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A Luminous Haze; or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Plagiarism

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LOUISE *Pound*

A Folklore and Literature Miscellany

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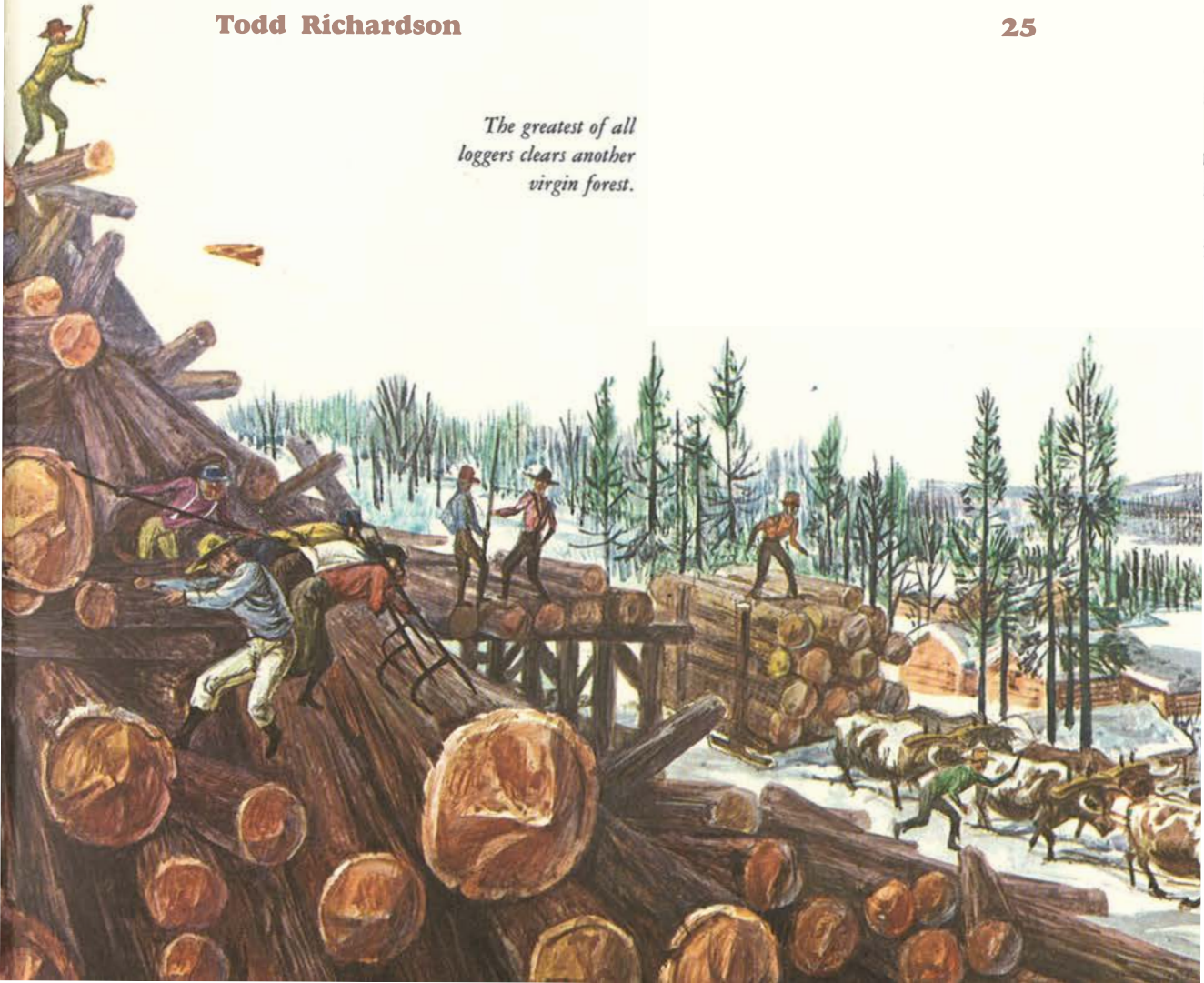
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A Luminous Haze; or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Plagiarism

Todd Richardson

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*The greatest of all
loggers clears another
virgin forest.*



