



Ieva Lesinska, Christopher Ricks

A lesson in Dylan appreciation

Christopher Ricks, professor of humanities at Boston University and professor of poetry at Oxford University, is famous for his close readings of Milton, Keats, and Eliot, and also for his passion for the music of Bob Dylan. This culminated in his book *Dylan's Visions of Sin* (2003), an analysis of Dylan's lyrics that had some critics grumble that Ricks could talk one into believing that even a phone book is poetry. Ieva Lesinska, editor of *Rigas Laiks*, decided to find out for herself.

Ieva Lesinska: Professor Ricks, why do you have a bathtub in your office?

Christopher Ricks: It's Bob Dylan's childhood bathtub. It's where the young Dylan made his first splash. It belongs to two former Boston University alumni. They saw it on e-bay and wondered whether to buy it; I urged them to do so.

IL: One of the things I'd really like to understand is why it is that I fail to appreciate Bob Dylan?

CR: And what does your psychoanalyst say about this problem?

IL: I don't have one. I mean, I don't have a psychoanalyst.

CR: I know what you mean: there's an immense lot of art out in the world that people I care about praise highly that means nothing to me. I've been to museums that are full of plates, but I've never seen a plate that would make any difference to my life. I've never seen a Braque painting that would mean anything to me. But I can't ignore Picasso or Daumier. On the other hand, you could ask: "I love Leonard Cohen, so how come I don't love Bob Dylan?"

IL: But I don't love Leonard Cohen, I find him somewhat tedious.

CR: Well, good. That's the right answer, as you surely know.

IL: When I read Dylan's lyrics, I know that I should like him, because the lyrics work for me. But when I hear the voice, first of all I can't hear the lyrics anymore, there's just that nasal tone that I don't much care for. But I've really tried.

CR: And why should you like him?

IL: Well, I think you yourself have at times repeated the old adage that great minds think alike. I don't presume to have a great mind but if I respect and admire those who like Dylan, I am moved to think that there is something there that I should be able to hear and I feel sorry that I don't.

CR: Good. Well, I'm glad that I answered your cry for help in the classified section of the *New York Review of Books*: "Sensitive, intelligent woman seeks an interpreter of Bob Dylan. For the right candidate, ready to cross oceans." But seriously: I know that the things that I believe may not necessarily help you. One of the things that we may need to redefine may be what people mean by singing. You don't have to be locked into some old idea of singing. A lot of my friends may think that Marlon Brando is a great actor, yet my parents knew that Marlon Brando could not act. They knew that all the more because they would look at John Gielgud and say: "Well, there's a real actor." That is what they meant by acting. I find it wonderful what Gielgud does — but no matter what you think of Brando, he redefined what we mean by acting. That's one sign of genius. You simply have to think again. I am not accusing you of not willing to think again...

IL: I'm here after all!

CR: And you are eager to think again? So one answer to your question would be to ask whether you are able to appreciate *any* popular music. And let's say you answered: yes, Cole Porter.

IL: Or the blues.

CR: All right, the blues. Well, the review of the new Dylan album — which I haven't heard yet because it's not out until Tuesday, and I wasn't interested in listening to something called a sampler — in today's *Boston Globe* is headlined: "The Blues Man Cometh". So we can expect the blues. Maybe that will open something for you. I know that some people find his voice repugnant and others find that he's not doing what they understand by singing. But I would like to remind you of that old thought in Wordsworth that you have to create the taste by which you are to be enjoyed. What an artist does is understand people's tastes and — without selling out — accommodate to them. But every now and then there are people — and Picasso was one, Brando was another — who do have to create the taste by which they are enjoyed. Brando was a genius, but the taste was really weird. I don't know if your country and your culture encountered some aspects of Dylan prior to others...

IL: Yes, maybe it really is a cultural thing.

