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"Come Writers and Critics. . ."

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I approach these five books from the perspective of one of the more peculiar and eccentric by-ways of contemporary criticism – Dylan Studies. Although he is arguably the most popular poet of the 20th century, and unarguably the only one to have been nominated both for a Nobel Prize and a Grammy, the critical understanding of Bob Dylan's work has lagged far behind his achievement, in a way still summed up best in his own famous challenge to a querulous music critic: "Something is happening, but you don't know what it is, do you, Mr Jones?" It was with general curiosity, but also a more particular interest in trying to understand what Dylan scholarship is doing, is not doing, and should be doing, that I turned to these new studies on the theory and aesthetics of popular music.

A problem for critics interested in a serious study of Bob Dylan is that he seems to cross so many traditional boundaries. Is he poet or songwriter? Are his key influences musical or literary ones? Does he belong to popular culture, high culture, or neither? Is he a modernist mask-wearer, a postmodern multimedia phenom, or simply an old-fashioned romantic seer? Innovator, or fierce traditionalist? And is the copy-text of "Like a Rolling Stone," say, the printed lyric, the album version, or one or more of the thousands of variants that Dylan has performed live? Instead of anyone's really having been able, thus far, to take Dylan's achievement whole, we have had a kind of shuttlecock between the literary interpreters – critics like Aidan Day, Stephen Scobie, and Christopher Ricks – who have focussed on a close-reading of the lyrics (whether in New Critical or deconstructive timbre), and the performance-oriented writers – music critics like Clinton Heylin, Paul Williams, and Robert Shelton – whose efforts have tended to be more descriptive/impressionistic than analytical. And while these are all worthy questers after understanding, almost drowning them out these days is the Internet, where, predictably, Dylan "sites" of varying levels of hysteria proliferate like toadstools.

Whereas Dylan was, famously, taken up by young university instructors in the 1960s, it was a short-lived phenomenon. This is particularly odd when you discover, as I have done by riffling through their record collections and then interrogating them mercilessly, that a great many literary academics born during or after the Second World War do have a high estimation of Dylan, and regard his work as important to their understandings, and their lives. Strangely, most of them have chosen to sequester this personal artistic enthusiasm from their professional interests – one reason, surely, being that the political climate in our universities since the early 1980s has hardly encouraged the taking up of a poet who is American, male, white, pro-Israel, some kind of Christian, and a multi-millionaire. Yet even a critic like Harold Bloom, supposedly unconstrained by these ideological categories and predisposed to American romanticisms, has been led away from Dylan by his general aversion to the popular: the “Great Books” appendix to *The Western Canon* would lead one to the strange conclusion that, a century from now, Dylan’s name will be entirely unknown. (If Bloom seriously believes that John Hollander will be remembered long after Bob Dylan is forgotten, then I am tempted to add the Wildean codicil: “After, but not until.”)

There are, however, some recent indications that Dylan Studies could be back on the up-and-up. There was a big conference at Stanford early in 1998, and then a major study by Greil Marcus – an unaffiliated public critic, but one with many connections to the academy and its discourses – of the so-called “basement tapes” that Dylan recorded privately with his group, The Band, following his motorcycle accident in 1967, and that, released in a dribble of bootleg and official versions ever since, have become a kind of nuclear generator of rumour, then fascination, then influence. *Invisible Republic* is an impressive, occasionally frustrating book that, although it remains essentially on the close-reading side of the shuttcock net, brings a sense of performative presence, and some cultural context, to bear as well.

