

Review Article

Sarah Hillenbrand Varela*

Revisiting Bob Dylan's *Tarantula* in a Rough and Rowdy Time

For over half a century, Bob Dylan has held what Ben Sisario of the *New York Times* calls “an almost mythic status as the bard of the current age.” Yet one can argue that the “current age” might well be every age. Since his first recordings sixty years ago, audiences have looked to Dylan as an icon of justice, civil rights, and protest, a sometimes reluctant guide and a voice widely understood to be one of reason and progress. Now, as devastating obstacles wreak havoc worldwide, response to Dylan's recent work suggests it is may be more significant than ever.

Were there doubt as to his cultural cachet, the purchase by Universal Publishing of Dylan's complete catalog for a staggering sum of over 300 million dollars immediately dispels it (NPR). Sisario observes that the “cultural and economic value of Dylan's songwriting corpus have both grown exponentially” due to his enduring popularity and ongoing commitment to civil issues. The price tag for publishing rights to Dylan's music far surpasses that paid for the catalog of any artist to date, more evidence that work frequently composed in response to specific events is nonetheless both priceless and timeless.

* Dr. Sarah Hillenbrand Varela is Assistant Professor of German at Longwood University in Virginia. Her research interests include cultural and literary animal studies, translation, pop culture, European scientific and ethical history, and the German detective narrative. She has published the sympathetic magical transference of punitive animality in the early modern *Volksbuch*, emotional and psychological human-animal bonds in German literature, and representations of companion animals in late nineteenth-century European novels of adultery.

The sale of his work notwithstanding, Dylan is in the spotlight again for a more familiar reason. The unexpected release of the seventeen-minute “Murder Most Foul” in March 2020 catapulted him back into the conversation about a world in crisis. Dylan’s songwriting is not, however, his only impact in a given moment. He is a prolific artist of other genres, including non-biographical prose.¹ This article argues that beyond Dylan’s music lies work of equal impact, including the relatively obscure *Tarantula*. Panned almost universally since its publication in 1971, *Tarantula* is both unlike and analogous to Dylan’s musical releases. Written when he was just twenty-three, *Tarantula* is in some eyes mere failed experimental juvenilia. Similarities between the book and Dylan’s recent studio album, however, bring the latter’s aims into sharp relief, marking *Tarantula* as worth retrieving from Dylan’s more esoteric and often forgotten artistic endeavors.

As with much of Dylan’s oeuvre, the 2020 album *Rough and Rowdy Ways* reflects on pivotal, history-changing moments and their consequences for humanity. Critics understand Dylan’s timing—particularly of the album’s first single—as intentional, a foray into what Craig Jenkins calls a “political climate increasingly identical to the tumult at the end of the 1960s” during which Dylan first made his mark. Bob Boilen of National Public Radio, a collaborator of Dylan’s, also recognizes “something eerie about [the album] coming out at this precise moment” of global unrest and social upheaval. The emergence of the greatest threat to public health in a century; deeply entrenched systemic racism, prejudice, and the rise of divisive populism worldwide; the existential threat of environmental destruction; and profound political and ideological schisms in nations around the globe all embody challenges of the sort to which Dylan so often responds.

Dylan himself affirms *Rough and Rowdy Ways* (hereafter, *R&RW*) as a politically participatory act, calling it an admonition to “stay safe” and “stay observant” in a chaotic world.²

Rolling Stone's Simon Vozick-Levinson proclaims that *R&RW* offers the “song we need right now,” proof that “music can comfort us in times of national trauma.” As audiences embrace him as a unifying force, Dylan appears to recognize his place in this moment as well. In a rare recent interview, Douglas Brinkley of Rice University observed that Dylan was “clearly shaken by the horror that had occurred” in his native Minnesota with the murder of George Floyd (2-3). This reaction indicates that both Dylan and his audience bring personal history and sensibility to his work. In the same vein, individual investment in and connection with Dylan’s words prove crucial to understanding *Tarantula*.

The relationship between *Tarantula* and *R&RW* shows that unfortunately, the times do not always change. Though fifty years separate them, both confront matters like the Vietnam War, social and economic inequality, civic unrest, and racial tensions during the 1960s. As the earlier composition, *Tarantula* reads almost as an anticipation of times to come. Put another way, *Tarantula*, a book written then and about then, speaks all too sharply now, as history threatens to repeat itself.