CR: Tough luck! You should have thought of that before being born Latvian! Of course, he's appreciated all over the world. But what I'm really suggesting is: the first time one hears Dylan will affect everything thereafter. Charlotte Brontë wrote wonderfully about first impressions and so did Jane Austen; we really need to value our first impressions and trust them, but not too much. I am the beneficiary — that also means the victim — of the fact that Dylan was first and foremost a love poet. At a party in Amherst, Massachusetts, the host and hostess announced that they were going to turn the lights out and that we were going to listen to a song. And we listened to "Desolation Row". I'd never heard anything like it except that it was terrifically like *The Waste Land*, which is terrifically like Pope's *Dunciad*. This is the extraordinary vision of hell on earth where civilization doesn't know what to value or when it does know — doesn't know *how* to value it.

Einstein, disguised as Robin Hood
With his memories in a trunk
Passed this way an hour ago

With his friend, a jealous monk,
 He looked so immaculately frightful
 As he bummed a cigarette
 Then he went off sniffing drainpipes
 And reciting the alphabet.

e=mc² isn't exactly reciting the alphabet, but it's a wonderful way to put it. Or let's take:

And Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot
 Fighting in the captain's tower
 While calypso singers laugh at them [...]

Which is quite right: modernism was like the Titanic, it was terrifically expensive, it depended upon people below stairs or below deck. And it was a kind of disaster.

IL: Dylan thinks modernism was a disaster?

CR: Yes.

IL: Or a reflection of disaster?

CR: Yes, that's good, you are right, that's a wiser thing than I said. But it's about disasters. For Pound, that's what the modern world was. And the same is true of *The Waste Land*. These falling towers of Eliot's are falling everywhere. Like on September 11 — I don't say 9/11 because it wasn't only Americans who were killed on that date. Modernism was terrifically expensive and kind of wonderful and recognized certain enduring realities — whereas calypso singers laugh at them. To some extent, Dylan thinks — as Tolstoy did — that you should value the art of the calypso singer more than the art of the high priest of learning and sophistication and high culture. But it's clear to him that Eliot is a genius and *The Waste Land* keeps coming into things that he writes. It's clear that he knows Eliot very well. I can only talk about words because I'm neither a musician nor a musicologist. I try to talk about words in relation to how he sings them, because a song is above all a particular system of punctuation. Eliot said that the difference between poetry and prose is that they are different systems of punctuation. You learn to ignore the line ending except where it's a paragraph. When a child learns to read, he does not yet understand that he has to disattend. Learning to read prose means learning to round the corner of the line without it seeming as if you were rounding a corner. But there is no equivalent in poetry or prose to melisma, there is no equivalent to one syllable flowering into several notes. (*Sings*) "Long to re—ign over us... " You're supposed to stand up, it's the British national anthem!

IL: But I'm not British!

CR: Don't I know it, but I stand up for the American anthem! Well, I'll learn the Latvian national anthem and force you to stand up with me!

So every song is changed by the possibility of melisma. Dylan sometimes uses melisma and sometimes he doesn't and it's quite wonderful what he does with it. In the song "One of Us Must Know", for instance, the last word or refrain in each verse has melisma: "that I never meant to do you any ha—arm". "Harm" is spread out over several notes and that gives you quite a different feeling about what it's saying. I don't know if he does it consciously. I'm trying to convince

you that he's a genius in the same way that a trained athlete is a genius. An athlete has to have wonderful instincts and intuitions and wonderful training and self-discipline and willingness to learn from other people. So all these questions of whether Dylan does it on purpose seem to me not to make sense.

And another thing: you probably know Mark Akenside's poem where God "rais'd his plastic arm". So when a student says it's wonderful and a challenge to Christian orthodoxy — we know that's not what the word "plastic" meant in the eighteenth century. You must set limits to your reading so you don't imagine things to be better than they are. But in Dylan's case I don't think I'm imagining anything, I think I can always give reasons for why I think something. It's like all these intersections of instruments in Haydn's symphonies. Something in him knew that at that point woodwind was going to do something but he couldn't have told you what. Dylan is actually pretty wise about his work. He says: you have to programme your brain so that it doesn't interfere. You have to programme your brain so that it won't be programmatic. My songs lead their own lives, he says. And they do. And they mean something different to him than to everybody else when he sings them later.

IL: Are you friends?

