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W'YX'U' dfcd\ētēs", a "prophet", literally one who speaks forth what we would call
true and false things. Dylan has always known, like the ancient Greeks, that what is
not true can be truer than true.

Now really to begin. What will you, from a classical perspective, learn and think about if

you read *Why Bob Dylan Matters*? First, through a ring construction (pp. 49-67; 291-323), Thomas covers in chapter 3 Dylan's life and career from his high school days (1955-59) in Hibbing, Minnesota when he took two years of Latin and was an active member of the *Societas Latina* and in chapter 9 and the conclusion, events surrounding the Nobel Prize, the Nobel Prize award banquet and speech and song performance (December 10, 2016, watch and listen to both these clips attentively: [Dylan speech Nobel 2016](#) [Dylan song Nobel 2016](#)) and the required Nobel Prize lecture (recorded June 4, 2017, watch: [Dylan lecture Nobel 2017](#)). The conclusion loops back to Dylan's stop in Stockholm (April 1, 2017) to receive privately his gold medallion and diploma (pp. 11-17).

So you will get a sweeping overview of Dylan's songs and writings, their cultural significance—what personal experiences and concerns, intellectual influences and historical issues called them into being—the methods that produced them, their intertextual relationships with works of other songsters, poets, writers, thinkers—mostly ancient, but a good many modern—all concentrating upon songs that best exemplify Dylan's grounding and continuing interests in classical, mainly Latin, authors. Thomas also invites us to see classical form and rhetorical techniques in songs that contain no classical allusions, e.g., "Blowin' in the Wind" (pp. 25-27). And he guides us through the poetic artistry of Virgil and Dylan (pp. 193-225), covering instances where Dylan is lovingly stealing from translations of Virgil (e.g., "Lonesome Day Blues" and *Aeneid* Book 6, p. 194) and ways in which Dylan's painstaking reworkings of texts, now traceable in the Dylan archives in Tulsa, are Virgilian (pp. 203-225). Thomas discusses many clear thefts from translations of Ovid and Homer in chapter 8 (pp. 227-265). These riches are provided by a master of classical intertextuality who has longstanding intellectual and spiritual sympathies for Dylan's art and what Dylan's songs have meant and continue to mean to humankind, to himself, to you and to me.

The image and inscription on the gold Nobel medallion have connections with Virgil's *Aeneid* 6.660-665 and *Eclogues* 1. Thomas discusses these in relationship to fellow Nobel laureate T.S. Eliot's essay, "What Is a Classic?" (1945) and Cicero's *De Officiis* and to Dylan's "Desolation Row" and Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. Thomas explains (p. 13) how Dylan acquired, as a painter and a songster, sensibilities that caused him to be absorbed with the 'Virgilian' words and scene on the award medallion (more later). Thomas takes us along one of the many 'roadmaps for the soul' that reveal the "empathy for the human condition" and the "focus on humanity that is at the core of Dylan's art." Hence the nod to Cicero's *On Moral Duties*, where Thomas (p. 17) has Cicero writing: "I am a human. I consider nothing connected to humanity to be alien to me" (more later).

Thomas issues a kind of manifesto (p. 17) that all classicists should take to heart.

This is also a book about how Dylan's genius has long been informed by the worlds of ancient Greece and Rome, and why the classics of those days matter to him and should matter to all of us interested in the humanities. We live in a world and an age in which the humanities—the study of the best that the human mind has risen to in art, music, writing, and performance—are being asked to justify their existence.... At the same time, those arts seem more vital than ever in terms of what they can teach us about how to live meaningful lives. The art of Bob Dylan...can be put to work in serving and preserving the humanities.

There is no implication in *Why Bob Dylan Matters* that Dylan has had a deeper interest in the Classics than what taking two years of high school Latin and watching in the 1950s at his uncle's theater the wave of Hollywood movies on Roman themes (pp. 49-57) would instill into a receptive soul.

Yet Dylan turns to Rome and Roman themes (gladiators, the Colosseum, the Roman soldiers at the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the mafioso-glamor of Roman power figures) in his own songs from "Goin' Back to Rome" and "Long Ago, Far Away" (pp. 70-72),

captured on subsequently bootlegged tape recordings in 1962-63, to “Early Roman Kings” (pp. 89-91) on the CD *Tempest* (2012). In the song “Early Roman Kings” Dylan derives *topoi* from Juvenal’s 6th and 10th satires, while alluding to gang warfare in the Bronx, NY, in the ’60s and ’70s.

Thomas’ work goes well beyond pointing out intertextual links between Dylan’s compositions and translations of classical authors, most famously Peter Green’s translations of Ovid, *The Poems of Exile: Tristia and the Black Sea Letters* (2006) (catalogue of intertexts by Cliff Fell on p. 240), placing them in the context of modern preoccupations with intellectual property rights and artistic authenticity, e.g., Joni Mitchell’s spontaneous indictment of Dylan in the *Los Angeles Times* April 22, 2010 ([Mitchell interview 2010](#)): “Bob is not authentic at all. He’s a plagiarist, and his name and voice are fake. Everything about Bob is a deception.”

