Argentina, some poets included in what was to be called the generation of the 1960s (from Juan Gelman to Miguel Angel Bustos), continued with the Girondo-Whitman style, with a poetry located in the city. Female poets, starting with Pizarnik, found another genealogy coming from Dickinson. At the end of the twentieth century, a group of new poets, known as “the generation of the ‘90s,” also received Whitman through the legacy of writers such as Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs, founding a new kind of “realism” in Argentinian poetry, but they took just one part of Whitman’s legacy. As I said, it is important to stress the word “Song” in Whitman’s major poem and many others in *Leaves of Grass*, such as “Song of the Answerer” (1973, 166) and the “Songs of Parting” cluster (1973, 488-506w; and even the fact that he frequently can appear as a *singer*, “I sing” (2005, 129) or as a *music player*, “I play not a march for victors only....” (2005, 47). Éric Athenot found: “206 musical words in his poems, 123 relate specifically to vocal music, and some are used many times. “Song” appears 154 times, “sing” 117, and “Singing” and “singers” more than 30 times each” (2018, 93).

In “Songs of Parting,” the last section of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman envisions his own “legacy” as “this bundle of songs (1973, 498), “These carols” (1973, 502), “my

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<sup>18</sup> On the contrary, in *Tarantula*, Dylan usually exalts Spanish, the language of the Hispanic immigrants in the U.S. in capital letters, while English, the language of the dominant country in the Americas—to which he belongs—is written in lower cases. The Dylan speaker in the book also defines himself as a musician, in Spanish “SOLO SOY UN GUITARRISTA” (Dylan 2008, 30), causing the reader to translate the phrase into English “I am just a guitar player.” In 1976, during his Rolling Thunder Review tour, Dylan sung with Joan Baez “Deportees,” a Woody Guthrie song against the persecution of Hispanic immigrants in the U.S. See also a strange piece, from 1969, “I Pity The Poor Immigrant,” in which he seems ironically to follow the attitude commonly adopted towards the figure of the immigrant, or, as others suggest, uses that orthodoxy to reveal how common sense wrongly places wealth as the main goal in life. Same critical perspective in the lines “Let me ask you one question / is your money that good?”, included in “Masters of War” (2016, 55).

<sup>19</sup> The title would translate to *Twenty poems to be read on the trolley*, and the book was received as a shock in Buenos Aires. Girondo, like Whitman, was writing in the modern cosmopolitan city, making visible the body of women and men in his poems, criticizing the old colonial cultural traditions.

chant” (1973, 492). But in the earlier “No Labor-Saving Machine,” he is already very clear and explicit:

Not a literary success nor intellect, nor book for the book-shelf,  
But a few carols vibrating through the air I leave,  
For comrades and lovers (1973, 131)

Athenot (2018) insists on Whitman’s attachment to opera, another artform uniting writing and singing. That is the realm connecting Whitman, Dickinson and the poets who followed their singing path, ending in what I called poetry of the post-globalization era, which Dylan’s work represents and takes to the edge.<sup>20</sup> In fact, when envisioning his legacy, Whitman seems to detach his work from what we call *literature*, turning his poetry into a kind of singing performance. In his Acceptance Speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature, Dylan holds a similar position about his own work. That is why, while receiving one of the most prestigious awards in literature, he shows that the field can take a new meaning and direction, following an experimental turn. As a “a musical expeditionary” (Dylan, Scorsese 2005, Part I, 29:11), working with all the traditional literary and musical roots he could know<sup>21</sup> he leads us to a new artistic field nobody was able to explain or categorize. He dismissed all labels and even from a very young age, in 1961, he provided a category linked to Whitman’s and Dickinson’s poetry. As we said, Dylan called his work “contemporary songs.” Whitman, in his Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, 1855, writes

A great poem is for ages and ages in common and for all degrees and complexions and all departments and sects and for a woman as much as man and a man as much as a woman. A great poem is no finish to a man or woman but rather a beginning (Whitman 2005, 9).

Dylan seems to agree in his interview in *No Direction Home*. He describes the task of an artist in the apparently contradictory terms of “state of becoming”:

An artist has got to be careful never to arrive a place where he thinks he is at somewhere, you have to realize you are constantly in the state of becoming, you know, and as long as you could stay in that room you’d be certainly alright. (Dylan, Scorsese 2005, Part II, 18:41).