This article challenges the critical assertion that much of *R&RW* is “unlike anything Dylan has ever released,” an assessment due largely to the sheer length and wandering imagery of “Murder Most Foul” (Slate). If taken alongside *Tarantula*, the album becomes much more familiar. Both speak to their respective social and political climates through topics ranging from the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and history-altering events to pop culture, beloved public figures, and national icons. “Murder Most Foul” consequently serves as an argument for reading *Tarantula*. Through a song written about “then” from the space of “now,” Dylan demonstrates the value of looking back to move forward. In drawing on the fluidity of time and

experience to explore historic moments and existential challenges, *Tarantula* is an early accomplishment of the goals toward which Dylan's music habitually strives.

A Baffling Web: Critical Response to *Tarantula*

Tarantula does not number among Dylan's best-known works. Audiences beyond his most deeply committed fan base have often never heard of it. As with *R&RW*, there was a deliberate delay from completion to release.³ Dylan concluded *Tarantula* in 1966 but did not publish it. It nevertheless circulated in bootlegged galleys until its formal publication in 1971, at which time it failed to impress.⁴ It was quick to baffle with its assortment of bizarrely punctuated text, meandering observations, eccentric proclamations, and unconventional allusions. Classifying it proved elusive; it was not quite a poem, did not adhere to the rules of a novel, and lacked traditional narrative structure.

Contributing to its obscurity, critics rarely name *Tarantula* with the work that earned Dylan accolades such as the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016. Many argue that an almost stubborn will is required to even read, let alone appreciate the book. Gabrielle Goodchild, whose scholarship on the text is among the most extensive, describes *Tarantula* as "a book-length series of free association passages, seeming at first only very loosely linked together" (50). Robin Witting is rather more succinct: "*Tarantula*: The book most people looked at, shrugged, and gave up on, intending to have another go at another time," suggesting that only the most ardent Dylan fans would eventually get through it (1). In some cases, even self-identified admirers of his work have lamented *Tarantula*'s dissimilarity to Dylan's more readily understood music. Elia Katz christens *Tarantula* a collection of "rambling accretions of exotic data and razzle-dazzle language" (38).

Margo Price, despite a relatively positive review, still remarks on its “nonsensical, run-on word vomit” (80). Robert Christgau, an avowed fan of Dylan’s music, argues that *Tarantula* recalls the writing of “a word-drunk undergraduate who had berserked himself into genius” (3). Identifying the divide between appreciation for the book and Dylan’s music, Michael Gray labels the former “an orphan...neglected [by its] audience” (427). Even Goodchild concedes that, like this proverbial orphan, “as readers, we are often simply lost” (56). Given that devoted fans of Dylan’s work struggled to engage with it, *Tarantula*’s status as a “deep cut” is unsurprising.

Tarantula has even been dismissed as unworthy of attention at all, a failed attempt at a genre beyond Dylan’s skill. Christgau rejects its literary designation, conceding only that the book is “reminiscent of literature” in the sense that “it takes an effort to read” (3). In a review for the *Boston Sunday Globe*, Michael Ohnert points to the book’s title to support his dismissal of it, offering a dictionary definition of a tarantula: a “sluggish” spider capable of biting but one “not significantly poisonous to man” and so ultimately impotent. Finding Dylan’s book as feeble as its namesake, Ohnert asserts that through the title, the author “has given us what is probably as frank an assessment of this work as we’re likely to get” and declares that “there is some reason to question why trees had to be cut down for this stuff” (67).

Because readers readily abandon what Ohnert derides as the “*Finnegan’s Wake* for the Pepsi Generation,” retreating instead, as Christgau urges them, to “buy [Dylan’s] records,” perception of *Tarantula* as hopelessly bewildering has come to define the book irrespective of its content. Readers hoping for something similar to Dylan’s music feel uninvited to enjoy or appreciate anything in his book, while its critics see only an author mocking his audience with a product that defies consumption and indeed discourages it.

A Work Worth Another Spin

The contrasting responses to *Tarantula* and Dylan's music represent a void as diverse as the subjects tackled in his work. Dylan himself seemed to understand that his prose would not enjoy the success of his music. *Tarantula*'s narrator warns, "dont do your ideas—everybody's got those—let the ideas do you & talk with melody," which, while not quite a premonition, offers one reason that Dylan's music outstrips his visual and narrative work in terms of appeal (36).

