A classicist reveals the poetic artistry of a song and dance man who explores the human heart, writes Tom Palaima

Why Dylan Matters
By Richard F. Thomas
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For love, for art, he took from them everything he could steal

Richard F. Thomas, George Martin Lecturer in Classics at Harvard University, spent his early life in New Zealand and recently sailed, swimming in the ocean, diving off ferry wharves, climbing cliffs, taking risks and placing all passions of that earlier age, which were, and generally learning to be disinclined...Grew up in such a beautiful setting, in a country that has always seemed to view social and economic justice, in a time that seemed more problematic. It probably was, has always stayed that way.

As an undergraduate at the University of Auckland, Thomas started doing Classics and, luring on to Classics and Japanese after Buddhist law, and then settling for Classics, in which he went on to do a doctorate at the University of Michigan. Although a Bob Dylan fan from about the age of 14, “[the] 1960s and 1970s singer-songwriters were out of acade

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Ricks’ Dylan’s Visions of Sin (2004), which examined Dylan’s songs along with “the greatest English literature of the last five centuries”. Both Ricks and Thomas understand Dylan’s “love and theft” of other musical and literary works. Thomas here explains Dylan’s appropriations of passages from Homer’s Odyssey, Virgil’s Aeneid, Ovid’s Epistles from Pontus, Catullus’ love poems and Juvenal’s Satires of a Yeastab as a distinctive practice of those T.S. Eliot calls good or mature poems. They “will usually borrow from authors remote in time, alien in language, or diverse in interest” and they will “(vividly) enter into a whole of feeling which is unique”. Thomas stresses that “for Dylan, it is the art of the song that matters”. Indeed, Dylan tells us in his Chronology: Volume One (2004) that early on he noticed other singers trying to put them- selves across, but he always “puts the song across”. Thomas’ literary critical obser-

V lations on Dylan’s art help us to see the Virgilian craft and hard labour gone into Dylan’s making of song poems. But Thomas also gets personal take on what Dylan has meant to him from the age of 23 when he travelled from New Zealand to graduate school in the US—in his trunk were The Songs of Lord Cohen (1959) and Dylan’s Blonde on Blonde (1966) —throughout his study of Dylan and Bob Dylan.

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