



Dylan's Visions of Sin

By Christopher Ricks

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Dylan's Visions of Sin By Christopher Ricks

Bob Dylan's ways with words are a wonder, matched as they are with his music and verified by those voices of his. In response to the whole range of Dylan early and late (his songs of social conscience, of earthly love, of divine love, and of contemplation), this critical appreciation listens to Dylan's attentive genius, alive in the very words and their rewards.

"Fools they made a mock of sin." Dylan's is an art in which sins are laid bare (and resisted), virtues are valued (and manifested), and the graces brought home. The seven deadly sins, the four cardinal virtues (harder to remember?), and the three heavenly graces: these make up everybody's world -- but Dylan's in particular. Or rather, his worlds, since human dealings of every kind are his for the artistic seizing. Pride is anatomized in "Like a Rolling Stone," Envy in "Positively 4th Street," Anger in "Only a Pawn in Their Game" ... But, hearteningly, Justice reclaims "Hattie Carroll," Fortitude "Blowin' in the Wind," Faith "Precious Angel," Hope "Forever Young," and Charity "Watered-Down Love."

In The "New Yorker," Alex Ross wrote that "Ricks's writing on Dylan is the best there is. Unlike most rock critics -- 'forty-year-olds talking to ten-year-olds,' Dylan has called them -- he writes for adults." In the "Times (London)," Bryan Appleyard maintained that "Ricks, one of the most distinguished literary critics of our time, is almost the only writer to have applied serious literary intelligence to Dylan ..."

Dylan's countless listeners (and even the artist himself, who knows?) may agree with W.H. Auden that Ricks "is exactly the kind of critic every poet dreams of finding."

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Dylan's Visions of Sin By Christopher Ricks Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #117095 in Books
- Published on: 2005-07-26
- Released on: 2005-07-26
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x 1.19" w x 5.31" l, 1.08 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 528 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Ricks, a professor of humanities at Boston University, allows his own musings about Bob Dylan to go "blowin' in the wind" in this love letter to the enigmatic bard. Focusing on the centrality of the seven deadly sins (pride, anger, lust, envy, sloth, greed, covetousness), the four virtues (justice, temperance, fortitude, prudence) and the three graces (faith, hope, love) in Dylan's writings, Ricks confirms Dylan's poetic genius and elevates the poet of the north country to canonical status alongside Tennyson, Shakespeare and Milton. Through a series of closely engaged readings of selected songs, Ricks demonstrates how each reflects a concern with sin, virtue or grace. Thus, "Lay, Lady, Lay" becomes an anthem of lust, "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" a paean to fortitude and "If Not for You" a tribute to love. In every reading of the songs, he compares Dylan's poetry to the work of other poets, often finding either explicit correspondence or structural echoes of earlier works. For example, Ricks contends that the structure of "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" mimics the structure of the early Scottish ballad "Lord Randal." Sometimes Ricks strives to be too hip and precious—as when he characterizes "Lay, Lady, Lay" as "erotolayladylaylia," and when he concludes that there are similarities between other poems and Dylan's by providing a list of one word correspondences, as he does with "Lay, Lady, Lay" and Donne's "To His Mistress Going to Bed." Nevertheless, Ricks's affectionate critical tour-de-force reminds readers why Dylan continues to encourage our "hearts always to be joyful" and our "songs always to be sung" as we remain "forever young."

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Review

Ricks's writing on Dylan is the best there is -- Alex Ross * New Yorker * A great case has been made by a great critic (Christopher Ricks) that a great lyricist - Bob Dylan - is, in fact, a poet * New York Review of Books * The rewards are just as one would expect: a bracing attention to artfulness, a wonderful sensitivity to nuance, and a particularly brilliant sympathy with the purpose and effect of Dylan's rhymes -- Andrew Motion * Guardian * Everything Ricks has to say about Dylan is original. He is a critic who seems to be talking to you from within the work. He can turn the smallest niche in a poem into a vast cathedral of resonance and implication. -- Bryan Appleyard * Sunday Times * Bob Dylan is fast becoming rock's equivalent of James Joyce -- Sean O'Hagan * Observer * Compelling, convincing and challenging work of literary scholarship. -- Alan Taylor * Sunday Herald * Structured around the concepts of sin, virtue and grace, Ricks's close reading and imaginative cross-referencing will indeed uncover meanings in Dylan's songs that would never have occurred to you. -- Anthony Quinn * Daily Telegraph * Zips along with irrepressible good humour... Ricks's work has the lustre of a lifetime of engagement with greatness. -- Peter Aspden * Financial Times * Fascinating, there are wonderfully penetrating and illuminating moments to be found. I was never less than stimulated and frequently stirred. -- John Preston * Sunday Telegraph * Ricks is an exemplar of the diminishingly seen art of "close reading", and expicator of Milton, Keats, Tennyson and Eliot... Such clockwork analysis never seems to drain Dylan's work of its vitality, but rather to renew a listener's amazement... In doing so he's found the songs all the more extraordinary, not wanting in any measure... Ricks's book leads you back to Dylan's music, no small virtue. -- Jonathan Lethem * New York Times Book Review * A serious-minded and forensic examination of Dylan's use of language, image and onomatopoeia. -- Peter Murphy * Hot Press *

About the Author

Christopher Ricks is a Warren Professor of the Humanities, codirector of the Editorial Institute at Boston University, and a member of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics. He was formerly professor of

English at the universities of Bristol and Cambridge.

Ricks is the author of *Milton's Grand Style* (1963), *Tennyson* (second edition, 1989), *Keats and Embarrassment* (1974), *The Force of Poetry* (1984), *T.S. Eliot and Prejudice* (1988), *Beckett's Dying Words* (1993), *Essays in Appreciation* (1996), *Allusion to the Poets* (2002), and *Reviewery* (2003). He is also the editor of *Poems of Tennyson* (second edition, 1987), *The New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* (1987), *A.E. Housman: Collected Poems and Selected Prose* (1988), *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917* by T.S. Eliot (1996), *The Oxford Book of English Verse* (1999), *Selected Poems of James Henry* (2002), and *Decisions and Revisions in T.S. Eliot* (2003).

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