‘Big universities to study in’: Review of
THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO BOB DYLAN, ed. Kevin J. Dettmar, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, soft covers, xvii + 185 pp., ISBN 978-0-521-71494-5

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Bob Dylan allowed academia a brief look-in on his very first album, informing the world in his spoken intro to ‘Baby, Let Me Follow You Down’ that he first met the blues guitar-player Eric von Schmidt ‘in the green pastures of Harvard University’; years later, in ‘Foot of Pride’, he berated those who ‘like to take all this money from sin, / Build big universities to study in’. Dylan’s relationship with the groves of academe is vexed but is also indisputable, as this multi-author volume now arrives to testify. The Cambridge Companions are an established series of study aids aimed in the first place at undergraduate students, covering a wide field of mostly literary subjects, ranging from Greek Tragedy through Ovid, Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe and Virginia Woolf all the way to Modern British Women Playwrights, even taking in the likes of Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. The arrival in 2009 of a *Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan* among this distinguished company is first and foremost further evidence, were it needed, of the ever-growing academic respectability of Dylan studies. However, the pretensions of such a volume are one thing, and the reality another, and my aim in this review will not to be question whether Dylan’s work merits substantive academic attention (there is more than enough evidence for that by now), but to examine this particular study guide with a view to determining whether it is up to the job.

The volume, though published in the UK, is decidedly American in cast. The editor, Kevin J. Dettmar, is chair of the English Department at Pomona College, California. The contributors (nineteen, five of them women; two of the contributions have two authors) are almost entirely fellow Americans, either academics from departments of English or American Studies or professional writers, the one exception being Lee Marshall, senior lecturer in Sociology at Bristol University, England. Strikingly *absent* are the major names in Dylan criticism: there is nothing from Aidan Day, Michael Gray, Greil Marcus, Christopher Ricks or Stephen Scobie, though there is a piece by Eric Lott, the professor of American Studies from the University of Virginia whose book on blackface minstrelsy, *Love and Theft*, famously supplied Dylan with an album title (Lott’s contribution is, suitably enough, a discussion of ... *“Love and Theft”*).

The book consists of: an editor’s introduction; a Dylan chronology; nine general articles, all titled using the formula ‘Bob Dylan and/as ...’, grouped under ‘Part I: Perspectives’; eight album studies grouped as ‘Part II: Landmark Albums’; a bibliography; and an index. The general studies are on: Dylan *and* ‘the Anglo-American tradition’, ‘Rolling Thunder’, ‘collaboration’, ‘gender politics’, ‘religion’, and ‘the Academy’; and Dylan *as* ‘songwriter’, ‘performer’, and ‘cultural icon’ (the room for overlap between some of these categories should at once be obvious). The eight albums allotted chapters are: *The Free-Wheelin’ Bob Dylan*, *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, *Blonde on Blonde*, *The Basement Tapes*, *Blood on the Tracks*, *Infidels* and *“Love and Theft”*. Despite the 2009 publication date, the book is in fact up-to-date as far as *Modern Times*, coming too late for *Tell-Tale Signs* (listed in the chronology as ‘announced’) and *Together Through Life*. I should add that in this review I shall not list every contributor, but will name the author(s) on the first discussion as such of a given article. With a few exceptions, this volume has a rather strong ‘house style’,

and it is not always easy to winnow out a particular contributor's perspective from what often comes over as a collective take on Dylan.

The introduction starts with the striking claim: 'No other figure from the world of American popular music, from this or any other era, has attracted the volume of critical attention ... that Bob Dylan has', adding that 'no popular-culture figure has ever been adopted into the curricula of college language and literature departments in the way Dylan has' (1). In this context, the editor offers the reader a volume which has, he says, been 'designed as a classroom text' (11). Of the book's purely informative parts, the chronology is adequate; the bibliography is a shade thin and not without omissions (e.g. it forgets the volume of academic studies *Do you, Mr Jones?*, edited by Neil Corcoran, nonetheless mentioned in the text on p. 101); and the index has some strange gaps, failing to pick up, for instance, the two references to Edgar Allan Poe or the two comparisons (one almost half a page) with Orson Welles. The volume is not free of errors: the introduction refers to 'six official live albums' (10) when in fact there are nine, or ten counting the Japanese release *Live 1961-2000*; Paterson, New Jersey, is spelt "Patterson" [sic] (32); Jimmie Rodgers is misnamed Jimmy Rogers (115). Perhaps more important, on the academically crucial issue of *text* all we get is a perfunctory 'Note on Dylan's lyrics' which summarises in a few words some of the textual problems (divergences between the *Lyrics* texts and the recordings) that bedevil rigorous Dylan studies. In a book like this, one would have expected more detailed discussion here, and, certainly, there is nothing like the perceptive consideration of the subject to be found in Stephen Scobie's *Alias Bob Dylan Revisited.*

