

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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“WHY DID 2013 become the year of the plagiarists?” Ruth Graham inquires on the Poetry Foundation website (see “Word Theft”). Why, indeed! British poets Christian Ward, C.J. Allen and David R. Morgan, and Australian poets Andrew Slattery, Graham Nunn and Vuong Pham have all been exposed. We might even say that “the cento defense” has begun to have as much cachet in the common parlance as “the Twinkie defense.” (For those of you *non* poetry buffs, a cento, from the Latin for “patchwork,” is a collage poem composed of lines borrowed from other poets.)

As an editor, I'm worried, but not surprised. I'm not sure it gives me hope, either, that although the Internet age offers a near infinitude of poems (or short stories or essays) to plagiarize, it also offers copious means by which a plagiarist can be caught red-handed. Googling “originality” these days leads, perversely, to pages and pages of listings for software products capable of generating “originality reports.” I think we've all known teachers who fixated on catching students *in flagrante delicto*, so to speak, with other writers. In my experience, they're never very good teachers. A terror of being exposed as frauds themselves—perhaps because they don't know their subject matter as well as they should—may be what's driving their obsession.

It's also a fact that accusations of cheating should not be leveled cavalierly. They damage lives. I speak from experience in that department. Over forty years later, I am shocked, appalled and (still) heartbroken that my Honors English teacher in sophomore year of high school accused me of plagiarizing a poem commemorating the launch of Apollo 14. The accusation was all the more absurd in that there were no smart phones in those days, and I would had to have plagiarized *ex nihilo*. How could I possibly have known ahead of time that Sister Felicitas would turn on the closed-circuit TV in our classroom on January 31, 1971, rev us up about the privilege of experiencing history, and then instruct us to write a poem commemorating the fact of Alan Shepard, Stuart Roosa and Edgar Mitchell blasting off into the sky? Shepard hit two golf balls on the moon during that lunar stay, but I only had the apocalyptic launch to work with. I can't imagine that I had anything terribly original to say. I think my mistake lay in writing the poem in meter and rhyme. Anyway, I was shortly ushered out of class and thrown upon the mercy of the principal.

If I remember anything from the two-semester aesthetics course I took in college, it is that our prior experiences of cognition count for

something. As Nelson Goodman commented, pushing off of Kant, “The innocent eye is blind and the virgin mind empty.” My poem may have struck Sister Felicitas as plagiarized because on some deep mnemonic level, it *did* resonate with poetry she had read. I no longer have the poem—I destroyed it the day it was written in shame and indignation—but I'm virtually certain that it aped the four-beat lines of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's “The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere.” My grandmother was given to reciting those lines at the drop of a hat, and the poem's cadences had penetrated my very bones. The patriotic context would have been ripe for appropriation too. Because Apollo 13's mission had been aborted due to the explosion of an oxygen tank two days after launch, I would have had all the more reason to interpret the astronauts aboard Apollo 14 as national heroes akin to Paul Revere.

Lucky for me, the principal saw fit to exonerate me. For one thing, she had always made it her business to roam about the school, and she knew for a fact that my head was always buried in a book. A former English teacher herself (and still a voracious reader, unlike Sister Felicitas), she understood immediately, too, that anyone who had read enough books outside of the regular high-school English curriculum to sink several ships could not help but bring all that reading into the writing process. In short, she deemed me perfectly capable of writing a ballad featuring ill-defined meter, too-obvious rhyme and inflated diction.

In terms of imitation, Petrarch argues in *Le familiari* that writers should aim not for the similarity of a portrait to a sitter but for that of a son to his father. Writers who aim for the strict likeness that would have been associated with portraiture in the fourteenth century are behaving like apes, not poets. Wholesale substitution of another's work for one's own of course constitutes the ultimate in ape-like behavior. I still remember the spastic howls that suddenly shattered the work-like ambience of the large office I shared with several other graduate students thirty years ago. A fellow teaching assistant had discovered Elizabeth Bishop's “The Fish” in the batch of class poems she was reading. The student who had signed her name to the poem had undoubtedly deemed Bishop a nonentity.