Classicists who take pleasure in the rigorous art of *Quellenforschung* will admire the magpie nature of Dylan’s *kunstvolle Quellennutzung*, especially now that pleurably scholastic footnotes are anathema to even prestigious academic presses.

Cuiusvis hominis est errare (Cic. *Phil.* 12.2.5). There are a few places where *Why Bob Dylan Matters* could be tweaked. I would add Ian Bell’s *Once Upon a Time: The Lives of Bob Dylan* (2012) and *Time Out of Mind: The Lives of Bob Dylan* (2013) to the closing bibliography as a fair-minded and critically insightful ‘biography’ of Dylan. Bell offers astute observations on the truly ridiculous controversies that have swirled around the songs Dylan has written and performed and around what Dylan has chosen to do with his artistic energies in various phases of his sixty years as an apprentice and then full-time songster, poet, prose writer, painter, scriptwriter, actor, Theme Time Radio announcer, business man, father, husband, lover, friend, recipient of numerous public honors and reluctant cultural icon. Bell’s chapter (2013: 411-438) explicating Dylan’s *Chronicles* (2004) as a “marvel” of story-telling that in Dylan’s own words “doesn’t attempt to be more than what it is” (2013: 412) complements Thomas’ own two chapters (pp. 95-160) covering *Chronicles* and charges of plagiarism.

My second suggestion is pedantic. But paying careful attention to the details of texts and intertexts is what classicists can do best. Although *Why Bob Dylan Matters* is written for a larger public, elucidating fine details precisely could demonstrate even better to that public the value of careful reading of texts in foreign languages, ancient or modern.

I close here with the two cases in point that I signaled above. Thomas writes (p. 17):

Cicero in *On Moral Duties* wrote “I am a human. I consider nothing connected to humanity to be alien to me.” For Cicero, thinking about justice and correct action in difficult times is a hallmark of humanistic thought.

Once inquiring readers find the passage Thomas has in mind—no easy matter without an exact reference—they will see that Cicero (*De Off.* 1.30) only paraphrases part of the Latin original for the full quotation from Terence and uses it to illustrate how difficult it is to practice what is preached in the statement:

est enim difficilis cura rerum alienarum. Quamquam Terentianus ille Chremes “humani nihil a se alienum putat”;

For it is hard to be actively concerned with the matters of other people’s lives. Nonetheless, the character Chremes in Terence’s play “thinks that everything relating to the human experience is of interest to him.”

It is to Dylan’s and Cicero’s and now Thomas’ everlasting credit to highlight the need for human empathy. Cicero does this through logical argument. Dylan does so by ingeniously redeploying passages from now obscure texts, whether written by classical authors or by

the likes of Civil War poet Henry Timrod (pp. 234-243), that make us see, think and feel what it is to be struggling human beings any time, any place in “this weary world of woe” ([Dylan, “Ain’t Talkin’” 2006](#)).

Lastly, in discussing Dylan’s fascination with the scene and inscription on the Nobel gold medallion, Thomas (p. 12) quotes Sara Danius, the permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy:

taken from Virgil’s *Aeneid* the inscription reads: *Inventas vitam iuvat excoluisse per artes*, loosely translated as “And they who bettered life on earth by their newfound mastery.”

Thomas agrees with her that “the words engraved around the medal’s rim are also Virgil’s: *Inventas vitam iuvat excoluisse per artes*” (p. 12) and he gives fuller context (p. 14) by stitching together Fagles’ translation of Virgil’s *Aeneid* 6.645-647 and 662-664, where line 663 is translated: “those who enriched our lives with the newfound arts they forged.”

However, the phrase on the gold medallion is not Virgil’s original line *inventas aut qui vitam excoluere per artes*. It is a loving theft from it. The official translation offered by the Swedish Academy and perpetuated unthinkingly on almost every Web retrieved by Google is not a translation of the medallion inscription, but of Virgil *Aeneid* 6.63. More significantly for the art of intertextuality, the Swedish Academy is using a translation of the line taken from William Morris, *The Aeneids of Virgil: Done Into English* (London 1876) p. 175. Morris’ Latin was not all that good, but his deep human concerns for the literally miserable lives of many common human beings are very much in line with Dylan’s.

Inventas vitam iuvat excoluisse per artes means something appropriate to the individual Nobel awardees in literature and various scientific fields:

it is of use (i.e., it is beneficial) to have improved life through discovered arts.

That is what Bob Dylan has done as a songster and in many other roles for sixty years and counting. That is what Richard Thomas helps us to see clearly.

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