

The Death and Resurrection of the Biopic

BOB DYLAN, ROBBIE WILLIAMS, AND DIVINE INSPIRATION

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We must be at a high watermark for biopics about musicians these days with the industry pumping out more and more hagiographic accounts of not only the dead, but also, the living. Recently, I watched the new Bob Dylan (*A Complete Unknown*) and Robbie Williams (*Better Man*) biopics in the same week. This pairing proved to be one of the more affective experiences in cinema-going I have ever experienced. Upon leaving the Dylan film, never have I felt so lost and confused about the meaning and practice of art, while a week later these feelings were completely inverted as *Better Man* caused me (some how) to see myself in an anthropomorphic, computer generated chimpanzee.

The problem with biopics is that they can never depict our great artists in the actual *work* of art. Neither the Dylan nor the Williams biopics accomplish this. It is something made impossible by the genre itself. To write a song is to engage the strange and spiritual process of bringing something into existence. By contrast, a film about an artist's life can only unveil to the audience what they already know. In the process, biopics often become less about a human being than about some god among men.

I, for one, can only make art as a human being, and if (as I gather from *A Complete Unknown*), to be an artist is to be more than human, then I better quit now. Or perhaps, to be human (as *Better Man* tells me) means to be always already inspired. We know that art is divine. Now does this mean the artist is a god, or inspired by one?

A Complete Unknown is in so many ways a wonderful film—an exquisite tribute to a great songwriter and a truly American moment of cultural rupture and revelation. The world of the film is alive and breathing. The performances have an immediacy



that is almost without contrivance. But while it is all that, it is never about art making. I suggest that it's not even really about an artist. The film presents a Dylan making and destroying worlds in his image. This Dylan never writes a song, he plucks them into being. Every scrap of paper and ditty on the guitar are shrouded in the sacred aura of what we know they *will* mean—with what they do mean to us now. And what the Timothée-Dylan brings forth is never simply a song, it is only ever *THAT* song (the song which is almost impossible to believe once didn't exist since it has already made us who we are). He buys *THAT* whistle, plays *THAT* guitar, performs *THAT* concert, and poses for *THAT* photo. And none of these things really “happen” in the film. They are, as the moments enshrined in our cultural eternity, simply invoked.

I spoke with a friend who is also an artist who put into words for me what has been so puzzling about the Dylan film. “After watching it”, he said, “I felt deflated. Oh man, I thought, he’s so gifted. But it wasn’t inspiring. And what was I thinking? I was comparing myself to Bob Dylan, or at least,” my friend corrected himself, “to the character in the movie.” Those who can relate to the Timothée-Dylan are probably already unblocked, inspired artists at home in their practices and at one with their work. But what if you are a fledgling aspirant tenderly taking your first nervous steps forward and

daring to trust the process? “After I watched the film,” my friend continued, “I thought, what’s the point?”

That feeling of disorientation, thankfully, was not the end of the story for my friend. Soon after, he returned to one of his core creative practices: “I started writing morning pages again, and all of a sudden these ideas start to come. Little bits of inspiration.” Morning pages are the practice made famous by Julia Cameron who encourages blocked artists to start by just writing



A circa 3rd-c. mosaic of Virgil from modern day Tunisia. On his left and right are the muses Cleo and Melpomene. If you ask me, they look here more to me like his office admin than the divine source of his poetry.

three pages of nothing each morning. “It’s the most banal, boring crap,” my friend said. “I write whatever, and it turns into ideas coming up from God—that’s how I see it. I’m not making something up, I’m putting something down.” My friend, in other words, got a taste of what most biopics are missing: divine inspiration.



The Timothée-Dylan about to “go electric”.

Maybe practices like morning pages are a way to invoke the muse? That the artist who wishes to create something must first petition the god is something the Archaic Greek poets knew well. Hesiod, for example, must begin his *Theogony* with a hymn to the muses over a hundred lines long before he can reveal the mystery that is the generations of the gods. Homer’s *Illiad* likewise begins with the request that the muse “sing in me”. The poem is not the poet’s words at all. The poet is the instrument.