Yet, the fact that *Tarantula* enjoyed a reprint after Dylan's receipt of the Nobel Prize—less than five years ago at this writing and with a back cover lauding it as "playful" and "illuminating"—attests that it may not be all nonsense. Beneath what its publisher calls a startlingly "strange" and "unique perspective," *Tarantula* offers perspectives akin to those of familiar and more easily digested songs—the "special gem" that is Dylan's catalog—despite its initially off-putting form (Sisario). Robert Scholes's assessment suggests as much: "[O]ne still has a sense of picking over a lot of unlovely stuff in order to find the good things," indicating that good things indeed wait to be found (29). This conflict is precisely what Dylan's work reflects of the world it hopes to influence. This world is not pretty, but once through the muck one might discover the tools and knowledge necessary to clean things up. As Spencer Kornhaber observes, "Dylan is never a believer in tidy meaning," but always does mean *something* (4).

Despite their generally tepid responses, critics have in fact recognized the wide-ranging political and social challenges *Tarantula* presents. Witting identifies six thematic strains in the text: "'America, Viet Nam, 'aretha,' Mexico, Maria and – the great panacea – Music," themes that raise questions about topics like the social unrest, economic injustice, and flawed political landscape of the United States of the sixties (12). In Goodchild's analysis, "[Dylan] confronts head-on the chaos and death of his society, makes art out of confrontation" (60). Truths about

societal inequity, historical revisionism, and systemic racism join war as targets of his political criticism.⁵ *Tarantula* thus reads very much like a precursor to his acclaimed 2020 album.⁶

As noted above regarding *R&RW*, personal investment is key to connecting to the text. Philosopher Walter Benjamin's model of the *flâneur* is helpful in understanding how the reader identifies with the work. More than an idle loungeur, the *flâneur* meticulously observes and chronicles time and place: "[He] does not describe; he narrates. Even more, he repeats what he has heard" (Benjamin 262).⁷ Dylan's narrator guides the reader through wild events and the lives of "sharply drawn, vividly recognizable kinds of contemporary people" (Gray 651). In 47 short, diary-like entries and epistolary poems, each packed with arresting juxtaposition and abstract meaning, Dylan presents a confusing world rife with problems and unsettling challenges.

Although the sum of the parts delivers a bizarre picture, Dylan in fact "draws off the banal obviousness" of everyday, familiar moments, turning them into provocative allegories (Benjamin 211).⁸ These moments "unsettle and disturb all our suburban self-satisfactions," destroying the blissful and intentional ignorance characteristic of what Dylan sees as the American status quo and which prohibits the progress for which he persistently lobbies (Goodchild 50). This accusation surfaces as the frustrated narrator complains, "your problem is that you / wanna better word for world . . . / you cannot kill what lives an expct no- / body to take notice. history is alive / it breathes" (24). Here Dylan's *flâneur* scorns those unwilling to accept an ugly reality and warns that constant revision to preserve an illusion rather than sacrifice comfort for change cannot impede truth as it marches on.

One may jump in to *Tarantula* at almost any point and perceive Dylan's critical aims. The opening pages, for example, register immediately as a mocking condemnation of racism. The narrator first waxes poetic about popular music via the imagined and exciting escapades of a

fictional Aretha Franklin, the “crystal jukebox queen” (1) Yet, the tone shifts with each hurdle “aretha” comes up against. Now far from “owning the earth,” aretha, “too gloomy” as she discovers “not everyone can dig her now” eventually “denies her corpse the courage to crawl” (1-3). On her heels follow pointed references to programs such as *Have Gun, Will Travel*, whose actors return to their regularly scheduled racism as they “spend their off hours remaining separate but equal” once filming on their supposedly progressive but ultimately imaginary worlds has wrapped (5). Finally, the narrator laments the “drag it gets to be / writing for this chosen few,” who hear the calls to reject and transcend the sentiments that give rise to shameful historical moments while those responsible keep on their ways (11).

Still, hope remains that “everyone will get” Dylan’s message so long as something in it speaks to them. In a book that elides nothing and no one in its catalog of controversial moments and consequential figures, such outcome seems likely (81). Bob Fish notes of “Murder Most Foul” that it “name-checks everyone from Edgar Allan Poe, Anne Frank, Indiana Jones to the Rolling Stones effectively pointing out that what we experience is based on our own reference points.” *Tarantula* predates this effect by doing the same; among its pages one encounters not only a menagerie of imaginative fictional characters but also figures like Richard Nixon, Liberace, Lady Godiva, H.G. Wells, Prince Hamlet, John Wayne and even God. What seems to be an unrelenting and unconnected series of references to and descriptions of historical and pop-culture moments in fact bares the lived experience of each reader, who will then ideally reflect, plan, and act.

