

'SHOW ME ALL AROUND THE WORLD': INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER ROLLASON

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Christopher Rollason is a British-born Dylan scholar currently living in France. He co-edits the Bob Dylan Critical Corner website, at: <http://nicolamenicacci.com/bdcc/>. He also has a general website at: <http://yatrarollason.info>, and a blog at: <http://spaces.msn.com/members/christopherrollason/>. He can be emailed at: rollason54@gmail.com

1) Could you tell us something about your scholarly background and current activity? Particularly, where do you situate Dylan in the overall context of your work? Is his work a central concern for you intellectually?

I am a British scholar in my mid-50s, currently resident in France, with a first degree in English from Trinity College, Cambridge and a Ph.D. from York University, England. My doctoral thesis was on Edgar Allan Poe. I was a lecturer at Coimbra University, Portugal for about a decade. More recently I have defined my status as that of "independent scholar": I have collaborated in various ways - publications, lectures, conferences - with different universities and other bodies in the UK, the US, Europe, Latin America, India and elsewhere, and I am particularly close to the academic community in Spain, as a member of their professional associations and regular participant in their journals and conferences. I write in Spanish and Portuguese as well as in English. All this may sound a bit ... "without a home," and I do certainly emphasise with notions of identity that value flux, hybridity and, indeed, surprise. It should therefore astound no-one if I say Bob Dylan is one of those artists - like Poe, like Byron, like Jorge Luis Borges, like José Saramago - with whom I particularly identify. Indeed I have done so since I first discovered Dylan's work, in my second year at Cambridge in 1974. My first new Dylan album as a fan was *Planet Waves*, and then came the revelation of *Blood on the Tracks!* As to situating Bob within my writings as a whole, well, I also write on topics including Poe and fantastic literature, Indian Writing in English, Latin American literature, and language and translation issues, and in cultural studies I have published several pieces on Walter Benjamin. Dylan for me is one among half-a-dozen specialisations, and with Dylan studies as with my other fields, where relevant I like to create bridges. So I have written, for example, on Dylan in the Spanish-speaking world, on Dylan in Spanish translation, and, recently, on Dylan and Poe. Dylan's work is as much of a central intellectual concern for me as any other subject I write or lecture about.

2) Do you see yourself as a fan/scholar? What are your relations with the wider Dylan community? Do you see yourself as straddling the various cultural milieux that Dylan's career has created?

I see myself as both a fan and a scholar, categories that in no way exclude each other. Over the years I have corresponded with other Dylan scholars, including some well-known ones, and even met some in person. Also, I am a long-standing contributor to the Dylan Usenet newsgroup, rec.music.dylan. I have published on Dylan in print, in fanzines but also in the general and academic press. I am a regular contributor to the UK fanzine *The Bridge*, and have published in the now defunct zines *Parking Meter* in Austria and *Fanzimmer* in Spain. Pieces of mine on Bob have

appeared in the general press in Portugal and Bolivia, and a university newspaper in Peru, as well as several academic journals - *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais* in Portugal, *Atlantis* in Spain and, in the US, *Oral Tradition* (today an on-line journal). Also I have lectured on Bob's work, in Dylan conferences or more general academic events, in Spain, Portugal and France. And then there is the website Bob Dylan Critical Corner, which I founded back in 1998 together with Nicola Menicacci from Italy, and where today you can find an archive of my articles and a Dylan blog. Since my work does appear in both fan and academic contexts, yes, I suppose it does try to straddle that diversity of cultural milieux.