The antithesis of this situation is also problematic. As a lowly lecturer in my first bona fide creative writing job, I once got a desperate call from our program secretary late on a Friday afternoon. A student was camping out in her office insisting that she conjure up

a professor. Despite her vehement assurances otherwise, the student remained convinced that a conversation on the department level could give him a leg up on the competition for admission. Reluctantly, I agreed to come to campus and play along. The jaunty rainbow beret the student was sporting should have tipped me off. When I asked him what writers he read, he said he didn't read any. He had consciously chosen *not* to be influenced, he informed me. He wanted to be an original.

In the training of writers, some level of imitation is not only inevitable, but desirable. The first six weeks of my first ever creative writing class were dedicated strictly to a pedagogy of mimesis. We read numerous canonical pre-modern texts—for example, by Sir Thomas Browne, Sir Thomas Malory, Sir Francis Bacon, and Sir Thomas More—in part or in full, and our assignment was to imitate them with as much fidelity as we could, but to exploit some differences too. In other words, we were admonished to follow Petrarch's advice in approximating the likeness between a son and his father. Imitation necessitated wrangling with hypotaxis, parataxis, parallelism, chiasmus, oxymoron, synecdoche, etc. We did “find our own voices” to a certain extent, often by learning how to manipulate cognitive dissonance. While none of us ever achieved the bracing originality of George Starbuck in rendering Gerard Manley Hopkins' “Margaret, are you grieving/over goldengrove unleaving?” as “Cool it, Mag./Sure it's a drag/With all that green flecked out,” we did learn more about using writerly tools to achieve originality than we probably would have if we had been left to our own devices to write fiction.

It goes without saying that with plagiarists, imitation goes too far. Is it also fair to acknowledge, though, that we are now living in a brave new world regarding plagiarism? Of course, Barthes and Foucault prepared us for it by telling us that the author was dead (at least as privileged authority), the text was unstable, etc. Still, it doesn't seem enough any more merely to concede that death blows have been dealt to Romanticism.

No doubt thousands, even millions, of literary works are whisked by us every day on the maniacal, anarchical conveyor belt of the Internet. Perhaps they are not mass-produced in the conventional sense, but they *are* produced by masses of individual writers. It's possible that, due to their incessant availability, these works are beginning to feel like Campbell's soup cans did to Andy Warhol—i.e., so telling in their ubiquitousness that it is difficult to take their individual origins for

real. Maybe commodification in the literary world has gone too far. Maybe a little Marx is in order. Maybe what we're all really lamenting is that, in a culture increasingly crowing about the death of the humanities, poets are starting to relate to the poems they write and publish as to alien objects.

It's true, too, that there's something terrifying for writers about originality not being valued as much as it used to be. Now, thanks to Wikipedia, the old accusation that creative writing workshops facilitate the writing of literary works by committee seems pretty tame. Not only are Wikipedia articles collaboratively written and edited; they are *constantly being* written and edited. The algorithms for robo-poetics programs have grown increasingly sophisticated, to the point where they can generate poems that mimic, say, Emily Dickinson's. Software is now capable of noting argumentation problems in freshman compositions.

When plagiarists win high-stakes contests, it's not true, though, that what we don't know won't hurt us. As it happens, my mother laughed so hard in trying to explain to my young sons why, in the videotape of *Toy Story* she had purchased for them on a street corner in New York City, real people scuttled across the screen in front of Cowboy Woody and Buzz Lightyear that I think she almost felt as if she had gotten her money's worth. Still, the fact remains that she *was* ripped off. By way of ending on a grace note here, albeit by defecting to the medium of film, I can only pay homage to the paying customers who got up to buy snacks or go to the restroom at Cinema X while *Toy Story* was being illegally videotaped. They are emblems, perhaps, for all of us who have been unwittingly caught up in this plagiarism scandal.

We are privileged to welcome Lydia Diemer to the printmaking community in western Kentucky. She deserves much grateful recognition for her assistance with the cover of this issue. Thanks, too, to the usual gang: Riley Hanick and Dale Ray Phillips, whose literary acumen is at the heart of every issue, and Jacque Day, whose assiduousness in rallying the troops and in attending to production details is always without peer. It was a pleasure, as well, to work with our Assistant Poetry Editor Lilia Joy and with our talented and dedicated MFA interns: Charles Booth, Evelyn Conley, Mica Garrett, Patricia Kurz, Troy Taylor, and Melissa Tyndall. Our undergraduate interns Cassie Benson, Rachel Clifford and Haley Russell more than pulled their weight. It was great to have them aboard as well. Thanks, too, to Nita King for her assistance in the final assault.