

Alessandro Carrera. On the Edge of the Abyss, with Dylan

Chiara Zamin (December 10, 2007)



Alessandro Carrera (born in Lodi, Italy) is a major authority on Bob Dylan. He has translated Dylan's songs and autobiography into Italian and in 2001 he published a passionate essay called *La voce di Bob Dylan* (Bob Dylan's Voice). Some of his more recent Dylan essays are collected in a book that accompanies the Italian DVD release of "I'm Not There," Todd Haynes' cinematic analysis of the Bob



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He is a poet, writer, and translator as well as a literary and music critic (in 1993 he was one of the recipients of the Montale Prize for poetry; in 1998 he won the Loria Prize for short fiction; and in 2006 won the Bertolucci Prize for literary criticism). Since 2001 he has been Director of Italian Studies at the University of Houston, Texas, where he is now Chair of the Department of Modern and Classical Language.

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We met Professor Carrera with the mixture of curiosity and wonderment that must be expected from someone who has heard of him and would like to know more about him. Here is what we found out.



Prof. Carrera, how did you develop such a strong relationship with America?

“To a certain extent, I owe it to Dylan. As a teenager in Milan, at the Liceo classico I was attending the teaching of English did not go beyond tenth grade, so I used to practice my English by memorizing Dylan songs. I could also play and sing them.”

Why were you so fascinated by Dylan’s songs?

“I have been living in the United States since 1987. However, even before I moved here, Dylan to me was the ‘voice’ that embodied the whole country, which I imagined constantly changing, always unpredictable, always so much different from the world I grew in and from what I had learned in school, because my training was not in American studies. In the 80’s I had the opportunity to move here with a teaching position sponsored by Italy’s Foreign Affairs Portfolio. My first assignment was Houston. After that, I went to Toronto and New York, where from 1995 to 2001 I taught at the Italian Department of the New York University and collaborated with the Italian Cultural Institute. Finally, I went back to Houston. In all these changes, Bob Dylan’s ‘voice’ has always followed me”.

How?

“For example, in 1988, in Houston, I was trying to give some poetic notes a coherent form. I stumbled upon an interview in which Dylan told a journalist: “Write only what is important”. As soon as I read that, I understood what I had to do. I reshaped my notes into a ‘family-history poem’ that I published in 1992 with the title *La ricerca della maturità* (The Quest for Ripeness).

You mean that Bob Dylan has been a sort of inspiration for you...

Yes, but of course he was not the only one. I grew up reading Montale and Ungaretti, Mallarmé and Rimbaud, T.S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas. But to me these poets are one and the same with the books they wrote. Sometimes, however, you need voices, and I mean physical voices guiding you, voices to which you lend, with your pronunciation, with your accent, the words your deepest conscience wants to tell you. Now, there was this voice telling me that when you write poetry you have nothing to lose, that is, you must be ready to lose everything. Dylan did it. He threw away entire periods of his art, he didn’t save anything; he has always been able to start all over again, without paying attention to his myth. Two lines of Pasternak come to my mind: “Being famous is not a good thing; it is not good to be excited about your manuscripts...”

You have translated Dylan’s lyrics into Italian; I suppose it wasn’t easy.

“Not easy indeed. I have translated several writers and poets, English as well as Americans, from Graham Greene to Allen Mandelbaum, but Dylan has been the most challenging of all. That is because, while the formers are writers, Dylan is not. He is an “oral” writer. He may write in metrics



and with rhymes, or in prose, but he never strays from the performing nature of his art. Dylan writes the way he sings. His language is full of idioms and common expressions slightly distorted so that they acquire a different meaning, quotations from the Bible or from folkloristic sources, which sometimes are rather obscure. That's why I had to complete my translation of his songs with a wide range of notes. Not only to illustrate the sources Dylan uses freely, but also to show that frequently the Italian translation cannot convey the multiple meanings of the original. In his prose there is also the aphoristic, surprising tone of many of his sentences, as when he writes that Roy Orbison sang like a crime professional or that Hank Williams's voice was as wonderful as the ship sirens he could hear from the shores of Lake Superior in the foggy nights".

