

Joe Dolce

On Bob Dylan and Christopher Ricks:

Hey Mr Cowbell Man

Mr Tambourine Man is one of my favourite Bob Dylan songs. I first heard it on the radio back in 1965 all edited to buggery to fit in that back-then written-in-stone three-minutes singles market (but somehow, even with only one verse and a chorus repeated twice, it still worked). It was performed by *The Byrds*. I felt in lifelong love with both the song and the band.

Previously I had known of Dylan but didn't like him much as I had no idea what the bejzus he was talking about. Occasionally while stoned on marijuana it would seem that I actually heard some kind of fireworks and magic in the words but then that feeling would pass, the glassy-eyed stare would return and I would go in the kitchen and suck on a lemon for fifteen minutes. I didn't understand what the lyrics to *Mr. Tambourine Man* were about either at the time but it didn't matter: the jingle-jangle electric 12-string guitar of Roger McGuinn and those ethereal and delicate three-part harmonies took me 'disappearing through the smoke rings of my mind'. (The cancer warnings were to come much later).

Forty years on, I am now asking myself what the heck is a *tambourine man*? Has anyone out there ever seen one?

Is it some homeless guy on the corner – you throw a coin into his hoop? Why would anyone 'come following' him? Except to the shelter. A creepy old guy with a *magic sailing ship*. Coleridge's ancient mariner in front of Safeway.

Maybe it's the percussionist in a big orchestra with his bell tree and triangle, patiently waiting to slap his tambourine that one or two times in Schoenberg's *Cacophony on a G-String*.

After a half a bottle of Laphroaig, if I squint, I can see a gypsy with a monkey, or hear the shouts of old revival tent meetings - but in the latter case the tambourine player would have been a woman (the men were either preaching, drinking or out riding with the Ku Klux Klan) so in that case why didn't Dylan call the song *Mrs. Tambourine Man*?

I knew this character had nothing to do with drugs, despite what some longhaired critics claimed.

Truthfully, I always assumed it referred to the guy in a rock band (like Gene Clark of the *Byrds*) who only played the tambourine. (Sir Christopher Ricks is alleged to have said that it refers to the thin membrane of William Blake's inner ear.)

In the actual pecking order of musical importance, the tambourine player ranks just below the harmonica player. Two down from the cowbell player. 'More cowbell', as Christopher Walken once said.

The celebrated modern scholar and critic, Sir Christopher Ricks, one of the few critics (rather than practising poet) elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford University, offered up the ultimate shrine to Bob Dylan's writing in his twenty-year in the making book *Dylan's Visions of Sin*. In it, this Queen-knighted avowed atheist, from his podium of unshakable unbelief, tries to jerry-rig the Christian Seven Deadly Sins, the four Cardinal Virtues and the three Heavenly Graces (the very beliefs he just said he doesn't believe in, eh duh) as themes or 'handles' in order to 'pick up' and understand the dynamic of Dylan's work. This idea is so incorrect and off-the-mark that I understand once again why I dropped out of university. Simply put: you can apply this kind of axe-handle to literally *any* passionate artist i.e. Johnny Cash, Hemingway, Anne Sexton, Dylan Thomas so this kind of scaffolding does next to nothing. Why not spend fifty years aligning every chapter in the Bible to key lines in Dylan's songs? It would yield as much real insight.

When asked what his dislikes were, Ricks is alleged to have replied: 'fans who sing along at Dylan concerts and Virginia Woolf.' I would give him a failing mark on both accounts. Virginia Woolf is music to my ears and as important historically as Dylan, if not more so - and, excuse me, singing along at concerts is the *essence* of the folk tradition wherein Dylan first sprang. When I ordered Ricks' book at Readings Bookshop, the girl serving me said, 'that's all we need: another book about Dylan.' And she was the salesperson! Truth from the mouths of babes.

Ricks made a comment about the first time he saw the infamous **Victoria Secret** lingerie commercial: ' [Dylan] is in it. A famous model, although she wasn't famous to me, is in it. I don't know her name; I'm not interested in that I find him more beautiful,' said Mr. Ricks, sinking down into his shoulders and bringing his hand up to his mouth with a little self-conscious giggle. "It's 30 seconds of

seeing him prowling slightly and, I think, looking fine and good. I, of course, know what Victoria's Secret is," he said. "Do you know what Victoria's secret is? Victoria's secret is John Brown - that is, the gillie with whom Queen Victoria was supposedly really in love so is it just a coincidence that Dylan's lately been performing - as he did not for decades - his song 'John Brown'?" He paused. "Of course not!"

