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An Interview with Richard F. Thomas on Bob Dylan and the Classics

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Richard F. Thomas is Harvard University's George Martin Lane Professor of the Classics. He has served as the Director of Undergraduate Studies, Director of Graduate Studies, and Department Chair in the Department of the Classics. He is Co-chair of the Seminar on "The Civilizations of Ancient Greece and Rome," in Harvard's Mahindra Humanities Center. He has served as Director of the American Philological Association and as Trustee and Director of the Vergilian Society of America, of which he is currently President. Since 2001, he has been a Trustee of the Loeb Classical Library, and is currently serving as Editor of Harvard Studies in Classical Philology.

He has taught extensively about Bob Dylan and the Classics. The following interview was conducted in reference to Professor Thomas' article, "The Streets of Rome: The Classical Dylan," published in Oral Tradition 22/1 (2007):30-56.
http://journal.oraltradition.org/files/articles/22i/Thomas.pdf

P: Do you remember the first Bob Dylan song you ever heard?

RFT: Yes; Dylan is nine year older than I am and he started putting out music when I was 11 or 12… "Blowin' in the Wind" I guess is the obvious one…In the context of 1963 it was the civil rights song. I remember singing that in my school chorus.

P: So this was in New Zealand?

RFT: Yeah. Things usually arrived in New Zealand about a year later.The same album had "Masters of War," which is generally acknowledged as the greatest song of the anti-war period. That wasn't about Vietnam, though, which was just starting at that point, it was about the [military] industrial complex…The thing about Dylan's performative essence is he keeps singing these old songs as well as the new songs… In Iraq, after 2003, Dylan was singing this forty-year-old song but with new meaning. He tends not to have geographical or chronological markers that tie a song to its context.

P: When did you first begin to notice intertextuality between Bob Dylan and classical authors?

RFT: It really wasn't until 9/11. Dylan had an album that came out on that morning called "*Love and Theft*." Now I had noticed intertextuality of a similar sort in 1997 with the song "Highlands" from the album *Time Out of Mind*, a very long, narrative song that

has the refrain “My Heart’s in the Highlands.” So [that was from] Robert Burns... But it wasn’t really until the 2001 album *“Love and Theft”* [that I noticed intertextuality with classical authors]…Now if the intertexts are activated in the mind of the listener, it’s not just Vietnam, the war of Dylan’s youth, it’s all of these literary wars, including the Roman wars of Aeneas and the Civil Wars, for which they in some way stand.

P: You write quite a lot about Dylan’s lyrics. For you, is his appeal primarily textual, or would you say that the music plays as important a role in your listening experience as his lyrics?

RFT: That’s a great question. I think the latter; there are some singer-songwriters who start out as poets. And...Dylan wrote and published poetry in the early 60s, but then started writing songs… He’s a poet in the sense of bard, *oidos* or *vates*. He truly is a poet whose song is part of the poetry.

P: In your article “The Streets of Rome: the Classical Dylan,” you mention T.S. Eliot’s maxim “immature poets imitate; mature poets steal.” And you’ve found that his lyrics consist of a mélange of intertexts -- “stolen” words from other authors. Does he engage in the same sort of “theft” in his music?

RFT: Yes, absolutely… He put out an album in 1992 called “World Gone Wrong.” There are blues songs in that...in which the melody is stolen. But who do the blues belong to? Blues songs, like folk songs, are a continuous stream.

P: Every author wants to claim that he or she was the progenitor of some creative movement, although it might be said that nothing can ever be truly “original” because our inspiration has to come from somewhere. Do you think that intertextuality is an inherent component of any literary genre and its reception, whether that intertextuality is intentional or not?

RFT: Sure - Look at the song “Fourth Time Around,” released in 1966, which came out soon after the Beatles released “Norwegian Wood,” and compare the songs side by side.

The Beatles sing: “I once had a girl, or should I say, she once had me / She showed me her room, isn't it good, norwegian wood?”

But let’s cross-reference it with Dylan’s lyrics: “I stood there and hummed / I tapped on her drum and asked her how come /And she buttoned her boot /And straightened her suit /Then she said, ‘Don’t get cute’ / So I forced my hands in my pockets / And felt with my thumbs / And gallantly handed her /My very last piece of gum.”

I would like to think that with this simplistic rhyming Dylan is sort of making fun of "Norwegian Wood." Also think about the last verse: "I never asked for your crutch / Now don't ask for mine." But who is the "you" here? Is it John Lennon?

P: So in a song like "Fourth Time Around" it seems as though the intertext is intentional, but do you think there are other songs where he's less conscious of the authors whom he is alluding to or incorporating? Are there songs where intertexts emerge organically?

> RFT: I think the process and the composing is [mostly] pretty conscious. [But] during a 60 Minutes interview, Ed Bradley starting quoting "It's Alright Ma." Bradley wanted to know where it came from. And Dylan didn't know… Basically he read a lot, and he's always read eclectically as opposed to canonically. One of the things he discovered was the evoking of other literature, including Ovid's exile poetry or Kimrod's Confederate Poetry. These two authors are referenced in some songs together, actually. Dylan's always been interested in the Civil War, which perhaps led to his interest in Rome. There is a song from *Modern Times* with 18 lines of Ovid.

P: Just to play devil's advocate, do you think those lines represent a conscious intertext? Is there any way that these similarities could be coincidental?

> R: No, no, these lines, almost word for word, can be nailed specifically to Peter Green's translation of Ovid. And that's part of the effect. In the first song of that album, "Thunder on the Mountain," Dylan sings "I've been sitting down studying the Art of Love / I think it will fit me like a glove." Of course, the *Ars Amatoria* isn't explicitly there, but as you listen, you're thinking of Ovid.

P: You mention briefly that you've come close to meeting Dylan, but you've never actually met him. Would getting answers immediately would ruin the joy of interpreting his music, and does this distance speak to an ideal relationship between a poet and scholar?

> RFT: Some artists respond to critics' questions about their art. I think Dylan would refuse to respond to questions of that sort. Think about the movie *Don't Look Back.* It portrays musical critics trying to understand the phenomenon of Dylan's popularity, which they don't approve of because they dislike his music, and Dylan is contemptuous of all of them. Dylan has always written about personae...to maintain that distance. Afterall, Bob Dylan is itself a non-name. [He was born Robert Zimmerman]. There's one famous song– around Halloween in '63 – where he says "I've got my Bob Dylan Mask on today."

P: Do you believe that Dylan is aware that classicists are interested in him?

RFT: Yeah, I have reason to think that those of us who have written about Classics have showed up on his radar... Dylan has a line in the song "Nettie Moore" from *Modern Times.* He sings, "The world of research has gone berserk. Too much paper work." Some of us thought he might referring to the excessive writing about his music.

Moreover, look at the song "Early Roman Kings." At a superficial glance, it sounds Roman, but the Roman Kings actually refers to a 60s gang in New York. He's playing with his audience, because the title is much more Latin than the other titles of songs that actually have Ovid.

In the bigger picture, isn't this the case with Roman intertextuality too? Didn't Vergil or Ovid expect his readers to constantly be thinking about intertext and past precedent? Consider Horace's quote in Epistulae II.224: "cum lamentamur non apparere labores" – we lament that our hard work isn't seen. Horace complains that his efforts at intertextuality are not appreciated even though they exist.