In your book, "La voce di Bob Dylan," you write about a mysterious Italian reference in the fifth stanza of "Tangled Up in Blue" in which Dylan tells about a woman who opens a book of poetry written by an Italian poet from the 13th Century. How does Italian literature influence Dylan's work?

"There is for sure a Beatrice (more than one) in many of Dylan's songs. Dylan, however, is a poet of love's strife more than he is a poet of love's joy. Dylan's love, even when true and passionate, is never free from suspicion, the will to dominate, resentment, and violence. The poet he refers to in "Tangled Up in Blue" may be everybody and nobody. Somebody said it was Cavalcanti, somebody else said Dante. Actually, as I found out from one of Dylan's interviews, it is more likely to be Petrarca. However, Dylan doesn't really care about precision when it comes to dates and names. I cannot say that Italian literature has really influenced Dylan, because Dylan's inspiration doesn't come from literature as much as it comes from English, American, and African-American folk music in every form, from the ballads to country music, from blues to gospel. But I want to point out that in *Chronicles Volume One*, the first volume of his autobiography I translated into Italian and Feltrinelli published, Dylan mentions Dante, Machiavelli, Leopardi, and Fellini. I would say it is a remarkable choice of names, covering eight centuries of Italian culture."

The song "I'm Not There" is also the title of the film dedicated to his life. Did you like it?

"I've just seen it, and I liked it a lot. It has some weaknesses and some unsuccessful moments, but it is brilliant and courageous. Of course, the more you know about Dylan the more you can appreciate it. A lot of references may be a little obscure to the non-initiated, but Dylan's multifarious character and his ungraspable personality really manage to come across. The film makes also several references to Fellini and Godard, and it is a sort of meditation on what was like to be an artist in the 60's, and why we miss that scene now.

"Don't Think Twice, It's All Right," as many other Dylan songs, is about the love story between Dylan and Suze Rotolo, the Italian-American young woman he met at the Village, in Manhattan. Can you tell us something about her?

"Suze came from a family very committed to art and politics. Thanks to her, Dylan found out about Brecht and Rimbaud, and he went for the first time to the Moma and the Metropolitan Museum with her. She was well read, culturally independent, and Dylan acknowledged that in the *Chronicles* pages he dedicated to her. Susan Rotolo has taught at the Parsons School of Design, and she is well known in New York. I had the privilege to meet her some years ago, at the opening of one of her exhibitions of collages and drawings at the Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò, and I thought she was a beautiful person.



Have you ever met Dylan? How was it?

“I have never met him. If I met him, I would ask him if he still practices I-Ching, the Chinese divination system he once referred to as ‘fantastically true’.”

Dylan said once that it will take us 100 years to understand his work. What did he mean by that? Is he really a genius?

Dylan has composed about 400 songs, and I haven't included the unfinished or unpublished ones, which are many. If he completes his autobiographic trilogy the way he has started it, he will leave to posterity a piece of very original American prose. Last March I was invited as a keynote speaker at an international conference on Dylan that took place at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. It was the largest conference ever organized on Dylan. If I ever thought I was a little crazy myself, after I heard very serious professors from Harvard and Oxford comparing Dylan to the greatest names in literature I realized I was not such a desperate case after all. Maybe this dylanolatry will eventually fade away, which might be a good thing, but we have to understand that in our age genius is rare. A genius is not just a good artist, a serious intellectual who has something to say and knows how to say it. We have many artists like that. A genius is something else. A genius is someone who is able to make us feel we all are walking on the edge of the abyss, one who has outlined the very geography of that abyss, and yet he or she doesn't know whether at the end of the way we will be safe or if we are going to fall down together with our pied piper. This feeling of shared risk, which in turn creates a community of people who are willing to take risks, is something that very few artists have the power to communicate. You don't need to be a good singer or a good poet in order to achieve this dimension. You need something more, which Dylan possesses.”

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