

THE DYLANISTA

I know something is happening, but, honestly, I don't know what it is. This is quite a moment, a climacteric in Dylan studies. Thanks in large measure to the imprimatur of the Nobel Prize, the academic institutionalization of Bob Dylan has begun in earnest. A transition is underway from the unshored fragments of the old tribalism toward—perhaps—the dream of a new cohesion. After twenty centuries of stony sleep, a Bob Dylan bureaucracy seems to be gathering force. The carpet is moving. Can a Bob Dylan Society, with a President and elected officers, be far off?

Let's just concentrate on Tulsa, Oklahoma, the New Bethlehem of Dylan studies. Established in 2016, and still growing, The Bob Dylan Archive is housed at the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa. The Archive librarians are cataloguing thousands of items, including song manuscripts, personal notebooks, recordings, photographs, and films. Scholars (who must make appointments in advance and justify their interest in written applications) are lining up to use the reading room. Has a new anthropological era dawned? So it would seem. All the hunter-gatherers who have tracked and chased down Dylan material across the savanna for all these past years can now settle down to a bottomless trove collected in a single place. But caveat emptor. The Presidential Library aspect of the The Bob Dylan Archive gives the misleading impression of completeness. And I'm not referring to *completism*, that abhorred disease, merely to a delimitation, and if I can quote Spinoza without seeming too pedantic, *Omnis determinatio est negatio* ("every definition is also an exclusion"). There's no question the Archive's collation will be an indispensable resource, but I hope it never becomes the exclusive definition of Dylan studies. May we stay forever (a bit) Neolithic.

Back to Tulsa. The Tulsa University Institute for Bob Dylan Studies, according to their website, "is one component of a three-part collaboration that includes The Bob Dylan Archive at the Helmerich Center for American Research and the George Kaiser Family Foundation." The Kaiser Family Foundation, we are told, is

“in the process of designing and building the Bob Dylan Center, which will be located in downtown Tulsa’s vibrant Arts District. It will be the outward-facing dimension of this partnership.” Bristling with bureaucratic ambition, and with deep pockets to boot, this tripartite collaboration seems tantamount to a Bob Dylan hegemony *in statu nascendi*.

Am I the only one amused by the words “institute” and “Bob Dylan” in the same title? Or should I wipe the smile off my face? Maybe I’m missing the warning signals, a falconer out of earshot of his falcon. Maybe we’re all witnessing a rough beast shifting across the Oklahoma hills to be born.

As the poet says, “Time will tell who has fell and who’s been left behind.” This new journal, the *Dylan Review*, should take that lyric to heart—not as a creed but as an aspiration. We should let the others go their way while we go ours, determined neither to be left behind nor to move in tandem with the academic bureaucratization.

The *Dylan Review* is only the most recent of many magazines and journals on Bob Dylan. We honor those who came before and recognize our debt. Yet things have changed and are changing. Our scholarly mission grows from the organized academic interest in Dylan that has spread during the last few years. International, well-funded Dylan conferences pop up regularly in Europe—in Berlin and Lisbon, for instance—and, like the TU Institute for Bob Dylan Studies’ “The World of Bob Dylan Symposium,” these gatherings have attracted hundreds of participants. Scholarly papers and thematic sessions have multiplied exponentially, demonstrating all the nuanced criticism and theoretical analysis expected of a large-scale 21st-century academic meeting. And this efflorescence of sophisticated criticism, this mania for organizational parity between Dylan and other major figures of the curriculum, has profited a host of neglected disciplines, not least musicology, ethics, versification, and even classics. Apropos of the last, however, let’s not abandon what used to be called connoisseurship (or less pretty names) and find ourselves, like Aeneas, sailing away from Carthage with

puzzlement. As you probably remember, Aeneas and his crew looked back at the great fire on the shore and wondered what could kindle such a light. The reason was hidden from them—*quae tantum accenderit igna causa latet* (*Aeneid* 5.4-5)—but what they were seeing were the flames of Queen Dido's pyre.

This may be a climacteric in Dylan studies, but it is also a departure. We don't want to look back from where we are only to realize we've left a burning body in our wake. Because something is happening *and* something is missing too—the *frisson* we used to feel adding Dylan to the conventional syllabus, the pride of resistance and loyal nonconformity, along with that sense of being partisans dropped behind the lines. We seem to have won the war after losing (almost) every battle.

F. Scott Fitzgerald once quipped, "To the spoils goes the victor." The resonance of this remark echoes down the corridors of the academy as Dylan studies, freshly legitimized, claims its laurel crown. The controversy over the Nobel has melted back into the night, replaced by seminars on Dylan on campuses everywhere. We now list our Dylan courses with the secret glee of staunch haruspices who saw the future laureate in the entrails—and conspicuously without attracting supercilious glances from colleagues.

But is it naïve to ask if Bob Dylan will survive the victory? Shakespeare didn't, nor did Dante, which is why we have Shakespeareans and Dantista(s) to recover what we can of their achievements. This is not to compare great things to small nor to beg the question of Dylan's place in literary (and lyrical) history. But the act of recovery is always already a death certificate. Can Dylan's lyrical charisma—the voice and timbre and timing that make him what he is—survive its systematic study and routinization? Performance and improvisation are of the moment, spontaneous experiences of shared intimacy. Can a song lift out of an archive?

Maybe this is a crossroads. Part of me hopes it isn't, because you never know who, with tract oblique, might arrive at the crossroads offering too much knowledge.

Part of me, on the other hand, hopes this truly is a crossroads. Not a place of pacts or glozing promises, however, and not the diminished site of future quibbles. Instead, part of me hopes for a crossroads of opportunity and exchange, a crossroads of scholarly disciplines and coeval interpretative languages—a marketplace where nothing is sold, nothing bought, and everything is delivered. But that isn't up to me.

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