It is on Dylan as folk-artist that Marcus concentrates, and he is particularly good on this artist’s ambiguous relationship to social music and social movements. Nobody has understood better, I think, the extent to which whatever it is that makes Dylan an artist with a claim to permanent value is the *same* thing that caused his rupture with his established folk/protest audience in 1965 and 1966 – a rupture summed up in the famous cry of “Judas!” from a fan in Manchester, captured forever on tape, and now a kind of cryogenic warning about the dangers of stardom for a serious artist. Dylan’s turn to electric music and experimental (“psychedelic”) lyricism not only implied the freedom of

imagination from socially lived commitment, but also upbraided a whole system of cherished “folkie” beliefs:

For when Dylan turned away from the equation of life and art, when he followed where his music led him, he turned away not just from a philosophical proposition but from an entire complex of beliefs and maxims that to so many defined what was good and what was bad. Thus when he appeared before them holding a garishly shaped and colored electric guitar and dressed in a bizarre tight suit that looked like a single piece of checkered cloth, like some medieval court fool’s costume bought on Carnaby Street, he signified no mere apostasy, but the destruction of hope. As he stood on the stage he seemed to affirm the claims of the city over the country, and capital over labour – and also the claims of the white artist over the black Folk, selfishness over compassion, rapacity over need, the thrill of the moment over the trials of endurance, the hustler over the worker, the thief over the orphan. (30)

When Dylan, recuperating from his accident as the decade he helped to shape winds down, returns to a “folk” style, holed up in a Woodstock basement with his backing group and a reel-to-reel tape-deck, it is, on Marcus’ reckoning, with a more genuine engagement with the American folk-music tradition than his earlier, “protest” phase entailed. The odd quality of the original songs on the tapes is that they *feel* like traditional materials that have been around forever (members of The Band have testified that they frequently were unsure if Dylan had written the songs, or was remembering them). Marcus’ explanation of this is that weirdness and gnosticism, so evident on the tapes, and not social consciousness, mark out the folk aesthetic; so that, in a sense, commitment to any cause is a detour for folk sensibility. A key text in this argument is Harry Smith’s *Folkways Anthology of American Folk Music*. First released in the early 1950s, and containing 84 commercial recordings from the 1920s, the *Anthology* was a key text in the folk revival of the 1960s; its recent re-release on CD, with Smith’s suitably occult original catalogue and a new accompanying booklet, has concentrated everyone’s mind on how eccentric, mystical, and gothic the folk imagination is: its worldview, ill-starred and pessimistic, is concerned less with temporal social justice than with themes like metamorphosis, madness, incest, and murder. For Marcus this worldview functions as a “public secret,” the “invisible republic” of his title: his chapter on the *Anthology*, also included in the booklet that accompanies its re-release, is called “The Old, Weird America.” This world’s makers are people (men, overwhelmingly) who use their art to stand out from their communities, rather than to identify with them (the relevance of this for Bob Dylan’s own radically individualist stance is obvious).

My reservation about *Invisible Republic* is, first, that Marcus much too frequently allows his own style to imitate the gnomic quality of the songs he is

was the foundational element in his own coming-of-age – Cantwell sees the revival as an aftereffect, a fading coal:

What is to me most intriguing about the dissolution in the early fifties of the "folksong movement," the phrase I use to refer to the politically motivated singing of folksongs between, roughly, the emergence of the Popular Front in 1935 and the Wallace presidential campaign of 1948, is that it was induced by cold-war anticommunism, which drove not only folksingers but many others in the arts, education, and entertainment out of the public arena; it was just this suppression that "deideologised," or depoliticized, the folksong movement, preparing the way for the folk revival by sending the ideologically derived signs and symbols of the earlier movement into the postwar world apparently fresh, innocent, and untouched, ready to carry both the aspirations and the discontents of a new generation. (21)

With tremendous aphoristic panache – "Every generation, working from the mystery of its own origins, rewrites the history of the last" (117) – and in the best traditions of enlightenment cultural history, Cantwell is superb at drawing together the whole web of connections that supported and informed the blossoming of folk music in the early 1960s: black minstrelsy, radical Jewry, unionism, New York as an icon, the socialist youth-camp movement of the '40s, the Newport Festival, and the original romantic idea of a "folk" embedded within a system of noble hierarchy, are all among the elements woven into Cantwell's narrative. He, too, spends a lot of time on the *Folkways Anthology*, and although his idea of the records and catalogue as a kind of folk "memory theatre" is suggestive, he tends a little too much, and more than Marcus, to drag these songs into the light and try and provide plausible accounts of why, for example, Bascom Lamar Lunsford wishes so insistently that he was a mole in the ground, or why, on "The Coo Coo Bird," Clarence Ashley avows that he will build a log cabin on a mountain "So I can / See Willie / When he goes / On by." This of course is in line with Cantwell's enlightenment project, but we still need to remember Bob Dylan's own, very different, view on it all:

I have to think of all this as traditional music. Traditional music is based on hexagrams. It comes from legends, Bibles, plagues, and it revolves around vegetables and death. There's nobody that's going to kill traditional music. All those songs about roses growing out of people's brains and lovers who are really geese and swans that turn into angels – they're not going to die. It's all those paranoid people who think that someone's going to come and take away their toilet paper – *they're* going to die. Songs like "Which Side Are You On?" and "I Love You Porgy" – they're not folk-music songs; they're political songs. They're *already* dead. (Quoted in Marcus, 113)

discussing. "Time is longer than rope, and more supple" (68) is a characteristic Marcus utterance, and one of many to which we can only reply, "Yes and no" (the on-line satirical magazine *Suck* has referred, with some justice, to Marcus' style as "associative vine-swinging"). Second, Marcus tends, like Christopher Ricks before him, to over-read the songs somewhat, or, more accurately, to read them as more finished objects than I believe they are – as if Dylan were a verbal fustbudget like T.S. Eliot or John Donne, instead of a great American slap-dash artist in the tradition of Walt Whitman and Hart Crane. This is particularly fatal in the case of the basement tapes, which, to use two favourite terms of Northrop Frye, contain the unrestrained doodle and babble of Dylan's imagination. Dylan's doodling is of course utterly fascinating (in a lesser artist it would be unbearable), but when Marcus relentlessly allegorises throwaway songs like "Clothesline Saga" (in which a hilarious reference to vice-presidential dementia sets him off on a long detour concerning Hubert Humphrey), the weight of the commentary is more than even the most gifted doodling ought to be forced to bear. "Reefer run amok," a comment on some of these songs by Band guitarist Robbie Robertson, quoted by Marcus (75), seems closer to the truth, and a useful corrective to seeing them as polished gems. Marcus is at his best when he reads the material, not as finished art, but simply as a kind of scrapbook of all the various and vagrant bits and pieces of American folk history.

Although it also deals with American folk-music traditions, Robert Cantwell's exquisitely written and richly informative *When We Were Good* is a very different book to Marcus'. It is, in fact, a traditional kind of cultural history, aware at once of the social and political forces and, especially, institutions that shape artistic understandings, but at the same time of the individuals who, with all their own baggage (and I intend the term literally: Cantwell knows what kind of guitar or banjo every folkie and bluesman of the '50s and '60s dragged around with him), give to these understandings a sound, a flavour, a voice.

Although he necessarily goes back to the 1920s, '30s, and (especially) '40s, Cantwell's theme is the "folk revival" of the early 1960s, or, more specifically, "the seven-year period between the release of the Kingston Trio's 'Tom Dooley' and Bob Dylan's appearance at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965 with an electric guitar and a blues band" (20-21). Cantwell is interested in the immense popularity of post-Tom Dooley folk music; his explanation, in brief, is that it arises as a depoliticised version of 1940s musical activism, driven towards a more generalised humanitarian stance by the virulent anti-communism of the 1950s. In a sense, then, for all his investment in its allure – he evokes brilliantly how it

As a sociological critic, Robert Cantwell clearly could not have much sympathy with this idea that political songs are "already dead." Cantwell's heroes are the passionately politicised precursors of the revival, and eventual victims of the House Un-American Activities Committee, people like Pete Seeger and Paul Robeson. And the chief weakness in his book is a long detour on the HUAC hearings, and the role that business and industry played in setting the tone for them: these pages reflect about as intimate an understanding of how business and industry actually think as HUAC possessed of communism. Cantwell's squeaky-clean received version of the pro-Soviet American intelligentsia of the 1940s needs to be supplemented by such recent revisionary texts as Philip Roth's novel, *I Married a Communist*, and David Horowitz's memoir, *Radical Son*.