CR: Friends? No. I usually don't tell this but I don't mind telling you. Five years ago he played a concert here at the university and I had no hand in arranging it; I was told about it rather late and could have killed the organizers. Shortly before the concert I received word to come backstage, so my wife and I went half an hour before the show. And Dylan said: "Mr Ricks, we meet at last." My reply was: "Have you read any good books lately?" I thought it was a rather good thing to say, actually. Lord David Cecil once told me that when you sit down next to someone at lunch you can start the conversation by saying: "Have you had a good morning?" Everybody has had a morning of some kind and usually they will be pleased to talk about it. This is how the English managed to rule the world! So anyway, I said: "Have you read any good books lately?" and he said: "Richard III". But the British newspapers that seem to care about this Dylan-mania of mine came up with a perversion of this story. John Sutherland wrote that: "Dylan recognized Ricks across the room [...] and came across and said: 'Professor Ricks, we meet at last.' Ricks, very unusual for him to be at a loss for words, could not think of anything to say but to blurt out something about reading books." But Dylan wasn't at all surprised by my question and he really did want to talk about Richard III. I think it was partly because there had been some films of it and partly because I'd mentioned Richard III in something I'd written about his song "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll". I think it's a perfect song. Do you know it?

IL: That story about a murder?

CR: Yes. I'll remind you of the beginning:

William Zanzinger killed poor Hattie Carroll
 With a cane that he twirled around his diamond ring finger
 At a Baltimore hotel society gath'rin'.
 And the cops were called in and his weapon took from him
 As they rode him in custody down to the station
 And booked William Zanzinger for first-degree murder.

It's a wonderfully moving song, a narrative. And — did you notice? — all the verses have a feminine ending, taking as the point of departure the main

characters' names: Carroll and Zanzinger both end in an unstressed syllable. The song is based on that rhythm and it works — the feminine ending always works. Remember this?

The thought of death sits easy on the man
Who has been born and dies among the mountains.¹

Not among "the hills", but among "the mountains", you have this unstressed final syllable which is either like something dying or like something very courageously held up — like a flag, which either flutters or is limp. Dylan's refrain is all masculine:

You who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears,
Take the rag away from your face.
Now ain't the time for your tears.

It's a wonderful artistic instinct that said — it didn't have to be consciously — take these two names (which are from a newspaper) and make them into a story. The moment when he kills her sounds different. He didn't mean to kill her, he just hit her on the head, she apparently had a very thin skull and it was all over. The first verse is all him, the second verse is all her. Hattie Carroll was a maid in the kitchen, she was 51–years old, had given birth to ten children. And then Dylan tells us about her work:

And never sat once at the head of the table
And didn't even talk to the people at the table
Who just cleaned up all the food from the table

So this repetition of "table" renders the monotony of all this work. Then it continues:

Got killed by a blow, lay slain by a cane
That sailed through the air and came down through the room,
Doomed and determined to destroy all the gentle.

He doesn't say "through the chamber" — he cuts off a syllable, because her life has been cut off at this moment, but he wants to avoid melodramatizing it. And there's this refrain in every verse where it's as if the person he's talking to, the listener, is moved to tears; and he says, no, no, it's not time for your tears:

Take the rag away from your face.
Now ain't the time for your tears.

And he addresses this imaginary listener: "you who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears", I'll tell you when it's time for your tears: it's when the man who killed her gets a six–month sentence. The song does not contest the verdict, but it does say that "for penalty and repentance" it's six months. Indignation would have said: "Can you believe it! Is there no justice in this country?" But no, it's like at the beginning of *Richard III* — it's this "I... I...":

Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time?

It is audible on the page as spoken by Olivier. I think a bard can be believable in his condemnation of injustice only if he can bear witness to it, without anger or sentiment.

But back to my story about meeting Dylan. So the conversation turned to "Hattie Carroll" and he asked me: "You liked that song?" And I said, "I think it's perfect." And he said: "I won't be playing it tonight." But then he played it the next night when I wasn't there. And that was it, no matter what this hound, this professional hound in London, told in his garbled way. So the next time I speak to journalists...

