Re-Cycling Discourse: Facilitating Felicity

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Introduction

Recently, Rekdal Paisley got two Facebook messages last January from fellow poets who had some disturbing news: a poet in England by the name of Christian Ward had taken an old poem of hers and published it, barely altered, as his own. Her first reaction was to wonder if it was some kind of experiment. Perhaps by changing the gender of the author of a poem about infidelity and infertility, he was teasing out new meanings?

Then she saw the “new” poem, with its new line breaks and minor but grating word changes. It was obviously a work of deception, not conceptual play. “That’s the thing that enraged me,” she said recently. “If he had just plagiarized the poem and published under his name, I would have been less annoyed. When I saw he wanted to take part in something I had done myself and claim it as his own, I felt kind of violated.”

Paisley, who responded to Ward with a righteously angry blog post (and later a more melancholy one), is not the only one feeling violated these days. The poetry world experienced something of a plagiarism epidemic last year. CJ Allen withdrew from the shortlist of England’s Forward Prize in September when it was revealed that he had plagiarized some of his past work. Australian poet Andrew Slattery was stripped of three prizes when it turned out he had cribbed from Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath, among others. When caught, he claimed the poems were written in the cento form, in which each line is pulled from another source; he also called his work “a cynical experiment.”

The list goes on: British poet David R. Morgan admitted last spring that many of his poems, stretching back to at least the 1980s, had been plagiarized. Rekdal’s perpetrator turned out to have stolen from several other poets, including Helen Mort and Sandra Beasley. Graham Nunn, longtime organizer of a major Australian poetry festival, was accused last September of at least eight instances of plagiarism, which he defended in part as “sampling”; on his blog, he wrote that “reading and listening to music are a vital part of my process” and that “parts of the original text are creatively appropriated in the formation of a new work.” These are all published, and often prize-winning, poems—they are not students or amateurs. Why did 2013 become the year of the plagiarists?

Through all of the history of literature and of the arts in general, works of art are for a large part repetitions of the tradition; to the entire history of artistic creativity belong plagiarism, literary theft, appropriation, incorporation, retelling, rewriting, recapitulation, revision, reprise, thematic variation, ironic retake, parody, imitation, stylistic theft, pastiches, collages, and deliberate assemblages. There is no rigorous and precise distinction between practices like imitation, stylistic plagiarism, copy, replica and forgery. These appropriation procedures are the main axis of a literate culture, in which the tradition of the canonic past is being constantly rewritten.

Within academia, plagiarism by students, professors, or researchers is considered academic dishonesty or academic fraud, and offenders are subject to academic censure, up to and including expulsion. Many institutions use plagiarism detection software to uncover potential plagiarism and to deter students from plagiarizing. In journalism, plagiarism is considered a breach of journalistic ethics, and reporters caught plagiarizing typically face disciplinary measures ranging from suspension to termination of employment. Some individuals caught plagiarizing in academic or journalistic contexts claim that they plagiarized unintentionally, by failing to include quotations or give the appropriate citation. While plagiarism in scholarship and journalism has a centuries-old history, the development of the Internet, where articles appear as electronic text, has made the physical act of copying the work of others much easier.

Premised upon an expected level of learning/comprehension having been achieved, all associated academic accreditation becomes seriously undermined if plagiarism is allowed to become the norm within academic submissions. For professors and researchers, plagiarism is punished by sanctions ranging from suspension to termination, along with the loss of credibility and perceived integrity. Charges of plagiarism against students and professors are typically heard by internal disciplinary committees, by which students and professors have agreed to be bound. Self-plagiarism (also known as “recycling fraud”) is the reuse of significant, identical, or nearly identical portions of one’s own work without acknowledging that one is doing so or without citing the original work. Articles of this nature are often referred to as duplicate or multiple publication. In addition there can be a copyright issue if copyright of the prior work has been transferred to another entity. Typically, self-plagiarism is only considered a serious ethical issue in settings where someone asserts that a publication consist of new material, such as in publishing or factual documentation. It does not apply to public-interest texts, such as social, professional, and cultural opinions usually published in newspapers and magazines.