Dylan, clearly, was troubled by some of the attitudes of his older comrades in the early 1960s (when he finally went electric at the Newport Folk Festival, Pete Seeger tried literally to axe the show, by cutting the sound cables). And indeed, for all his professed admiration for Dylan, Cantwell is able to say little of interest about him: when we finally get to the chapter on Dylan and Joan Baez, we learn much more about Baez, who, of course, intensified, rather than off-loading, her political commitments. As a critic interested in movements and institutions, there is another romantic idea – the renegade, anti-social, individualist artist – that Cantwell cannot get a proper handle on. The ambivalence towards Dylan is indicated in Cantwell's acknowledgment that it is precisely when Dylan turns towards *that* possibility, and becomes the first solo rock superstar, that the curtain falls on the revival. But I suggest that, without the spark-plug of that romantic possibility, Dylan, on the basement tapes and beyond, could never have recuperated folk in a way that Pete Seeger or even Woody Guthrie were incapable of doing.

Theodore Gracyk's *Rhythm and Noise* does the opposite kind of work to *When We Were Good*. It looks at the music of the last 40 years quite apart from the wider social and cultural history of the period, and attempts to resolve some of the usual questions raised by aesthetics – preeminently, how and in what terms is this body of art experienced as beautiful? – in relation to it. Although rock, and rock 'n' roll (Gracyk spends a good deal of time distinguishing the two), are much more dehistoricised genres than the folk-revivalism of the 1960s (which, despite its romance and medieval resonances, engaged directly with social questions), Gracyk is well aware that even the very name "aesthetics" will lead hostile critics to claim that he is falsifying or, worse, ideologising. That claim is, in fact, one of many methodological confusions that are effectively dealt with in this genial study. After all, if rock is purely evanescent and "for the moment," and thus unavailable to the trans-historical gaze of aesthetics, why are "Greatest

Hits and Golden Memories" stations such a lamentable omnipresence on our radio dials?

Gracyk looks at all the simplifications of rock, both from friendly and hostile commentators, and is able to demonstrate in each case how the reality is more complicated – how heterogeneous and, often, self-contradicting a genre rock is. He is able to do this because this is such a highly informed study, notable not just for its attention to the views of earlier critics of rock music, but to those of the rock musicians themselves, including Bob Dylan. While this can lead to some off-beat conflation – "Fiske concurs with Sting that commodified pop culture cannot be radically oppositional" (210) – its great advantage is that it allows Gracyk to judge rock, not by external standards imposed upon it, but by the experienced standards of its producers and consumers. In other words, it gives him access to the phenomenology of rock, and allows him to draw his conclusions from that, rather than from *a priori* assumptions.

The first consequence of this inductive survey of how rock is actually made and heard is a startling claim, sure to be extensively debated, concerning its definitive feature: that the recording, not the performance, is its primary mode; or, to use another term of Frye, the heard album or single is its "radical of presentation." In this it is different not only to classical music, but also to jazz and early rock 'n' roll. Recording, Gracyk argues, is not a byproduct of the rock performance, but the place where rock is actually made (in this respect, it resembles film, which likewise cannot be reproduced in performance). Of course, performance can be, and frequently is, a byproduct of recording, sometimes with very unhappy consequences: Milli Vanilli's attempts to perform the recordings that had made them popular, but upon which they had not themselves, alas, performed was what eventually unravelled them; and anyone who has heard the attempts of even fine groups like the Bee Gees to reproduce their studio sound "live" must have been struck by how "live" the recordings sound by comparison. So the recording studio becomes, for Gracyk, not a place where the performative spark is watered down and filtered for public consumption, but the very workshop where, with all the technical tools available, this particular art is wrought. Having located rock in the studio, Gracyk is then able to develop related dimensions having to do with its essentially collaborative nature – another similarity to film – and the central role of the electric guitar.

