

## THE DYLANISTA

Right now, in the fury of the moment, it would take Linnaeus to untangle and classify the infinite variety of Dylan scholars. We could spend an amusing afternoon paging through a *Species hominum litteris Dylani eruditorum*, identifying familiar, not so familiar, and positively bizarre kinds. But a taxonomy alone, regardless of its categorizing properties (and its entertainment value), wouldn't give us any idea of the future course of Dylan scholarship. In fact, ironically, by tracing, grouping, listing, and labeling all the extant types, while maybe resolving confusion on one hand, would, on the other, create a mystery all its own: that is, which species of *homo litteris Dylani eruditus*, what particular kind of Dylan scholar, will survive?

Once upon a time, or so we're told, people would perform Sortes to predict the future. They would choose a sacred book or a literary classic like *The Aeneid* and open it to a random page. Then they'd toss a talismanic object like, say, a skeleton key, onto the open page. The exact passage where the key landed was considered prophetic, revealing the future of the key-tosser. An unlikely legend has it the Emperor Constantine used *Sortes Vergilianae* to make decisions about military strategy. And in Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Bathsheba Everdene tries *Sortes Bibliae* to choose between two suitors for her hand (and we know where that got her).

But still, maybe trying Sortes would be apt for predicting the fate of Jack Fate scholarship. We could toss a D# Blues Harp onto a randomly opened page of our new *Species* and reveal the future Dylan scholar where the harmonica lands. Would it be the Obsessive Encyclopedist? Or the Eschewer of Footnotes, a Harold Bloom of Dylan critics? Or perhaps the key would land on the page containing that rare thing, the Performance Historian? Or would it be the Indefatigable Biographical Interpreter? The New Hermeneuticist? Or maybe the Musicologist, also an inexplicably rare specimen in Dylan studies? Or, *mirabile dictu*, would the Prosodist finally emerge from the shadows?

I don't mean to be glib—or not just glib—and I realize that all the above categories can be combined, in whole or in part. Nevertheless, a Silver Age of scholarship seems increasingly to be replacing what will no doubt be regarded as the Golden Age of Dylan studies: according to Ovid, there was no law or punishment, and there were no judges, in the Golden Age. But with the Silver Age, technology came into the world, along with rules and hardship (“the oxen struggled”).

As eyewitnesses fade away and the fan base shifts to those who can legitimately say “I wasn't there,” archivists and researchers increase in value. There have always been hoarders, collectors, and secret traders of Dylanalia. But the systematic gathering and cataloguing of collections only recently began—the reviewing of Dylan's notebooks and scribbled songs, unseen photographs, matchbook rhymes, unreleased recordings, cached draft lyrics, letters, postcards, and pen-and-ink doodles. This systematizing is the harbinger of Silver-Age technology. It's a new morning, and, predictably, the locusts are singing (or swarming). New legal strictures have appeared. And, with the imprimatur of academic affiliation, the judges of peer-review have all but replaced the lawless brilliance of Golden Age authors. The newly entitled scholarly community has developed a distinct skepticism for what Walter Pater called “appreciations.”

On one hand, this is all to the good. I am, after all, writing this column for the *Dylan Review*, a journal manifestly, and by credo, scholarly. And, presumably without coercion, you've chosen to read this new journal committed to Silver-Age peer-reviewing and the technologies inseparable from erudition, research, and scholarly writing on Bob Dylan.

On the other hand, however—if I can argue briefly *in utramque partem*—is this progress? I wonder. I wonder if there'll be a price to pay for going through things twice. Consider the case of the visual arts. The Golden Age of connoisseurship in art criticism—more learned perhaps than the Dylan *Siglo de oro*—was nonetheless pushed aside by the arrival of pedigreed art historians

flaunting PhDs. The museums' notorious infinity-salvation problem fell into the tight grip of academic scholarship. "Appreciations" and essayistic forays, written by now-controversial connoisseurs, soon disappeared from learned journals. The times were different, but I wonder: is this a cautionary tale for Dylan studies?

A Yeats poem, "The Scholars," comes to mind:

Bald heads forgetful of their sins  
Old, learned, respectable bald heads  
Edit and annotate the lines  
That young men, tossing on their beds,  
Rhymed out in love's despair  
To flatter beauty's ignorant ear.

All shuffle there; all cough in ink;  
All wear the carpet with their shoes;  
All think what other people think;  
All know the man their neighbour knows.  
Lord, what would they say  
Did their Catullus walk that way?

What would we say, as scholars, should *our* Catullus walk our way? And how would we say it? Yeats, a poet, sees little hope for closing the gap between poetry and scholarship. He mocks the old scholars: their staid respectability owes everything, paradoxically, to young men tossing on their beds "in love's despair." He laughs at their uniformity and purblind annotations. Something is happening, but they don't know what it is.

Yeats's scenario reminds me of Saul Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift*. The guilt-ridden, embittered Charlie Citrine is asked by an eager graduate student what he thought about his late friend, the poet Von Humboldt Fleisher (a thinly disguised Delmore Schwartz). Citrine replies mercilessly, "I think the dead owe us a living."

But do they? Or is it the other way around? I think Yeats is half-wrong and Charlie Citrine has inverted the question. It isn't what they owe us—dead or alive—but what we, as critics, owe them. Scholars might need a biographical reality-check from time to time, as Yeats too-scornfully reminds us, but the *work* is the thing. Critical tact and scholarly detachment defeat familiarity, sad as that might seem to all of us who feel a personal connection to Dylan's voice and songs. But our ongoing debt is to Dylan's oeuvre, his collected work, regardless of how broadly we define that work. The ideal Dylan scholar won't "think what other people think," I hope, but won't fall into the flesh-and-blood trap either. I hope, instead, she'll combine critical erudition and learned speculation with a hint of Golden-Age vision.

Imagine if the D# Blues Harp landed on a scholar like that in the *Species*.

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