In academic fields, self-plagiarism occurs when an author reuses portions of his own published and copyrighted work in subsequent publications, but without attributing the previous publication. Identifying self-plagiarism is often difficult because limited reuse of material is accepted both legally (as fair use) and ethically.

It is common for university researchers to rephrase and republish their own work, tailoring it for different academic journals and newspaper articles, to disseminate their work to the widest possible interested public. However, these researchers also obey limits: If half...
an article is the same as a previous one, it is usually rejected. One of the functions of the process of peer review in academic writing is to prevent this type of “recycling.”

The Concept of Self-plagiarism

The concept of "self-plagiarism" has been challenged as being self-contradictory, an oxymoron, and on other grounds. For example, Stephanie J. Bird argues that self-plagiarism is a misnomer, since by definition plagiarism concerns the use of others' material.

However, the phrase is used to refer to specific forms of unethical publication. Bird identifies the ethical issues of "self-plagiarism" as those of "dual or redundant publication." She also notes that in an educational context, "self-plagiarism" refers to the case of a student who resubmits "the same essay for credit in two different courses." As David B. Resnik clarifies, "Self-plagiarism involves dishonesty but not intellectual theft."

According to Patrick M. Scanlon, "Self-plagiarism" is a term with some specialized currency. Most prominently, it is used in discussions of research and publishing integrity in biomedicine, where heavy publish-or-perish demands have led to a rash of duplicate and "salami-slicing" publication, the reporting of a single study's results in "least publishable units" within multiple articles offers a useful classification system including four types of self-plagiarism: duplicate publication of an article in more than one journal; partitioning of one study into multiple publications, often called salami-slicing; text recycling; and copyright infringement.

Writing is a dance that involves imitation, inspiration, and originality. But all things considered, writerly disapproval of plagiarism has remained remarkably consistent over the centuries—really, even over millennia. The Roman poet Martial accused his rival Fidentinus, whom he called a "miscreant magpie": "My books need no one to accuse or judge you: the page which is yours stands up against you and says, 'You are a thief.'" Martial was particularly galled that Fidentinus had mixed in his own inferior work with Martial's original material. Yes, approaches to borrowing and attribution have shifted over time, but wholesale copying has never been kosher.

T. S. Eliot who relied on other sources for much of "The Waste Land" (plagiarism or allusion?), famously wrote, "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal." Less often quoted is the next line, "Bad poets deface what they take." This is what seems to gall many victims of plagiarists: to see their poems reprinted in weaker versions than the original.

Ruth Ellen Kocher, a Colorado-based poet and professor, recently learned that her 2004 poem "Issues Involving Interpretation" had been plagiarized online by an Australian named Vuong Pham. Pham kept her line breaks intact but changed a few words and added some new lines. "When he stole my work, he didn’t make it better," Kocher said. "If my work was going to be taken and pillfered in that way, I would have loved to see it undergo a transformation and evolution." Instead, she said, it reminded her of a "reverse revision": his small changes actually made the poem worse.

Since the 19th century, when the Romantics embraced what Marilyn Randall, a professor of French studies at the University of Western Ontario and the author of a 2001 book on literary plagiarism, calls the "authentic poetic soul," borrowing has become even more cemented as a literary crime. (Redkcl refers to her plagiarist as a Romantic, because "he was trying to tie his own imagination to the poem and claim it"). Even in our age of collage and appropriation and "intertextuality," it's only at the extreme edges of such experimentation that you'll find even mild defenses of outright plagiarism.

Despite the fact that plagiarism has always been taboo, readers are often more forgiving of historical offenses. As Thomas Mallon puts it in his insightful 1989 book on plagiarism, "Stolen Words," "Everyone enjoys a good scandal in the present…. What we seem far less able to endure is that platter cast falling from the library shelf: Its shattering somehow bothers us more than the live body going off the cliff.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example, was an inveterate thief, but he remains firmly in the canon. Hart Crane borrowed heavily from a lesser-known poet named Samuel Greenberg, most notably in his early poem "Emblems of Conduct." ("No doubt he meant to acknowledge his debt," James Laughlin wrote in 1939. "It simply slipped his mind.")

