

Alfred Tennyson, A. E. Housman. Now This.

A major literary critic turns his hand to the matter of Bob Dylan.

DYLAN'S VISION OF SIN

By Christopher Ricks.
517 pp. Ecco. \$26.95.

By Jonathan Lethem

CHRISTOPHER RICKS and I share a privilege. It's one you share too, assuming you join in our almost fathomless esteem for the songs and performances of the sui generis poet-singer Bob Dylan. That is, to have had our lifetimes overlap with an artist whom stone Dylan fans like Ricks and I suspect future generations will regard, in his visionary fecundity, with the awe reserved for Blake, Whitman, Picasso and the like. This concurrence of our lives with his is a privilege that shouldn't be taken for granted: 40 or 50 years from now, one of the few questions younger people will be certain to ask of elderly witnesses to the 20th century is, "Did you ever go to a Bob Dylan concert?" If the reply comes: "You have no idea what a hassle Madison Square Garden could be," it will certainly be met with shaming incredulity.

That Christopher Ricks? Yes, that one — the great British literary critic, newly elected Oxford Professor of Poetry, to succeed Paul Muldoon in September. Ricks is an exemplar of the dimly seen art of "close reading," an explicator of Milton, Keats, Tennyson and Eliot, praised by none other than W. H. Auden as "the kind of critic every poet dreams of finding," and now the author of "Dylan's Vision of Sin" — a volume perhaps ipso facto to be regarded as either the most intimidating rock-critical treatise ever published, or the silliest, or both. Or, as one friend blurted when I'd said I was reviewing the book: "Does that mean you have to read all the way to the end?"

I did, with escalating ease and pleasure. Ricks, surely aware of the oddness of his enterprise — the elevation of a member of the Traveling Wilburys to a place among the greatest poets in the English language — has anticipated not only the possible resistance of his usual readership to his subject at hand, but also the probable unfamiliarity with his aims and methods in the potential new readership he will have attracted. "Most people who are likely to read this book will already know what they feel about Dylan, though they might not always know quite why they feel it or what they think," is how he opens the book, with typical brio and warmth. Soon enough Ricks also addresses concerns that Dylan might not be properly treated as a poet: "The case for denying Dylan the title of poet could not summarily, if at all, be made good by any open-minded close attention to the words and his ways with them. The case would need to begin with his medium, or rather with the mixed-media nature of song, as

Jonathan Lethem's most recent novel is "The Fortress of Solitude."



DAVID GAHR

Bob Dylan at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival.

of drama." Translation: if the lines in Shakespeare's plays, written for and much enlivened by (sufficiently inspired) performance, make a legitimate object of reverence and study, what's your problem? Might it really only be that you never had to see Shakespeare sing on "We Are the World," or accept an Oscar by live satellite feed from Australia? If so, get over it.

Perhaps thinking of potential new readers, Ricks makes the book a seductive primer in his own methods. Take a look, he seems to say, at the pleasure in juxtaposing one poet with another (he abuts Dylan with a wide array: Robert Lowell, Marvell, Tennyson, Eliot, George Herbert and more): see how they seem to read one another, while you and I, reader, stand back and watch. Or consider the rewards of parsing what you've taken for granted even in songs you praise as masterworks: a lyric's exact strategy and means, what it has in common with other human utterances, and what sets it apart. Such clockwork analysis never seems to drain Dylan's work of its vitality (a tribute to Ricks and Dylan both, I suspect), but rather to renew a listener's amazement. For instance, by the end of one such disquisition Ricks may threaten to persuade you that rhyme, that corny tool, is the central receptacle not only for Dylan's wit but for the moral and emotional brilliance of his art.

Close reading, on close reading, turns out in Ricks's hands to be a lively sport, full of beguiling allusions, teasing asides and free philosophical musings, and bursting with groanworthy puns. See, or rather hear, Ricks analyze Dylan's use of pronouns in "Like a Rolling Stone": "The pronoun 'you' is the song's pronouncement, this being a song in which, although 'they' may for a while be hanging out with 'you' ('They're all drinkin', thinkin' that they got it made'), and 'he' may be doing so, too (even if 'He's not selling any alibis'), 'you' will never, Miss Lonely, enjoy the company of 'we' or 'us,' and never ever the company of an 'I.' Of all Dylan's creations this is the song that, while it is one of his most individual, exercises the severest self-control when it comes to never mentioning its first person. Never say I. Not I and I: you and you."

Elsewhere, Ricks riffs on one of Dylan's latest offerings, the song "Sugar Baby" (2001): "Two idioms were the parents of this Sugar Baby, parents who — despite not exactly getting on with one another — were determined to make a go of it. They are the idioms to go without ('You went years without me') and to keep going ('Might as well keep going now'). Their child would be keep going without. Meanwhile, lurking in the brains behind ma and pa is the thought of getting going, which is why the words 'get' and 'got' get to usher in 'went without' and 'keep going.'" Ricks's lighter-than-air allusion to an earlier song — "the brains behind ma and pa" is a near-quote from "Maggie's Farm" — reminds us of another lyric about quitting and setting off down the road. There's madness in his method, but Ricks's confidence in his reader's willingness to follow him derives from the willingness to follow displayed by Dylan's listeners.