The eight album studies mostly disappoint. They do not follow a consistent template, and tend to more like fan appreciations than proper analyses. One only, that of *Bringing It All Back Home* (Jean Tamarin) takes the trouble to go through the album track by track, an approach a shade plodding but at least thorough. Eric Lott's impressions of *"Love and Theft"* are of course worth having, and are appreciative and generous but not specially systematic, though he does eloquently praise the album's 'incredible range, literary, musical and philosophical' (167). The pieces on *The Basement Tapes* (Alex Abramovich) and *Infidels* (Jonathan Lethem) both suffer from lack of definition of their object: Abramovich does not always make it clear whether he's talking about the original acetate, the official Robertson release or the full five-CD bootleg, while Lethem's digressions on the songs from the *Infidels* sessions which didn't make it to the album, 'Blind Willie McTell' and the rest, cannot be said to advance the understanding of the released album. The most ambitious, and the best, of these analyses is that of *Blonde and Blonde* by Michael Coyle and Debra Rae Cohen, a deconstructionist take on the album that would not be out of place in Day's or Scobie's pages ('Dylan refers to the impossibility of presumptive knowledge … pointing to taxonomic categories ... even while undercutting them' - 145), and which represents the volume's most (or only?) substantial contribution to the nuts and bolts of practical Dylan criticism.

The general chapters are, again, variable in nature and quality, and, again, disappoint more often than not. The piece on 'Dylan as performer' (Alan Light) lacks the detail and critical edge of Gray's major account of the subject in *Song and Dance Man III*, and is also methodologically inconsistent: it eschews bootlegs in order to give the released live albums their due , which is fair enough, and then fails to live up to its brief by omitting all mention of *MTV Unplugged* (an album loved by few, but which should be there if the equally undistinguished *Real Live* and *Dylan and the Dead* are). This chapter is overlapped thematically by that entitled 'Dylan and Rolling Thunder' (Michael Denning), which comes across as overly anecdotal and would have been best not included at all. The two chapters that

aim to connect Dylan's work to the wider world, those on gender politics (Barbara O'Dair) and religion (Clifton Spargo and Anne K. Ream) are both on the thin side. It could be of interest to consider a 'feminist case against Dylan' and how it might be dealt with it in a classroom situation, but O'Dair, again, fails to go much beyond the anecdotal; Spargo and Ream's account of the born-again period does not really address any of the three religious albums in detail, or tackle the key question of how far Dylan's then Christian certainties affected the quality of his songwriting. O'Dair also exhibits a frequent fault in this collection, what I would call the 'I and I' syndrome: the methodologically suspect confusion of text and autobiography, of the 'I' constructed by the song texts and the historical Bob Dylan. To describe 'Idiot Wind', even speculatively, as 'despicably blaming the victim' (83) is to give unnecessary floor-space to two untenable assumptions, namely that the song's 'I' is Bob Dylan and that it is addressed to a 'real' individual rather than a textually constructed 'you'.

Dylan's songwriting is examined in four overlapping chapters, those on 'the Anglo-American tradition' (David Yaffe), 'Dylan as songwriter' (Anthony Decurtis), 'collaboration' (Martin Jacobi) and 'Dylan as cultural icon' (David R. Shumway), and also in the related chapter 'Bob Dylan and the Academy' by Lee Marshall, which I will examine in more detail below. The first-named four all make some valid points, but none really goes into depth on how Dylan's songwriting actually *works* on a particular song or album: there is no equivalent to, and very little mention of, the hands-on practical criticism offered by Ricks, Gray, Day or Scobie, or to Gray's exhaustive exploration of Dylan's literary and musical sources (Lee Marshall, at least, does briefly enumerate those critics – 101). The authors' failure to come to terms with those acknowledged Dylan experts does, indeed, raise eyebrows, in a book packaged as a 'classroom text'. Indeed, Ricks - not a critic I would associate with either George W. Bush or Christian fundamentalism - is, bizarrely, described at one point as a 'right-wing culture warrior' (Shumway, 117). Nor is Dylan's annual candidacy for the literature Nobel – as defended in print by his nominator, Gordon Ball – given house-room, other than a brief mention in Dettmar's introduction (10). It should also be noted that, while it is, again, Marshall who makes the important point that with a couple of exceptions (Wilfred Mellers and Keith Negus) academic Dylan studies typically concentrate almost entirely on the *words* to the exclusion of the *music*, nothing in this volume actually redresses that balance by offering any kind of musicological analysis. What we do get about the words, while not valueless, suffers from a number of defects: a needless obsession with the (non-)issue of plagiarism (the Junichi Saga, Ovid and Henry Timrod cases all, predictably, surface – Yaffe 27, Decurtis 53-54, Jacobi 66-67), with no proper corrective invocation of intertextuality; an excessive concern with biography; and repeated lapses into what I have earlier called the 'I and I' syndrome.