Yikes! Of course, the two John Browns are different people. Surely he jests. Or does he?

Over educated and over-celebrated intellectuals and connect-the-cosmic-dots critics like Mr Ricks, who cannot write actual credible poetry worth a damn themselves, somehow in a supreme irony of nature end up sitting on chairs as poetry professors at the most prestigious universities in the world. The last thing I would recommend to someone who actually wants to write song lyrics or poetry is to apprentice yourself to an academic like this. The obsessive-forensic way in which Ricks takes every single image of Dylan apart in the spirit of glorifying him and making some almighty connection to Milton, Keats and whoever – is actually the precise process that acts as saboteur of the very poetic potential in Ricks himself and anyone else who takes this left brain approach to writing too seriously. Dylan once said he doesn't like critics who 'dissect my songs like rabbits.' If Ricks truly respected Dylan, why doesn't he listen to him? i.e. hands off my bunny! And if Ricks truly understood the real genius in Dylan's best writing, he would have been influenced by it in his own poetry. Where is the evidence of this? By now, Ricks ought to be writing his own song lyrics or light verse. It ain't that hard. He should have been imitating his sacred hero, as Dylan once imitated Woody Guthrie in order to learn. Salvatore Dali said so succinctly, 'those that are afraid to imitate, create nothing.' Why hasn't Ricks apprenticed himself directly to the *master* (as I assure you I did when Dylan truly *was* a master) and learned the craft Dylan had to teach? Ricks hasn't learned anything from Dylan. He is content to be just another salesman – albeit an educated one - working on Bob's Dylan Farm.

I can barely make my way through *Visions of Sin* without passing out – a good book to read when you are having a hard time getting to sleep - I feel the poetic soul in me atrophying in degrees as I wade through the pretentious and inaccurate muck. I feel like I'm being interfered with. Ricks is a true atheist, not only of God - but also of his own poetic self. He does

not believe. He is happy to be Bob Dylan's bitch: 'Of course I have to concede at once that my imagination is immensely smaller than his.'

I wouldn't say that. It took quite an active imagination to write this fat work of critical pork fat. This tome needs to sit up there on the dusty shelf along with L. Ron Hubbard's sciencefictionology.

Ricks continues perplexingly to refute his very own authority: "The greatest literary critics have been poets." Ok, good one, Chris - so show us *your* poetry if you want us to take you seriously as a credible literary critic. Where is it? Richard Wagner once said 'if someone cannot *do* what you can do, do not *give* them the authority to criticize it.'

Then suddenly Ricks expels a moment of rare clarity:

"Granted it is possible that all this is mere coincidence and that I am imaging things rather than noticing how Dylan imagined things.'

Granted there never was a truer word spoken in this entire book.

There are many things I could quote to illustrate the Nostradamitis of Ricks' leap-off-the-cliff waffling. Here is one:

“..in the first song on *Self-Portrait: All the Tired Horses* . . .

‘All the tired horses in the sun
How'm I s'posed to get any ridin' done
Hmmm'

or rather:

‘hmmmmmmmm hmmmmmm hmmm hmm-hmm'

“Dylan who believes every word of it doesn't sing a word of it. With endearing effrontery, he leaves it to the back-up singers – except that it doesn't make sense to call them back-up singers in the absence of any full frontal voice of his. His has not backed down exactly or backed out but he has backed away - from the very first song on an album called, of all things, *Self-Portrait*. Where is Dylan's self now that we need it? But then you don't need it. The song gets on very

beautifully without him, thank you. A good Self Portrait may begin with Self Abnegation.”

Hello? Are you still with me? Wakey wakey. Good.

Here’s another *deep* look inside *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*:

‘For now it is too late. Now is the time for your tears. Or as he sings, ‘for now’s the time for your tears’. If I’d had the genius to come up with the song, I fear that – having sung ‘now ain’t the time for your tears’ all the way through til now – I would have gratified myself emphatically by singing ‘Now *is* the time for your tears.’ He doesn’t sing ‘Now is,’ he sings ‘Now’s’. The contraction at the very end quietly takes out anything hotly hortatory.”

Can’t you just feel the horrid heat of the hot hortatory hovering? (From the Latin *hortatorius* ‘tending or aiming to exhort.’) Of course, I could be wrong, but that contraction could have more likely been just a simple six of one, half dozen of the other decision, or Dylan could have been trying to squeeze two syllables over one musical note or . . .