It lies beyond the present scope to unwind each of *Tarantula*’s threads, an almost certainly futile undertaking with a text that relies heavily on the individual reader. Fish underscores this point, arguing that any given scene depends on understanding of and connection to the content. For example, the frequent mentions of “Aretha” may recall on the one hand memories of a summer

dance, a boat ride with family, or the purchase of a first car. On the other, a reader from Memphis, a singer starting out, or a civil rights advocate targeted by racism may identify with the singer's appearance in an utterly different way. In his final missive, the narrator explains that in Gallup, Wheeling, Pittsburgh, Atlanta, Bowling Green, Cheyenne, or New York City, Aretha represents as many ideas as there are inhabitants of those places. She is a sex symbol, a musical deviant, a minority to be scorned. To the narrator, Aretha is "Black Gal," a "trump card" who will help him "feel [his] evaporation like [she] feels her co-existence," an empathetic move that embodies what it means to bring one's own life story to the work to bridge spaces between experiences (135).

Dylan seems slyly aware of the unique "conversation" each reader will have with the text. In one letter, the narrator challenges the recipient to such an exchange, revealing that open-minded interlocution is essential to progress:

how come youre so afraid of
 things that dont make any
 sense to you? [...] is there
 anything that does make sense
 to you? [...] how come youre
 so afraid to stop talking? (39-40)

It is a call to reject fear of the unfamiliar, to overcome reticence to connect, and to listen as much as speak. What Goodchild calls a "repeated jamming together of opposites" in *Tarantula* does more than simply evoke the dissonance and turmoil that characterized the sixties. Rather, it invites readers to relive and reconsider their unique relationships to those moments with the goal of inspiring critical thought and progressive action.

Coda

This article does not mean to imply that Dylan's recent release is a mere rehash of *Tarantula*. Rather, it contends that one can broaden the uplifting and mobilizing effects of *R&RW* through a renewed exploration of Dylan's book. "Murder Most Foul" warns listeners: "We'll mock you and shock you and we'll put it in your face," a promise kept in *Tarantula* and evidence that audiences moved by Dylan's newest offerings are fit for the challenge presented in his book. Schoepp understands the record in much the same way one might view *Tarantula*—that is, as corresponding to the "defining moment" in which the world now finds itself through "commentary on a major cultural event that's happening now by referencing a major cultural event of the past." As a cultural artefact of that past, *Tarantula* can be a reference that speaks to, and perhaps offers comfort in, the moment facing humanity now. Dylan's narrator in fact reminds the reader that time is fluid: "the artists live in the meantime—the meantime dies & in its place comes the sometimes—there is never any real sometime" (136). This notion suggests a wisdom in revisiting a work whose events occurred sometime previous to make sense of where one is in the meantime. *Tarantula* is such a work, ready and waiting for readers to rediscover.

¹ I.e. *Chronicles, The Drawn Blank Series*.

² Dylan tweet, 27 March 2020.

³ Dylan tweet, 27 March 2020.

⁴ Dylan's 1966 motorcycle accident is frequently cited as reason for the publication delay, though some scholars have argued that even that event was orchestrated in order to allow Dylan to disappear from the public eye. See Spitzer, Gray, et.al.

⁵ See Richard David Wissolik's catalogue of allusions to history, mythology, literature and pop culture in *Tarantula*. While few entries touch on the passages described here, this companion enhances reading of Dylan's book.

⁶ See Spitzer, Walter, Brinkley et. al.

⁷ See Benjamin's discussion of Franz Hessel's *On Foot in Berlin (Spazieren in Berlin, 1929)*, in which he takes Hessel as a model for the *flâneur*.

⁸ For more on the Surrealism in which Dylan's book participates, see Breton, Benjamin, et. al. Further recognition of Dylan's participation in the Surrealist tradition was evident to critics at the time the book first appeared. In his 1971 review in the *New York Times*, Christgau writes, "Literature comes in books, and Dylan does not intend his most

important work to be read...his famous Surrealism owes as much to Chuck Berry as to Breton” (30). Benjamin, on the other hand, argues that Surrealism ideally invites such a “primal upsurge of esoteric poetry,” under which genre one can definitely file much of *Tarantula* (2: 212).

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