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Last or Latest? The Plagiarism Controversy
Regarding Graham Swift's Last Orders

Abstract:

In 1968 Roland Barthes famously declared the author dead; a few years later Harold Bloom's theory of the "anxiety of influence" (1973) suggested that through the ages poets wage Oedipal wars against their literary forefathers. Yet no graver insult exists against an author than the charge of plagiarism. How is this possible when every serious reader accepts parody and pastiche as common practices in postmodern literature? Which parameters define originality while critics allow that allusion and adaptation are established means through which authors pay homage to their ancestors? In 1996 Graham Swift won the prestigious Man Booker Prize with his sixth novel, Last Orders. In 1997 he was accused of "borrowing the plot and formal structure" for his book from William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying (1930). Using this example, I will discuss the notions of originality and plagiarism in the context of contemporary literature. I will argue that Swift's novel pays intertextual homage to Faulkner as well as to Chaucer and to T. S. Eliot while remaining an original work of fiction. In all of his works Swift echoes an established literary tradition adapting themes and techniques in ways that test the limits of modern notions of originality and creativity.

Last or Latest? The Plagiarism Controversy Regarding Graham Swift's Last Orders

When Brahms wrote his first symphony he was accused of having used a big theme from Beethoven's Ninth. Brahms' reply was that any fool could see that.

Julian Barnes

For a few days in mid-February 2007 the members of EATAW, the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing, engaged in a heated debate on plagiarism. Each day several long email messages clogged my Inbox, arguing over the definition and practices associated with what teachers worldwide consider the most heinous of academic offences. I read the exchanges with an increased sense of déjà vu until a simple one-line contribution from Robert Lankamp caught my attention. He wondered: "Is plagiarism more about stealing ideas than stealing language?" The query epitomizes the hermeneutic and epistemological complexity of the predicament in which academics, critics and writers find themselves in the postmodern world. Furthermore, the question foregrounds the contemporary controversy over definitions of terms like language or ideas, over legal issues of authorship and ownership, and over the sacred status afforded to notions of originality and creativity.

In Europe the modern concept of the author was born out of the Enlightenment, was given legal status in British law in early eighteenth century, and was effectively killed all over the western world in 1968 when Roland Barthes famously declared the author dead. Yet to date no greater praise for a writer exists than the reviewers' cry of 'original work,' no graver insult against an author than the charge of plagiarism. The suspicion of plagiarism casts the writer in the role of cheating student: an incompetent apprentice who has failed to master his craft but reproduces material in a manner that reveals the true source. Such charges, no matter how ludicrous, are sure to be offered some space within the literary sections of prestigious periodicals. When every sophisticated reader accepts parody and pastiche as common practices in postmodern literature, why do we

lend an ear to accusations of stealing? How does this paradox coexist with contemporary notions of copyright? Which parameters define originality while critics allow that allusion and adaptation are established means through which authors pay homage to their ancestors?

Perhaps plagiarists are not shoddy scholars but authors who parody subject matter, expecting postmodern readers to recognize the intent and appreciate the subversion. Maybe the celebrated "death of the author" signifies the birth of the author-as-plagiarist. Still, if contemporary habits of thought have elevated the plagiarist to the status of the true postmodern reader/writer, then why do accusations of any kind of borrowing still make headlines? Since T. S. Eliot did not write The Waste Land; since D. M. Thomas copied verbatim case histories and testimonies in sections of The White Hotel; since some literary works have acquired endnotes and footnotes to resemble reference works; and since Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose can convincingly pass itself off as a detective story, why do readers continue to distinguish fiction from fact, his story from history?

Some authors use postmodern trickery to discuss originality in their work. Such a tongue-in-cheek anecdote occurs towards the end of Tom Stoppard's play The Real Thing. The protagonist, Henry, who is a playwright, listens to the radio, which is playing Bach's Air on a G String. Decidedly unsophisticated in taste, Henry appears spellbound. When Annie, his partner, points out that he is listening to Bach, Henry exclaims "the cheeky beggar" and accuses the composer of stealing the piece "note for note, practically a straight lift from Procul Harum." Then he dashes to his record collection in order to play the "original," the classic rock ballad "A Whiter Shade of Pale." Is Stoppard playfully suggesting that originality, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder?

Are we as readers the only ones engaged in the debate over the origins of original work? Are we not clue-hunting inspectors, looking behind the text in hand for other voices? Whether we textualize our reactions or contextualize our views of the texts we read, we are sophisticated and cautious travelers of literary landscapes.

