

# Let It Rock

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One day in the late spring of 1983, toward the end of my junior year at the University of Pittsburgh, I stopped by during office hours to see my poetry teacher, Ed Ochester, up on the fifth floor of the Cathedral of Learning. I had just been asked to join a band that some guys I knew were putting together. It's possible, looking back, that I went to see Ed because I was excited, and wanted to share the news with a paternal figure who was likely to be more excited than my father about my imminent baptism in the church of rock 'n' roll, but I'm not sure. You didn't really need a reason to stop by and see Ed Ochester. He would always make time for you and your poems, even when your poems, like mine, were nothing special.

In class, Ed always used to start by reading to us, his voice roughened by a Queens accent and the unfiltered Pall Malls he smoked, his straight hair falling from his big square brow down across his big square glasses. With his Auden haircut and his flannel shirts and blue jeans, Ed looked the way that I thought a poet ought to look, at the time; blue-collar but intellectual, like an old-school folksinger, or a man who was sent by the union to organize lumberjacks.

Ed spoke with a mild stammer that disappeared when he read aloud to us. The poetry he favored tended to have a deceptively conversational tone: somebody just talking, yet saying things that no one would ever say, in language that—unlike conversation—was intended to catch you off-guard and surprise you. Ed read us plainspoken, sometimes ribald poems by people like Edward Field, David Ignatow, Linda Pastan, and Etheridge Knight, and then with an effortless zigzag he might take up some thorny and austere piece of Eliot or Stevens, and make it sound like Rodney Dangerfield in a pensive mood.

When he had finished reading us a poem he would open it up like a watch and show us the inner works, all the decisions the poet had made about line breaks and rhyme schemes (if any), vocabulary and diction, rhythm and tone. He emphasized accuracy and precision in language, the sadness of cliché, the need to find newness

in the way one wrote about the world, and, unconsciously I think, the supreme importance of exuberance, the kind of mordant exuberance he discovered to us when he read William Carlos Williams's famous number about the mooched plums, so sweet and so cold.

It was Ed who introduced me to the work of the most exuberant poet who ever lived, Frank O'Hara, giving us the one that begins

*How funny you are today New York  
like Ginger Rogers in Swingtime  
and St. Bridget's steeple leaning a little to the left*

The voice of O'Hara was the voice of a friend, a best friend. It was intimate and casual. And yet at the same time it was also refined, literary, erudite, capable of hopping like a sparrow down a sidewalk from densely imagistic to dishy and familiar in the space of a single line. Over that semester Ed read us a bunch of other O'Hara poems, among them "The Day Lady Died," "Lana Turner Has Collapsed!," and my favorite, "Autobiographia Literaria":

*When I was a child  
I played by myself in a  
corner of the schoolyard  
all alone.*

*I hated dolls and I  
hated games, animals were  
not friendly and birds  
flew away.*

*If anyone was looking  
for me I hid behind a  
tree and cried out "I am  
an orphan."*

*And here I am, the  
center of all beauty!  
writing these poems!  
Imagine!*

In the thirty years since I left Pittsburgh I've written exactly one indisputable poem. Now, if you plan to write only one poem every thirty years, you should probably make it a love poem; and indeed this one indisputable poem of mine, composed in 2003, is addressed to my beloved. She keeps it folded in the top drawer of her lingerie chest, I believe, with her good jewelry and our children's baby teeth. Over that span of decades, however, I've also written a bunch of what, until now, I've always considered to be my "other poems," poems so disputable that no one apart from me has ever considered them to be poems at all.

They're too long, for one thing; crazy long: some of them go on for hundreds and hundreds of pages. Each of their lines breaks arbitrarily, at the righthand margin of every page. For stanzas they have paragraphs, and for cantos, chapters, and while they revel freely in the rhythmic antics of anapests, iambs, trochees, and dactyls, they shun rhyme. They have plots, and characters, and everyone who looks at them seems to regard them as novels. A number of readers have wondered, at times publicly and not without exasperation, if the things I write really ought to feature quite so many similes, which is not a question that people tend to bother poets with. They point to my fondness for extended metaphors and shake their rueful heads. Nobody ever gives poets a hard time for their extended metaphors! On the contrary. John Donne's been cashing in on them for years now.

But if you build for a campanile you are no less an horologist than if you build for a dainty wrist. I tweeze each whirring word into its little niche in the clockworks, and the stroke of my hammer is a gentle tap, tap. To set the hands of plot into motion and to make the carillons of character chime, I wind the language of my five-hundred-page mainspring ever tighter, striving, the way the poet Ed Ochester taught me to strive, to combine conversation with surprise, dishiness with density of imagery, to bring my consciousness to bear on the world around me with the darting flash of Frank O'Hara, who noticed everything.