Plato comments on this tradition in his dialogue, *Ion*, which sees Socrates speaking to a professional performer of Homer’s poetry. The two are trying to understand the meaning of the poet’s knowledge. The rhapsode believes Homer to be the wisest of all men, a fact demonstrated by the beauty of his poetry which seems to contain and disclose all things. But prodded by Socrates, he finally admits that in fact, as amazing as the poems are, it would seem that the poet knows nothing at all about what he speaks. The poet is an expert in words, not in warfare, law, politics, theology, or horses. After this inversion, Socrates brings the discussion to a profound conclusion: the poet discloses truth because the poet is inspired by the god. And likewise, those who recite Homer’s poems are inspired by the poet, and their audiences too, captured by the poem’s beauty are inspired in turn. The poem, then, is like a divine lodestone, drawing reality up towards the god which is the source and end of the work. To make art, to perform art, and to enjoy art—these practices are all infused by the divine.

If I’m right and the tendency in our own cultural moment is to deify the artist rather than recognize divine source of their inspiration, we are less like the Greeks, and much

more like the Romans. There emerged in the Roman Empire a tendency for poets to claim divinity and immortality for themselves. In contrast to Homer’s petition that the god “sing in me”, Virgil begins his epic with the first-person pronouncement: “I sing.” And when the poem’s hero Aeneas performs his katabasis and is invited to see the destiny

of Rome from the divine perspective of the underworld (which is really just the retro-spective vision of the poet’s present!), lo and behold, there is Virgil himself at the cusp of the parade of the eternal city. Compared to the piety of Homer and Hesiod, this poetic self-possession feels almost perverse. It’s even more grotesque in Ovid who, at the end of the *Metamorphosis*, after paying homage to the divine Caesars, deifies himself. His poem, he claims, has made him immortal, and this is a work which “neither the wrath of Jove, nor fire, nor sword, nor consuming time will be able to destroy.” The poet has not even made himself a god among gods, but thanks to the universality of Rome, his immortality calls even the *fatum* of Jove into question.



“It’s because Animals are more relatable than human beings” —Amy Bird

According to Dante, the problem with these Roman poets is that they did not dare to hope enough. Their poetry, however divine, is sealed off in the worlds of empire and the self. Their vision, to put it in another

way, dared not peer far enough into the same Mystery that inspired their art. In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante locates them, together with his beloved Virgil, in Limbo. In this place, they are not condemned to suffer but to sigh for want of something *more*. It’s as if their punishment is to get exactly what they wanted: an immortality sealed off in themselves.

Our popular culture seems to find itself in a moment analogous to that of the Roman poets. We live in our own limbo. In my weak moments, I live to be entertained and find myself believing that to entertain would be to really live. Mass media is a religion. How else could we comprehend the greatness of Dylan’s art other than as what bedecks the human-made heaven of our own Culture. Do we have any other sphere of meaning to locate great art? Our poets create our universe and we worship them because in this world, it is they who have given us ourselves. It is abundantly clear, I think, that we believe art comes from the god. The real question is, “Who is this god?”

The biopic about the U.K. pop star, Robbie Williams, *Better Man* is another film about a living figure. But this film does not see Williams played by a younger, better looking (better singing) actor in a prosthetic nose. No, *Better Man*’s central conceit is far more strange: Robbie Williams is represented entirely by a computer-generated chimpanzee. The presence of a CGI animal posturing as a human amongst the otherwise actually human cast is never once acknowledged in the film. And while this sleight of hand is maybe the only thing that truly distinguishes the film from any other artist’s biopic, the result, for me, is sublime.

In an advertisement for the film, the voice of Chimp-Robbie addresses the viewer, “I know what you’re thinking: ‘What’s with the monkey?’”—a question, I want to reiterate, the film never openly asks itself— and he continues “I’ve always felt less evolved than other people.” Ostensibly, this is the

meaning of “the monkey”: the film makes external the struggles that have defined Robbie Williams’ inner life. Chimp-Robbie has always felt less than, and yet capable of so much more. As Chimp-Robbie say



in the film, “I’m stunted. I’m unevolved.” I think, though, that this is only one layer. In a promotional interview, the director, Michael Gracey, says (and I’m paraphrasing), “Whatever you think the film is about, it’s not.” In an attempt to bring all of these reflections to a conclusion, I’m going to choose to use this probably out of context quote to license a different claim about what the film has to say about art and inspiration.