But as far as your problem goes, I don't really have suggestions how an intelligent and sensitive person could go about it. Sometimes you just get off on the wrong foot — it happens with people and it can happen with artists. Like a child with a Dickens novel that is the wrong choice and is presented at the wrong moment: they will forever be associated with Dickens just like red hair is associated with a particular bully at school. Robert Bridges has written some fine poems, but if I had started with the "Testament of Beauty", I would have just said, forget it.

IL: Frankly, much of what you see in Dylan's lyrics does not seem so novel to me. It is your reading that makes them fresh, as if you are co-authoring his texts.

CR: So he borrows — so what? Somebody has told me almost everything I know about T.S. Eliot; I mean, I didn't just suddenly discover everything myself, Conrad Aiken had something to do with it. And Dylan has a genius for gratitude. His radio programmes are really wonderful. Each one is an hour of songs that he really loves. From everywhere. With most touching tributes to Bing Crosby, to Woody Guthrie. His *Chronicles* is a book of great gratitude and it includes repudiations of other people's ingratitude. And yes, of course he talks about his album *Oh Mercy*, because it really was a massively underappreciated record. When he came back with *Time Out of Mind* it was like Lazarus risen from the dead — partly because he had this heart condition and there were people who said, yes, this is about Dylan being afraid as he faces dying. But Dylan says, why is it about my dying, why isn't it about *their* dying? Why not about *everybody's* dying? *Oh Mercy* is the only album he treats at length in the *Chronicles*, and he is right to because it's so stoical, because most of the time — "Don't even remember what her lips felt like on mine". It's not a psychiatric land he is coming to terms with — "I have to move on" and all that awful stuff — it's about the need to move on, it's about moving, it's about the near future, about the unimaginability of it.

IL: Do you write poetry or have you ever?

CR: No. In the school magazine I had a poem or two attacking the Christian God, in whom I still don't believe by the way...

IL: What did the Christian God do to you?

CR: Well, I didn't like what he did to other people. It's a system of torture worship. At least there is a long honourable tradition of it. If his Son is something other than Him, then he is a sadist, if the Son is identical with Him, He is a masochist. What's this that you have to suffer excruciatingly? What's this price, this ransom that has to be paid? Christianity is trying to get out from under the concept of ransom. Except in Africa, no bishop will talk about ransom anymore, but ransom is a huge metaphor, a huge figure of speech. Christianity says that people are slaves that will be liberated by this extraordinary ransom... Except that he'd better not sacrifice somebody else because that's morally and spiritually not so good and he better not attack

Christ himself because that's also not good. So he needs to be dual. Just like Virgin Mary is and isn't a virgin. There's this whole idea about women how some should be virgins, some should be mothers. But hey — how about a Virgin Mother? That's getting the best of both worlds. It's a brilliantly conceived story. So when I was about fourteen—and-a-half I felt moved to write about it in some poems.

IL: Have you thought about why you don't write poetry?

CR: Because I'm no good at it.

IL: But have you thought about why you aren't? Because the way you write about other people's poetry often comes very close to poetry.

CR: A lot of people would say as T.S. Eliot said about Milton's prose: "It's too damn near half-formed poetry to be good prose." Sometimes I think they're right, other times not. There's an assumption about poetry that only poetry has certain kinds of flourish or exuberance or playfulness, but prose can certainly have them too. I thought I could never be good at it. There were lots of things I thought about myself. Norman Mailer, whom I admire and whose *Executioner's Song* I consider a great novel, writes somewhere about himself as a counterpuncher, that is, he waits for people to strike out and then he strikes back. When feminism attacks him or his cast of mind or his notion of what it is to be a man, he will write a piece attacking the feminists. He sees himself as a kind of boxer who responds. He is wonderful at it. I am a much weaker, smaller form of that. I respond to works of art in a way that I'd like to think is continuous with the works of art. Continuous with them, but absolutely different. Recent theory wants everything to be discourse and everything to be text in order to abolish the distinction between professor-critics and artists. On the contrary, I want to maintain the distinction. If I write a book about *Paradise Lost*, it is ontologically different from *Paradise Lost*. I don't think if I write about *Paradise Lost* it's a waste of people's time but for me there this gigantic chasm between works of art and commentary on them. I need commentary, I need new editions, I need help all the time. Works of art are mediations but they themselves need to be mediated. The academy, as it likes to call itself nowadays in grand style, loves abolishing all distinction: Harold Bloom wants a book by Harold Bloom to be just as important as a book by Dante. He doesn't have to think of it as equally good, most of the time he doesn't think it's equally good, but every now and then he is overcome by some gigantic American hopefulness that by God it will be judged as just to be good.