These arguments all have resonances with regard to Bob Dylan – especially the bit about the electric guitar – but there are problems too. Dylan is notorious for resisting the possibilities offered by the modern recording studio, even, until late in his career, refusing to over-dub. And he has stated repeatedly that the primary medium, for him, is performance. Yet, on the other side, he almost

never performs a song in concert until it has been released as a recording, and his singular performative trademark – refusing even to attempt to reproduce the album version – could be taken as evidence either for or against. And Gracyk quotes him to suggest that his most characteristic artistic expressions are inconceivable without the studio: “The closest I ever got to the sound I hear in my mind was on individual bands in the *Blonde on Blonde* album. It’s that thin, that wild mercury sound. It’s metallic and bright gold . . . That’s my particular sound” (11).

The fact that Gracyk studies what rock artists actually do, and what they think about what they do, rather than what they’re supposed to think and do, makes him reluctant to bring down the usual negative judgements, for example concerning the supposed “commercialisation” of rock: after all, it would be impossible for it to be rock without the full-scale commercial involvement of recording companies and PR firms (he demonstrates how much the “rebel” image of the early Stones was a PR confection, and is hilarious in dismissing the suggested alternative route for rock “artists,” the academy and public funding). His catholicity is equally effective when he is using it to dismiss the unrealistic contraries of judgement that present themselves to the student of this subject: Camille Paglia’s celebration of rock’s Dionysian or “primitive” beat, and Allan Bloom’s denunciation of the same thing, are equally beside the point. First, neither of them know what they really mean by their key terms, hence what they are talking about (for example, Gracyk shows that the “beat” in rock is much more variegated than Bloom claims). And second, there are just as many counter examples that could be offered, of songs that emphasize civilized or enlightenment values: Dylan wrote “Lay Lady Lay” and “Tears of Rage.” Tipper Gore fulminated against Gangsta Rap and Heavy Metal, but had no qualms about sharing a podium with Fleetwood Mac and Michael Jackson (despite, as Gracyk points out, the “primitive thrust” of some of Jackson’s own earlier efforts).

In other words, again, it is always more complicated than that. Rejecting both Romanticism and postmodernism, subversiveness and conservatism, artistry and commercialism, as adequate categories to contain rock, Gracyk instead concludes that its “values” are, precisely like those of aesthetics itself, liberal ones:

As a cultural space in which the concept of “art” burrows into popular culture, rock seems to be a bastion of Enlightenment assumptions about the self. *Artistic* activity is offered as a strategy for surviving in commodified culture. When rock songs proclaim that rock will never die, this now looks less like a claim about the enduring attraction of the music and more like an expression of commitment to a liberal ideology at odds with the main themes of postmodernism. Rock authenticity

posits an absolute dichotomy between the inner and the outer, between the true self and the socially constructed mask. If rock sets itself an impossible task, the resulting tensions supply a large part of rock’s power. (226)

Gracyk is a philosopher, not a cultural or literary critic. He is much more concerned with clearing methodological ground than with, for example, lyrical close-reading, or exploring continuities between literary and rock traditions. It has sometimes occurred to me that the centrality that critics like Frye, Bloom, and Kermode have accorded the Bible in literary tradition may in fact be an overestimation, and an accidental effect of the centrality that the Bible happened to possess in the early imaginative experiences of these particular critics and their generation. For most of my own generation, I suggest, the Bible has not had anything like this centrality. Rather, popular music has had it: when we think of John and Paul, we think of Beatles, not Apostles. Yet who, among these generations growing up in the fifties and sixties and seventies, has given to any of that body of imaginative experience a central place, or indeed any place, in the configuring of a tradition? The phenomenon I started out by mentioning – the relative lack of interest in Bob Dylan by an intellectual generation deeply affected by his work – appears, on closer examination, to be an index of a broader reluctance by that generation to integrate its actual cultural experiences into its efforts at critical understanding. However, one could surely expect that the recent emergence, indeed hegemony, of cultural studies in the humanities, with all of its interest in the popular, would at last do something to enlarge the body of serious knowledge about Bob Dylan and the other major lyricists of the past 30 years.

