

Book Review: Christopher Rollason, ‘Read Books, Repeat Quotations’: *The Literary Bob Dylan. Two Riders / The Bridge*. 2021. ISBN: 978-1-9196390-0-0 (Paperback). 219 pages. \$40.

Reviewed by Jesús López-Peláez Casellas¹

[Article copies available for a fee from *The Transformative Studies Institute*. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org
Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2022 by *The Transformative Studies Institute*. All rights reserved.]

To write, like Christopher Rollason does in this volume, about the ‘literary Bob Dylan’ seems a perfectly sensible academic endeavor in 2021. Scholarly books and articles dealing with the aesthetic achievements of the artist from Minnesota are constantly being published far and wide, be it in Europe, North America or Asia. However, this was not always the case if one wanted to be taken seriously in the field of English studies, especially if the work was intended to appear in book form and appeal to a specialized (academic) readership. Until 2016 Dylan was, to many, little more than a (relatively enlightened) singer-songwriter, the “unwashed phenomenon, the original vagabond”, as Joan Baez famously put it as early as 1975. Admittedly a musician of world stature, yes, but not a poet to be taken too seriously, much less an intellectual. His songs had proven meaningful to thousands of fans of different generations, had helped define the structure of feeling of the 1960’s -that decade so intensely loaded with all sorts of significances: anti-war protests, civil rights movements..., but that was all. Yet, this perception changed abruptly when Bob Dylan, to the dismay of many, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016. In this post-Nobel award era, Dylan studies have almost magically become a totally acceptable academic activity, an established discipline in itself. Consequently works such as Andrew Muir’s *Bob Dylan and William Shakespeare: The True Performing of It* (2019), which boldly confronts the two Bards (from Minnesota and Avon) and relates the intertextual dialogues established among different Shakespearean productions to

¹ Jesús López-Peláez Casellas, Professor, English Department Chair Universidad de Jaén.

those existing among Dylan versions of his own songs, can proudly be published (and re-edited and updated in the case of Muir's tome).

The present collection of essays (some previously published, some new) by Dylanite authority Christopher Rollason, *'Read Books, Repeat Quotations': The Literary Bob Dylan*, clearly shows how, in the pre-Nobel period, the author of this book had already considered the corpus of songs by the Bard (of Minnesota) as literary material worthy of the close-reading techniques usually applied to the hermeneutic study of canonical literature (by Joyce, Yeats, Shakespeare...). To be sure, Dr. Rollason has been seriously studying Dylan's work in this fashion for more than 25 years, as many of the essays gathered in this volume clearly show. Thus, in the present volume Rollason bears witness –through his work of the last decades- to how Dylan's work is as deep and sophisticated as any conceivable literary production, and consequently may be fruitfully examined on its own as a cultural artifact of the utmost relevance and artistic merit, or in any of its many connections with other texts by well-established literary authors.

Indeed, this extremely interesting and illuminating book on the literary Bob Dylan includes a collection of essays from various different approaches. Namely, the book explores the state of Dylan studies (without neglecting a take on the Nobel Prize controversy), addresses the intertextual fabric of much of Dylan's work (Dylan and E.A. Poe, Dylan and Salman Rushdie) and –most compellingly- close-reads specific songs, from Dylan's classic and world-famous 1960s "Desolation Row" to the encyclopedic and recent "Murder Most Foul," through some lesser known pieces, such as "The Man in the Long Black Coat," or "Bob Dylan's Dream" (not to be confused with "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream").

The opening chapter, "Dylan and the Nobel," originally published in 2016 in the Spanish academic journal *The Grove. Working Papers on English Studies*, deserves special comment. In this piece, Rollason discusses the (mostly, although not unanimously) negative reactions to the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016 to Bob Dylan, and he classifies them into five categories, namely: categorial, qualitative, individual-centered, politically correct and feminist identitarian. As could be expected, and in spite of being held by well-established authors of fiction, poets and journalists (most of them writing from prestigious institutions), all these objections are successfully challenged by Rollason with convincing arguments in which he states clearly the range of subject matter and language registers of Dylan's corpus of songs, his cross-fertilization of popular and high cultural registers, and his artistic freedom, which "may be seen as emblematic of human freedom as such"

(19). Additionally, Rollason demonstrates how the prejudices surrounding the consideration of Dylan as ‘poet’ or ‘singer-song writer’ (or both) are part and parcel of the reluctance, by the academia, to acknowledge the relevance of popular culture in today’s world.

Chapter Two is a fascinating and insightful work on the early number “Bob Dylan’s Dream” (the song from the 1963 album *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*), which Rollason examines as a sophisticated palimpsest. “Bob Dylan’s Dream”, Rollason convincingly shows, simultaneously includes references to: Dylan’s current (at the time of writing the song) status as a protest singer-songwriter, a criticism of this same role by Dylan himself and a proleptic glance at his eventual evolution as an artist. Furthermore, Rollason also studies some intriguing intertextual traces of an English 19th century English folk song and poem, ‘Lord Franklin’ (also known as ‘Lady Franklin’s Lament’ and ‘The Sailor’s Dream’), which is argued to be the hipotext of “Bob Dylan’s Dream”. With very rigorous philological criteria (Chris Rollason holds a BA in English from the University of Cambridge, and a doctorate in literature from the University of York), the author addresses the issue of the difficulty of fixing a reliable control text of Dylan’s songs, and eventually establishes both control texts and variants, openly discussing his academic criteria for choosing one over the others.

The book also offers, as has been claimed, various hermeneutic tours de force, very notably in his stanza-by-stanza examination of a number of central songs in the Dylan canon, notably “Desolation Row” (chapter 4). “Desolation” has been –through the years, for many of those pioneer scholars studying the work of Dylan– the Bard’s take on Eliot’s *Wasteland*, and has been widely considered to be as intriguing, sophisticated and captivating as Eliot’s poem. Previously unpublished, Rollason’s analysis boldly goes through all ten stanzas of the text, without avoiding any of the song’s most conspicuous conundrums: Dr. Filth, the hanging, the totalitarian state, death by water and the Titanic, Eliot and Pound’s struggle “in the captain’s tower”, Shakespearean allusions (Romeo, Ophelia), the fortune-telling lady (Dylan’s Madame Sosostri), the Bible, Cinderella, Casanova and the Hunchback from Notre Dame. Rollason’s insightful comments certainly clarify this most perplexing of texts, as his analyses of other songs such as “Shelter from the Storm” (ch 5), “Dignity” (ch. 8) or “Murder Most Foul” (ch. 10), do.

Prefaced by Canadian poet and Dylan scholar Stephen Scobie, Chris Rollason’s collection of essays *‘Read Books, Repeat Quotations’: The Literary Bob Dylan* is elegantly written and also profusely annotated, being –like Dylan’s songs themselves– both entertaining and deep,

hypnotizing and thought-provoking, passionate but scholarly. In conclusion, it can be safely argued that the field of Dylan studies -a discipline the origins of which could be safely traced to the publication of Michael Gray's *Song and Dance Man* in 1972, and to which Dr. Rollason has been significantly contributing for the last quarter-century- has greatly been expanded and reinforced by Chris Rollason's book.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gray, Michael *Song and Dance Man: The Art of Bob Dylan*. London: Hart-Davis, 1972.

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