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<sup>20</sup> I used the concept for Dylan’s poetry, in 2018, for the first time, see [https://www.clarin.com/revista-ene/literatura/lenguas-flores\\_0\\_ryVd7o6vQ.html](https://www.clarin.com/revista-ene/literatura/lenguas-flores_0_ryVd7o6vQ.html). We already saw the connections Plath established with music and visual arts. Pizarnik also used words linked to music and songs. Like Whitman, and Dickinson, she identifies the I with a singer: “Yo canto” [“I sing”] (2000, 149), “mi canto” [“my chant”] (2000, 387), and one series of last poems is called “Los pequeños cantos” [“Little Chants”] (2000, 377).

<sup>21</sup> The list is long: Appalachian music, country, folk, bluegrass, blues, rock & roll, soul, spirituals, gospel, Irish ballads, England ballads, Scottish ballads, classical music, Italian, Spanish, and Latin American music. Literature, from Shakespeare to Byron, and Keats, Whitman, and Dickinson to Eliot, Pound, Allen Ginsberg to Sandburg, Balzac, and Brecht to Kerouac, among others.

As in Whitman's proposal, the poem, for Dylan, keeps changing, with each performance, whether live or taped during a recording session or rehearsal, offering a possibility for alternate versions, changing lyrics and music<sup>22</sup>, as Whitman kept re-writing his *Leaves of Grass* through the years. Dylan explains early on, in 1965, that on stage, he is not really performing the songs, "but just letting them be there" (2006, 75). In 2004, he said "The songs are the star of the show, not me" (2006, 431). This conception implies a quality that is very crucial to his approach to art. In the early 1960s, he had already said that the songs were there before he arrived.<sup>23</sup> The songs have their own life, and the stage is a sort of laboratory where music and poetry expand their limits in each song and its variations. Dickinson seems to agree when she expresses in the poem J250 "I shall keep singing" (1955, 114).

Whitman, Dickinson, and their great followers of the 1960s were very conscious of the role they were playing in the history of poetry and art: led by the old and now underrated *inspiration*, they knew they would fulfill their goal like a mission.<sup>24</sup> Whitman's and Dickinson's works were received with shock by their contemporaries<sup>25</sup>; but they kept going on with determination. Dylan's work also appeared as shocking at different moments of his *state of becoming*. In *No Direction Home* interview, he speaks about the animosity he found among the audience and critics with the first major variation in his work, when he decided to play with a band and electric musical instruments:

I cannot self-analyze my work and I wasn't going to cater to the crowd because I knew certain people would like it and certain people wouldn't like it. I mean, I got in the door where no one was looking, I was there now and there was nothing nobody from then on could do about it. (Dylan, Scorsese 2005, Part II, 19:00-17)<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> This applies also to his paintings: you can never say you are in front of the definitive one, because there can be always a new version with a different color.

<sup>23</sup> Dylan said to *Sing Out!* magazine, in October-November 1962, "The songs are there. They exist all by themselves just waiting for someone to write them down. I just put them down on paper. If I didn't do it, somebody else would."

<sup>24</sup> Plath and Pizarnik knew they would open a new field for women writers. Dylan always insisted that what he was doing was not a *job* or *work*, that it chose him: "What career? I never had a career" (Sydney TV show interview, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=defc43G5pGE>). This part was not included in the transcription quoted note 6). He was doing what he *had* to do: "Music has given me a purpose" (2006, 284): "if you believe you have a purpose and a mission" (2006, 223); "I don't know anything else to do. I'm good at it," "I am an artist. I try to create art" (2006, 224); "The highest purpose of art is to inspire. What else can you do? What else can you do for anyone but inspire them?" (2006, 196).

<sup>25</sup> In Dickinson's case, those would just mean a handful of people: especially her mentor Higginson and Martha Dickinson, her niece and first publisher.

<sup>26</sup> He was booed in the 1965 U.S. tour, and he was called "Judas" by the audience of his 1966 England tour (Scorsese 2005, Part II, 1:29:55) because of this new change in his sound. But his misjudged change started an innovation in *popular* music worldwide. I italicize the word because this is a narrow label that leads to a confusion in the consideration of Dylan's work. Even when he covers a "pop" song, he turns it into another dimension. We cannot say Dylan changes styles, but his unique style varies in his constant *state of becoming*. Dylan kept going with these variations up until our years. We can hear in the rehearsals and outtakes of recording sessions, that in each of those variations he was never stuck or still in one kind of sound, freely moving between one to another, in a way we can say all of them are