3) *What place do you believe Dylan's work should occupy in academic culture? Do you envision, say, "Desolation Row" and "Highlands" as ending up absorbed into the canon of *touchstones* of culture, as central, enduring, and self-renewing aesthetic, emotional, intellectual experiences? Or do you see Dylan's work as a singularity? Does it introduce new and unique conversations about art?*

Dylan is a highly complex and hybrid cultural figure. Of course 'it's the music as well as the words', but the words are more than strong enough to stand up on their own. So it's as with Shakespeare: you can study the plays as theatre, or you can read them perfectly well as standalone literary texts. And then we have Dylan's two works of prose, *Tarantula* and the first volume (so far) of *Chronicles*, neither of which, I feel, has fully had its due as literature. Despite the fact that he works in a song milieu, I think we can legitimately study him as a major twentieth- and twenty-first-century American writer, in poetry and prose. That of course is for literary studies. Obviously his work can also be looked at in contexts such as media studies, cultural studies, social history - let alone departments of music, or even theology! I confine my comments, though, to the literary field because that is what I know best. And yes, within that field we are talking about works like "Desolation Row" or "Every Grain of Sand" which deserve to be up there as cultural artefacts along with the finest poems of Blake or Christina Rossetti or Dickinson or Eliot or Frost. I don't see Dylan's work as some kind of singularity: it is intertextually linked to the work of so many other writers and musicians. And yes, it is also art about art: think of that line in "Tangled Up in Blue" about words that "glowed like burning coal," or the woman in "Red River Shore" who for the song's narrator is the only one "who ever saw me here at all." We are talking revelation, insight, the flash of privileged perception ...

4) *Complementing the above, how would you like to see academic culture contributing to current and future audiences' encounters with Dylan's work?*

I honestly think the best means is the academic conference, followed up with the publication of the papers (preferably on-line). Dylan conferences of this kind are not unknown: the one I attended in Caen, France in 2005 was a great success. Putting Dylan on internal courses is obviously necessary too, but conferences have a bigger public impact.

5) *The recent Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan met with opposing charges: on the one hand, some claimed his work does not merit this canonical package, this High Culture stamp of approval; on the other hand, other voices - and here I include your own excellent critique of the book - argued that its selections were overall too weak to do justice to his accomplishments. I'd love to know how you would characterize the contentious and muddy place Dylan occupies in culture. And does that place look different from your relatively cosmopolitan perspective, as a British-educated scholar active in Europe?*

Indeed, I didn't find the *Cambridge Companion* a great success, and my reasons are there in my review (<http://yatrarollason.info/files/DylanCantab.pdf>). There are far better books on Dylan than this one, and here please let me name, in the first rank, Michael Gray's *Song and Dance Man III*, Stephen Scobie's *Alias Bob Dylan Revisited* and Greil Marcus' *Invisible Republic*, and then, behind them but still with major insights, Aidan Day's *Jokerman* and Christopher Ricks' *Dylan's Visions of Sin*. If you read those, you don't need the *Cambridge Companion*. As for the anti-Dylan case, I do have to say that I've never seen it substantiated in detail. Those who dismiss Dylan's writing out of hand, be they academics or writers, to my knowledge have never, any of them, backed up their position with a detailed practical-critical analysis of, let us say, representative lyrics which might claim to prove his writing is bad. Dylan's detractors should try to do what Gray and Scobie and Ricks and Day have done - i.e. practical criticism on the lyrics - in reverse. I don't believe they have. I suspect these people simply have a vague notion of Dylan as a 60s protest singer, have heard nothing of his work beyond the 10 to 12 tracks on the 1966 *Greatest Hits*, have never looked at the lyrics on the page or even thought of doing so, and ... reject him a priori simply because they take it for granted that song can't be poetry. This of course, despite the evidence to the contrary from Robert Burns, or a Nobel prizewinner like Rabindranath Tagore, whose canon includes, among much else, some thousand songs that are known even to the simplest folk in Bengal. And of course talking of the Nobel, how many in the anti-Dylan camp even know that Bob has been nominated for the Literature Nobel, year on year since the 1997 round, and that whether or not he ever gets it (and will Philip Roth? will Carlos Fuentes?), the Swedish Academy does by now accept him as a serious candidate?

On Dylan's place in culture ... I have always maintained there are not two cultures, high and low, but three - high culture, folk culture and mass culture - with permeable boundaries between them: not that the distinctions don't exist, but that they do get crossed and re-crossed by hybrid artists, hybrid artworks - and hybrid audiences, too. Dylan is a key exponent here, because his work belongs to all three cultures at once. He is poet, folk singer and rock singer rolled into one! And yes, appreciation of his multifaceted, prismatic cultural identity no doubt is enhanced if one looks at his work and its reception in its full international dimension. But for that, let's move to the next question.