A LUMINOUS HAZE; OR HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE PLAGIARISM

by **Todd Richardson**

And he just walked along, alone
With his guilt so well concealed
And muttered underneath his breath
"Nothing is revealed"

—"The Ballad of Frankie Lee and
Judas Priest," Bob Dylan

"I really was never any more than what I was," Bob Dylan writes in his autobiography *Chronicles*, "a folk musician who gazed into the gray mist with tear-blinded eyes and made up songs that floated in a luminous haze."¹ I'd call his proclamation inefficient if that didn't imply that it gets a job done, albeit poorly. The sentence, rather, strikes me as grand-sounding balderdash. It begins with a promise of humility, after which it gradually evaporates into bleary images that never realize anything resembling actual meaning. On the whole, Dylan is exceedingly specific throughout *Chronicles*, recounting in detail the music he's listened to, people he's met and books he's read. At one point, he exhausts three pages, minus a two paragraph digression about how he once met the wrestler Gorgeous George, detailing the wisdom he gleaned from the Prussian general Carl Von Clausewitz's book *Vom Kriege* (On War).² When it comes to the specifics of who he is, however, they're just not there, which makes *Chronicles* the most precisely indefinite autobiography I've ever read.

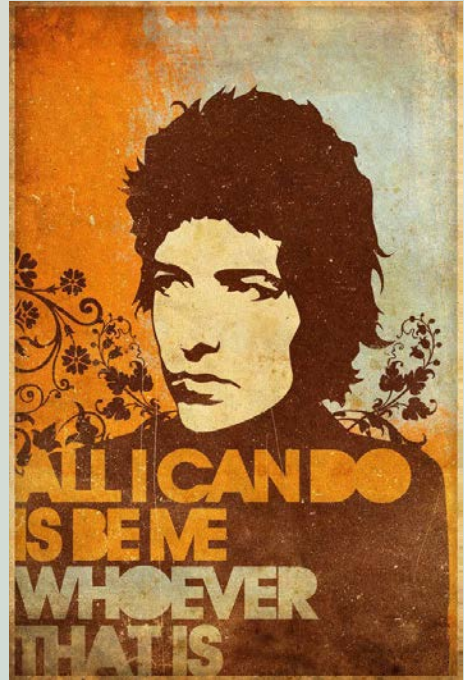
The book's cageyness befits its author and subject, someone who once told an interviewer, "All I can do is be me, whoever that is."² Throughout his career, Bob Dylan has invested an immense amount of creative energy in NOT signifying, turning his work and, at times, life into

1. Dylan, Bob. 2004. *Chronicles: Volume One*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 116.

2. From an interview in the *Los Angeles Free Press* (September 17 and 24, 1965)

absences that audiences can put whatever meaning they wish into, meanings Dylan will invariably deny when presented with them. Personally, I've always found the experience rather exhilarating. For one, I like puzzles, even the ones without solutions. Moreover, I don't know of another writer who has said nothing as enchantingly as Bob Dylan has. Most importantly though, it's because I like making my own meaning, and there are countless opportunities to do that throughout the Bob Dylan catalogue.

As empty as that luminous haze line may be, it left enough of an impression that something bell-like rang in me when I again encountered the phrase “floated in a luminous haze” in Willa Cather's novel *Alexander's Bridge*: “Somerset House and the bleached gray pinnacles about Whitehall,” Cather writes, “were floated in a luminous haze.”³ Not many people read that book these days. Hell, few folks read *Alexander's Bridge* book those days either.



The 1912 novel is what academics call “apprentice work,” the first novel by a writer who would only later become great, and the only reason I was reading it is because I am a Cather fanboy—it was her work that initially inspired me to get an advanced degree in literature, and my first academic publication was an essay about how I experience her novels differently as a scholar and as a Nebraskan. Overall, I'm very defensive of Cather's writing, yet my first reaction to Dylan's apparent theft was, “*Alexander's Bridge?*” Susan Sontag, another writer I deeply admire, also stole from Cather, but at least she was discerning enough to pilfer from *Song of the Lark*, a work that's in the Cather Canon. Dylan, it seems, had broken into a literary Fort Knox and come out with a lead bar.