In *Better Man*’s opening scenes, Chimp-Robbie remembers his early years with a charismatic but neglectful father. Robbie’s dad is in love with the great entertainers of a by-gone age, especially Frank Sinatra. “They were gods to him”, Robbie remembers. And Robbie’s dad believes this. Great artists and entertainers are not really human. They are different. “You’re either born with it,” he says, “or you’re a nobody.” At the close of Act 1, in an attempt to imitate the gods (who are bound by no flesh), Robbie’s dad abandons his family to follow his dreams.

At the same time, Robbie’s nanny is there to speak the truth of the film. “You’re enough,” she tells the little boy-chimp: “There’s no such thing as a nobody”—there are only human beings. Except Chimp-Robbie isn’t a human, is he? The story of rise, fall, and recovery that unfolds is familiar, but there is something about witnessing this narrative trope experienced by an ape that transforms its meaning. Maybe, as my wife Amy pointed out, it’s because animals are ultimately more relatable than celebrities. And maybe it’s because Chimp-Robbie is, in the end, not merely an animal at all: he is an animal inspired with human nature. This is where the film, for me, becomes a deeply profound commentary on the life of the artist (*id est*, the life of the human being).

At the end of the film, Chimp-Robbie has regained his dignity, recovered from drug addiction, and worked to restore his human relationships (those things, again, that distinguish us from the gods). In the reenactment of the beloved performance

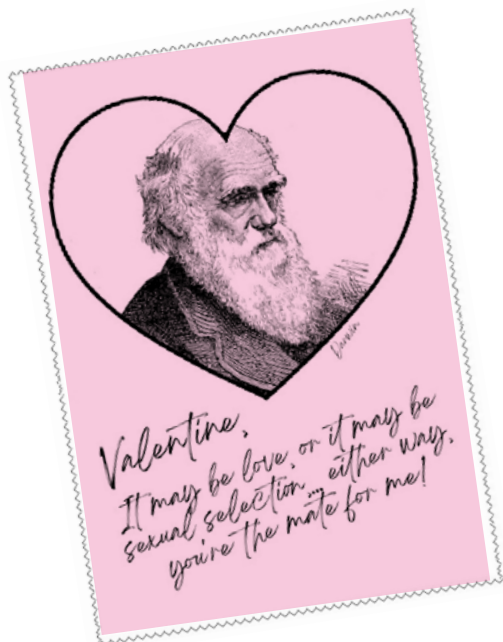


Matthew Vanderkwaak, Robert Vanderkwaak, and Amy Bird

at Royal Albert Hall in 2001, Chimp-Robbie invites his father to the stage to join him in the closing number, “My Way”, by Frank Sinatra. At the end of the song, Chimp-Robbie’s father whispers to him, “Now look at you. You’re one of the gods.” And somehow, this time, it rings true.

The Chimp-man *has* been transformed, but not into a god, into a human being, and in this we see an image of the human who is also inspired, but by what is truly divine. Art makes present something that transcends what is available within the horizon of our present cultural moment. We understand this intuitively, and so we make our great artists into pseudo-divinities. But in the end, the work of art *does* divinize human nature, transforming it after the image of the higher life from which art springs. *Better Man*, for me, makes this anthropological claim: we are who we are when we are drawn up by something greater than ourselves. As the first Robbie Williams’ song featured in the film sings, “I’ve got so much life running through my veins going to waste.” What happens when that human longing turns to the Mystic Spring which longs itself to be made known in myriad ways upon us, its instruments? 🐼

Reprinted from Matthew Joel Vanderkwaak on Substack (Check it out!)



Dance of the Maenads (transformation of a man into an olive tree), Andries Cornelius Lens, 1765.