

CHRISTOPHER ROLLANSON, ‘READ BOOKS, REPEAT QUOTATIONS’: THE LITERARY BOB DYLAN. TWO RIDERS/THE BRIDGE, 2021

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Oddly enough, it seems as if the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, had, in paralysing the world at large, in a sense, resuscitated the literary Bob Dylan. Considered today as much a part of the canon as T.S. Eliot, Samuel Beckett, or Toni Morrison, in the Anglophone sphere, Bob Dylan quite literally continues to roar in the present twenties. As of November 1, 2022, he published *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, the first work in prose he has released after being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, and second in line to the *Rough and Rowdy Ways* album, a multimodal masterpiece of his usual remarkable music and superior poetic writing. The latter was released two years prior, in his own mystical, celebratory glorification of the ill-fated year’s Midsummer’s Eve.¹ A self-proclaimed prophet, considering the themes and topics in his last album, the illuminatingly awakened Bob Dylan attempted to warn the population of what was —or still is— to come. However, it was Dr Christopher Rollason, independent scholar and prominent and pioneering dylanologist who since the mid-1980s had been foreseeing a future for scholarly studies in Bob Dylan.

Throughout his more than seventy publications (in English, Spanish, and Portuguese), Dr Rollason has managed to shed light onto a topic in popular culture that would have, otherwise, been neglected. It may well definitely be due to his, as well as other devout Dylanist scholars’ tireless efforts, that Dylan grew to eventually become a recognised author in academia. As a matter of fact, the most academically oriented works of analysis on Bob

Dylan started being published after Rollason's 2021 book; see, for example the collection of essays by renowned scholars in *Dylan at 80: It used to go like that, and now it goes like this*, released only a few months after 'Read Books, Repeat Quotations': *The Literary Bob Dylan* by Christopher Rollason.

To be sure, it may be argued that Rollason was one of the first scholars to take Dylan seriously. Only a few of them were at the time considering Dylan an authority in his own right, but merely contained within the scope of music. Andrew Muir, for example, compared Dylan and Shakespeare in his *Bob Dylan & William Shakespeare: The True Performing of It* (2019), but, in my opinion, in what appears to be an unnecessary limitation of their *personas* to their relations with the public. While Muir's study provides a thorough comparison of the "more popular," lowly backgrounds of the two Bards, and their rise as audience favourites, Rollason endows us, Dylan scholars, with proper and traditionally academic pieces of pure literary studies of a select few of the Minnesota author's multiple masterful creations. In this collection of essays and articles, some of them published—in particular, we are proud to have featured the opening chapter "Dylan and the Nobel" in a recent number from *The Grove*—Rollason, in a most skilful manner, explains the literature of Dylan with different approaches (line-by-lines, stanza in-depths, more broadly, song contextual and literary analyses, etc.) as well as with varied perspectives, alternating between the author reviewed alone and the author in transtextual relation to another. This reaches its peak in the chapter entitled "Dylan and Edgar Allan Poe" (pp.143-64) where the love of the gothic the two of them share becomes evident as Rollason—not newly nor surprisingly, since he had already compared his two favourites a few times back—encompasses nearly every single direct allusion by Dylan to the works of Poe.

Over and above the confines of intertextuality, it is one aspect of the chapters relating Dylan to Poe that is seldom noticed, that I found remarkable, for it is true that Dylan's conversion to Christianity can potentially be seen as misleading, as it (most of the time) effectively casts a shadow over the darkness lurking in his songs. Rollason unveils Dylan's 'Kingdom of Shadows'² brick by brick and presents it as something to be made sense of, mainly, allegorically. In the chapters discussing the songs 'Bob Dylan's Dream,' 'Every Grain of Sand,' 'Dignity,' 'Red River Shore,' and 'Man in the Long Black Coat,' Chris Rollason, very cleverly, manages to give tangible examples of what Milton described as "darkness visible" (*Paradise Lost*, 'Book 1') in Dylan.

The North-American author's mastery over the subtleties of language come in handy as his poetic voice narrates in all the beauty and glory, the

gloomy state of the world. 'Desolation Row' already pointed at this reality, and Rollason analyses each stanza according to Dylan's utterly pessimistic poetic voice's ruminations. This is, likely, the other chapter that deals the most with intertextuality, displaying evident similarities between the Dylan classic and Eliot's *The Waste Land*. It leaves the reader wondering whether it was always Dylan's intention to recreate the Modernist centrepiece. In this sense, the Bard of Hibbing does a little more than explicitly allude to his contemporaries and the authors from the past that helped shape his roots, as, Rollason states (pp. 57-77), he borrows with the sole intention of making his art unique. The premise that Dylan takes, or even steals, from others merely limps, as one notices the extreme intricacy and evolution within Dylan's writing process, where he ends up owning the amalgamation of literatures as one unified *magnum opus*. This, non-coincidentally, rings true to Eliot's interpretation of his own poem as a "heap of broken images" (*WL*, l.22), which only the better versed in the writings of a particular writer, in this case, Rollason with Dylan, can dissect with true accuracy.

As a conclusive note, I would like to draw the attention towards the analyses of Dylanian verses as narrative. Once again, this is yet another instance of Rollason's depth of insight into the world of Bob Dylan. After all, the singer-songwriter was only awarded the Nobel Prize "for having created new poetic expressions [...]"³ when as a matter of fact most of his songs are, in technical terms, closer to narrative than to poetry. Chris Rollason draws upon this divide to classify some of the pieces as poems and others as narratives. The amount of detail, descriptive passages, and accounts of events in certain songs can, at times, compare to Dickensian classics (as well as, of course, Poe's short fiction). 'Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts,' 'Man in the Long Black Coat,' 'Tangled Up in Blue,' 'Isis,' 'Hurricane,' 'Black Diamond Bay' and 'Joey,' to mention a few, are songs that could bear the status of full-on narratives. It is thus that Christopher Rollason instigates in the scholarly reader the urge to further investigate into topics the likes of these, which he never fails to bring on. It is in hope only that the careful crafting of this book, as well as the comprehensiveness of the literary analyses have been properly honoured in my review. Clearly, Rollason's *The Literary Bob Dylan* has proven to contain multitudes, much like the author he examines throughout the thirteen decidedly insightful essays. The prolific scholar Chris Rollason has managed to, firstly, lead the forward path towards uncharted territory in Dylanian studies, and, secondly, to establish himself, in a re-formulation of the Nietzschean saying, as 'not a man, but *dylanite*.'

References

Browning, Gary & Sandis, Constantine, editors. *Dylan at 80: It used to go like that, and now it goes like this*. Imprint Academic, 2021.

Muir, Andrew. *Bob Dylan and William Shakespeare: The True Performing of It*. Red Planet, 2019.

Notes

1. In 'Changing of the Guards' (from the album *Street-Legal*, 1978), the Summer Solstice, both as a festivity and as a day of pagan symbolism, is rendered as synonymous of the notions of rebirth transfiguration that permeate the majority of Dylan's *oeuvre*.
2. This is a reference to his *on-live* (online and live) performance entitled *Shadow Kingdom*, which took place during the pandemic.
3. https://archive.ph/20170920010410/https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2016/press.pdf