I know the books I've written may look, feel, and tip the scales like novels, but to me they have always felt like poems, because when I was writing them—and only when I was writing them—I, too, became the center of all beauty. When I was done for the day I would go back to hiding behind that same old schoolyard tree. But in trying to consider the impact that the work of Bob Dylan has had on my own writing—as only seems fitting since he has just been inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters—I've found myself thinking back on that afternoon in the Cathedral of Learning when I hung out in Ed's office for a while, smoking and talking on and on, with all the tedious vainglory for which Ed, God bless him, had such an apparently high tolerance, about the band I was going to be in, to be called Lunchmeat Island or Hex Wrench or the Bats or Dannon Yogurt

Steam-Shovel (in the end we would go with the Bats), writing song lyrics and “singing.” As I was leaving his office, Ed handed me a book, an advance copy of an anthology some textbook publisher had sent him for consideration, called *Rock Lyrics as Poetry*, or something like that. The idea that rock lyrics might (or might not) be a new, modern form of poetry was a meme of the Seventies that was still hanging around even as late as 1983, and even though nobody used the word “meme” back then; not in Pittsburgh, anyway.

I didn't quite know what to make of Ed's gift, which featured the lyrics to dozens of well-known songs by Bob Dylan, the Beatles, Joni Mitchell, and many other artists whose work was beloved by and important to me. In 1983 I loved rock 'n' roll music no less than I do now—the love of rock 'n' roll is probably the most durable and unvarying passion of my life. Many, many lyrics and bits of lyrics mattered a lot to me, then as now—like, for example:

*I remember  
How the darkness doubled  
I recall  
Lightning struck itself  
or*

*Then I woke up, Mom and Dad  
Are rolling on the couch  
Rollin' numbers rock and rollin'  
Got my KISS records out  
or*

*Beat on the brat  
With a baseball bat  
Oh yeah.*

It was interesting to learn, from the book Ed gave me, that the first line of Dylan's “Chimes of Freedom” went “far between sundown's finish an' midnight's broken toll” and not, as I had always heard it, “far between sundown's finish and midnight's broken toe.” But the question, the debate as to whether or not rock lyrics were poetry, did not really interest me. I had always assumed that they weren't, even though one day in class Ed had read to us, as if it were just another poem, the lyrics to “Suzanne” by Leonard Cohen, getting us to pay close attention, the way Cohen was paying close attention, to the Chinese provenance of the tea and oranges; and the fact that Suzanne's rags and feathers had been purchased, no

doubt on a tight budget, at the Salvation Army; and the beauty of the metaphor comparing Christ's view of the world atop his fatal cross to the lookout from the crow's nest of a ship.

But Leonard Cohen was a special case, a published, acclaimed young poet before he ever wrote his first song, and even Cohen had resorted, as Ed duly pointed out to us, to a cheesy pop cliché like “When she gets you on her wavelength.”

Anyway, it turned out not to be elitist snobbery that made me dubious of the thesis of *Rock Lyrics as Poetry*, or some clear sense of the boundary between a poem and a song lyric. As I read through the book Ed had given me I saw that rock lyrics could not really be poetry because when you took away the melody, the instrumentation, and above all the voice of the singer, a song lyric just kind of huddled there on a page looking plucked and forlorn, like Foghorn Leghorn after a brush with the Tasmanian Devil. I remembered how absurd the lyrics to the song “She's Leaving Home” had seemed, mimeographed on a sheet passed out in my eighth-grade English class by an earnest student teacher who was trying to help us find profundity in the song's social commentary. I had always felt a sense of exaltation at the end of that song when I listened to *Sgt. Pepper*, as ascending angelic voices triumphantly asserted “*She...is having... FUN ...*” But typed out on a ditto, those words had looked banal, trivial, even to a twelve-year-old who hoped to slip out the back door into the world someday and have fun, too, although not necessarily by meeting a man from the motor trade.

Now when I think about Ed Ochester and the book he gave me, back when he was trying to teach me how to be a poet, the question of whether or not Dylan's lyrics are poetry feels irrelevant. Dylan's lyrics are *writing*, and as writing they have influenced my own writing as much as if not more than the work of any poet apart from O'Hara and maybe Edgar Allan Poe. In fact, song lyrics in general have arguably mattered to and shaped me more, as a writer, than novels or short stories written by any but the most crucial of my literary heroes.

Ask me to name a few of those heroes, and I'm likely to come up with a random sample of literary crushes: Cheever, Welty, Pynchon, Fitzgerald. I might try to mix things up with a genre wild card like Chandler or Ursula Le Guin, or even Ian Fleming. Maybe reach across forms to a poet like O'Hara, or an essayist like S.J. Perelman. But I have never once told the deeper truth, and answered Dylan, or Rakim, or Mitchell, or Verlaine (Tom, not Paul).

And yet the words chosen, resorted to, or arrived at by the lyricists of rock, soul, and hip-hop constitute the body of writing that I know best, that I have studied most intensively, puzzled over longest. (I can't begin to calculate or tell you how many hours I had devoted, before Ed Ochester handed me that book, to trying to understand, to really feel, that midnight had toes, and that one of them—the big toe?—could be broken.) Lyrics are the only written works that I have ever reliably committed to memory, apart from a touch of Poe, a smidgen of Kipling's "If," bits and pieces of Shakespeare. I have memorized thousands of song lyrics. Sometimes at night, I lie in bed waiting to fall asleep with a radio in my head playing "Wild West End," by Dire Straits, or Rakim's "I Know You Got Soul," or "Hejira," by Joni Mitchell, or some random piece of pop craftsmanship from my childhood like "Brandy," by Looking Glass, and the remembering of every word of every verse is perfect, and completely involuntary. Song lyrics are part of my literary firmware, programmed permanently into my read-only memory.