Lee Marshall's chapter on 'Bob Dylan and the Academy' is the most valuable thing in this book. After pointing out how Dylan studies tend to be concentrated in English departments rather than departments of music, or popular culture, or cultural studies, Marshall goes on to break new Dylanological ground by trying to account for this phenomenon (as borne out, indeed, by the provenance of most of this book's contributors): 'How was it', he asks, that in the 1960s 'a writer of popular songs became (partially) accepted into the literary canon?' He points out that 'the 1960s were the heyday of the study of poetry in English departments', and suggests that at the time lecturers in the field, a shade opportunistically, brought Dylan into poetry class so as 'to appear hip to their students' (104) (though also, presumably, as a strategy for inducing a taste for poetry in general?) Marshall goes on to stress that *since* then there has been 'a great expansion of the study of popular culture in universities' - and that, paradoxically, 'cultural studies generally has paid very little attention to Dylan' (107). In

other words, Dylan studies remain very much the province of academics who are, most of the time, high-cultural rather than mass-cultural specialists: a circumstance which might surprise the uninitiated but which empirical testing would no doubt amply confirm. Intriguingly, Marshall suggests that one crucial reason for this may be that Dylan's work is actually *too* like high culture for many of those who study mass culture – or: Dylan, even if alive and Jewish, is too like the 'dead, white, European males' notoriously execrated in certain academic circles. He goes on to argue in favour of a greater emphasis on issues of quality and evaluation in mass-cultural studies, and suggests Dylan's work as a useful signpost for ideological repositioning in that area (he does not, though, raise the possibility that Dylan may be best seen as a *hybrid* figure who belongs neither to high culture nor mass culture but to both, the exact nature of the mix depending on where one looks at his work from). At all events, Marshall's essay opens up a significant area for future debate in Dylan studies.

Since this is a study guide, it is also worth enumerating what is *not* there – what aspects are considered cursorily or not at all. There is no chapter on Dylan's prose works, though surely *Tarantula* (mentioned only once to be dismissed as 'unreadable' – Abramovich, 150) and *Chronicles Volume One* together provide enough material for one; no systematic discussion of Dylan and film; nothing on songs covered by Dylan (no nod to Derek Barker's excellent *The Songs He Didn't Write* from 2008) or Dylan songs covered by others; no detailed look at *Theme Time Radio Hour* and what that programme can tell us about Dylan's influences; nothing on Dylan and the charts; no chapter on Dylan and the blues (nor any mention of Gray's essential discussion of that vital aspect); no head-on engagement with the vexed issue of earlier-versus-later Dylan and whether or not there is a decline; no account of Dylan and the Internet and the on-line resources available today; no discussion of the Dylan fan community; and, as alas is almost always the case in Dylan books by monoglot Anglophones, not a word on the reception and influence of Bob Dylan's work in that rather large proportion of the world which does not speak English as a native language (even though, just for instance, it so happens that while I was writing this review a full-scale Dylan seminar was going on in, of all places, Cochabamba in Bolivia ...). Of course, a volume this size could not have taken on all the aspects I have just mentioned, but with more synthesising care and more avoidance of overlapping, I believe more dimensions could have been covered.

Marshall's insights on the academic reception of Dylan, alongside Lott's views on *"Love and Theft"* and Coyle and Cohen's stimulating take on *Blonde and Blonde*, together constitute sufficient reason to justify purchase of this book by those interested in the academic side of Dylanology. Much of the volume is, however, marred by the anecdotal shading into the trivial and the judgmental into the dogmatic – features all too common, alas, in the contemporary journalism which has left its visible claw-marks on this book's contributors. Still, this collection is at least more useful for academic purposes than Corcoran's *Do you, Mr Jones*?, many of whose contributors seemed not actually to know that much about Dylan. What the *Cambridge Companion* will most certainly not do is in any way replace Michael Gray's still monumental *Song and Dance Man III*, which remains unrivalled as the reference point for the serious, detailed and rigorous study of Bob Dylan as songwriter, and, on the evidence of this latest offering, is likely to keep that pre-eminence for the foreseeable future.