Here is a fragment from a lecture Ricks gave for **The Jepson School of Leadership Studies**. Ricks is much easier to watch than to read. He dotters and personally I find that entertaining. Dylan invited the Queen’s Knight backstage after one of his concerts:

“ ‘Mr. Ricks we meet at last.’ [Dylan said.] I wanted to burst into tears and offer him my body in marriage. Or I would have an operation if need be – or not – if he didn’t want that. I said, *read any good books lately?* - which I was told as a child to say to people if you don’t know what to say to people, *read any good books lately?* He said **Richard III.**”

Let’s imagine how Professor Ricks might dissect my own Brer Rabbit of a lyric parody, *Hey Mr Combell Man*. The lights are dimming. Shhhhh!

“Good afternoon students of poetry, Poe, trees and dirt po’ Magnolia trees. Today I would like to discombobulate a song-lyric that belongs right up there next to the finest song-lyrics of Milton, Keats and R L Stevenson using the **Seven Wonders of the Ancient World** and the **Three Faces of Eve** as devices which will serve as ‘vice-grips’ to squeeze the life out of the

creative process. From the first line of *Hey Mr Cowbell Man* we know that we are in the presence of one who has truly tasted milk. Possibly sour milk. Milk, bells, cows. The barn reeks of them. The metaphor of the cowbell suggests not merely the cheap market cowbell around the neck of some skinny Indian cow but the elegant *trychel*, the large cowbell of the Swiss alps, hammered out of sheet metal with a much less clean clanking sound - but a bell lighter and easier to for the cow to carry. This would be important for a songwriter-performer if he chose to wear it around his neck while performing his Never-Ending-Please-Stop-Someone-Pull-Out-The-Plug Tour. The archtypical mooing of the ribs-poking-out cowish cosmic mother is taken directly from ancient Indian erotic stone masonry that the songwriter would have been familiar with from the National Geographic he read in the dentist's waiting room. The sacred cow is held in esteem through India, and most evident on the Australian Indian take-away menu as there is no such thing as a cow curry, for instance.

Let's just examine the key lines of the song.

HEY MR COWBELL MAN

Hey Mr. Cowbell man play more cowbell please
I'm so thirsty and there ain't no milk for drinking too.
Hey Mr. Cowbell man sing a nasal wheeze
all that clang-clang gibberish moaning I can't follow you.

Take me for a ride upon your dappled cowhide back
tie me up inside your sack
a three-legged race on crack
let me slip and twist my back
get compensation.

I'm ready in my underwear with Victoria's Secret's cash
and my pencil thin moustache
a motorcycle there to mash
I could hit a tree and crash
only think about tomorrow
in recuperation.

Let me trip my tongue upon the clichés I recall
Humpty Dumpty on a wall
roll and tumbling all night long
I could cut and paste it all
no one would ever have the gall
to say I'm blinkin'

I'm ready to jump off a cliff to your gay Pied Piper tune
let me drown in some lagoon
get married by Sun Myung Moon
drink some Kool-Aid from a spoon
my mind's so out of tune
for real thinkin'.

Hey Mr. Cowbell man play more cowbell please
I'm so thirsty and there ain't no milk for drinking too
Hey Mr. Cowbell man sing that nasal wheeze
all that clang-clang gibberish moaning I can't follow you.

In the title itself we are reminded of the First Wonder of the Ancient World, the **Temple of Artemis** at Olympia; Artemis goddess of the wildland, Mistress of Cows, with reversed gender:

Hey Mr. Cowbell man play more cowbell please
I'm so thirsty and there ain't no milk for drinking too.

Now the counter-theme of the First Face of Eve emerges, that of **Eve White**, symbolized by the milky-white colour – Eve White, the timid wife/mother, who thirsts, as Dr Patrick Carnes calls it, to 'access the unresolved' of her repressed unconscious desire. The word 'too' also reminds us that 'thirst' and 'drinking' are more closely related than we might think.

Before The Rose became the dominant metaphor of the Romantic Era, The Milk was the most common image in English poetry. The great blues singer, Blind John Milton, in 1658, dictated *Paradise Lost* to an amanuensis who would read it back to him for corrections. Milton's daughter described her father during these times as a 'cow ready for milking'

nervously pacing the room until the amanuensis would arrive with his metaphorical bucket and stool.

Hey Mr. Cowbell man sing a nasal wheeze
all that clang-clang gibberish moaning I can't follow you.

In the last line, the inability to 'follow' will naturally create the need for the Second Face of Eve, **Eve Black**, to emerge later as salvation for the repressed Eve White.

Take me for a ride upon your dappled cowhide back

In another reference to the goddess Artemis: where Atalanta participated in the hunt for the Calydonian Cow, which Artemis had sent to destroy Calydon because King Oeneus had forgotten to milk her at the harvest sacrifices. Atalanta drew the first blood and was awarded the prize of the cowhide. She hung it in a sacred grove at Tegea as a dedication to the goddess.