Readers may indeed be disconcerted by Ricks's sheer goofiness. But this is

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hardly confined to his writing on this new, pop-culture subject. Ricks's "Beckett's Dying Words" (1993), taken as a more or less random sample, is equally antic, even as it worries at Beckett's deathly gravity. Punning is less an ornament on Ricks's critical prose than one of its central methods, one consonant with the kind of linguistically embedded meanings he wants to excavate in the first place. Bent on tormenting into view the recalcitrant intention hidden in a writer's vocabulary, syntax and rhyme, Ricks will stop at nothing to extract the information he craves, even tickling. Happily, Ricks has an ear for a tune as well as a trope. The songs he discusses, taken as the contents of a mix tape, would consist neither of Dylan's greatest hits (though many are here), nor of a bunch of stuff rewarding to parse but musically dull. Rather, Ricks has picked a lot of "sleepers" — those Dylan songs that emerge as favorites on long listening, not purely for their lyrical sophistication but for their depth in that mysterious conjunction of lyric, music and performance. Ricks's book leads you back into Dylan's music, no small virtue.

"Dylan's Vision of Sin" seems a conscious attempt to forge a post-biographical context for Dylan's art, to

sweep away in one gesture the defensiveness, gossip and, perhaps worst of all, proprietary distortions too often imposed on an artist's legacy while it is still in the making. There are those who, like Kinbote staking his nutty claim to interpretive possession of the poem in Nabokov's "Pale Fire," ask us to believe their approach to Dylanology, pegged on Woody Guthrie, heroin or the cabala, is exclusively correct. Ricks, on the other hand, has no investment in persuading his reader that his particular taxonomical trick, which consists of reading Dylan's songs against the seven deadly sins, four cardinal virtues and three heavenly graces, is anything more than what William Empson called "the right handle to take hold of the bundle" — that is, a reasonably adequate stance from which to begin contemplating the artist's accomplishment. While using "lust" to treat "Lay, Lady, Lay" and "covetousness" as a measure of "Gotta Serve Somebody," Ricks grants art's ultimate indifference to criticism — so, despite a tone of vast assurance, his book is agreeably humble.

In seeming to set, almost single-handedly, the course for the future of "Dylan Studies," Ricks has a great partner in Greil Marcus. An American critic

who began as a "rock writer," Marcus brings to the consideration of Dylan's music a context of pop knowledge as thorough as Ricks's more academic bearings. Beginning in the classic "Mystery Train," and then, more recently and extensively, in "The Old, Weird America," Marcus has placed Dylan deep in his American context, the same swamp of indigenous voicings that gave rise to alchemists like Walt Whitman, John Ford and Chuck Berry.

In this, Marcus is both Ricks's twin and his opposite. Certainly, it is Marcus who provides the corrective to Ricks's seeming lack of interest in America, or in Dylan's magpie appropriations from folk and pop traditions, as opposed to his relationship to canonical poetry. For it must be said: there are moments, while reading Ricks, when you want to shout: The 16-year-old Robert Zimmerman didn't want to be Lord Tennyson, man, he wanted to be Muddy Waters! But Ricks himself wouldn't argue, and that's the strength of his book. The critic has, seemingly, merely wished to test the songs he loves against his own pre-existing context, which happens to be Philip Larkin and Matthew Arnold, not Blind Willie McTell. In doing so he's found the songs all the more extraordinary, not wanting in any measure. Fair enough. Any critic's a blind man, faced with an elephant as formidable as the collected works of Bob Dylan. But some blind men have extraordinarily sensitive hands, and it is not impossible to imagine an elephant's pleasure at their touch. □

Love That Mystic Hammering

By Lucinda Williams



WILLIAM C. ECKENBURG/ THE NEW YORK TIMES, 1963

Hey, Bobby, some editors over at The New York Times Book Review (remember "I'm gonna grow my hair down to my feet so strange / So I look like a walking mountain range / And I'm gonna ride into Omaha on a horse / Out to the country club and the golf course. / Carry The New York Times, shoot a few holes, blow their minds"?) asked me if I'd write something about the words to your songs. I have watched you and listened to your lyrics and have been struggling to get as good as you are for about the last 40 years. You probably don't care much for somebody trying to analyze your head like this, and I sure don't pretend to be no intellectual, but these folks seem to think I'm up to the job. So I guess I'll ramble on about some lines of yours that I think are brilliant, like these, from "Spanish Harlem Incident": "Gypsy gal, the hands of Harlem / Cannot hold you to its heat. / Your temperature's too hot for taming, / Your flaming feet burn up the street."

Or these, from "To Ramona":

*Your cracked country lips,
I still wish to kiss. . . .*

Lucinda Williams's most recent album is "World Without Tears."

*To see you tryin' to be a part of
A world that just don't exist.
It's all just a dream, babe,
A vacuum, a scheme, babe,
That sucks you into feelin' like this.*

Or these, from "Chimes of Freedom": "Through the mad mystic hammering of the wild rippin' hail / The sky cracked its poems in naked wonder / That the clinging of the church bells blew far into the breeze / leaving only bells of lightning and its thunder."

I hear Charles Bukowski and all the great Beats. But I also hear Woody Guthrie, Lightnin' Hopkins and Hank Williams. Even in their simplicity, there's an edge and a mysterious quality to your songs. Are you a poet or a songwriter? Who cares? You let your Minnesota, nonsinging, howling, raspy voice push the lyrics. Your guitar and harmonica and those sweet beautiful melodies hold them and give them a home. The words rest against them. They don't have to stand alone but they can. They have a consciousness, a carefulness, yet there's an almost sardonic, cavalier quality to them. I hear humor and wit; attitude and hipness. Words gotta have a hipness to them. I feel you must know something I haven't discovered yet. At the core lies a solid, basic truth that branches out of your experience and compassion.

Ethereal moments become almost literal. The images are striking, graphic and sensual. Words jump off the page and roll across the tongue. You are able to take an idea and give it form: the idea that Harlem has hands, feet are flaming, lips are cracked and country, hail hammers and skies crack poems.

Bobby Dylan, for all the years of being influenced by your humor, your wit, your brilliance and your sweet-ass attitude, thank you. *nick . . .* □