

Book Reviews

Bob Dylan's Poetics: How the Songs Work

By Timothy Hampton
(Zone Books, 978-1-942130-15-4, \$22.05)

Bob Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016. The release of serious writing on Dylan's work predated that stellar honor by some years, arguably beginning with Christopher Rick's *Dylan's Visions of Sin* and Michael Gray's *The Art of Bob Dylan: Song and Dance Man*, among other works of value. But Professor of Comparative Literature and French at UC Berkeley Timothy Hampton's volume, in this reviewer's reading experience, stands apart and, to date, alone.

In some respects, the volume is deceptive; it reads rather easily, but the content is weighty and substantive; and more importantly, it is well targeted.

For it is in the intersection of lyric and music – in the details of structure – that Dylan's art generates new types of knowledge. Lyric poetry, like much song, often seems to live outside of history and the flow of social conversations.

This quote is another marker of value in this worthwhile volume. It is interesting to consider the way in which composition (whether it be lyrical or literary) advances knowledge by juxtaposing images and presumptions of the past in new ways that, when successfully accomplished, push knowledge into new realms of awareness. Knowledge itself is transformed and altered, revitalized and freshened. This stands as yet one more benefit of Hampton's marvelous book.

However, while Hampton's thesis focuses on how Bob Dylan has integrated his accomplished abilities in music, lyric and observation, his book transcends his subject. Hampton uses Dylan's brilliant, creative ability to both articulate and imply larger reaches of possibility, sometimes via the examples of other creative influences that have enabled Dylan to talk more broadly than just the focus of Hampton's thesis.

...Dylan's songs derive their extraordinary vitality from the interplay of dif-



ferent registers and forms of utterance... These include everything from citations of the classics to invented dialects of American speech... listening deeply to Dylan's "influences" or unearthing "sources" than remaining open to the interplay of forms, conventions, and expressions within each song...

A remarkable book, and more than worthwhile to those interested in song, lyricism, literature and creative invention (not a redundant linkage of words). One need not be a Bob Dylan "fan," even, to enjoy this book; in fact, many fans may find themselves in territory beyond the familiar and perhaps even lose interest. But for those interested in how masterful creativity transcends and refreshes our sense of reality and "truth," this book is worth more than one reading.

— Ned Haggard

Losing Earth

By Nathaniel Rich
(MCD/FSG, 978-0-374191-33-7, \$16.51)

1988 was a hot year. Historically hot. It was also, incidentally, a year of widespread political unrest. "Political unrest" is term that has a way of nullifying itself—a platitude uttered so often that it has practically rendered itself banal. 1988, however, was no joke. It was cauldron of political unrest, a boiling ferment of an election year as hot and contentious as anything before or since. (Ok, maybe not since.) It was the year of Willie Horton and Michael Dukakis in a tank; the year Senator Lloyd Bentsen told Dan

Quayle the most obvious of all political observations, that he was, indeed, "no Jack Kennedy." It was the year immediately after Iran Contra, with the political miasma from that disaster still hanging over the country like a fog. It was also the year where we witnessed the last vestiges of the USSR and apartheid in South Africa, two toxic political systems dying on the vines of modernity. And, while all this was happening, it was the year Nebraska suffered its worst drought since the Dust Bowl, Yellowstone National Park lost almost a million acres of land, the mosquito population in New York quadrupled (as the murder rate reached record highs), and long stretches of the Mississippi River flowed at less than one-fifth its normal capacity.

In Nathaniel Rich's new book, *Losing Earth*, 1988 looms large, particularly that long hot summer. Although not entirely apparent at the time, it was a year that would come to symbolize a sort of breaking point in the early stages of the climate debate. And even though as a culture we had already seen the Chareny report, the Keeling Curve, the Montreal Protocol, and the Clean Air Act, not to mention countless Energy Department and National Research Council reports, the climate debate in 1988 still felt, to many, like it was in its inchoate phase.

Initially a feature article written for the *New York Times Magazine*, *Losing Earth* does not begin in 1988, nor does it inordinately reside there. In fact it ends there, dejected because a decade of incremental progress (which had led to what seemed like worthwhile cultural and political shifts, like Toronto's *World Conference on the Changing Atmosphere*, known by some that year as the "Woodstock of climate change") amounted to nothing more than a bunch of fruitless seminars and bureaucratic equivocations. Eventually, after all the false starts and unheeded reports, all the bureaucratise and miscommunication, the book ends like an Alan J. Pakula film from the '70s, only one where the heroes lose; "All the President's Men" this is not.

Like most paranoid political films of the '70s, midway through *Losing Earth* a political augur emerges, someone familiar with Washington who can foreshadow what lies ahead. His name is Michael Glantz, a scientist

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