Further homage is paid to John Keats' fourth stanza in *Ode on a Grecian Cowbell*:

" . . .to what green altar, O mysterious priest,
lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies. ..
and all her silken flanks with garlands drest?"

Notice the efficiency in the word 'drest' instead of 'dressed' whereby Keats saves two whole letters. This was important in the old days of the wooden printing press because each letter was hand-carved by Trappist monks and costs could get out of hand.

tie me up inside your sack

A reference to the Second Wonder of the World: **The Great Pyramid of Giza**. To be tied in the Cowbell man's sack, or in Jungian terms, the King's Sack, a reference to the only object found in the King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid: a rectangular granite sarcophagus.

I'm ready in my underwear with Victoria's Secret's cash

Here irrepressibly appears the Second Face of Eve – **Eve Black** –the wild, fun-loving, alter-personality who WILL follow the Cowbell man, come-what-may.

Let me trip my tongue upon the clichés I recall
Humpty Dumpty on a wall

The tragic image of the fragile Humpty Dumpty resonates with the Third Wonder of the World, the destruction of the **Statue of Zeus at Olympia**. 11th-century Byzantine historian Georgios Kedrenos recorded that the statue was carried off to Constantinople, where it was destroyed in the great fire of the Lauseion, in AD 475 but earlier accounts claim it perished with the temple when it burned in 425.

I'm ready to jump off a cliff to your gay Pied Piper tune

The Fourth Wonder of the World, **The Hanging Gardens of Babylon** were described this way in the *Scriptores Rerum Alexandrii Magni* - "and then there were the Hanging Gardens. Paracleisos going up to the top is like climbing a mountain. Each terrace rises up from the last like the syrinx, the **pipes of pan**, [my emphasis] which are made of several tubes of unequal length." Here in a unpredictably twist of expectation and creative license by the writer, instead of climbing, we encounter a sudden fall in order to:

let me drown in some lagoon

brilliantly segueing into the Fifth Wonder of the World, **The Colossus of Rhodes** as it symbolically crumbles into the sea

get married by Sun Myung Moon

Sun and Moon: the Sixth Wonder, **The Lighthouse of Alexandria**, and the bright beams that guided ships to safety through the treacherous cow-blind reefs

drink some Kool-Aid from a spoon

Another segue – not merely with overtones of the tragedy of Jim Jones at Guyana, but on a more profound level, the Sixth Wonder of the World: **The Mausoleum of Maussollos at Halicarnassus**, where during sacrifice rituals the bodies of a large number of dead cows were placed on the stairs leading to the tomb, and the stairs filled with stones and rubble, sealing the access.

Robert Louis Stevenson in *The Cow* strikes another clanger:

The friendly cow all red and white,
I love with all my heart:
She gives me cream with all her might,
To eat with apple-tart.

And blown by all the winds that pass [my emphasis]
And wet with all the showers,
She walks among the meadow grass
And eats the meadow flowers.

Expanding that fifth line, Dylan would later write:

‘The answer my friend is *lowing* in the wind.’
(A typographical error on the official lyric sheet accompanying Dylan’s album resulted in one of the most popular misunderstandings in contemporary songcraft.)

Hey Mr. Cowbell man play more cowbell please
I’m so thirsty and there ain’t no milk for drinking too
Hey Mr. Cowbell man sing that nasal wheeze
all that clang-clang gibberish moaning I can’t follow you.

Repetition of the chorus here acts as an anchor or safe harbor and finally demands the emergence of the Third Face of Eve - **Jane** – the stable unifying personality who can reconcile and mediate between both the self-effacing Eve White and the uncontrollable Eve Black - between the ‘thirst’ and the ‘ain’t no milk for drinking too’.

Robert Frost, another obvious inspiration, in *The Cow in Apple Time*, wrote:

She bellows on a knoll against the sky.
Her udder shrivels and the milk goes dry.

echoing the seminal trochaic second line:

‘I’m so thirsty and there ain’t no milk for drinking too.’

Full circle. Thank you for your attention this afternoon, class, and in closing
I’d like to leave you with a final thought:

“Therefore never send to know for whom the cowbell tolls; it tolls for thee.”
I think John Donne said that.”

Ecstatic applause. Sir Professor Christopher Ricks exits stage left.

Hmmmmmmmm hmmmmmmmm hmmm hmm-hmm.

I’ll let you clang on my cowbell if you let me clang on yours.

I said that.

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