Dylan's generous use of other people's words was old news by the time I ran across this instance of it. The plagiarism accusations started flying when someone discovered lines from Dylan's 2001 album *Love and Theft* in an obscure novel, *Confessions of a Yakuza* by Junichi Saga, that had been

3. Cather, Willa. 1912. *Alexander's Bridge*. New York: Vintage. 23.

published years earlier. Deeper investigation ensued, and it turned out Dylan had also appropriated phrases from the Nineteenth-century poet Henry Timrod, “poet laureate of the Confederacy,” on another song on that album, “Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee.” Hardly chastened by the accusations, Dylan again stole from Timrod’s poetry, using at least six of the poet’s phrases in songs on his next album *Modern Times*, an album that a closer look reveals is almost fully composed of handed-down phrases and heisted lines. When questioned about the controversy in an interview conducted by Mikal Gilmore, Dylan provided some fiery answers:

Oh, yeah, in folk and jazz, quotation is a rich and enriching tradition. That certainly is true. It’s true for everybody, but me. I mean, everyone else can do it but not me. There are different rules for me. And as far as Henry Timrod is concerned, have you even heard of him? Who’s been reading him lately? And who’s pushed him to the forefront? Who’s been making you read him? And ask his descendants what they think of the hoopla. And if you think it’s so easy to quote him and it can help your work, do it yourself and see how far you can get. Wussies and pussies complain about that stuff. It’s an old thing – it’s part of the tradition. It goes way back.

When those lines make their way into a song, you’re conscious of it happening?

Well, not really. But even if you are, you let it go. I’m not going to limit what I can say. I have to be true to the song. It’s a particular art form that has its own rules. It’s a different type of thing. All my stuff comes out of the folk tradition – it’s not necessarily akin to the pop world.

I’m working within my art form. It’s that simple. I work within the rules and limitations of it. There are authoritarian figures that can explain that kind of art form better to you than I can. It’s called songwriting. It has to do with melody and rhythm, and then after that, anything goes. You make everything yours. We all do it.

Do you find that sort of criticism irrelevant, or silly?

I try to get past all that. I have to. When you ask me if I find criticism of my work irrelevant or silly, no, not if it’s constructive. If someone could point out here or there where my work could be improved upon, I guess I’d be willing to listen. The people who are obsessed with criticism – it’s not honest criticism. They are not the people who I play to anyway.

But surely you’ve heard about this particular controversy?

People have tried to stop me every inch of the way. They’ve always had bad stuff to say about me. *Newsweek* magazine lit the fuse way back when. *Newsweek* printed that some kid from New Jersey wrote “Blowin’ in the Wind” and it wasn’t me at all. And when that didn’t fly, people accused me of stealing the melody from a 16th-century Protestant hymn. And when that didn’t work, they said they made a mistake and it was really an old Negro spiritual. So what’s so different? It’s gone on for so long I might not be able to live without it now. Fuck ‘em. I’ll see them all in their graves.

All the above quotes are from “Bob Dylan: The *Rolling Stone* Interview” (*Rolling Stone*, Issue 1166, Sept. 27, 2012, 42-51, 80-81).

I'm not sure who all is included in Dylan's "we," but it's certain that he has been taking in and remaking other people's notions throughout his career. Bob Dylan, the character, started as a simulacrum of Woody Guthrie, from whom he stole lines, tone of voice, style of dress, even portions of Guthrie's life story. Of the thirteen songs on Dylan's eponymous debut album, only two were originals, and they were, at best, thinly original. Even when Dylan outraged the folk establishment by "going electric" at Newport in '65, he opened with "Maggie's Farm," a song that borrowed both lyrics and spirit from a traditional tune called "Down on Penny's Farm." Appropriation has long been a cornerstone of Dylan's creativity.

Dylan is absolutely right: it is a tradition in songwriting to borrow lines, phrases, melodies and rhythms. But borrowing or reworking elements from a blues song just isn't the same thing as lifting lines from a book and passing them off as your own in another book. Words spoken out loud are different. They are fleeting and, thus, forgettable, which means they need to be re-spoken to survive. Orality's ephemerality can make the poaching of good words downright heroic, but transposing lines from one book to yours, without attribution, is a lot sketchier, particularly when it happens inside a culture that worships both individuality and property rights. And make no mistake: Bob Dylan grew up in such a culture and he knows what he is doing; ignorant of the conventions of expression, he is not.

