

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Bob Dylan, and where are we now with poetry?

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, January 11th, 2017

If you write poetry, no doubt you've found yourself facing the nagging question: *who cares?* In a vast world of non-stop media, infotainment, pressing political issues, social media, viral content, streaming TV/music, torrents, and hyper-relevant books you need to read immediately, your poetry can seem trivial at best. Is anyone reading? If they are, do they take time to understand?

Particularly for poets not in the academic sphere, it's an uphill battle. The questions keep on coming. How do you determine the relevance of your poems beyond your family and friends, who are inherently biased? Even online, where there are a lot of diverse publishing options, how do you know you're not just catering to a tiny niche, destined to remain an obscure blip on the radar? How do you know your poems matter?

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The triumph(?) of Dylan



Bob Dylan / © Kyle Legates

In this atmosphere of uncertainty surrounding poetry—myriad voices, millions of amazing poets, LGBTQ poets, slam poets, blogging poets, academic poets, conceptual poets, confessional poets, everyday poets who write for nothing but the pleasure of the art—stands one man: Bob Dylan.

We knew Dylan is a poet putting his verse to music. But Dylan's Nobel Prize for Literature gave him a sudden jolt of official acclaim. I say *gave* because [responses to his win](#) have made the prize seem less like a jolt of acclaim and more like a shroud colored by ambivalence. While popular writers like Stephen King and Billy Collins are more than happy to declare Dylan worthy of the Nobel, writers such as Jodi Picoult and novelist Rabih Alameddine aren't.

English novelist Will Self called on Dylan to refuse the prize, like philosopher [Jean-Paul Sartre](#) did in 1964. In a statement to [The Guardian](#), Self said, "My only caveat about the award is that it cheapens Dylan to be associated at all with a prize founded on an explosives and armaments fortune." He's talking about the fact that Alfred Nobel was the owner of an armaments manufacturing company. Furthermore, Dylan himself has kept the award at a distance, at first appearing to snub the Nobel committee, then agreeing to [provide a speech](#)...but not to read it himself.

Much like the multi-faceted, enigmatic, kaleidoscopic Dylan, the Dylan Nobel Prize isn't easy to categorize.

By this, I mean we want to say an artist either deserves a prize or doesn't, and we want to put the prize itself into the category of a good prize, one we'd want to win, or one we don't care to consider. We want to say that the Nobel means Dylan's work matters as literature and as poetry. But do a prize or some sort of official acclaim make something matter? No, these words of poetry we're writing matter all along, for a very different reason, and it has nothing to do with the advancement of ourselves as prize-winners or officially legitimate poets.

The triumph(!) of community

I live in Boise, Idaho. In my hometown, in a state where a largely rural and Republican population tends to look askance at poetry, local poets and organizers are working hard at establishing a community.

One example is the [Death Rattle Writers Festival](#). It's not just a festival, it's a nonprofit organization "dedicated to bringing the Northwest and Treasure Valley together in a joyous celebration of the literary arts in Idaho." Death Rattle emphasizes the importance of artistic expression, the community and the individual: "We believe that the Death Rattle Writers Festival represents a reverberation of raw speech and artistic opportunity in Idaho; lending voice to those in our community who are given little chance to speak."

As a model of poetic relevance, the voices of Death Rattle are embodied each year. These poets don't exist in a vacuum of singular achievement. But they could. In 2014, I heard readings from Idaho's Poet Laureate, Diane Raptosh; from award-winning author [Alan Heathcock](#); from Idaho's Writer-in-Residence, [Christian Winn](#). In 2015, I heard Martin Corless-Smith, the director of Boise State University's MFA program, and in 2016 I heard the amazing Quenton Baker, a Pushcart Prize nominee and chronicler of what it is to be black in America.

Granted, these people aren't Nobel Prize winners. But they're luminaries reading alongside artists no one has ever heard of. When everyone comes together to celebrate art and to make their voices heard, the community triumphs. Everyone is equal. When you have a room full of cheering, laughing, thinking, loving people, all focusing on the artist's work, and on the collective, there's no ambivalence about value whatsoever.

Where we are now

The [words of the Swedish Academy's Permanent Secretary, Sara Danius](#), say a lot: "[Dylan's] a very interesting traditionalist in a highly original way. Not just the written one but also the oral one, not just high literature but also low literature." Dylan's work is a democratic standard-bearer of poetry. We're now at the place where the high-brow and low-brow of poetry meet, where the entire community has a voice. Dylan's lyrics often speak for the down-and-out people, for the [Moonshiner](#), the slave ([Maggie's Farm](#)), the barmaid ([The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll](#)). They tell stories in the oral tradition, but also include surrealist imagery like the work of Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Blake.

In other words, we're in a great place for poetry right now. Imagine my surprise when, on a recent search for all things poetry, I found a surprisingly helpful [collection of poetry resources](#) on a site dedicated to "small business know-how". Even business folk need poetry. I was extremely

surprised at these words from the collection's insightful introduction: "The oldest poems are records of cultural information of their era. With the development of literacy, poetry became much more personal and more lyrical. Today's most famous poets are singer-songwriters and rappers."

Dylan's singer-songwriter poems are records of cultural information—they're communal. They are also personal, dealing directly with what Dylan sees before him everyday, with his relationships ([Lay, Lady, Lay](#)) and beliefs ([Death Is Not the End](#)).

To be clear, we're in a time where we need to fight for and [support diverse culture](#). We need to support the poetry that comes from diversity, from marginalized communities, from the oppressed and those who speak for them. And we need to push for the recognition that literature matters by emphasizing the [teaching of poetry in our nation's schools](#).

The coming years could be a dangerous time for poetry. If America takes on values against democracy, truth, and diversity, freedom of artistic expression may suffer. You and I don't want that to happen. As Dylan said, "The times they are a-changin'." It's up to us change them for the better.

Featured image © Death Rattle Writers Festival

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