6) *I'd like to give you a chance to talk about things going on in Dylan studies outside the English-speaking world. Do you see international academic interest in him growing?*

Let me make one general comment here, and then I'd like to focus on a more specific aspect. The major critical studies of Dylan which I've mentioned are all in English. Equally, if I recall aright they only refer to Dylan, his reception and criticism, in an Anglophone context. Michael Gray's other book, his *Bob Dylan Encyclopaedia*, does branch out a bit - e.g. it has an entry on Hugues Aufray's French covers of Dylan - but still only fairly minimally. On the other hand though, does there exist a genuinely detailed and rigorous critical study of Dylan in a language other than English? Maybe there does, but if so I'm not aware of it. So we do have a problem: how far is the non-Anglophone contribution to Dylan studies being recognised, and how far have non-Anglophones underperformed in the field thanks to the domination of critics from the US, Britain and Canada?

Now more concretely, I'd like to consider Dylan's presence in the non-Anglophone area I know most about, namely the Spanish-speaking world - Spain and Latin America. He has long been very popular there - a popularity reinforced by his various Spanish and Latin American tours. He has influenced numerous Hispanophone singer-songwriters, and there has been, at least in Spain, no lack of Dylan books, though, as I implied above, to my knowledge nothing that could be called 100% crucial to Dylan interpretation per se. The lyrics have appeared in Spanish in various

translations. *Chronicles* is available in Spanish and Catalan, and - wait for this - did you know there are *four* different Spanish translations of *Tarantula* (one of them Argentinian?). Academic interest is there too, and seems to be on the rise. I can name you three recent university events: a one-day seminar in Lima, Peru in 2007; a course running over several months in Cochabamba, Bolivia in 2009; and a seminar in Seville, Spain, which is now (2010) in its second edition and is programmed to take place annually.

How many English-speaking Dylan scholars, there at the Anglo-American centre, know these things are happening on the so-called periphery? And how can they evaluate these things unless they know Spanish or have someone straddling both universes to relay them the info? I did make some kind of start myself here, in an essay on Dylan and the Spanish-speaking world which I wrote in 2005 (full version on-line at: <http://yatararollason.info/files/CaenlongversionJun07.pdf>) and gave in a condensed version as a paper at the Caen conference (that's the piece published in *Oral Tradition*: <http://journal.oraltradition.org/files/articles/22i/Rollason.pdf>). I speak for what I know, but I do believe that worldwide, Dylan as international phenomenon, Dylan's reception and influence as American yet also global artist - all this deserves much more attention and study than it gets.

7) Your recent essay on Poe and Dylan is something I want to draw readers' attention to, because you do three things in this essay that, well, I like a lot: you dissolve boundaries between life and work without resorting to biographical speculation, so each artist emerges in the fullness of his life; you narrate a plausible set of parallels between two artists that creates a fluid sense of history; you offer one of the strongest arguments for destroying and remaking paradigms of originality and authenticity I've come across in this minefield of a topic as it relates to Bob Dylan and his gleanings. Can you talk about what was exciting and satisfying to you in working on that essay, and what audience(s) you would most like to reach with it?

I'm glad you like that article. As far as I know I really think I was breaking new ground: I mean I'm not aware that anyone had set out before to trace the parallels and influences between Poe and Dylan in detail. Let me tell you more about the history of that piece. It began as a plenary lecture for one of the international Poe conferences - there were actually four, Poe is very popular there - held in Spain in 2009 to mark the bicentennial of Edgar's birth. This one was in May, at Alcalá de Henares, near Madrid. I accompanied the lecture with a Power Point presentation. This was beautifully done for me in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico by my graphic designer, the architect Hilda Hurtado, and it allowed me to bring the parallels to life by juxtaposing portraits and book covers, showing illustrations to Poe's works, and so on. I also included two musical extracts: at the beginning, stanza three of "Chimes of Freedom" (which draws on Poe's poem "The Bells"), and at the end, "Man in the Long Black Coat." I played the whole of that song, displaying the lyrics on screen stanza by stanza, and in parallel, a set of stills from the Jean Epstein film of "The Fall of the House of Usher." My point was, that song is steeped in a Gothic atmosphere which Dylan has imbibed from Poe. Interestingly though, no-one in the audience had ever heard or heard of the song - so much needs to be done to bring the later Dylan to the attention of the general public! So yes, that multimedia aspect of the project was especially gratifying.