In our postmodern times literary terra firma has been transformed into red-hot lava by eruptions of theory: structuralism, then post-structuralism; semiotics and reader-response practices; Marxism and feminism, new historicism and cultural materialism. However, when most of us immerse ourselves in the act of reading, to some extent we are still governed by time-honored notions of originality and tradition. The best texts are the ones that enable us to become aware of what we bring to a text: no plot or quote can be declared borrowed or stolen unless our memory of other texts engages in intertextual dialogue with the text in hand. This constitutes the ultimate challenge: how to work within tradition without appropriating it; to build with bricks derived from others but to erect a new edifice. After decades of incessant allusion and appropriation in literature and cinema, music and architecture, we may no longer be able to distinguish plagiarism from homage, pastiche, ventriloquism, parody, intertextuality, echoing, reference, sequels and prequels. The contemporary artist self-consciously walks the tightrope that unites expectations of originality with the postmodern notion of the writer as the Great Anthologist, and of the novel as a work of reference.

Plagiarism constitutes a multi-faceted problem in the contemporary study of literature due to the inherent difficulty of a satisfactory definition within the context of postmodern theories of language and literature, parameters which make only the broadest definition of the term possible. Chris Baldick in The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms recognizes that "plagiarism is not always easily separable from imitation, adaptation or pastiche". In such a context, what one reader might define as 'stolen', depending on his understanding and memory of the original text, another might consider 'borrowed'. Nevertheless, it is one thing when a work resonates with the author's nods to tradition and quite another to be poked in the ribs at every reference. As we find ourselves immersed in the vast pool of intertextuality, books can only be read in relation to other books and everything springs from the same primal source: in such a context even Homer practiced pastiche. But isn't it true that the writer who pays homage hopes that the allusions will be recognized and the original text enriched, while the plagiarist hopes to go undetected?

Furthermore, the contemporary writer's struggle against the notion of the death of the author occurs within a culture that celebrates artistic creativity to an unprecedented degree. While the dominance of the reader over the text is emphasized, and, to quote Roland Barthes famous words, "the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred," simultaneously, a multitude of annual literary prizes confers undeniable prestige on authorship. Reviewing is still given space completely disproportionate to the commercial significance of most books. The media have turned artists into celebrities and sponsorship helps some of them lead privileged lives. Artists in the past could hardly expect serious artistic endeavors to earn £50,000 as the annual Man-Booker-prize winner does from Man-Booker plc, a multinational company. Thus, a charge of theft, legitimate or not, is big news when it involves significant monetary awards. Plagiarism seems to be the inevitable skeleton every journalist or scholar wants to discover in an artist's closet.

The first Copyright laws date back to the 18th century but the issue of plagiarism has been around since antiquity. Contrary to academic writing, which is governed by rules that make the theft of words and ideas easier to detect, creative writing celebrates the breaking of rules. The concept and practice of *mimesis* has a long history in the Western literary tradition. Literary works develop by way of the transformation of earlier texts, which they echo, rework, parody, undermine. the vitality of any literary culture depends upon the freedom to make creative use of other writings. As Harold Bloom argues, "only great writers should be plagiarized," only the "quality of the stolen material" should be examined since what new writers are expected to bring to the canon is a "strong misreading' of precursors." Thus, Bloom defines originality as the artist's ability to pour back into the creative pool what s/he draws out of it. Plagiarists, on the contrary, drain that pool.

The rest of this paper concerns a contemporary English novel which constitutes, in Bloom's terms, a "strong misreading" of a modernist classic. In 1996 Graham Swift won the prestigious Man Booker Prize with his sixth novel, Last Orders. In

1997 he was accused of "borrowing the plot and formal structure" for his book from William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying (1930). This plagiarism controversy appeared on the front page of some British newspapers for more than a week in March 1997. Several months after Swift's win and a whole year after the novel's publication, John Frow, an Australian academic, voiced doubts about the novel's originality based on a number of structural and thematic similarities Last Orders bears to Faulkner's As I Lay Dying. An indignant Swift denied any wrongdoing and a great number of critics and novelists supported him. Last Orders remains the most celebrated work of an author who self-consciously works within an established literary tradition. Swift's novel pays intertextual homage to Faulkner as well as to Chaucer and to T. S. Eliot while remaining an original work of fiction. The accusations leveled against Swift were unjust but significant in a political and theoretical context.