A person might argue that Dylan and Cather's twinned use of "floated in a luminous haze" is coincidence, infinite monkey theorem or whatever, but Scott Warmuth, a disc jockey and esteemed Dylanologist, can provide hundreds of other examples of lines and phrases from other people's books appearing in *Chronicles*.⁵ In fact, Warmuth spotted the phrase in question long before I did, only he suspects Dylan got it second-hand from another book, *The Cowboy and the Dandy: Crossing Over from Romanticism to Rock and Roll*, by Perry Meisel, which happens to quote the "luminous haze" passage from *Alexander's Bridge* on page 92. Dylan, Warmuth suspects, took a number of lines and phrases from Meisel's book, including at least one other second-hand phrase from *Alexander's Bridge* that I didn't catch on my own.

5. In particular, I recommend checking out his Pinterest page (www.pinterest.com/scottwarmuth/a-bob-dylan-bookshelf/). On it, he chronicles all the books alluded to, quoted from or outright robbed in Dylan's *Chronicles*. His blog, *Goon Talk*, is a stellar resource as well (swarmuth.blogspot.com/).

The proof for Dylan's plagiarism is too strong to be denied, and I'm not sure he can plead folk process as plagiarism is not part of the folk process I learned about in graduate school. Then again, "the folk process" is, ultimately, a scholarly conceit, and as much as I want to don my folklorist's mortarboard and scold Dylan for his uninformed invocation of the folk process, who am I, really, to question one of the great tradition bearers? Bob Dylan has forgotten more about words than I'll ever know, and if he says it's part of the tradition, so it shall be. It certainly wouldn't be the first time Dylan expressed a grander notion of folklore than folklorists were ready to accept. "These are the same people that tried to pin the name Judas on me." Dylan elaborated when asked about the plagiarism charges, "Judas, the most hated name in human history? If you think you've been called a bad name, try to work your way out from under that. Yeah, and for what? For playing an electric guitar? As if that is in some kind of way equitable to betraying our Lord and delivering him up to be crucified. All those evil motherfuckers can rot in hell."

In his essay "The Ecstasy of Influence,"⁶ Jonathan Lethem defends Dylan's strategy without relying on anything as fusty as the folk process, arguing that "Dylan's originality and appropriations are as one." Lethem explains:

Any text is woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony. The citations that go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read; they are quotations without inverted commas. The kernel, the soul—let us go further and say the substance, the bulk, the actual and valuable

of regard and remuneration.

A time is marked not so much by ideas that are argued about as by ideas that are taken for granted. The character of an era hangs upon what needs no defense. In this regard, few of us question the contemporary construction of copyright. It is taken as a law, both in the sense of a universally recognizable moral absolute, like the law against murder, and as naturally inherent in our world, like the law of gravity. In fact, it is neither. Rather, copyright is an ongoing social negotiation, tenuously forged, endlessly revised, and imperfect in its every incarnation.

6. Lethem, Jonathan. "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism." *Harper's Magazine*, Feb 2007.

material of all human utterances—is plagiarism. For substantially all ideas are secondhand, consciously and unconsciously drawn from a million outside sources, and daily used by the garnerer with a pride and satisfaction born of the superstition that he originated them anywhere except the little discoloration they get from his mental and moral caliber and this temperament, and which is revealed in characteristics of phrasing. Old and new make the warp and woof of every moment. There is no thread that is not a twist of these two strands. By necessity, by proclivity, and by delight, we all quote. Neurological study has lately shown that memory, imagination, and consciousness itself is stitched, quilted, pastiched. If we cut-and-paste our selves, might we not forgive it of our artworks.⁷

Long story short: existence is plagiarism, and so too is art. In other words, Dylan doesn't need to justify his process by dressing it up in folk rags. He's creating art and that means he can do whatever it takes to get his meaning across.

If only I knew what that meaning might be. The way I figure, the only reason to take something from *Alexander's Bridge* is to be obscure, in effect making the mystery the message, and perhaps that's the point: through his plagiarism, Bob Dylan has found a new and exciting way to say nothing at all.



Sure, he could put Cather's words to better use—or at least poach better words from Cather—yet doing so would risk revealing something, and that's just not something Bob Dylan does.

6. *ibid*, 68.