

Songs With a Life of Their Own

The poems of Bob Dylan

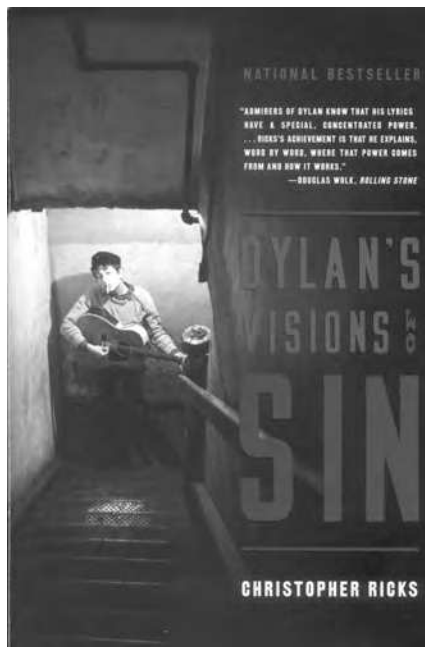
DYLAN'S VISIONS OF SIN

by Christopher Ricks. Penguin Group, London, 2003. HarperCollins, Ecco hardcover, 2004. Ecco paperback, 2005, \$15.95.

There are plenty of crackpot books out there about rock legends, but this isn't one of them. Literary critic and prolific writer Christopher Ricks, the Oxford professor of poetry since September 2005, does to Dylan what he's done in previous books to Tennyson, T.S. Eliot, Keats and Milton: He reads his poems very closely.

Ricks offers some 40 of Dylan's works from different periods of his songwriting career to support Dylan's connection to sin. Actually, he selects and analyzes songs that relate to the seven deadly sins (Envy, Covetousness, Greed, Sloth, Lust, Anger and Pride), the four cardinal virtues (Justice, Prudence, Temperance and Fortitude), and the three heavenly graces (Faith, Hope and Charity). From his previous work, Ricks cites many English-language poems that also speak of these subjects.

But don't think the book will be a dry-as-dust academic pursuit. Ricks has his own way with language that's surprising, spicy and hip. In deconstructing the songs, he looks for the poet's intention, his vocabulary, the poem's rhyming patterns and its overall structure. Ricks shows that the



acknowledge, carry additional information through inflection and rhythm when sung:

"Dylan is a performer of genius. So he is necessarily in the business (and game) of playing his timing against his rhyming. The cadences, the voicing, the rhythmical draping and shaping don't ... make a song superior to a poem, but they do change the hidden-places of its power."

Ricks' careful scrutiny of a song as familiar as "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" (from *Bringing It All Back Home*) has the charming effect of showing you why you've remembered its words all these years.

"The highway is for gamblers, better use your sense / Take what you have gathered from coincidence"

Ricks calls the rhyme here one of Dylan's best. "For all rhymes are a coincidence issuing in a new sense," he writes. "It

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poem's meaning, if it can be discovered, lies in the words and collections of words (or syllables) the poet arranges just so.

Refreshingly, Ricks is not interested in Dylan's biography but only in his work — the words on the page. Words, which Ricks would

is a pure coincidence that *sense* rhymes with *coincidence*, and from this you *gather* something."

Advancing to more complex rhyming patterns, try to hear these lines from "Like a Rolling Stone" (*Highway 61 Revisited*) as if

for the first time:

"Once upon a time you dressed so fine / Threw the bums a dime in your prime, didn't you? / People'd call, say 'Beware, doll, you're bound to fall' / You thought they were all kiddin' you"

Dylan creates unexpected rhymes: *time/fine* in the first line; *threw/you* and *dime/prime* in the second; *call/doll/fall* in the third line; and *didn't you/kiddin' you* from lines two and four for the juiciest pair. It's clear why in Ricks' scheme, this song is about Pride, that which goeth before a fall.

I enjoyed every minute I spent with this book, reading it a bit at time over several months. I love the way Ricks recognizes and lauds the magic in words, how he solves the puzzles of rhyme and repetition, how he lays bare Dylan's strategy in each song he looks at in depth. And I appreciate so much his bringing fully into Dylan's canon his songs about Faith. Ricks says he is not a believer himself, but maybe that helps him write so that even non-believers can understand what Dylan is saying in these songs.

"One delight of Dylan's Christian songs can arise from finding (to your surprise and not chagrin) that your own system of beliefs doesn't have a monopoly of intuition, sensitivity, scruple and concern."

If you enjoy solving riddles, analyzing why you do or don't like a song, or if you simply have long loved Dylan's poetry, this wonderful book is for you. I like its intellectual challenges. Remember, *Dylan's Visions of Sin* didn't get to be a national bestseller because there are so few of us. **EW**

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