Upon publication, Last Orders, met with critical acclaim: the Times reviewer called it a "resonant work of art, an extremely fine novel," the TLS found it "emotionally charged and technically superb," while the Sunday Times pronounced it a "triumph of quiet authenticity." It was a long-awaited return to form. Almost fifteen years had passed since equally admiring epithets had been attributed to the only other Swift novel to be widely read and praised: the 1983 Waterland. Swift's reputation had been established by that one novel, but nothing he had written before or after Waterland had lived up to critical expectations. With Last Orders Swift was finally reclaiming his post as one of his generation's finest, an immaculate stylist with a vibrant imagination.

Thus, when the Booker prize shortlist was announced a few months later no one was surprised to discover that Last Orders was included and had been pronounced as the strongest contender. On October 30, 1996, award night for what has become Britain's most prestigious annual fiction award, Graham Swift had a lovely acceptance speech ready and thirteen years' worth of rehearsal opportunities: he had been owed the Booker since 1983 for a novel that had come to be known as the most popular shortlisted item never to have won. This

time, however, not only were there no unpleasant surprises for Swift, but the Chair of the judging panel, Carmen Callil, had already leaked to the press parts of an after-dinner speech that almost guaranteed the prize would be awarded to an English novelist. Co-founder of the feminist Virago Press, Callil accused British literary critics of engaging in a "ritual moan about the dire state of the English novel," in "an unhealthy obsession with American fiction" and a "kind of political correctness" that permits only "guarded praise." In bemoaning what she considered to be unnecessarily destructive criticism, Callil identified the "obsessive denigration of English fiction" to be the "dying chirrup of some sort of imperial misery." When she finally accused the British Press of "reveling in public executions," little could she know that her accusations were also ironically prescient. That night's Booker winner was soon to be accused of constituting the plagiarized version of an American classic.

Last Orders concerns the journey taken from Bermondsey, in South London, to Margate, in South-East England (Kent) following the title's request by a dead man. Three ageing cockneys, Ray, Vic and Lennie, and the fortyish Vince, the deceased's adopted son, drive south to scatter the ashes of their friend Jack Dodds, a family butcher. As the quartet of quarreling, drinking companions navigates through country roads and numerous detours, their past lives, fractured careers and secret relationships are gradually revealed: Wars global and domestic, traumas of the body and the mind, failed marriages and estranged daughters become the building blocks of ordinary lives that resonate universal themes. In typical Swifitean fashion this is a moving evocation of lives lost and redeemed.

To British critics the novel inevitably evoked Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, Eliot's Waste Land and Joyce's Ulysses. To North American reviewers Faulkner was the obvious connection made. In fact, Swift was asked about this influence often enough when he toured the US and Canada to promote the book's release in 1996 and he readily accepted that "there is a kind of homage" to As I Lay Dying, but he also added that "the story about the pressure of the dead on the living in

the wake of death is as old as Homer." Indeed The Odyssey seems to be a source of inspiration for Faulkner's story as well since Odysseus' journey into Hades and his wanderings parallel Addie Bundren's final days and the family's many trials until they complete the task at hand. Homer's tale is for Faulkner what Faulkner's tale is for Swift: an archetypal journey to be taken time and time again in fiction as in life.

Thus, Swift was completely unprepared when trouble began brewing down under. In a letter to the book review supplement of the Australian, John Frow, professor of English at Queensland University, pointed out several similarities in structure and subject matter between Last Orders and Faulkner's As I Lay Dying. Frow claimed that "the borrowing (if that's the right word) is substantial." He supported this observation by pointing out that

As I Lay Dying is about the transport of the body of Addie Bundren to her burial in Mississippi; Last Orders is about the transport of the ashes of Jack Dodds to be scattered in the sea off Margate. As I Lay Dying developed a distinctive formal structure of alternating short first-person narratives; Last Orders uses precisely the same structure, even to the point of matching the chapter given to the dead person, the chapter composed of a set of numbered points and the chapter made up of a single sentence.

Professor Frow concluded that "Last Orders, in its plot and formal structure, is almost identical to that novel without acknowledgement and without even, as far as [he could] see, the kind of knowing nod towards the earlier novel that would have made this acceptable." Although Frow recognized that "these are tricky matters" he described Swift's novel as "direct and unacknowledged imitation."