Then in December 2009 the article was published in *Atlantis*, the journal of the Spanish Association for Anglo-American Studies. This is the most prestigious English Studies journal in Spain. Being published there ensured a wide audience, in Spain and also worldwide: the article is on the journal's website, open access and free of charge (www.atlantisjournal.org/ARCHIVE/31.2/2009Rollason.pdf). I know it has already been put on at least one course reading list, and it's been favourably mentioned in the on-line Albuquerque Literary Examiner. I'd like that article to reach as wide a public as possible, academic and non-

academic, and if you consider how Dylan and Poe are both “crossover” figures culturally, I do think it should interest a pretty wide range of readers.

I’d also like to stress how working on that essay sharpened my awareness of the so-called plagiarism issue. My personal view is that, while plagiarism of academic papers is certainly a real problem, if you are talking about literature the whole issue is basically a non-starter. All writing is intertextual and all writers exist in relation to other texts and writers. However, I realise a lot of people haven’t been educated to see it that way. The Poe-Dylan connection is specially interesting here, as you are dealing with two artists from different periods who have both attracted a lot of attention on the plagiarism issue. Poe was obsessed with plagiarism, as in his literary battles with Longfellow, and that itself is a useful reminder that the issue isn’t a new one. With Dylan’s recent work, there has been much discussion of his use of Junichi Saga’s *Confessions of a Yakuza* on “*Love and Theft*”, and then of the poems of Henry Timrod and Ovid’s letters from exile on *Modern Times*. Of course I look at all this more closely in the article, but let me just say here: “*Love and Theft*” isn’t about Japan and *Modern Times* isn’t about the American Civil War or ancient Rome, so how can a rational listener cry “plagiarism”? This is intertextuality, full stop. Another point: would I ever have read Saga’s book, Timrod’s poems or Ovid’s Black Sea confessions - and I enjoyed all of them - had it not been for Dylan? Almost certainly not: Ovid has far better-known works, and I’ll admit that until Dylan’s use of them surfaced I had never heard of either Saga or Timrod. So out of all this I gained some valuable reading experiences. I am sure the whole ... saga (!) has done wonders for the Japanese writer’s profile, and his sales too, here in the West! Indeed, Saga was reported as saying that the story put him on to Bob Dylan’s work, which he didn’t know before, and that he’d listened to “*Love and Theft*” and ... enjoyed the songwriting. So if you look at it calmly, everyone wins!

8) *What Dylan themes have you been working on recently? What Dylan have you been listening to? And do you have a Dylan project for the near future?*

The last Dylan-related book I read was Suze Rotolo’s memoir *A Freewheelin’ Time*, which I thought was excellent and have reviewed on the Critical Corner blog (<http://nicolamenicacci.com/bdcc/on-suze-rotolos-a-freewheelin-timr>). So in tandem with that I was listening a lot - with fresh ears - to *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*. When the project of this interview came up, I went back to *Tell-Tale Signs*, which has been fascinating to listen to again because of the powerful sense it gives of Dylan’s writing as a constant work-in-progress. And now, what might I do next? If an invitation to Spain comes up (I’m hoping), what I would want to look at would be the Spanish translation of *Chronicles* and what we can learn from it as to how far the details of Dylan’s work and writing are translatable across cultures. I’d really like to do that, and hope I will soon get the opportunity. And then, as long as Bob Dylan is with us in this life, there’s always the next album, over there “beyond the horizon” ...