IL: I talked to Bloom two years ago.

CR: Was it fun?

IL: It was a lot of fun!

CR: Oh, I am sorry to hear that.

IL: When I read his books, he seemed so full of himself, making sweeping statements about everything. But I enjoyed the conversation, I enjoyed the fact that he did not seem to have ready answers for everything and he seemed to think while he was talking to me. I found it very touching and interesting.

CR: I think he is really a very interesting person. But I tend to have ready answers and I tend to distrust people who don't. Just look at American

presidents, going back to Richard Nixon. Well, you know that he'd been asked that particular question a million times and contrary to his pretences he does have an answer. Same thing with Harold. "Harold, what do you think of...?" Of course he's answered that same obvious question a million times. But no, he will start off: "Well, coming back to Freud..."

IL: One of the questions I asked him was what he forgets, since every article about him emphasizes his preternatural memory. I would like to ask you the same thing, since you also seem to have an incredible memory.

CR: Ha! I don't remember numbers and I don't even know the telephone numbers of my children. It's not quite that I am inured, I am not fiscally irresponsible. I sometimes try to forget things I am ashamed of. And sometimes I have success at that, most of the time not. I can less and less remember things. I can less and less newly master things. When I was a student at Oxford I would spend a half an hour at lunch every day learning something by heart. I did not naturally know it like Bloom seems to. So I would get, say, some stanzas of Spencer that I loved and I would learn them.

IL: Do you still do that?

CR: No. I haven't done it in a long time. I still remember a lot of the things in question, but not always. At dinner last night we were talking about a great poet, Geoffrey Hill. He retired from here in his early seventies — he is a year older than I am — and went back to England. I know him well and I pride myself in knowing his poetry fairly well. And my wife Judith asked about a poem of his called "Ovid in the Third Reich", but I faltered towards the end of it. The poem's epigraph is "non peccat, quaecumque potest pecasse negare, solaque famosam culpa professa facit" from Ovid's *Amores*. It engages that dark thought that it's not doing something dishonourable that matters, it's being found out. It is about what the Germans acquiesced to during Nazism.

I love my work and my children. God
Is distant, difficult. Things happen.
Too near the ancient troughs of blood
Innocence is no earthly weapon

And then I could not go on. But I am about to be seventy-three, so I am supposed to have what are known as "senior moments". I cannot remember the number for any Haydn symphony or for any Haydn trio. I can do Beethoven's Fifth, that's probably the only thing I can do — but that's probably because it came as a unit "Beethoven's Fifth". But I say: "I just love this movement in Haydn", and people want to know which trio it is and I can't do that. Music does not come to me with any numbers attached. Which is unhelpful if I want to talk about it.

IL: So. Have *you* read any good books lately?

CR: You know, just like a lot of septuagenarians, I reread things more than I read them. And even things that I am newly reading are old things, so I'd be much more likely to read a Henry James novel that I haven't read or reread one that I have read. I have read and reread, for example, *What Maisie Knew*, which I think is his best novel. And I find it heartbreaking and heartening because Maisie will survive her terrible parents who get divorced and will survive the terrible step-parents, one of whom is good and weak and the other of whom is terrible and strong. This novel anticipated everything that was

going to happen to the family unit — that practically everybody was going to have four parents and it's going to be like having no parent at all. And it is right on the money about divorce — I know, my parents were divorced when I was three. And also about this duality: you wish to have children and pretty sensibly not to have children — you know, I'd rather be in Paris than have to be driving the children to school. So James had these premonitions about the sort of world we live in. So that's something I have read and reread lately. Have you read Roald Dahl's *Matilda*?

IL: No.

CR: It's a book I will have to recommend to your daughter when she's a little older. It's about the escapability of parents. Children need to know the ways in which the parents will escape but they also need to know the ways in which to wean themselves. I mean they don't always have to be the wean-ees, they can be the wean-ers.

