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## Who's This Guy Dylan Who's Borrowing Lines From Henry Timrod?

By [MOTOKO RICH](#)

Perhaps you've never heard of Henry Timrod, sometimes known as the poet laureate of the Confederacy.

But maybe you've heard his words, if you're one of the 320,000 people so far who have bought [Bob Dylan](#)'s latest album, "Modern Times," which made its debut last week at No. 1 on the Billboard album chart.

It seems that many of the lyrics on that album, Mr. Dylan's first No. 1 album in 30 years (down to No. 3 this week), bear some strong echoes to the poems of Timrod, a Charleston native who wrote poems about the Civil War and died in 1867 at the age of 39.

"More frailer than the flowers, these precious hours," the 65-year-old Mr. Dylan sings in "When the Deal Goes Down," one of the songs on "Modern Times." Compare that to these lines from Timrod's "Rhapsody of a Southern Winter Night":

A round of precious hours

Oh! here, where in that summer noon I basked

And strove, with logic frailer than the flowers.

"No doubt about it, there has been some borrowing going on," said Walter Brian Cisco, who wrote a 2004 biography of Timrod, when shown Mr. Dylan's lyrics. Mr. Cisco said he could find at least six other phrases from Timrod's poetry that appeared in Mr. Dylan's songs. But Mr. Cisco didn't seem particularly bothered by that. "I'm glad Timrod is getting some recognition," he said.

Henry Timrod was born in 1828 and was a private tutor on plantations before the Civil War started. He tried to sign up for the Confederate Army but was unable to serve in the field because he suffered from tuberculosis. He worked as an editor for a daily paper in Columbia, S.C., and began writing poems about the war and how it affected the residents of the South. He also wrote love poems and ruminations on nature. During his lifetime he published only one volume of poetry. Among his most famous poems were "Ode Sung on the Occasion of Decorating the Graves of the Confederate Dead at Magnolia Cemetery, Charleston, South Carolina 1866," and "Ethnogenesis." Mr. Cisco said he could not find any phrases from these poems in Mr. Dylan's lyrics.

Mr. Dylan does not acknowledge any debt to Timrod on "Modern Times." The liner notes simply say "All songs written by Bob Dylan" (although some fans have noted online that the title of the album contains the letters of Timrod's last name).

Nor does he credit the traditional blues songs from which he took the titles, tunes and some lyrics for “Rollin’ and Tumblin’ ” and “Nettie Moore.”

This isn’t the first time fans have found striking similarities between Mr. Dylan’s lyrics and the words of other writers. On his last album, “Love and Theft,” a fan spotted about a dozen passages similar to lines from “Confessions of a Yakuza,” a gangster novel written by Junichi Saga, an obscure Japanese writer. Other fans have pointed out the numerous references to lines of dialogue from movies and dramas that appear throughout Mr. Dylan’s oeuvre. Example: “Love Is Just a Four-Letter Word” echoes a line from “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.”

This time around Scott Warmuth, a disc jockey in Albuquerque and a former music director for WUSB, a public radio station in Stony Brook, on Long Island, discovered the concordances between Mr. Dylan’s lyrics and Timrod’s poetry by doing some judicious Google searches. Mr. Warmuth said he wasn’t surprised to find that Mr. Dylan had leaned on a strong influence in writing his lyrics.

“I think that’s the way Bob Dylan has always written songs,” he said. “It’s part of the folk process, even if you look from his first album until now.”

Mr. Warmuth noted that Mr. Dylan may also have used a line from Timrod in “ ’Cross the Green Mountain,” a song he wrote for the soundtrack to the movie “Gods and Generals,” which came out three years ago. Mr. Warmuth said there also appeared to be passages from Timrod in “Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum,” a song on “Love and Theft.”

Mr. Dylan has long been interested in the Civil War: in “Chronicles: Vol. 1,” Mr. Dylan’s autobiography, published by Simon & Schuster in 2004, he writes about spending time in the [New York Public Library](#) combing through microfilm copies of newspapers published from 1855 to 1865. “I crammed my head full of as much of this stuff as I could stand and locked it away in my mind out of sight, left it alone,” Mr. Dylan wrote.

To Mr. Warmuth, who found 10 phrases echoing Timrod’s poetry on “Modern Times,” Mr. Dylan’s work is still original. “You could give the collected works of Henry Timrod to a bunch of people, but none of them are going to come up with Bob Dylan songs,” he said.

Mr. Dylan could not be reached through his publicist for comment. A spokeswoman for Columbia Records, Mr. Dylan’s record label and a division of Sony BMG Music Entertainment, did not return calls for comment.

Because Timrod is long dead and his work has fallen out of copyright — you can find his collected poems on the Internet — there is no legal claim that could be made against Mr. Dylan.

But some fans are bothered by the ethics of Mr. Dylan’s borrowing ways. “Bob really is a thieving little swine,” wrote one poster on Dylan Pool ([pool.dylantree.com/phorum5/read.php?1,642969](http://pool.dylantree.com/phorum5/read.php?1,642969)), a chat room where Mr. Warmuth posted his findings. “If it was anyone else we’d be stringing them up by their neck, but no, it’s Bobby Dee, and ‘the folk process.’ ”

Authors who have been caught copying from other writers have been accused outright of plagiarism.

Earlier this year [Kaavya Viswanathan](#), a [Harvard](#) sophomore who had written a first novel, “How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild and Got a Life,” was attacked when readers discovered that many passages in the book nearly exactly replicated portions of “Sloppy Firsts” and “Second Helpings,” novels by Megan McCafferty. Ms. Viswanathan’s publisher, Little, Brown, pulled the book from shelves, and the author was disgraced in the press.

In Mr. Dylan’s case, critics and fans have long described the songwriter’s magpie tendencies, looking upon that as a manifestation of his genius, not unlike other great writers and poets like T. S. Eliot or [James Joyce](#) who have referenced past works.

Christopher Ricks, a professor of the humanities at [Boston University](#) who wrote “Dylan’s Visions of Sin,” a flattering study of the musician, said, “I may be too inclined to defend, but I do think it’s characteristic of great artists and songsters to immediately draw on their predecessors.” He added that it was atypical for popular musicians to acknowledge their influences.

Mr. Ricks said that one important distinguishing factor between plagiarism and allusion, which is common among poets and songwriters, is that “plagiarism wants you not to know the original, whereas allusion wants you to know.”

“When Eliot says, ‘No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be’ — to have a line ending ‘to be’ when the most famous line uttered by Hamlet is ‘to be or not to be’ — then part of the fun and illumination in the Eliot poem is that you should know it,” he said. But he added: “I don’t think Dylan is alluding to Timrod. I don’t think people can say that you’re meant to know that it’s Timrod.”

That’s exactly what bothers Chris Dineen, a middle school Spanish teacher and casual fan of Mr. Dylan’s in Albuquerque. “It seems kind of duplicitous,” he said. “Even casual fans know that Dylan has a history of doing this and it’s part of what makes him great, but this is different. This is one poet who’s used over and over and over again.”

Mr. Dineen said he would have been happy if Mr. Dylan had just given Timrod credit for the lines. “Maybe it’s the teacher in me. If I found out that he had done this in a research paper, he’d be in big trouble.”

But James Kibler, a professor of English at the [University of Georgia](#) who teaches the poetry of Timrod in his Southern literature classes, was delighted to hear of Mr. Dylan’s use of the verse. “If I were Timrod, I would love it,” he said. “I would say he’s doing a great honor to Timrod and let’s celebrate that.” Mr. Kibler said he planned to share Mr. Dylan’s references with his classes because his students “probably know more about Bob Dylan than Timrod.”

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