More recently, the British conceptual poet Ira Lightman, who was behind many of last year's revelations, got involved simply because he didn't see anyone else doing it. "The poetry world is genteel," he said. "People don't like to make any kind of stir." Lightman has taken it upon himself to comb through suspect work, alert the victims, and publicize his findings.

But even Lightman, who spent untold hours last year ferreting out violators, doesn't want to banish them indefinitely. "I don't see them all as these sinister, plotting, Machiavellian characters," he said. "I see it as a corruption. And we're all vulnerable to corruption." He suggests that transgressors retreat to self-publishing for a few years, prove themselves honest, and then return to the fold.

If plagiarists are not sinister and Machiavellian, then why do they do it? This question gets asked every time there's a fresh revelation of plagiarism, whether it's in the literary world, journalism, or academia. There's never a satisfying answer, but there are at least lots of guesses, often somewhat at odds with each other: laziness or panic, narcissism or low self-esteem, ambition or deliberate self-sabotage.

In poetry, at least, everyone agrees it's not about the money. One of the hardest things is that the stakes in poetry are not very high," Kocher said. "I'm not a rocket scientist. I'm not going to cure cancer with one of my poems. I don't get paid an extraordinary amount of money, and I don't have any great notoriety outside of the writing community. So to take something that most people engage as an act of joy and sully it this way—it just seems one of the most egregious offenses.

But does anyone write just for the money? Laurence Sterne, the plagiarist author of Tristram Shandy, said he wrote "not to be fed but to be famous." Now, of course, he is. It worked.

The Internet has made both plagiarism itself and its detection much easier for everyone. But the major cases that came up in 2013 have all concerned British and Australian poets, often, but not always, cribbing from American ones. Despite some speculation that our national character makes us less likely to plagiarize—Americans are obsessively respectful of private property! American egos are too big to rely on the Internet to bring down transgressors—there's also the possibility that Americans have simply been lucky enough to not be caught in the current dragnet.

For one, the primary detective is British, more familiar with the Commonwealth scene than the American one. And it's not as if Americans haven't been caught in the past. An Iowa poet named Neal Bowers a former editor of Poet and Critic magazine, wrote a 1997 book about tracking down the Illinois elementary school teacher who
published work copied from Bowers in 13 journals over the course of a few years. “It’s a very uneasy feeling,” Bowers told the New York Times at the time, “a bit like having a stalker.”

The gut reactions of the plagiarized are hard to predict. The poet and essayist H.L. Hix, for example, found out in October that his work had been lifted by Graham Nunn in an Australian anthology of love poems. He said his first reaction to getting the news from Lightman was sheer surprise: “As a poet one gets used to being completely ignored.”

Some victims feel moved to reach out the perpetrators. Kocher sent a note to Pham through Facebook after he posted a brief apology, which has since been removed, on his blog. She hasn’t heard back. (Pham has defended himself by saying he was simply naive and not taught about proper attribution; he also recently wrote that he has become a victim of cyberbullying.) After Paisley Rekdal posted her open letter to Christian Ward on her blog, she also asked online for an apology from him. She got one: a one-sentence email that she recalls as something to the effect of “I’m sorry, I’m not this kind of person.” It’s the kind of open, vacuous statement that could make you hate someone, or feel sorry for them, or both at once. “He gave me what I asked for,” she said, “but he gave me no more than what I asked for.”

Is there such a thing as a resolution to a plagiarism story? Plagiarism isn’t a crime, there’s no universally accepted punishment for it, and the perfect expression of contrition may never come. Hix, for his part, says he has no plans to get in touch with Graham Nunn. “These were love poems that are being stolen,” he said. “I don’t have any more interest in speaking with Mr. Nunn than I would with the person who had broken into my house and stolen my property.”