IL: I read that you served in the army.

CR: Yes, for two years I was guarding the Suez Canal zone against the Egyptians' wish — probably a proper one — to nationalize it. So I developed my sympathies for the Egyptians although the only Egyptian I knew got electrocuted while ironing laundry. I wasn't really in Egypt, I was sitting on sand a hundred yards from barbed wire, allowed a glimpse of a pyramid here and there, and guarding sacks of rotten potatoes.

IL: Are you in America or are you just at Boston University?

CR: I'm here because of my wife Judith. Judith is an American, I met her thirty years ago, my first wife was leaving me for some imbecile — but (*theatrically*) I don't give a damn about that woman and the life she chose! So, as they say, I realized that it's time to move on. So I met Judith and we got married twenty-seven years ago and for eleven years we lived in England. But in the long run she definitely wanted to return to America, her prospects for work were much better in this country. She is a graphic designer and a photographer. And it is much easier for me to get work here than for her to get work in England. I have many American friends some of whom I have known for forty years. And — at this point if she was here she would mildly protest — I wanted the matter settled. I didn't want to stay in England and then find out five years later that we would move. I had done my tour of duty in Cambridge but I needed to know whether I could stay in Cambridge or whether we were going to make this move.

John Silber, the highly admirable president of this university, wanted to make an appointment immediately because the most famous person at the university, the critic Helen Vendler, had a joint appointment with Harvard that permitted her to be a professor both here and at Harvard. But Silber didn't want this. They quarrelled all the time and finally he asked her to decide; and she decided on Harvard. He wanted someone whose name would be known to some degree and who could cover a range of poetry. And I wanted to come here when I was near fifty, not sixty and she near forty, not fifty. I didn't shake the dust of Thatcherite Britain off my shoes, I didn't say: "No longer will I countenance Mrs. Thatcher's neo-fascism!" and then go to California, which has its own share of neo-fascism. There are things that repel me in America and sometimes it's the case that they rule here more than they do elsewhere. But when my son David comes to this country, he is grateful for the courtesy and

the civility of the people. I like American poetry a great deal. I haven't written much about it. I have written about Lowell and Eliot of course...

IL: So you consider Eliot an American?

CR: He is for me. Actually, in 1910 England didn't really deserve him. He was right to say that you never overcome — nor should you wish to — what formed you. He had a complicated relation to Whitman and Poe, he had to get out from under them. There is no Dickinson in him, however. In Dickinson, a poem does not develop, it gives you more of the same thing. It is wonderful that she could have so many variations on a theme, but every now and again you just want another theme. But these are ready answers, I'm disappointing you, unlike Harold who was funny and charming and gave you whiskey and soda instead of just a plain glass of water.

IL: Not quite, but he did have his ways.

CR: He does have his ways, the old scoundrel. But I'm with Empson who said that one of the reasons we even have art and literature is that they allow us to access systems of thought that are not ours. In recent decades there has been this tendency to value only that in art that corroborates what you already think. Whereas Empson felt that what was most valuable in art was that it allowed him to see that people who are in every way intelligent and sensitive may not agree with him. One can learn that only from art or people who are very close friends.

IL: You are one of the directors of the Editorial Institute, but I have only a very vague idea what it is and what it does.

CR: We give graduate degrees, one-year M.A., a three-year Ph.D. We take people with proposals instead of people who are considered good and then have to come up with a proposal. You arrive knowing what you want to do, all you have to do is to put your mind to it. It's an institute to teach people to value editorial work, not necessarily in English. It tends to be more literary though than anything else. There is a woman who is doing her PhD on an Italian writer; she found a body of material that was miscatalogued. We are proud of our edition of A.E. Housman's letters, of our monument to the friendship between Robert Frost and Edward Thomas — letters, mutual reviews and a collection of poetry. Right now we are working on an edition of James Fitzjames Stephen in eleven volumes, a monumental project to be published by Oxford University Press. Since this is an institute instead of a department, we have the use of this very lovely place. I have this room because I have compromising photographs: of the previous provost locked in the arms of a dog.

¹ William Wordsworth — ed.