The results have been far more ambiguous. When cultural studies has turned its gaze to the popular, it has been less with a sense of giving some long overdue attention to neglected cultural objects, than with an interest in announcing, then iterating, then reiterating, the hardly stunning news that the popular is a constructed, not a natural, category. And when it has treated individual popular artists, cultural studies has been hindered, in my view, by what is in other respects a strength, its Marxist / Frankfurt School inheritance. The Marxist view, with notable exceptions, has been that popular culture is ideology with a sugar coating, while Adorno simply refuses to countenance that popularity can be achieved other than at the expense of art. And, insofar as cultural studies is infected with these views, it is fated to repeat, in a strange new form, the snobbery that has characterised a great deal of cultural criticism since Matthew Arnold. What cultural studies gives to the popular with one hand, it sometimes sweeps away with the other.

When cultural studies thinks about what a popular artist has achieved, it typically thinks of that achievement as an outcome of complicated political, cultural, and commercial forces, not as an outcome of personal genius, a category that it suspects of bad faith. This may work well enough with some popular artists – the more vapid, the better – but it is fatal in the case of someone like Dylan, who is not a “construction” at all, and who has resolutely made his art against the grain of public expectation, marketing savvy, and music industry hype. If Dylan’s notorious “changes” look like canny commercial moves with the benefit of hindsight, without that benefit they look more like uncompromising artistry. And far from using the media as a personal confessional, or a machine for massaging the public’s view of him, Dylan has sought to avoid the media entirely, and to make his albums and concerts the exclusive source of any image his audience possesses of him (he would hate the notion of an “image” anyway). He may be a traditional American romantic poet, but as a public figure he is doggedly and notoriously eccentric. It is his own personal muse, not the *Zeitgeist* of post-industrial American capitalism, that has wrought his art.

These weaknesses are shown in various ways in *The Sex Revolts*, by Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, and in Simon Frith’s new study, *Performing Rites*. Although Reynolds and Press are journalists, and their book is written in an attractive, racy style, they have picked up some of the worst mannerisms of the current academy. They are uncritically enamored of the latest fashionable theories, particularly the French feminisms, and when they are not summarising those, as a prelude to lambasting the rock artists who fail to live up to their prescriptions, they are providing handy thumbnail sketches for the historically untutored: “In the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century alike, women grew up in conditions of extreme sexual repression” (277) (true, but only because they hadn’t read Hélène Cixous).

With genuine reforming zeal, always a bad sign, Reynolds and Press set out to show how all of rock’s pretensions to “rebellion” are empty poses, especially as far as the gender wars are concerned. Like the various Marxist theories to which they are indebted, this leads them towards an essentially conspiratorial view of their subject: “We’re intrigued by the way that what sounds and feels like ‘freedom’ – the music of the Rolling Stones, the Stooges, Sex Pistols, for instance – can conceal the seeds of domination” (xv). And later: “We take it as read that rock is not a revolutionary art, that its insubordination and ego tantrums are complicit with or bound within the terms of capitalism and patriarchy” (3). Take that as read if you like, but I’m not sure why *we* should take as read the presumption that the role of art is to be revolutionary, in that

sense, in the first place. Artist after artist, group after group, is found to fail by this false standard, but only because the critics applying it cannot see the difference between what “revolution” actually means to post-Romantic artists, and the contemporary politics of equal opportunity. About all we hear of Dylan is the ancient chestnut about a comfortable middle-class upbringing – complete nonsense as information, but who cares? – disqualifying his own rebellious pedigree. Perhaps Reynolds and Press would be less inclined to be dismissive of their own artists if they actually paid them some attention: “The archetypal Stones anthem ‘(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction’ (1965) was a protest against a society which denied young men the possibility of an untamed, virile existence” (45). No, listen to the words: you’ll find that it’s a rather witty satire on the advertising industry.