In the last line Dylan firmly stands against any critic or adviser<sup>27</sup>, with the same resolved attitude that can be found at the start of the Scorsese documentary interview, when he describes the start of his artistic journey:

I had envisioned to set up like an Odyssey, set up to find the home I left a while back and couldn't exactly remember where it was, but I am on my way there [...]. I didn't have any ambitions at all. I was born very far from where I was supposed to be in, so I'm on my way home. (Dylan, Scorsese 2005, Part I, 00:00-58)

Another important remark in Athenot (2018, 86) refers to Whitman's balance between the individual and the collective. We can add here the connection with the pair famous-anonymous and known-unknown, both linked to the rejection of the mass-media-market, so clear in Dickinson J288:

How dreary – to be – Somebody!  
How public – like a Frog-

To tell one's name – the livelong June  
To and admiring Bog! (1955, 133)

Then, as we saw, while she apparently denounces in the “Nobody” of the first stanza of the poem the censorship of her times, she seems to envision in the second the star-system that Dylan dismissed from the beginning.<sup>28</sup> The public “Somebody” suffers the same rejection as the censored “Nobody,” which can be also opened to another meaning, as always in great poetry: it can provide a protective shield, like the name Ulysses used to defeat Polyphemus; and as we saw above, Dylan, too, compares his journey to an Odyssey. In fact, Dylan goes ahead with this proposal,

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flowing in his music with different levels and preeminence, always ready to incorporate a new one in the next innovation.

<sup>27</sup> He dismissed, for example, his Columbia producer's advice (like Dickinson did with Higginson's) to not consider an improvised intromission of an electric organ while recording one take of “Like A Rolling Stone” in 1965. Dylan immediately incorporated the organ into the music of the song, and that decision influenced many rock & roll bands of those times, even if he didn't write orthodox rock & roll. The length of his complex songs was also an innovation for the audiences and producers, who were used to hearing 2-3 minutes songs; as the sound of his voice and harmonica, with long non-conventional and expressive solos that speak their own language.

<sup>28</sup> In 1966, Dylan discussed with some fans surrounding his car, asking for his autograph. He replied, “You don't need my autograph, if you needed it, I'd give it to you” (in Scorsese 2005, Part II, 1:24:18-43). In 1965, he already said “I've never followed any trend” (2006, 57); “Well you see, a lot of people start out and they plan to be stars, [...] I started from New York City, you know, and there wasn't any of that around” (2006, 74). In the 1986 BBC interview, he speaks about how the star-system of fame can alter people's life; he observes, for example, how when a *famous* person enters a room became the focus point for everybody, who sadly leaves their own real lives aside. He denied again the relevance of the autograph, which is just a part of that system (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9pLZh9yx7E&t=112s>). It doesn't mean he doesn't agree to sign an autograph now and then, it's the concept of it that he is questioning.

breaking the boundaries between collective and individual interests, cultural high art and popular art, commercial and non-commercial artifacts. His lines, like *gems* disconnected from Dylan signature, working as anonymous and personal statements at the same time, travel through the streams of sounds and images. It was impressive to see, in 2009, a newspaper chronicle about a march for Peace held in the Middle East showing a photo with a sign emerging from the multitude: I CANNOT SHOOT THEM ANYMORE, a line from “Knocking on Heaven’s Door.” The short poem-song with a repeated chorus and just two stanzas, which Dylan changed many times through the years, starts

Mama, take this badge of off me  
 I cannot use it anymore  
 It’s getting dark, too dark to see  
 Feels like I’m knocking on Heaven’s Door (2016, 313)

The song definitively is a claim for peace, the end of shooting guns as the sign emerging in the protest said; but in this other stanza we can see Dylan’s poetry possesses that special quality he himself describes as “My songs speak volumes.”<sup>29</sup> The form, synthetic and complex, full of rhyme and alliterations, produces the effect that the words can be perceived opened to a variety of possible situations and contexts. So, this *badge* shines in the verse with multiple meanings and the path of liberation, from darkness to light, which ended in the “Heaven’s Door” of the song’s repeated chorus, may also refer to something beyond the conventional religious image.<sup>30</sup> The brevity of this song contrasts with the length of “Chimes of Freedom,” remarkably connected to Whitman in the display of an existential panoramic view and its ethical claim for liberty, but also to Dickinson’s enigmatic and elaborated compositions. We can even build a bridge with poem J258, where she compares the atmosphere of a winter afternoon with “the heft/ of Cathedral Tunes” (1955, 118), uniting the solemnity of the music in cathedrals with the colloquial word “Tune,” used for simpler songs (the “carol” in Whitman seems a fusion of both). Dickinson made of the imposing noun “Cathedral” an adjective for “tune.” In Dylan’s song, “cathedral” is used as an adjective, too, but he uses one of his typical rhetorical devices, the hyperbole, transforming the Dickinson’s transgression into a bigger one:

Through the wild cathedral evening the rain unraveled tales  
 For the disrobed faceless forms of no position (2016, 116)

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<sup>29</sup> While the possessive “my” seems in contradiction with the concept of the songs living by themselves, it is not, as we can see in the complete quote: “I’ve got to know that I’m singing something with truth to it. My songs are different from anybody else’s songs. Other artists can get by on their voices and their style, but my songs speak volumes, and all I have to do is lay them down correctly, lyrically, and they’ll do what they need to do” (Dylan 2006, 393).

<sup>30</sup> As Dylan said, in 1964: “[...] it doesn’t really matter where a song comes from. It just matters where it takes you” (Dylan 2006, 436).

Used as an adjective, “cathedral,” preceded by the adjective “wild,” makes the *oxymoron* of the two adjectives with opposite connotations falls over the unexpected name “evening,” producing an even more complex image. The sophisticated composition continues with a series of contrasts related to prefixes and suffixes (“un-,” “dis-,” “-less”), but we cannot develop the reading any further here. Somehow, though, no matter how dark the panorama described is, as the situation and images in “A Hard Rain Is A-Gonn Fall,” we see in Dylan’s work, as in Whitman’s and Dickinson’s, the light of a certain hope. At the end of that long poem, for example, the voice announces the possibility of a song to communicate with others in a sort of solidarity and communion.<sup>31</sup> Even each one of the difficult questions of his first well-known song “Blowing in the Wind” is opened to a possible better world. His new experimental form brings a difference inside the standardization of the mass-media system, which he called “one big carnival sideshow” (Dylan 2006, 203), or an invasive “mass monster” (2006, 327). In many of his interviews, Dylan clearly detached his work from the music industry: “To me it’s not a business, [...] it’s not a business. It’s just a way to survive” (2006, 323), more like a mission, making art with an unexpected use of the business field. So, after a bootleg of his private recording sessions, in 1969, was made public, Dylan surprised his admirers and critics again with the constant release of his *official* Bootlegs Series (number 16 became available in September 2021), which includes rehearsals, live concerts, outtakes of recording sessions, private performances. We can find musical and poetic *gems* all along those bootlegs, making his work almost infinite. In Bootleg 3, for example, we find the short and apparently simple love song “Wallflower” of 1973, where we can hear two existential questions that remain in our minds:

Just like you I’m wondering what I’m doing here  
Just like you I’m wondering what is going on (2016, 272)

As a conclusion, we can reaffirm that Dylan takes to the edge the legacy left by Whitman and Dickinson—who, as we have seen, repeatedly linked their oeuvres to the *song*—with an experimental work, leading poetry back to its musical origins, breaking the boundaries of what we call modern literature, creating a new field where the *writing sings* connected with visual art and musical scores. We can say Dylan inaugurates the art of the post-globalization era, in which globalization can be reconverted following a positive way. His work uses the laws of the *mass monster* to subvert them: going against stereotypes and common expectations, his *song* sails in

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<sup>31</sup> In fact, the song was chosen as a symbol for the Seminar on “Water and Sanitation in EU External Aid,” in Expo Zaragoza 2008, organized against pollution in the environment and waters of our planet. Dylan envisioned the situation in that song, from 1961, with the line “Where the pellets of poison are flooding their waters” (2016, 60). He contributed to the event with an unexpected arrangement of the song: it seems lighter, turning the meaning even deeper. Another similar contrast happened when he played at the 2011 TV Grammy Show a rather strange country-folk version of “Maggie’s Farm,” one of the songs that made his way to the electronic quasi-rock sound of 1965.

different formats in the streaming flow of mass-media culture, surprisingly uniting in a *rhythmical map*, sophisticated enigmatic forms—or apparently simple ones—with deep insights. In a world dominated by global fast changes and the superfluous instant, Dylan paradoxically makes memorable, formally perfect lines stand: they are never still, spreading multiple ethical, existential, and philosophical meanings, or simply making artistic beauty shine, even working sometimes as anonymous illuminations, reaching any kind of audiences. Inspiring our life, culture, and society, they make a difference.

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