

Essay
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Kidnapping the Brainchildren

A story that haunts me: The book critic for a newspaper plagiarized an old essay of mine. Someone sent the thing to me. There on the page, under another man's name, my words had taken up a new life—clause upon clause, whole paragraphs transplanted. My phrases ambled along dressed in the same meanings. The language gesticulated as before. It argued and whistled and waved to friends. It acted very much at home. My sentences had gone over into a parallel universe, which was another writer's work. The words mocked me across the distance, like an ex-wife who shows up years later looking much the same but married to a gangster. The thoughts were mine, all right. But they were tricked up as another man's inner life, a stranger's.

Coming upon my own words, now alienated, I was amused, amazed, flattered, outraged, spooked—and in a moment, simply pained: I learned that after the article was published, the plagiarist had been found out, by someone else, not me, and had committed suicide.

I do not know what to make of his death, or of my bizarre and passive implication in it: the man died of the words that he stole from me, or he died of shame. Or something more complex; I cannot say. Maybe he killed himself for other reasons entirely. But his death has a sad phosphorescence in my mind.

Strange: we know that plagiarism may be fatal to reputation. But it is seldom so savage that it actually kills the writer. Plagiarism is usually too squalid and minor to take a part in tragedy; maybe that was the suicide's true shame, the grubbiness. Plagiarism proclaims no majestic flaw of character but a trait, pathetic, that makes you turn aside in embarrassment. It belongs to the same run-down neighborhood as obscene phone calls or shoplifting.

That is why it is hard to make sense of the information that Martin Luther King Jr. was guilty of plagiarism a number of times in the course of his academic career. How could it be that King, with his extraordinary moral intelligence, the man who sought the transformation of the American soul at the level of its deepest wrong (race), could commit that trashy offense, not once but many times?

Character is unexpected mystery. King wrote his doctoral dissertation about the theologians Henry Nelson Wieman and Paul Tillich and plagiarized passages from an earlier student's dissertation. Tillich, one of the great theologians of the 20th century, also had secrets, including a taste for pornography and many women not his wife.

I believe in the Moping Dog doctrine. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote about the inconsistencies of human behavior: "It seems as if heaven had sent its insane angels into our world as to an asylum, and here they will break out in their native music and utter at intervals the words they have heard in heaven; then the mad fit returns and they mope and wallow like dogs."

Part of the mystery is that King had no need to plagiarize.

He dealt himself a gratuitous wound. And what he lifted from others, or failed to attribute, tended to be pedestrian—a moping prose.

Plagiarism at least proclaims that some written words are valuable enough to steal. If the language is magnificent, the sin is comprehensible: the plagiarist could not resist. But what if the borrowed stuff is a flat, lifeless mess—the road kill of passing ideas? In that case there is less risk, but surely no joy at all. (Does the plagiarist ever feel joy?) Safer to steal the duller stones. None but the dreariest specialists will remember them or sift for them in the muck.

The Commandments warn against stealing, against bearing false witness, against coveting. *Plagiarius* is kidnapper in Latin. The plagiarist snatches the writer's brainchildren, pieces of his soul. Plagiarism gives off a shabby metaphysic. Delaware's Senator Joseph Biden, during the 1988 presidential primaries, expanded the conceptual frontier by appropriating not just the language of British Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock but also of his poignant Welsh coal-mining ancestors.

Biden transplanted the mythic forebears to northeastern Pennsylvania. He conjured them coming up out of the mines to play football. "They read poetry and wrote poetry and taught me how to sing verse." A fascinating avenue: the romantic plagiarist reinvented himself and his heritage entirely. He jumped out of his own skin and evicted his ancestors from theirs as well.

Why plagiarize? Out of some clammy hope for fame, for a grade, for a for-

lorn fix of approbation. Out of dread of a deadline, or out of sheer neurotic compulsion. Plagiarism is a specialized mystery. Or the mystery may be writing itself. Many people cannot manage it. They borrow. Or they call up a term-paper service.

The only charming plagiarism belongs to the young. Schoolchildren shovel information out of an encyclopedia. Gradually they complicate the burglary, taking from two or three reference books instead of one. The mind (still on the wrong side of the law) then deviously begins to intermingle passages, reshuffle sentences, disguise raw chunks from the Britannica, find synonyms, reshape information until it becomes something like the student's own. A writer, as Saul Bellow has said, "is a reader moved to emulation." Knowledge transforms theft. An autonomous mind emerges from the sloughed skin of the plagiarist.

There is a certain symmetry of the childish in the King case. Something childish in King's student mind was still copying out of encyclopedias, just as something immature in his sexual development had him going obsessively after women. And something childish in every mind rejects imperfection in heroes. King's greatness came from somewhere else entirely, a deeper part of the forest. No character is flawless, and if it were flawless, that would be its flaw. Everything in nature, Emerson wrote, is cracked.



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