Though a much more substantial contribution to popular music studies than *The Sex Revolts*, Simon Frith’s *Performing Rites* is also a somewhat disappointing book. Like any self-respecting figure in cultural studies, Frith begins with a long and pointless anecdote designed to show what an interesting person he is. I’ve no doubt he is an interesting person, but here he has achieved the rather unlikely triumph of writing a tedious book on a fascinating subject. (To an extent, as someone who writes about Dylan, a figure consistently more interesting than anything that can be said about him, I sympathise with his predicament.)

Frith has many useful things to say in this book and, like Gracyk, complicates received ideas concerning the production and reception of rock. Indeed, some of the same ground is covered here as in *Rhythm and Noise*, particularly on the question of the “beat” of rock, and on how the reduction of this beat to something “sexually primitive” and “African” constitutes both a musical and a racial caricature. Indeed, the first third of *Performing Rites* could stand alone as a useful theoretical introduction to questions of value-judgement as they relate to the distinction between high, middlebrow, and popular culture. Frith is aware of all the baggage – social, ideological, and generic – that goes into the (apparently) simple matter of saying what we like and do not like in popular music. Yet Frith’s project is to bring value judgement back in from the literary-critical cold; because, whether we like it or not, talking about popular music is talking about what we like and dislike:

We can only begin to make sense of the aesthetics of popular music when we understand, first, the language in which value judgements are articulated and expressed and, second, the social situations in which they are appropriate. Value language is itself shaped by historical and social circumstance; and in the West, at least, how people think about popular music is an effect of the nineteenth-century

industrialization of culture, and the use of music as a commodity. . . . We can only make sense of musical value judgements, moreover, if we understand the circumstances in which they are made – and what they are made for. (94-95)

This is all worth getting learnt, even if much of it has, as I suggested, been said by cultural studies before. And in the second half of *Performing Rites*, Frith has equally subtle observations on the particulars of music and its consumption, especially on the way that, through our judgements on popular music, we rehearse, produce, and revise versions of ourselves (as a certified “Dylan freak,” shunned by many, I know too well the investments and sacrifices involved). Frith is excellent on just how much knowledge and experience are *impacted* in the apparently unintellectual process of hearing and understanding rock and pop; indeed, he shows how, at every level, rock happens in your head, as there are sophisticated messages, including of course ironic ones, being sent and interpreted (that most of these messages could not be stated as arguments is no more a problem for rock than it is for poetry). All of this takes us, happily, miles from the story that hostile critics want to tell of rock and pop as essentially physical forms of release. And as someone who mediates between the music writers and the literary critical types, Frith is indirectly helpful in coming to terms with the poet/songwriter conundrum that Dylan poses. According to Frith, “the issue in lyrical analysis is not words, but words in performance” (166); and the best pop lyrics are *never* good poetry, since the best pop songs “are those that can be heard as a *struggle* between verbal and musical rhetoric” (182). The problem, though, is that Frith wants to spend far too much of his own time struggling with his fellow popular culture theorists, rather than with the narrative demands of the reader: his book shows the self-absorption that can detour cultural studies, and, when it becomes that annoying tic of endless “citationalism,” as it does here, make cultural studies sound like an absurdly antiquated kind of scholasticism. While this no doubt makes Frith a popular character at conferences, it doesn’t do much for the non-specialist reader. To add to that reader’s problems, the engagements with other theorists are laid out in a plodding, mechanical style. When Frith announces, typically, that “There seem to be three issues here” (244), the words carry more threat than the sound of any creaking floorboard in dead of night, because we know that he is going to work through them, exhaustively, one, by one, by one....

Ultimately this kind of navel-gazing places the discourse of contemporary academic criticism in front of the discourses that it is meant to explain – but as a curtain, not a window. However, the one certainty in intellectual history is that the Young Turks turn into the Old Farts. As this development now overtakes cultural studies, and new developments appear on the scene, it seems

to me that the best thing that could happen to Bob Dylan, and the other notable popular artists of the last 40 years, might be traditional author-study of the kind that once dominated literary criticism – minus the snobbery that usually went with it.

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