So went the letter published in the Australian Review of Books and for weeks nothing happened. Then someone in the British press discovered that letter, recognised its headline potential and it was reprinted on the front page of the Independent on Sunday, which is, in the words of Salman Rushdie, an "ailing newspaper, looking for a scandal to boost sales." As Rushdie argued in his letter to the Guardian in support of Swift, "can it be that writers are only interesting to the media when they can be abused?" Jan Dalley, the literary editor of the Independent on Sunday, agreed that "Booker-bashing is now an established

national pastime."

Unlike his friend Salman Rushdie, Swift, unused to being headline-worthy, wondered, in a characteristically low-key manner, what had prompted the press's attempt to undermine his literary reputation. In a polite but angry letter to the Times, Swift's immediate response to the accusations of undue borrowing was that his book can "understandably be compared to Faulkner's" but that it also "does not stand comparison to it." Indeed, had Professor Frow done any research into what reviewers had said about Last Orders in January 1996, he would have discovered that Claire Messud in the Times had called the novel a "triumphant, and ultimately redemptive, adaptation of Faulkner's classic." This reviewer identified the "specific debts" Swift owed his predecessor as "not mere pastiche" but a "resonant work of art in its own right." Similarly, in the New York Times Book Review Jay Parini identified it as a "reprise" of Faulkner's novel.

Like Julian Barnes and Salman Rushdie, many contemporary writers and scholars rushed to aid Swift by agreeing with him that "it is in the nature of literature that books may derive from or be influenced by others." As Kazuo Ishiguro indicated, "only a reader devoid of sophistication could mistake this for a case of plagiarism." What Swift and his supporters had taken for granted was that the literary establishment would recognize the resonance with As I Lay Dying for what it is: an allusion to an "established classic for its own purposes" (Ishiguro).

On many different occasions Swift has defined fiction as "the ability to produce something from almost nothing." In the case of Last Orders that "almost nothing" is not only all of Swift's earlier work, but also As I Lay Dying. A sensitive reader of Faulkner's classic and Swift's work can see that the affinity of these two books does not constitute plagiarism but exists at a more fundamental level than legally prescribed copyright rules. Swift's homage to Faulkner began in 1983 with Waterland, when American reviewers hailed Swift as "Faulkner of the Fens." In a 1985 interview in New York City, asked about the influence Faulkner seems to have exerted on Waterland, Swift denied any conscious imitation but

acknowledged his admiration for Faulkner and in particular As I Lay Dying which he called "one of my favorite novels."

Last Orders is the novel that most explicitly reveals the importance of Faulkner in terms of Swift's thematic concerns. Faulkner's belief that the "past keeps overtaking the present, second by second," illustrates Swift's preoccupation with plots which explore a present perpetually defined by a past crisis, with characters who exist suspended in post-traumatic shock. Faulkner's remark in the famous 1956 Paris Review interview that "there is no such thing as was, only is. If was existed there would be no such thing as grief or sorrow" epitomizes equally well Swift's definition of time as the only force in human existence able to define life and death and explain his characters' sorrows.

Like Faulkner's novels, Swift's works partake equally of the sublime and the ridiculous to exemplify the triumph of human absurdity and the absurdity of human triumph. Ultimately, what Faulkner called in his Nobel prize acceptance speech the "writer's privilege" defines Swift's humanistic approach equally well: "to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honour and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past."

So, when at the end of Last Orders, the four pilgrims stand on Margate Pier in order to empty the jar that contains their friend's ashes, according to his last orders, the voice of Ray mingles with many Faulknerian voices in a resonant stream-of-consciousness that celebrates human endurance:

Then I throw the last handful and the seagulls come back on a second chance and I hold up the jar, shaking it, like I should chuck it out to sea too, a message in a bottle, Jack Arthur Dodds, save our souls, and the ash that I carried in my hands, which was Jack who once walked around, is carried away by the wind, is whirled away by the wind till the ash becomes wind and the wind becomes Jack what we're made of.

Last Orders adapts As I Lay Dying to the contemporary English reality but does not imitate Faulkner's classic: Swift shares with Faulkner concerns and devices

that connect their respective fictions thematically and stylistically. Swift's novel pays intertextual homage to Faulkner as well as to Chaucer and to T. S. Eliot while remaining an original work of fiction. In all of his works Swift echoes an established literary tradition adapting themes and techniques in ways which test the limits of modern notions of originality and creativity.

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