Not just words: writing. Tropes and devices, rhetorical strategies, writerly techniques, entire structures of allusion and imagery: entire skeins of the synapses in my cerebral cortex by now are made up entirely of all this unforgettable literature. In the above tunes that I cited as playing on the radio inside midnight's broken brain, we find instances of a well-observed bit of characterization from Dire Straits's Mark Knopfler (an underrated lyricist), "*Now my conductress on the number 19/She was a honey/Pink toenails and hands all dirty with the money*"; two beautiful images, Mitchell's "*White flags of winter chimneys/Waving truce against the moon*" and Rakim's thrilling simile for the act of writing itself, "*I start to think/and then I sink/into the paper/like I was ink/when I'm writin/I'm trapped in between/the lines/I escape when I finish/the rhyme*"; and even, in the more workmanlike "Brandy," the efficient, patient setting of scene, the port on the western bay that serves a hundred ships a day, the girl in the harbor town who works laying whisky down, the care taken with these lines that open the extended, *Dubliners*-esque portrait of poor Brandy, that fine girl, with her love going endlessly to waste.

I don't think I could have learned more about the joy and sensuous appeal of alliteration, assonance, and consonance from any poem of Gerard Manley Hopkins than I did from Warren Zevon's wonderful line in "Werewolves of London": "*Little old lady got mutilated late last night*"; more about elliptical storytelling from Raymond Carver than from "Ode to Billy Joe" (Bobbie Gentry is another underrated writer); more about unreliable narrators from Poe or Nabokov than from Steely Dan (*passim*). And yet while songwriters are given the opportunity, often enough, to cite their literary influences, no one has ever thought to ask me

about the songwriters who have shaped my work, any more than I have asked myself, until now. I'm not sure why. Maybe it's the *sha-la-la-las* and the *wo-o-wo-os*. Maybe it's the fact that so many lyrics are nothing but clichés strung like costume jewelry beads on a string of backbeat. Maybe it's all the fault of poet manqués like Jim Morrison, the rock 'n' roll equivalent of the pretentious actor in *Annie Hall* who hopes to be torn apart by wild animals and asks Annie to touch his heart with her foot. You write enough lines like "There's a killer on the road/His brain is squirming like a toad" or "If they say I never loved you/You know they are a liar" and the stock of rock lyricists as influential literary figures is bound to go down.

*Of course* rock lyrics are not poetry. They don't need to be. What they may lack, on the page, in figurative ambition, in ruthless antipathy toward cliché, and above all in the combination of stance, diction, and point of view that we call a voice, is made up for by guitars, keyboards, drums, and by the living, infinitely expressive voice of a great singer like Bob Dylan, the ache and rasp of that all-too-human voice, now snarling, now weary, now sweet, now brokenhearted.

I wonder if, in handing me that book, Ed Ochester hoped to get me to see that even if the finest lyrics lacked something, on the page, it was not through insufficient craft or "poeticalness" but by their very nature, by design, the way a great play on the page lacks actors, scenery, lights, and costumes and yet remains, powerfully and indispensably, a work of literature. Maybe Ed gave me *Rock Lyrics as Poetry* because he wanted me to think about everything my poetry needed to do to make up for its grievous lack of Gibson guitars, Marshall amps, Slingerland drums, of a voice as full of fire and longing and wit as Bob Dylan's, or as Frank O'Hara's.

When the term ended I moved on from Ed Ochester's tutelage, and left the Bats behind, having contributed very little to the ensemble or to the greater glory of rock. For many years after that I was in and out of fiction workshops, writing short stories and first chapters of abortive novels, and never looking back except insofar as I continued to believe that my chapters were cantos, and my paragraphs stanzas, and my sentences lines of free verse that broke where they ran out of space at the right side of the page. Little by little, I began to grope my way toward a style that attempted to mingle the down-to-earth with the high-flown, or rather to fit everyday speech with antigravity discs and build elegant rhetorical flying machines out of common household objects. And I thought of the style that resulted, and that ever since has served, with steady adjustments and modifications, to let me write my books, as a poetic style.

Now it strikes me that all these years I may have had it wrong, that the lesson that I learned in Ed Ochester's class ought not to have been to think of my prose as poetry. Maybe the stories that fiction writers tell, their characters and settings, are only the lyrics to a song the writer is called upon to sing and play. Those characters and stories must be founded in an eye for people and the world as keen as that of the Kinks' Ray Davies, with a grasp of structure as careful as Elvis Costello's, according to a vision of life as dark as Tom Waits's, as luminous as Kate Bush's, as loopily grand as the vision of the Flaming Lips' Wayne Coyne. But the stories and characters won't come alive, won't catch the reader up, won't lift free of the page that imprisons them, until you plug your nouns into the stacks of your adjectives, settle into the pocket behind the drum kit of your verbs, throw back your head, open your mouth, and let it rock.